

Rites of passage: public response to Don Driver's *Ritual* (1982) and its institutional history

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ABSTRACT: For 30 years Don Driver's artwork *Ritual* (1982), from Te Papa's collection, has intrigued, angered and confused audiences. This text analyses documentation of the public response to the work and its institutional history from 1982 to 2012, and considers the impact of this chequered history upon *Ritual*'s iconic status within New Zealand art.

KEYWORDS: Don Driver, *Ritual*, sculpture, contemporary art, New Zealand, National Art Gallery, Te Papa, controversy.

Introduction

Don Driver's *Ritual* in the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) presents an opportunity to examine how a work obtains iconic status in New Zealand art and its varied fortunes over time. The story around *Ritual* has all the classic hallmarks of a good art scandal: an artist admired by art experts whose work baffled the general public; an artwork with overt sexual content and a whiff of black magic; and a controversy that played out in the media when the work was exhibited and, especially, when it was proposed for acquisition by a public gallery.

In order to understand why and how a work of art achieves fame, we need to consider the original context in which it was made, its initial and ongoing public and critical reception, and changes to the display and presentation of the work over time. All of these factors play a critical role in how a work of art becomes 'iconic', yet rarely is serious attention given to a work's entire exhibition history and the impact this has on consolidating its status within art history.

Rather than focus on the subject matter of *Ritual*, this text examines its rite of passage to become an iconic work in New Zealand art by addressing its history of public response and its institutional history. It is essential to interrogate the history of the work's reception in order to consider its legacy.

'Virtually no rules': a new installation for the National Art Gallery

Towards the end of 1981, Don Driver was invited to prepare a work for the National Art Gallery in Wellington. (The National Art Gallery was combined with the National Museum by an Act of Parliament in 1992 to become the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, which opened in 1998.)

By 1981, Driver already had a considerable reputation as a leading contemporary New Zealand artist. Under the mandate of National Art Gallery Director Luit Bieringa, 10 of his works were held in the national art collection.¹ In 1978, Driver had been selected as one of the New Zealand artists in the Mildura Sculpture Triennial in Australia, and a substantial survey show of his work organised by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth toured to numerous public galleries around New Zealand, including the National Art Gallery in 1979.²

The invitation from the National Art Gallery was very open in its brief. Louise Upston (now Pether), the exhibitions officer, wrote to Driver in 1981 on behalf of the gallery asking him to be part of a series of sculpture installation



Fig. 1 Don Driver, *Ritual*, 1982, plastic, fabric, bone, steel, iron, rubber, leather, paint, wood and straw with audio component, 1760 × 2210 × 2480 mm. The work is seen here installed at the National Art Gallery, Wellington, in 1982–83 (Te Papa 1989-0034-1) (photo: Te Papa).

projects: ‘We are attaching virtually no rules or regulations to the invitation’, Upston wrote, ‘(other than budgetary ones) as we wish to bring to the attention of the Wellington public nationally important artists.’³ Driver accepted the invitation and the result was his arresting installation *Ritual*, which was displayed at the gallery from 22 November 1982 to 6 February 1983 (Figs 1 and 2).

Some of the other artists invited to participate included Warren Viscoe, Neil Dawson, Jacqueline Fraser, Christine Hellyar, Pauline Rhodes, Andrew Drummond and Terry Stringer.⁴ Driver’s exhibition occurred after Drummond’s in this sequence and the preceding installations had also been of an experimental nature. Observations made by the National Art Gallery’s education officer about Viscoe’s installation are particularly interesting in light of Driver’s future project: ‘Viscoe acknowledges that his type of art



Fig. 2 Don Driver with *Ritual* at the National Art Gallery, Wellington, c. 1982 (photo: Mark Strange, Te Papa).

may owe something to the South Pacific culture, where the artist works very closely with ordinary materials from daily life, and where objects can possess a power and totemic quality ... He recognises that his work is of little “popular” appeal. It is neither pretty nor easy.⁵ These comments demonstrate the context within which Driver’s installation was likely received by visitors to the National Art Gallery.



Fig. 3 Detail of *Ritual* (photo: Te Papa MU000052/001/0011).

