

# The Beat Goes On:



**Emil McAvoy's 'Better Work Stories'**

# Contents

<b>Was it Us?</b> John Minto	<b>6</b>
<b>Paper, Scissors, Rock</b> Emma Bugden	<b>11</b>
<b>The Beat Goes On</b> Emil McAvoy	<b>15</b>
<b>Biographies</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>22</b>







# Was it Us?

John Minto

Seeing film footage of the 1981 Springbok Tour and its “winter of bitterness and discontent” is a surreal experience. It seems like another country, another people in battle with batons, shields, determination and fury. Could it really have happened in this quiet little country?

The PR24 Police Riot Baton was on display in New Zealand for the first time in Hamilton on 25 July 1981 when the police Red and Blue riot squads ranged themselves against the 300 kiwis who had invaded the pitch and stood firmly in the centre of the field. The 300 carried the hopes and aspirations of 30 million black South Africans into living rooms around New Zealand and around the world.

It was a telling spectacle.

The long baton became a symbol of state power during the tour and was wielded by police squads who had volunteered to take part in policing the tour.

The Red Squad which became infamous for its batons, its thuggery and its escape of censure (more notably in

the batoning of the clowns) met as a group by themselves before each game and psyched themselves up for the fray.

So while the protests chanted “Amandla, Amandla Ngawethu” (“Power, Power to the People”) the Red Squad chanted:

Red, Red, Red

Red's the best

R - root more

E - eat more

D - drink more piss

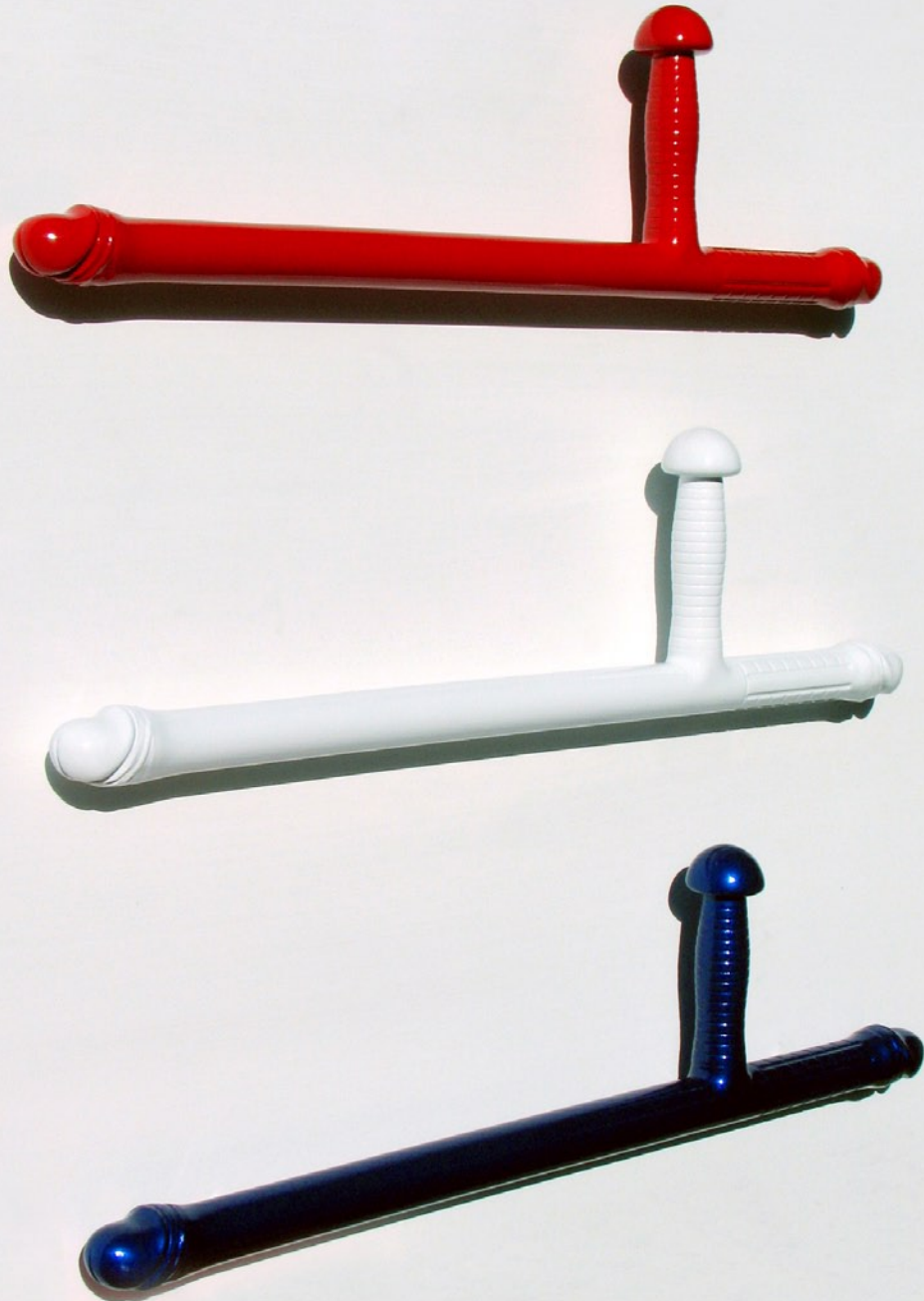
It was a chant which symbolises within the police the worst aspects of aggressive, oppressive, sexist male culture of New Zealand. It's a culture which, as the police repeatedly remind us, continues today.

