

Peter ROBINSON

## Introduction

Peter Robinson (born in 1966 in Ashburton, New Zealand) studied sculpture at Ilam School of Fine Arts (1985-1989), and now lives and works in Auckland. Robinson is an important figure in the wave of second generation Māori artists that emerged in the late eighties from the School of Fine Arts (Ilam) at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. Well known in New Zealand for dealing with issues such as race relations in a provocative and controversial manner, Peter Robinson's practice has been characterised by elements of shock and surprise. He has continually shifted tack throughout his career in his use of materials and techniques and the content he addresses.

His work seems to exist in a constant state of flux and change and his subject matter also appears to swing between an articulation of intellectual ideas and pop culture but certain forms and ideas run through his practice. Originally trained as a sculptor, he has also worked in painting, drawing, installation and digital media. His style has varied from rough hand written text on placards to the slick, clean aesthetic of digital prints.

Robinson's early works were concerned with personal and racial issues as he analysed and responded to his part-Maori heritage. He used painting and sculpture to wittily critique assumed aspects of bi-culturalism, the branding of ethnicity, and careerist strategizing - while simultaneously embracing them. He created a series known as the Percentage Paintings in the early 1990s that discussed his specific racial make-up. The works posed the question to the viewer – should a percentage of Maori blood determine his personal and social character, and his importance as an artist? He found that art critics began to stereotype him as a Maori artist but that personally he was not able to work in traditional Maori forms because this felt 'inauthentic'. Recognising this he changed direction and shocked art critics by adopting both Pakeha (non-Maori) and Maori voices often in a contradictory way. From this bi-cultural perspective Robinson could incisively comment on the complexities of race relations, both historical and contemporary, in New Zealand.

More recently, Robinson has shifted from this rhetoric and weight of interpretation to focus more exclusively on exploring and celebrating the materiality of the mediums with which he works such as felt, polystyrene, and steel. Interested in the play between order and disorder, density and lightness, dispersion and compression, Robinson creates bold, monumental and irrepressible forms where the idea of sculpture is often momentarily balanced between building up and breaking down. Indeed, Robinson's affection for materiality is regularly experienced as profusion and excess.

Robinson's work has been exhibited extensively in New Zealand and internationally. He was New Zealand's representative at the 49th Venice Biennale (2001), participated in the 13th Istanbul Biennale (2013), 11th and 18th Biennale of Sydney (1998/2012), and the 8th Baltic Triennale of International Art, Vilnius (2002). His work has been included in major international touring exhibitions including: Continental shift, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen (2000); Toi Toi Toi: three generations of artists from New Zealand, Museum Fridericianum, Kassel (1999); and Cultural safety: contemporary art from New Zealand, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt am Main (1995). Robinson was nominated for the Walters Prize in 2006 for The Humours at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, and again in 2008 when he won for his exhibition ACK at Artspace, Auckland.