From goats' skulls to pitchforks: Driver's source materials

Unfortunately, there is little correspondence in Te Papa's archives relating to what Driver intended to display, except for an intriguing reference to a book he had left behind at the gallery: Gert Schiff's *Images of horror and fantasy* (1979).⁶ The book followed an exhibition that Schiff had organised for the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, in 1977, in which a selection of historical and contemporary artworks were grouped around the following themes: 'Fear / Despair, Religion / Superstition, Persecution / Paranoia, Captivity / Madness, Pain / Torture, Sex / Sadism, Death, War, Dream, Utopia / Arcadia'. Clearly, the book did not offer light reading or viewing. Driver had a considerable personal library of books on the subject of black magic, superstition and ethnic art traditions from around the world, as well as a wide selection of science fiction and fantasy novels.⁷ He was

also an avid watcher of horror movies, and his wife, Joyce, recalls that 'a horror movie couldn't come to New Plymouth without Don going to see it'.⁸ Although the subject matter of *Ritual* is not the focus of this paper, unpacking the work in light of its art historical and cultural references – as perhaps indicated by Driver's possession of Schiff's book and the fact that he took it with him to the National Art Gallery around the time of early discussions about *Ritual* – warrants further investigation.

In July 1982, Upston wrote another letter to Driver, in which she noted, 'Other than your wonderful idea I have not heard anything definite back from you in the form of a proposal or budget for your installation here in November.'⁹ Their subsequent correspondence appears to have been largely of a financial or practical nature. One letter written by Joyce Driver to Upston later that month includes a list: 'Chris Garnham's labour, dray, 2 hayforks, 1 pitchfork, 1 slasher, other tools, stands, dolls, glass, timbacyl, drums,



Fig. 4 Don Driver in his studio, New Plymouth, 1981 (photo: Tony Mackle, Te Papa).

dresses, appendages, fibreglass, lights, mirror, skulls, sewing, tape-recording.¹⁰ In the same Te Papa Archives file is a letter from Driver to Chris Cane at the National Art Gallery, asking ‘a big favour’ – ‘Would it be possible to get the ½ a dozen goats’ skulls with horns attached? Maybe from the Museum Geology Dept. Luit was saying they could possibly have some. Here is hoping.’¹¹

As things turned out, sourcing the goats’ skulls proved to be quite difficult (Fig. 3). A newspaper article mentions that:

Ritual took six months to complete, with Don Driver working at it every morning and evening in the garage-studio of his home. *Ritual*’s starting point was the goat skulls. The supply problem (art shops tend to be limited in their range of animal heads) was solved by an advertisement in a New Plymouth paper. A local taxi driver-cum-hunter saw it, and in due course a suitable series of skeletal devil-heads arrived at Driver’s home.¹²



Fig. 5 Don Driver, *Fetish*, 1978, plastic, metal, fibre, wood, glass, 195 × 275 × 300 mm. Jim Barr and Mary Barr collection (photo: Bryan James, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery; reproduced with permission).

Fetish objects for twentieth-century New Zealand: *Ritual* and Driver’s other works

Ritual relates to other works that Driver had been making in the late 1970s (Fig. 4). He had begun to incorporate dolls into his sculptures some years earlier, and his two works *Fetish* (1978) and *Girl with skull* (1981) can be seen as predecessors to *Ritual*. About *Fetish* (Fig. 5), Driver commented, ‘I have always been interested in African sculpture with an emphasis on the fetish type of effigy. This is my own twentieth century New Zealand version’.¹³

Reflecting on *Girl with skull* (Fig. 6) in 1985, Driver noted:

I wanted to use the doll, with the head and skull in hand, to produce an awesome feeling. The blue dress against the



Fig.6 Don Driver, *Girl with skull*, 1981, mixed-media assemblage, 1534 × 600 × 600 mm. Gift of Hamish Keith, 1987 (Te Papa 1987-0003-1).

green drum and then the heads in the hands, the rough against the smooth – rusty iron chains, corroded head against the smoothed plastic, the shock of seeing a goat's skull upon a human body. This idea was later developed, and became a component part of a very large work *Ritual*.¹⁴