Yes it was us in 1981. It did happen in New Zealand. Warts and all.









## Paper, Scissors, Rock

Emma Bugden

Of all the things about New Zealand that Australians make fun of, probably the one that's hardest to refute are the jokes about our local television show *Police 10/7*, somewhat unfortunately screened in Australia on Foxtel's crime network. The format is a universal one - a camera crew follow cops around as they investigate law infringements, allowing you as viewer to become part of the intensity and drama of the moment.

The New Zealand version, however, is perhaps a little tamer perhaps than equivalent shows from other countries - as one Australian said to me recently: 'it's mostly helping old ladies across the road and rescuing cats'. Although, in a strange twist, *Police 10/7* experienced a flurry of notoriety this year when TVNZ chief executive Rick Ellis rashly offered it up to a parliamentary committee as an example of local programmes offering a Maori presence as per charter requirements. Brown people commit crimes, appeared to be his rationale.

But for a long time this benign perception of our cops was one shared by most New Zealanders. Cops were the good guys right? The ones you went to for help;

**Left:** *Better Work Stories*  
(*He Patu! Ano*) (2007)  
Emil McAvoy  
Cast aluminium, enamel.

the nation's moral compass, demonstrating a kind but firm paternalism. Maybe the first rupture in this perception was the 1981 Springbok Tour, when (then cop, later National MP) Ross Meurant's Red Squad set a new precedent for police brutality, played out large on camera. The Springbok Tour effectively drew a line across New Zealand, dividing those for and those against. But it's fair to say most people, regardless of political affiliation, were shocked by the images splashed across the media of police batons used against the faces and bodies of protesting civilians. We weren't used to seeing our own blood spill.

The more recent spotlight on the New Zealand police force came after several court appearances by policemen, or former policemen, for historic cases of rape against young women, also from the 1980s. We all know how this one played out, not so much dividing those for and against, as uniting the country in mass disapproval of what was perceived by most as a systemic abuse of power against the young and vulnerable, whatever the legal outcomes. Even the prime minister came out in fierce and telling censure.

As artist Emil McAvoy makes visible in his work *Better Work Stories (He Patu! Ano)* one of the most disturbing aspects of the whole spectacle was the fetishisation of

objects as symbols of hierarchy and authority. The police baton, the silver buttons glinting on the police uniform Clint Rickards naughtily wore on his first day to court despite his suspension - these were surely not random artifacts, but rather, a knowing manipulation of their command as visual reminders of a hidden but irrefutable power.

But if both the Springbok Tour and (at least one of) the more recent court cases were notable for their disturbing use of the erect baton against fragile and damaged bodies, then perhaps a more positive outcome of both were their ability to use grassroots media to communicate their message - from fliers and banners in the Springbok Tour to the internet and fax machines used recently to communicate leaked information about the rape cases. Barely three days after I saw the first anonymous fax spit itself out of our machine, I found it hard to find anyone that hadn't seen one of the banned info sheets. Blogs, emails, leaflets, banners, the illegal distribution of suppressed information was almost instantaneous and mostly untraceable, a viral contamination which was all more powerful for its ephemeral nature, its lack of physical solidity, its lack of artifact.



