

Lye centre risks being a morgue

This may or may not be relevant, but when I read cartoonist Peter Bromhead's autobiography recently I came across something that resonates with the current controversy over our Len Lye Centre.

After working as a curator at Auckland City Art Gallery in 1970, he concluded that although artists believe they attain some semblance of mortality through their efforts, their creativity inevitably ends up slumbering like a series of corpses in temperature-controlled crypts, resurrected on rare occasions for public viewing.

Len Lye's sculptures presumably don't need temperature-controlled storage (perhaps salt-spray free), but you can't help wondering if that same mentality doesn't still afflict the exhibitors of Lye's great works.

I'm referring to the centre managers, since the owner of many of the pieces, the Len Lye Foundation, assures us 16 or 17 of Lye's sculptures are now available for showing. Which begs the question that seems to be on the mind of almost everyone who visits the place: where are they, these marvellous objects of moving art that have justified such a splendid temple?

In an effort to be fair to curator Simon Rees, I offered him the chance to explain (the outcome is published elsewhere in the paper today), and was granted a 50-minute audience with him and his new boss, Teresa Turner, the New Plymouth District Council's manager of recreation and culture.

As we sat down, I noticed Rees had been doing some preparation. He had before him a pile of council documents, well decorated with highlighter. They turned out to be a series of policy statements setting out the principles to which he is required to adhere when deciding how to present Lye to the world. They were written by a previous director and a couple of the council CEOs.

Early on in our chat, Rees emphasised that these enumerated 17 areas of interest surrounding Lye (they've since grown to 24), and the areas must be considered when exhibitions and other activities are planned over time.

My reaction to this is mixed. Policy documents are essential to have in local government. They can thwart a lot of legal and political shenanigans. But are they really much use when dealing with something as ferociously debatable as artistic merit, or more exactly, the showing thereof?

I would argue there are a couple of things that are a lot more significant. One is Rees' undoubted knowledge and expertise as an art curator, whose gut instinct ought to trump so-called bureaucratic principles nearly every time. The second is public opinion.

The second is more difficult. New Zealand's population is too small to support a large enough arts elite that it can please itself when it comes to the spending of public money. The great unwashed (that certainly includes me, although not in the literal sense, hopefully) gets to have a say, because while in the case of an arts museum like this the funds to build it are donated, funding for stage two – its operation in perpetuity – comes mostly from us.

That reality was cemented in, the minute the district council agreed the Len Lye Centre should be built here.

Of course, it doesn't give us a mandate to override Simon Rees on the minutiae of operating the museum. That would be like a councillor with an engineering background telling contractors how deep to bury the sewage pipes. But we do have a right to be listened to when it comes to - and please forgive this lapse into bureaucratese - "overall strategic direction".

The direction we want seems straight forward. We want more of Len's sculptures on show.

Rees says we'll get them, but staged over each year, four at a time, because locals are the main visitors and they will want variety. I disagree. Lye's sculptures are worth seeing more than once, and when – as many apparently do – we proudly take out-of-town visitors to see “our” Len Lye Centre, we want them to see as many as possible.

Nobody can tell me how many that number ought to be. I can only think of the great museums and their permanent collections, and how rich those collections seemed to be whenever I chanced in.

The district council's Len Lye Committee, dormant for the past year, must get to grips with this. It should be wary of etched-in-stone principles. Give Rees and his people policy direction that pays at least some heed to the call of the crowd. Or else the second year of operation might be as terrifying as he fears.