Ironic juxtaposition: Driver's *Ritual* and Rita Angus

The timing of *Ritual*'s display at the National Art Gallery appears quite ironic. Shortly after the project was launched on 22 November 1982, the gallery opened its substantial survey exhibition of modernist New Zealand artist Rita Angus (1908–70). Many visitors to the gallery would have passed through the room *Ritual* occupied in order to visit the Angus show (Fig. 7). It is fascinating to speculate on the potential impact that this experience may have had on

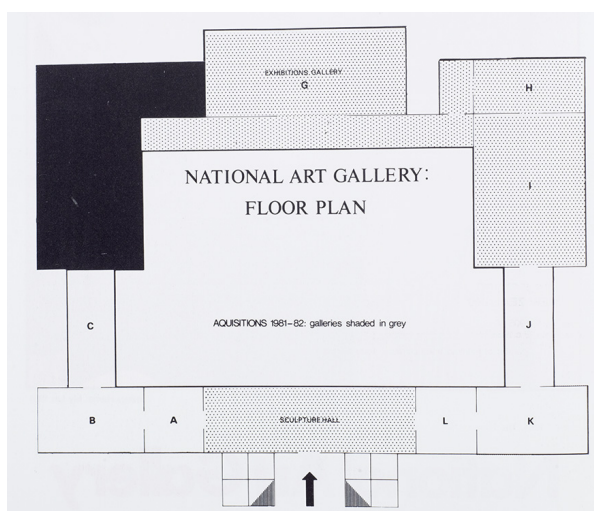


Fig.7 Floor plan of the National Art Gallery in 1982. *Ritual* was displayed in the space marked 'J' and the Rita Angus exhibition was shown in galleries G, H, I and the Blue Room (reproduced from National Art Gallery (1982), *Acquisitions 1981–82*, Wellington: National Art Gallery, p. 2).



Fig.8 Rita Angus, *Fay and Jane Birkinshaw*, 1938, oil on canvas, 532 × 692 mm. Purchased 1998 with New Zealand Lottery Grants Board funds (Te Papa 1998-0028-3) (photo: Michael Hall, Te Papa; reproduced courtesy of the Angus Estate).

gallery visitors when they went on to view Angus's works, such as her double portrait *Fay and Jane Birkinshaw* of 1938 (Fig. 8). It's hard to imagine viewing Fay and Jane without a lingering sense of unease after seeing Driver's fetish dolls aboard a farm dray. Even the girls' playthings in the painting's background appear uncannily animated. Likewise, the shock of encountering Driver's work again after being immersed in the relative comfort and familiarity of Angus's paintings must have been quite unsettling.



Fig. 9 Don Driver among his works in the loading dock at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, c. 1979–80 (photo: photographer unknown; Don Driver unnumbered artist's file, Te Aka Matua Research Library, Te Papa). By this date Driver had dismantled *The magician* (1967) and later reworked the parts into a new sculpture titled *The red lady*, which appears to the left of the artist. This photograph was possibly taken around the time that the Govett-Brewster organised the retrospective exhibition of Driver's work that went on to tour extensively around New Zealand. The exhibition was on show at the Govett-Brewster from 28 June to 15 July 1979. To the right of the artist is his work *Flyaway* (1966–69), acquired by the Govett-Brewster in 1970 and included in the 1979 exhibition.

A shock to the system: *Ritual's* initial reception

When *Ritual* was first shown at the National Art Gallery in 1981, Driver was already no stranger to controversy. Writing in 1999, journalist David Hill commented, 'Hell and its self-appointed opponents have often raged around Driver's work.'¹⁵ *The magician* (1967) had been withdrawn from an exhibition at the public library in New Plymouth after a



Fig. 10 Cover of the *Friends of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Newsletter* 29, June–July 1983 (reproduced with the permission of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth).