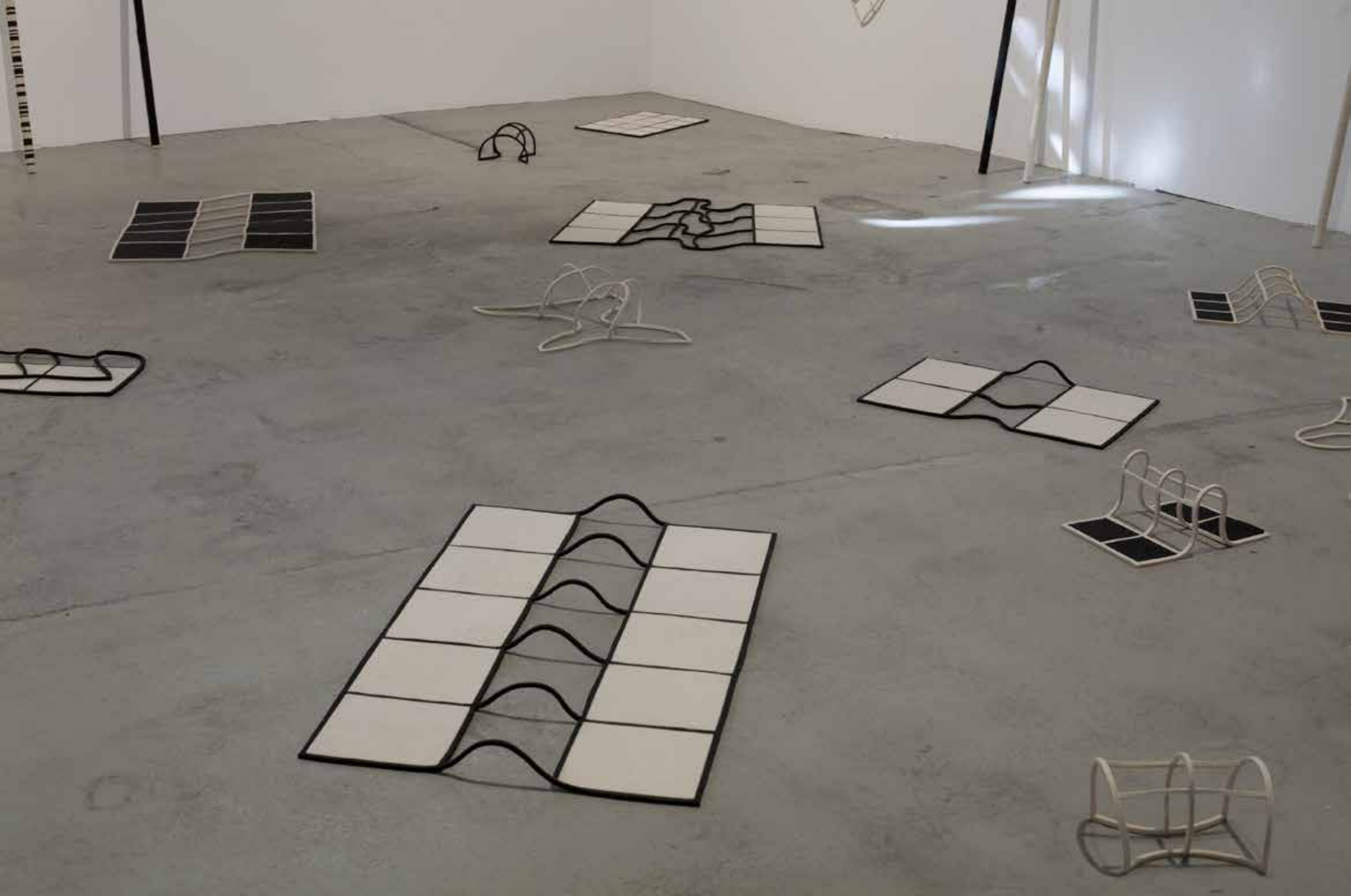
*Pair et Impair* 2014 -- exhibition view -- Art-O-Rama, Marseille, France



