

“BRING IT ON!”: SCOTT EADY’S RHETORIC

Rebecca Hamid

“It is that phenomenological shift that brings uncertainty; that asks the question – what are we looking at? And I hope that somewhere in that is a moment of poetry.”¹

It is September 2010 and Scott Eady’s “Bring It On!” exhibition has been installed in the RH Gallery at Woollaston Estates, Mahana, Nelson. The owner of the premises acted quickly to censor one work, removing *Ivan; ‘Kick Me’* (2010), an orange-painted 70 kilogram cast brass ball with a small hand written sign “Kick Me” cello-taped to one side. After protracted and tense negotiations, the director of the gallery secured the return of the sculpture to its original position; but now without the sign, and with the addition of a brass plinth to protect the gallery floor.

There is a recurring anecdotal scene of censorship, communication, power, annunciation and reception with minimalist sculpture. In her essay “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power,” 1990, Anna Chave describes two teenage girls in the Museum of Modern Art who walk over to a Donald Judd gleaming brass floor box (1968), kick it, laugh and then putting its reflective surface to good use to rearrange their hair before bending down to kiss their images. The guard watching did not respond.² Chave’s writing examines the relations of power in annunciation and reception behind minimalist art. She observes minimalism’s departure from offering neither negative nor prophetic moments that have previously placed it at the vanguard of modernist art. Chave concludes that where minimalism offers non-discourse, presented as non-art, or offers nothing new, only more of the same, the viewer is left disillusioned and possibly hostile.³ Moreover, where the artist’s trajectory is deliberately aimed at a discourse of power and violence or disinterest in the viewer, it is not surprising that such art may illicit responses of violence or mockery, or both.



Figure 1. Scott Eady, *Ivan; ‘Kick Me’* (2010), bronze, enamel paint, paper, 36 cm diameter.

Minimalist sculpture has long been associated with art historical rhetoric including the gambits of such luminaries as Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Tony Smith, Sol LeWitt and Dan Flavin. During the 1960s minimalist artists considered it their role to redefine societal values; though it is problematic whether or not they ever effected any real social change.⁴ The types of materials used, their weight, size and construction were associated with the values and rhetoric of power and politics. Richard Serra’s mammoth corten steel structures which tower and lean over the viewer are some of the most explicit examples of this. Art which aspires to be non-art⁵ is often only recognised

as art by the viewer because it is located in a gallery, curated by an art professional or created by a 'named' artist. Complicated nuances of association and referencing of other art objects have been the underlying premise of much of this minimalist art practice. Most often this is demonstrated in its conception and construction, which is to further complicate the deliberate non-narrative objective. Increasingly, the degree of difficulty in understanding what the artist intended became the primary trajectory and this, not its meaning – if it had any at all – was what gave the artwork its intrinsic and elevated value.

Tony Smith's *Die* (1962), with its complexity of meanings by association and with only the title offering hints about its content, is typical of minimalist artists' sculptures of that period. Like Donald Judd, Smith was effectively offering this work as non-art or as an object that denies art as it is commonly thought of. Judd wrote in his essay "Specific Objects" about 'plain power',⁶ expounding his minimalist platform of stressing the physical, phenomenological experience of objects. Like Smith, Judd aimed to remove all natural form, all traces of the artisan, inventiveness or uniqueness from his sculpture, denying viewers the usual prerequisites customarily used to engage their attention with a work of art. Mass-produced, commercially fabricated, machine-made and with minimal intervention by the artist, this trajectory of non-art, as Chave points out, has initiated not only a violence against the art itself but also against its audience.⁷ There is also the explicit denial of any motivating humanist endeavour or any sense of moral or spiritual inspiration. Not surprising then that a viewer's reaction would be hostile or violent.



Figure 2. Scott Eady, "Bring it On!", installation.

Eady's installation "Bring It On!" included *Ivan*; 'Kick Me' and two other brass sculptures, *Jonathan you were Wrong* (2010), and *Into the Light: Crazy Little S of Fools* (2010). The installation also included an exploding wooden castle, two catapults and several small photographs mounted on one wall. As with Smith's *Die*, the titles are deliberate and significant as they contain a multitude of complex references which in the minimalist idiom, unless explained, are not readily discernable. *Jonathan you were Wrong*, a 30-kilogram cast brass pretzel painted a pale pink and cellotaped to the gallery wall, rests on a biscuit tin with a landscape of Mitre Peak on the lid. Its reference to a gallery owner's refusal to install sculpture against a wall is obscure. Unless explained to them, viewers would be unlikely to 'get' its meaning. The multitude of complex art historical references are all there, but only the very well-informed punter would realise this.