large number of complaints were received, and there was further outcry when the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery proposed the purchase of another Driver work, *50kg* (1978). The artist's award-winning entry into the 1972 Benson & Hedges Art Award – *Painted relief no. 11* (1972) – was not a popular choice, with the *New Zealand Herald's* headline reading 'Top painting "not for average man"' and some members of the public describing the abstract painting as a 'confidence trick'.¹⁶ In 1980, the National Art Gallery's purchase of *High chair* (1968) became the focus of media attention when it contributed to the loss of a \$500 annual grant from the Hutt Valley Electric Power and Gas Board.¹⁷ Board member Len Little had denounced the purchase and claimed the money had been 'wasted on these stupid gallery people'.¹⁸

Given this context, it is surprising that there is little record of the initial public response to *Ritual*, other than a couple of anecdotes and thoughtful reviews. Elizabeth Smither's article in the *New Zealand Listener* is notable here both for its engagement with the work and for the writer's



Fig. 11 *Ritual* in the *Installation Art* exhibition at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (photo: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery; reproduced with permission).

ability to elicit some fascinating comments about the work from the artist. In particular, Smither quotes Driver saying that ‘magic is very strong in most people’s lives. I think we cover it up in New Zealand’.¹⁹

Joyce Driver recalls the response of other artists and the arts community in general as being very positive.²⁰ In a letter to Don dated 23 December 1982, shortly after the opening at the National Art Gallery, Louise Upston wrote that ‘the exhibit is looking really good and have many appreciative comments – one person has written in the visitors book “Bravo to Don Driver” – others have obviously had their say as well’.²¹ She tells Driver about a mysterious action that occurred each night after the show had opened. A newspaper article recounts the story: ‘On the first few mornings after it was installed, there were indications that *Ritual* had been interfered with. It turned out to be a gallery guard, disturbed by the undeniable maleness or femaleness of the figures, was going around each night tugging down the hemlines of their dresses’.²²

Elva Bett reviewed the exhibition for *The Dominion* in 1983, describing Driver’s work as a ‘shock to the system’ and ‘tough fare, thought provoking in its symbolism and shattering in implication’.²³ She wrote that *Ritual* harbours

those voodoo practices we in the Western world feel reluctant to acknowledge ... These half-child, half-goat spectres stand ready to indulge in the pagan rites of their idolatrous society ... Don Driver is one of New Zealand’s most innovative artists ... He can place innocence upon pedestals and we are left to face the ills and obscenities in our society which we would sooner keep hidden. For Driver is our social conscience. God forbid that we actually need him.²⁴

Not everyone felt the same way. In fact, *Ritual* was seen as objectionable and in ‘bad taste’ by some when it was shown at the Govett-Brewster later in 1983 as part of the gallery’s *Installation Art* exhibition (Figs 10 and 11).²⁵ Letters to the editor of New Plymouth’s *Daily News* decried the work as ‘disgusting’.²⁶ ‘If this “Ritual” was displayed in a shop or street somebody would be locked up for perverted behaviour or indecent exposure, but inside an art gallery it is apparently allowed’, wrote ‘MG’ of Waitara.²⁷ Yet even amidst the protests against the work, some commentators and correspondents advised open-mindedness, including ‘Think Bigger’ of New Plymouth, who said that people ought to ‘give themselves more time to think about what the artist is trying to say. They might be surprised rather than confused and disgusted’.²⁸

**Council says no to
controversial artwork**

**DRIVER WORK IN BAD
TASTE: COUNCILLOR**

Driver’s *Ritual* divides council

Art work price

tag too high Council rejects Ritual

*Delay buying Driver
artwork, experts say*

**Driver sculpture
divides council**

Council defers \$5000 art purchase

**Sculpture price to
be renegotiated**

**Bid to block
art buy fails**

Move to block art work fails

**Gallery approves
Driver’s Ritual**

Fig. 12 Selection of newspaper headlines dating from the proposed acquisition of *Ritual* by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 1984–85.

Driver’s *Ritual* divides council: attempts to acquire *Ritual*

In 1984, the Govett-Brewster sought the New Plymouth City Council’s approval to acquire *Ritual* for its collection. This is when the media storm began (Fig. 12).