## The Beat Goes On

Emil McAvoy

The specially-formed Red and Blue Squads were the first New Zealand police issued with the PR24 Control Baton during the 1981 Springbok Tour. The baton, also known as the riot baton or long baton, represented a technological leap in policing, perhaps akin to the introduction of the Taser in recent times. Through the course of the 1981 tour, the long baton gained infamy as a symbol of state power through its use in violent clashes with anti-apartheid protesters.

In 2005, the used baton of Ross Meurant (Red Squad second-in-command during the Springbok Tour police action) went up for sale on Trade Me. The baton, which Meurant wielded throughout the tour, was dubbed the “Minto Bar” after John Minto, a senior leader in the anti-tour protest movement. Meurant and several of his Red Squad colleagues had imported aluminium models from the United States at their own expense. On Trade Me, the sales photo of the “Minto Bar” was displayed in a sexualised manner, on a white sheet lying across a single red rose. A highly charged public response to the sale (notably on the site itself) demonstrated that the events

**Left:** *Better Work Stories*  
*(He Patu! Ano)* (2007) [Detail]  
Emil McAvoy  
Cast aluminium, enamel.



surrounding the 1981 tour remained fresh in the people's memory.

One group, the BlackMask Collective were so outraged that the sale was allowed to proceed that they went as far as to create *MintoBar 2.0*, a software hack designed to cause problems for the Trade Me site. Meurant's "Minto Bar" went on to sell to a South African collector for \$(NZ)20,000.

Similarly, the recent police rape trials have brought other historic events to public attention, and sadly the long baton has reappeared as a physical and symbolic aid in the alleged abuse of power.

Viewers of *Better Work Stories (He Patu! Ano)* may bring to mind even more recent events where others have suffered through an abuse of power in cases of domestic violence. These acts did not inspire the creation of the artwork. Nevertheless, they belong to the territory of shame that the work points to. It is a shame we all share and a problem we all face. *Better Work Stories (He Patu! Ano)* may be seen as an embodiment of the way in which violence, sexual violence and the violation of the less-powerful linger as a pernicious blight in our country. These events

have touched us all, and we share the future to be crafted in their wake.

There is also an online component to this work's story. An edition of *Better Work Stories (He Patu! Ano)* is available for sale on [www.trademe.co.nz](http://www.trademe.co.nz) from 6pm Saturday 10th August. The proceeds from this sale will be donated to charity, and bidders on the site will have an opportunity to nominate appropriate charities.



Reconstruction  
of Ross Meurant's  
'Minto Bar' Trade Me  
sales photograph.



**John Minto** has been an activist since 1975 and became well known as the face of the protest movement against the 1981 Springbok rugby tour to New Zealand. Currently he is Chairperson of QPEC (Quality Public Education Coalition), a spokesperson for Global Peace and Justice Auckland and editor of the Workers Charter newspaper. He lives in Auckland and is the father of two teenage boys.

**Emma Bugden** is Curatorial Director of Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts. A former Curator at City Gallery Wellington, and Director of the Physics Room in Christchurch, her arrival at Te Tuhi has signaled a significant change in direction for the organization, moving from a regional community space to a nationally focused public art gallery. Notable exhibitions she has worked on include *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?*, Te Tuhi, 2007, 'Telecom Prospect 2004: New Art New Zealand', City Gallery Wellington and other venues 2004, and co-curating *Small World Big Town*, Contemporary Art from Te Papa, City Gallery Wellington 2005.

**Emil McAvoy** is an interdisciplinary artist based in Wellington. Since graduating with a Bachelor of Visual Arts from Auckland University of Technology in 2002, he has become known primarily for his real-time video performances in collaboration with sonic artist Frey. Performance highlights include participating in *Intimacy and In.yer.face* (online performance/installation event, Litmus Research Initiative), *Interdigitate* (MIC Toi Rerehiko), *Soundtracks 2006* (New Zealand Film Archive Mediaplex), and *Prospect 2004: New Art New Zealand* (with artists Eugene Hansen, Jenny Gillam and Kaleb Bennett).

McAvoy collaborates widely, and also works in video installation, experimental film, photography, painting, and club VJing. He is a video digitisation specialist for the New Zealand Film Archive, and a visual arts educator at the Wellington Institute of Technology.

*The Beat Goes On* published in conjunction with the premiere of *Better Work stories (He Patu! Ano)* by Emil McAvoy at the Trust Waikato National Contemporary Art Award 2007, in which the work is a finalist on exhibition.

The artist wishes to gratefully acknowledge all those who have helped bring this project to fruition.

This would not have been possible without you.

Photographs of the 1981 Springbok Tour courtesy of John Miller.

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