Ironically, through referencing the Judd anecdote cited above, Eady was inciting his audience to kick his artwork, which resulted in the censoring of *Ivan*; 'Kick Me.' There was concern that viewers might break a toe, not that the artwork might get damaged. Intentionally, the artist had cast this 70-kilogram solid brass ball and coated it in a soft ice cream orange texture like paint [correct?], presenting it as a disguised soft toy, a product of children at play. The sort of trick one brother might play on another. Old enough to read the sign, one would surely clue up to the trick. That aside, the minimalist ruse of power over and violence against art conventions and the art audience is all there.

One would have to be a barren soul not to enjoy Scott Eady's art. Eady's sculptures delight. They present us with artful masquerade and if we let them, they ignite our imagination and can make us smile. Mostly, they are images which include a tongue-in-cheek glimpse at many of the things in this world that we often take too seriously. Or, as we read here, others take too seriously. Eady's aesthetic appreciation of objects is reflected back to us, larger than life.

While referencing the minimalist sculpture of Judd and others, Eady offers his own unique and engaging discourse. There is a humanist motivating endeavour and a sense of moral inspiration and prophetic moments in his art. The human touch is apparent, and deliberately juxtaposed with the manufactured, mass-produced non-art of the minimalist idiom he is referencing.

Eady is a self-reflective spirit. He is an eloquent artist, using visual expression for his musings on the meaning of life and the meaning of art per se for his audience. His trajectory charts complex relationships and incidents he has shared with art professionals, curators and gallery owners. In the past, the discourse has included a focus on the deconstructive exploration of what it is to be an adult male in New Zealand, entwined with a playful affection for objects and trappings, processes and artifacts. More lately, he has shifted this focus to his experience and reflections on what it is to be a parent, and more specifically, a father of young boys.⁸



Figure 3. Scott Eady, 'Jonathan You Were Wrong' (2010), bronze, enamel paint, biscuit tin, cello-tape; dimensions variable.



Figure 4. Scott Eady, *Castle* (2010), wood, hardware, paint, crash net; dimensions variable.



Figure 5. Scott Eady, *Catapult 1 (Ping)* (2010), wood, hardware, rubber balls; dimensions variable.

If it was Eady's dialogue with and observations of masculine culture that cast the central focus of his work from the mid-1990s to early 2000s, it is his experiences of fatherhood and collaboration with his children that have influenced his practice in recent years. Earlier sculptures consisted of constructions of vastly over-scaled models of a chainsaw, nail gun and bolt-cutters.⁹ The massive amplification of these objects, their form and their loss of functionality, portrayed male culture, intimacy with tools and a relationship stated in terms of something larger than their utility value.

Eady moved into portraying the contradictions of male culture and expressions of masculine fantasy. Eady's jovial and tongue-in-cheek sculptures twist contemporary narratives about being a real man's man, the tough New Zealand bloke. He often contrasts the dilemmas of whether to conform to this or to more recent stereotypes such as the metrosexual through objects that caricature both extreme masculine and effeminate notions of manhood.

Sculptor Anish Kapoor talks about the importance of the artist's work in their studio and the creation of sculpture through the process of play. This is something Scott Eady's practice readily embraces. Inside and outside the workshop, his sculptures are about play and the relationships integral to that play – the play of young boys and his observations and delight as a parent experienced in observing children at play. "Bring It On!" extended this play into the gallery. The installation included *Catapult 1 (Ping)* (2010), and *Catapult 2 (Pong)* (2010), and *Castle* (2010), which provided interactive play for children and adults firing rubber balls across the gallery at each other and at other sculptures. The *Castle* had walls which exploded by means of a mousetrap mechanism set off when its door was opened. The resetting of this and the catapults sorely tested the intervention of gallery staff, another poignant reference by Eady to the Judd museum anecdote above and juxtaposition with it.