The gallery’s director at the time, Dick Bett, defended *Ritual* as ‘an extremely important work by Driver’.²⁹ In response to Councillor David Lyall’s wish to disassociate himself from the purchase on the grounds that he wanted to respect those people who found *Ritual* offensive, Bett is recorded as responding that ‘Personally I do not find it offensive – far, far from being offensive’.³⁰ And while the police had never been called in to act on complaints about the work being obscene,³¹ some feared that *Ritual* was a comment on the occult and that if the council approved the purchase then it was ‘virtually saying that occult practices were quite acceptable in the community’.³²

The council’s deliberations continued through 1985, during which time Cheryl Sotheran replaced Dick Bett as director of the Govett-Brewster. Sotheran reinitiated the acquisition process. When the New Plymouth City Council voted against the acquisition once again, the matter went

into arbitration. It is important to note that council money was not being used to acquire the work – the Monica Brewster Trust provided the gallery's annual acquisition budget. As a condition of the trust, the directors of four New Zealand public galleries had to be asked for their advice and recommendation in the event that an acquisition did not receive council support. These four galleries were the National Art Gallery in Wellington, the Auckland Art Gallery, the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.³³ If the four committee members disagreed, then the director of the National Art Gallery had the deciding vote. Te Papa's archives include a letter sent by Sotheran to the director of the National Art Gallery, Luit Bieringa, in June 1985 to kickstart this process.³⁴ The committee went on to support the acquisition but advised the gallery to defer taking action and instead arrange an option on the work owing to limited funds at that time.³⁵

When art hits the headlines: *Ritual* on display

In October 1987, *Ritual* was exhibited at the Dowse Art Museum, where it again caused uproar. Newspaper headlines include "Ritual" sexual overtones concern', 'Driver's "primitive" art startles' and 'Dowse exhibit revolts visitor'.³⁶ A Lower Hutt city councillor received about a dozen complaints from Dowse visitors.³⁷ Pauline Clayton noted in an article that Driver's

ability to put together source material which could come from a monastery or a junk heap, has both riled and caused anguish as well as great joy and enlightenment ... One wonders if the attitudes of fear and 'revulsion' expressed so audibly, are based on similar responses to those of some of the early Christian missionaries who were known to cut penises from Maori carvings rather than be confronted by the commonplace – yet sacred – symbols of fertility and racial survival.³⁸

A review of a subsequent 1989 exhibition of Driver's work at the Dowse noted that when *Ritual* had been put on display in 1987, the gallery's attendance figures had nearly doubled.³⁹

Following the Dowse exhibition, *Ritual* was borrowed once again by the National Art Gallery from the artist for its exhibition *When Art Hits the Headlines: a survey of controversial art in New Zealand*. Curated by Jim and Mary Barr, this exhibition was held at the National Art Gallery's



Fig. 13 National Art Gallery exhibition designer Neil Pardington working on the layout for the exhibition *When Art Hits the Headlines* at Shed 11, the Temporary/Contemporary, 1988. *Ritual* is shown in the centre of the gallery. In the foreground on the left-hand side is a model of possibly the world's most notorious artwork, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (photo: Te Papa).

additional venue Shed 11, the Temporary/Contemporary, from 12 December 1987 to 14 February 1988. The inclusion of *Ritual* within this exhibition cemented its reputation as a provocative and challenging work.

The exhibition placed *Ritual* alongside possibly the most notorious artwork in the world, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), a ready-made urinal sculpture (Fig. 13). From the outset, *Fountain* had challenged audiences – including the art world – and it continued to spark strong reactions when it was included in an exhibition of Duchamp's works from the Mary Sisler collection touring New Zealand in 1967. The work was illustrated in an article in the *Evening Post*, headlined 'It's the rudest and crudest show ever held at the National Art Gallery'.⁴⁰ In Christchurch, *Fountain* and another work had not been put on public display but were available for viewing, upon appointment, in the director's office.



Fig. 14 Installation view of *Ritual* within the exhibition *When Art Hits the Headlines* at Shed 11, the Temporary/Contemporary, 1988 (photo: Te Papa).

When Art Hits the Headlines was also the first exhibition in which *Ritual* was displayed with hay beneath the dray (Fig 14). Despite being part of the artist's original plan for *Ritual*, the hay component had not been accommodated at the National Art Gallery, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery or the Dowse Art Museum. Looking back, hay is conspicuously absent from early photographic documentation of *Ritual* at these venues. A letter from Louise Pether to Don Driver dated 6 July 1987 provides more information:

Now I recall, when we had it installed here that you were rather inclined to have it on hay and we couldn't do it. At Shed 11 we could! Of course it would have to be restrained to the area near the dray but I think even so it would look great. Is it an area you'd still like to see happen? Let me know.⁴¹

Driver certainly did, and Joyce Driver notes Pether's description of Driver being 'rather inclined' to the plan as something of a diplomatic understatement.⁴² Since December 1987, *Ritual* has been exhibited according to the artist's original intentions, and whenever it is shown the smell of hay permeates the surrounding gallery space.

Preventing a ritual burning: *Ritual's* acquisition by the National Art Gallery

After the *When Art Hits the Headlines* exhibition, *Ritual* was returned to the Dowse in 1988, where it remained in storage until the gallery's director, Bob Maysmor, informed Driver that the space was needed for other things. At this point, Driver contacted the National Art Gallery to ask whether it would consider taking the work as either a long-term loan or a loan for display, or as a purchase. He had no space for the work back in New Plymouth and wrote: 'I am seriously considering a *Ritual* burning unless you have any other ideas?'⁴³ By this time, Driver had clearly given up hope on the Govett-Brewster acquiring the work, and the National Art Gallery was quick to act. On 20 July 1989, Robert Leonard, then curator at the National Art Gallery, wrote a short curatorial justification for the acquisition proposal, saying:

Ritual, initially executed as a project for this gallery, has become one of the most controversial and despised works



Fig. 15 Installation view of *Ritual* within the exhibition *With Spirit* at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1999 (photo: Bryan James, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery; reproduced with permission).

of New Zealand art history. It is also one of Driver's most important and successful works, and probably his best installation work ever. This portrayal of Pakeha rural sexual mythology as primitive fetish is properly regarded as misogynist, but the extent to which the misogyny is Driver's or merely part of his subject matter (NZ rural sexual mythology) is debatable.⁴⁴

Luit Bieringa signed his approval of the acquisition on 12 August 1989 and *Ritual* arrived back at the National Art Gallery on 31 August 1989. It remained in storage for the next decade.

With Spirit: exhibiting Ritual in the 1990s and 2000s

If the exhibition *When Art Hits the Headlines* firmly established *Ritual* as one of the most notorious examples of contemporary New Zealand art, it was the 1999 exhibition *With Spirit: Don Driver a retrospective* and its accompanying catalogue that confirmed the work as one of Driver's most important. Following a stint at the Govett-Brewster Art

Gallery (Fig. 15), the exhibition travelled to the Manawatu Art Gallery, the Auckland Art Gallery, the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, the Robert McDougall Art Gallery and the Waikato Museum of Art and History. Initial plans discussed including a stint at City Gallery Wellington, but this never eventuated.

Ritual was a key work displayed at each venue and there is little record of a negative public reaction – in the media at least. One can speculate that within the context of Driver's other works, *Ritual* lost some of its shock value. Reviewing *With Spirit* for *Art New Zealand*, William McAloon wrote that *Ritual* 'compellingly combines a sense of magical potency – what Driver calls "myths of the past but also the ongoing of myth in the future" – with equal measures of revulsion and eroticism, humour and sensual pleasure. It's a dangerous combination, and one that retains its potency nearly two decades after the work's production.'⁴⁵

Ritual was displayed at Te Papa from November 2003 to October 2004 within *Signs and Wonders*, an exhibition exploring spiritual aspects of works from the national art collection. Once again, there is little record in either the



Fig. 16 Detail of *Ritual* (photo: Michael Hall, Te Papa).

media or anecdotally about *Ritual*'s reception. However, there is a note in Te Papa's object files that in May 2004 one of the hosts noticed that 'someone had pulled down three of the dresses that were previously folded up'.⁴⁶ The next day, the dresses were put back to their original position by one of the art collection managers. Evidently, the overt sexual nature of *Ritual* continued to cause trouble.⁴⁷

Ritual and The Obstinate Object

In 2012, some 30 years after it was first exhibited, *Ritual* was presented in the context of a survey of contemporary New Zealand art at City Gallery Wellington.⁴⁸ *The Obstinate Object*'s curator, Aaron Lister, had wanted to bring the work back into the spotlight, to examine its impact and legacy upon subsequent sculptural practice in New Zealand. Despite this intention, visitors who saw *Ritual* within the exhibition may have left wondering what all the fuss surrounding the work had been about.