Eady mines the life-experience and imagination of his children (and himself) to resolve issues about himself and his relationship to others. In the process, some of the deepest and most complex existential states, including fear, power, joy and self-doubt, are exposed and materialised in sculptures memorable for their unabashed honesty and insightful ambivalence. As we follow the interplay between fragment and whole, past and present, we become voyeurs; we feel the oscillations of his life, his challenge of being a man and a parent. More sustaining is the artist's ability to encourage an empathy with parenthood and reflection on our own experience and what it means to us to be a parent, or to have been parented. As parents we have mused and been amused by the imaginations and insights of children and their games. Reflections on the passing of time and what this means in our adult lives are equally absorbing. The questions raised are important. The politics of war games and toys, the identity we gain from these, and whether we should censor these or, like our parents, invest in our children's imaginations and trust in their ability to develop into mature discerning adults, provide much to reflect on.

On another level, these works of Eady's have a powerful and captivating abstract component to them. This is revealed to us through continuous looking and experiencing, through anticipation, observation and recollection. Eady's use of colour; the painted surface he applies to the cast bronze, and the pristine surfaces of some pieces are crucial to our appreciation of their abstract qualities. As Barnett Newman noted, abstraction and the use of a single colour is about "a real time of dreaming; not just something static, but deeper and beyond its sculptural confines."¹⁰

Meaning and experience are personal and our own. There is no prescribed view, no preferred way of looking, no defined explanation nor understanding. Each person will take in the gallery space differently. There is an unlimited range of individual experiences, which may take place over time and in more than one session of viewing. Eady's sculpture is about us. The meaning of the sculpture we see is held within our imaginations. There are moments of recognition that hold power for us whether this is perceptual, or aesthetic, or emotional or psychological. *Into the Light: Crazy Little S of Fools*, is a powerful example of this. Two Dollar Shop plastic, battery-fired candles light up a marshmallow-like cake, cast in solid brass and painted a pale yellow, placed on a stand which is more like a plinth than a cake stand. The discourse is complex. Yellow and blue are fundamental to the aesthetic appeal of this sculpture. Simultaneously satirising and revering minimalist sculpture, while contextualising this in the play and pranks of children and a parent's response to these, are just something of what Eady touches upon here. The ambiguities,

the aesthetic qualities and the deliberate minimalist overtones and complex references combine to encourage a multitude of responses from the viewer. There is much more besides the purposefully perplexing title to engage the audience.

Thus the power or success of Eady's sculpture lies within the audience. It's not about the sculpture by itself. If it can act as a catalyst for thought or change people's ideas or encourage people to think new thoughts, then that is more encouraging than just thinking about the possibilities of what these sculptural objects could be. As sculptor Ai Wei Wei argues, "Life is about art, politics and exchange."¹¹ While embracing much of what the art audience appreciates in minimalist art, Eady's sculpture offers much more.

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Figure 6. Scott Eady, *Into the Light: Crazy Little S of Fools* (2010), bronze, candlelite candles, aluminum, wood, enamel paint; dimensions variable.

- 1 Anish Kapoor; audio recording, Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain, September 2010.
- 2 Anna C Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," rptd in *Minimalism*, ed. James Meger (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 274-84. First pub. 1990.
- 3 Ibid, 282.
- 4 However, by the late 1960s Judd and others denied their art had anything to do with societal values, theories or institutions. The contradictions in their claims were that, while negating many of the attributes traditionally associated with fine art, their work was presented as 'valued' fine art for the consumption of a fine art audience.
- 5 Clement Greenberg, *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, ed. Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: County Museum of Art, 1967).
- 6 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," rptd in *Donald Judd: Early Work, 1955-1968*, ed. Thomas Kellein (New York: D.A.P., 2002). First pub. 1965.
- 7 Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," 279.
- 8 Richard Lummis, "Big Time, Major Works by Scott Eady," *Art New Zealand*, 99 (2001), 74 –7.
- 9 "The Big Time," an exhibition held in Artis Gallery, Parnell, Auckland in 1997.
- 10 Anish Kapoor quoting Barnett Newman, audio recording, Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain, September 2010.
- 11 Ai Wei Wei, artist quote from video about his installation "Sunflower Seeds." Recording by Tate Modern, London, October 2010.