Certainly, audiences in contemporary art galleries in 2012 have different expectations than those during the 1980s, 1990s and even the 2000s. The wide proliferation of contemporary art galleries worldwide and the general popularisation of contemporary art – not to mention the growing influence of the international contemporary art market – attest to a growing familiarity with contemporary art and its modus operandi. Many would argue that people have become used to the idea of being shocked when visiting contemporary art galleries. These arguments suggest that Driver's work would be considered less contentious in 2012 than when it was first shown.

However, there is another angle to consider: to what extent did the presentation of the work within *The Obstinate Object* actually dilute *Ritual*'s impact? At City Gallery the work occupied a central position within the exhibition's first gallery space and was presented alongside work by younger artists, including Eddie Clemens, Peter Trevelyan, Glen Hayward and Bekah Carran. Clemens' work was made in direct response to *Ritual* and connected the work with other 1970s, 1980s and 1990s pop culture references such as British horror *The Wicker Man* (1973), through to more recent film series such as *Mad Max* (1979–85), *Terminator* (1984–2009) and *Child's Play* (also known as 'Chucky', 1988–2004) (Fig. 17). While *Ritual* packed an undeniable punch within this selection of artists' works, the group show presentation arguably reduced the intensity of encountering *Ritual* on its own terms, as the artist had originally devised.



Fig. 17 *Ritual* on display in *The Obstinate Object* exhibition at City Gallery Wellington, 2012. In the background is Eddie Clemens' artwork *Delusional Architecture (temporary)* (2012) (photo: Kate Whitley, City Gallery Wellington; reproduced with permission).

While *The Obstinate Object* exhibition sought to reinforce the importance of *Ritual* to the history of contemporary New Zealand sculpture, the unintentional result may instead have been to raise the question of why *Ritual* has obtained such iconic status.

Conclusion

Ritual's chequered history of display and its relationship to New Zealand art institutions and audiences offers a fascinating insight into the way in which an artwork claims territory within New Zealand art history. Thirty years after it was first exhibited, *Ritual*'s presentation within a survey of contemporary New Zealand art provided an opportunity to take stock, to consider how it has stood the test of time and to interrogate the myths that surround it. In Jim and Mary Barr's essay about Driver's work in the *With Spirit* catalogue, they describe *Ritual* as 'trekking endlessly through the order and mock neutrality of twentieth century, white

cube, art galleries'.⁴⁹ With this in mind, the latest exhibition, *The Obstinate Object*, is just another moment along *Ritual's* journey – wherever it goes from here is for the future to determine.

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Notes

- 1 These 10 works include *Horizontal no. 2* (1970–71); *Relief VIII* (1976), purchased in 1976; *Billy Apple as a prisoner* (1977); *High chair* (1968); *Lawn cuttings* (1978); *Painted relief no. 14: three blues* (1972), purchased in 1980; *Battery case no. 2* (1972–73); *Big relief* (1980); *Blue and green Pacific* (1978); and *Zither* (1968), purchased in 1981.
- 2 The exhibition *Don Driver, 1965–1978* was organised by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery with the support of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand. The exhibition travelled around New Zealand from late June 1979 through to mid-July 1980. The full list of venues included the Govett-Brewster; the Sarjeant, Wanganui; Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North; National Art Gallery, Wellington; Bishop Suter Art Gallery, Nelson; Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch; Wairarapa Arts Foundation, Masterton; Hastings Cultural Centre, Hastings; Gisborne Museum and Art Centre, Gisborne; Rotorua City Art Gallery, Rotorua; Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland; and Waikato Art Museum, Hamilton.
- 3 Louise Upston to Don Driver, draft letter, 1981, MU000052/001/0011, Te Papa Archives, Wellington.
- 4 Following is a chronological list of these solo artist 'installation' exhibitions at the National Art Gallery, Wellington, from early 1981 to mid-1983. The series was at times referred to as 'Installations', but more often the exhibitions appear to have been presented as individual artists' projects with individual titles or with the word 'installation' used in a descriptive sense. Each artist was invited to develop a new work for a single gallery space of their choice within the National Art Gallery. 'Warren Viscoe: A midden site', 14 March–10 May 1981; 'Neil Dawson: Reflections', 5 September–1 November 1981; '3 Sculptors: Jacqueline Fraser, Christine Hellyar, Pauline Rhodes', 5 November 1981–14 January 1982; 'Andrew Drummond: Cycles/stages', 13 March–16 May 1982; 'Don Driver: Ritual', 22 November 1982–6 February 1983; 'Terry Stringer: Wrap around sculpture', 29 July–19 September 1983.
- 5 National Art Gallery, 'Warren Viscoe installation at the National Art Gallery', information sheet, Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1981, p. 2, located in Warren Viscoe unnumbered artist's file, Te Aka Matua Research Library, Te Papa, Wellington.
- 6 Joyce and Don Driver to Louise Upston, letter, 22 January 1982, MU000052/001/0011, Te Papa Archives, Wellington.
- 7 Joyce Driver, conversation with the author, 29 January 2013.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Louise Upston to Don Driver, letter, 21 July 1982, MU000052/001/0011, Te Papa Archives, Wellington.
- 10 Joyce Driver to Louise Upston, letter, 30 July 1982, MU000052/001/0011, Te Papa Archives, Wellington.
- 11 Don Driver to Chris Cane, letter, undated, MU000052/001/0011, Te Papa Archives, Wellington.
- 12 David Hill, 'Ritual shows power', *Auckland Star*, 25 August 1983, p. B7.
- 13 Don Driver quoted in National Art Gallery, 'Don Driver', pamphlet for *Don Driver* exhibition, 12 February–22 June 1986, Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1986, p. 2, located in Don Driver High chair 1980-0014-1 object file, Art Department, Te Papa, Wellington.
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- 33 The directors were Rodney Wilson, Auckland City Art Gallery; Luit Bieringa, National Art Gallery, Wellington; John Coley, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch; and Frank Dickinson, Dunedin Public Art Gallery.
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- 35 'Delay buying Driver artwork, experts say', *Daily News* [New Plymouth], 13 August 1985, p. 3.
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- 38 Clayton, 'Driver's primitive art startles'.
- 39 'A mixed bag at Dowse Art Museum: mixed-media fills Lower Hutt', *Capital Times*, 1 August 1989, p. 4.
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- 44 Robert Leonard, acquisition proposal for Don Driver's *Ritual*, 20 July 1989, located in Don Driver Ritual object file 1989-34-1, Art Department, Te Papa, Wellington.
- 45 William McAloon, 'Invention unlimited: With Spirit: Don Driver a retrospective', *Art New Zealand* 92, Spring 1999, p. 87.
- 46 Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Notification of change or damage form, 13 May 2004, located in Don Driver unnumbered artist's file, Te Aka Matua Research Library, Te Papa, Wellington.
- 47 *Ritual* was not the only work by the artist to attract negative reaction at Te Papa. In 1998, a letter was written by a member of the public to Te Papa's director, Cheryll Sotheran, raising concerns about Driver's *Girl with skull*, then on display in the *Parade* exhibition on level 4. Don Driver *Girl with skull* 1987-0003-1 object file, Art Department, Te Papa, Wellington.
- 48 In conjunction with the exhibition, City Gallery Wellington and Te Papa jointly organised a symposium to examine Don Driver's work and legacy. An earlier version of this article was originally presented by the author as a lecture at this symposium.
- 49 Jim Barr and Mary Barr, 'Made to order', *With Spirit: Don Driver a retrospective*, New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1999, p. 14.

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