*Pair et Impair 2014 -- exhibition view -- Art-O-Rama, Marseille, France*



*Pair et Impair 2014 -- exhibition view -- Art-O-Rama, Marseille, France*



*Pair et Impair 2014 -- exhibition view -- Art-O-Rama, Marseille, France*





*Pair et Impair 2014 -- exhibition view -- Art-O-Rama, Marseille, France*

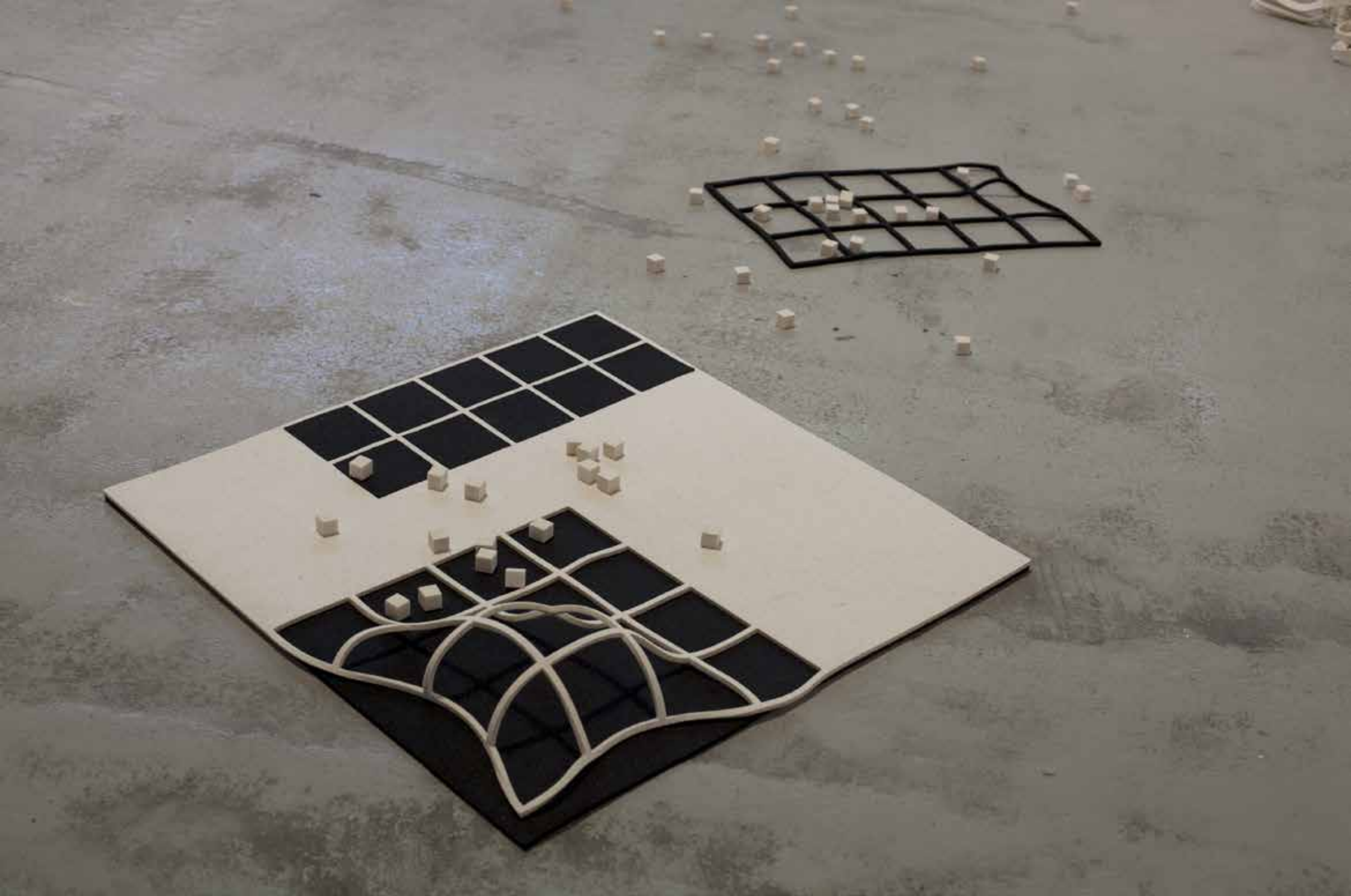


*Pair et Impair 2014 -- exhibition view -- Art-O-Rama, Marseille, France*





*Pair et Impair 2014 -- exhibition view -- Art-O-Rama, Marseille, France*



*Pair et Impair 2014 -- exhibition view -- Art-O-Rama, Marseille, France*

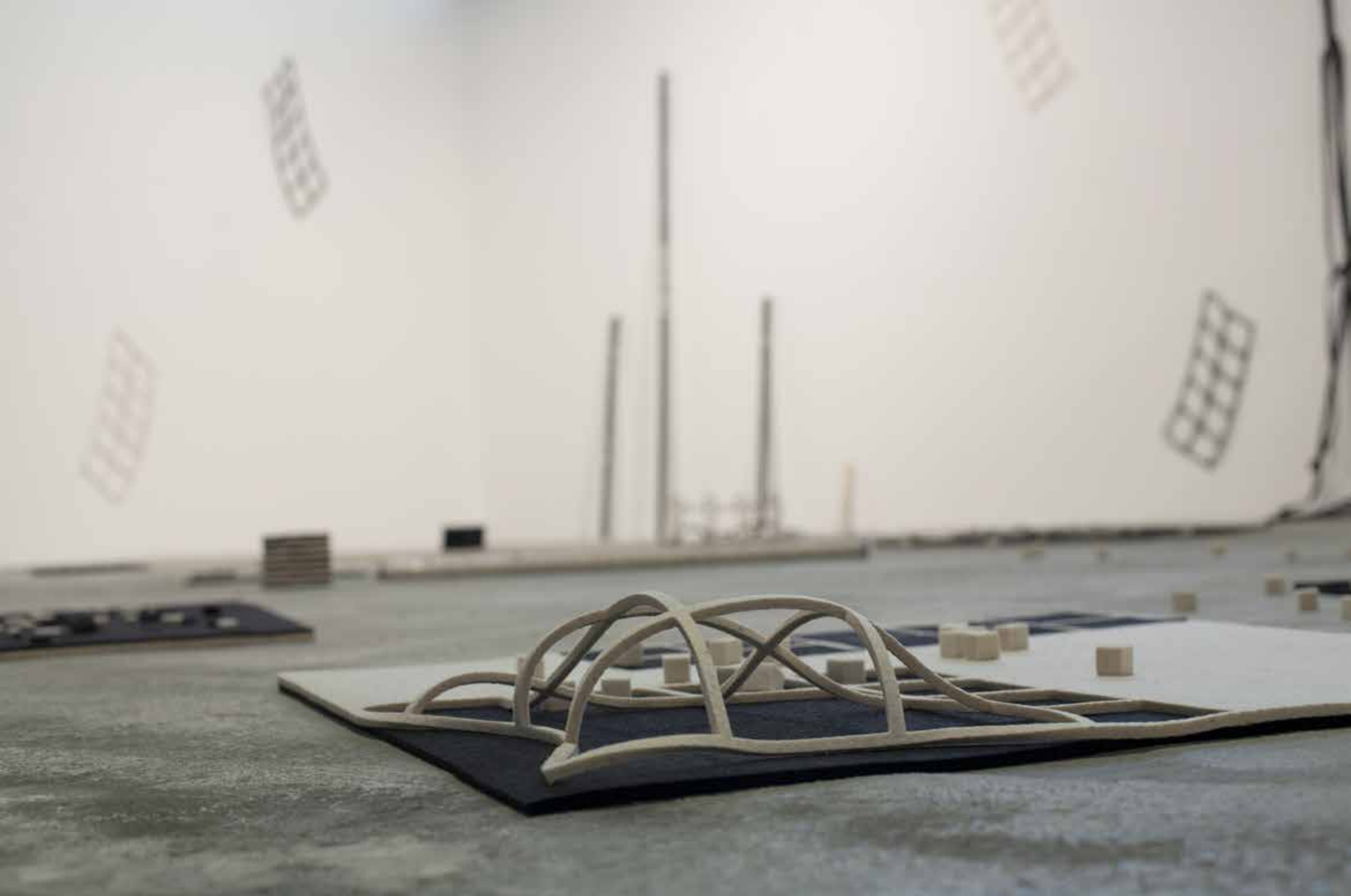


*Pair et Impair* 2014 -- exhibition view -- Art-O-Rama, Marseille, France





*Pair et Impair 2014 -- exhibition view -- Art-O-Rama, Marseille, France*



*Pair et Impair 2014 -- exhibition view -- Art-O-Rama, Marseille, France*



With *Tribe Subtribe*, audiences are invited to take part to create a series of colourful felt sticks in the gallery, bringing together conceptual minimalism with craft traditions.

Following on from Robinson's major piece for the Auckland Triennial, *If You Were To Work Here: The Mood At The Museum*, this follow-up exhibition continues the artist's recent interest in bringing together strangers to co-create with him. On opening day the gallery floor will be filled with a carpet of hundreds of small felt rings, while a stack of coloured aluminium rods stand by. Visitors are encouraged to select a rod and feed rings on to it, creating a unique felt stick.

Robinson has always been simultaneously a materialist and a conceptualist, weaving complex ideas into the most spectacular manipulations of fabric, felt, wax, or plastic. He is the artist who wrangled six tonnes of expanded polystyrene foam so it wound its way through an entire gallery, the glare of light coming off so much white it was as blinding as its title, *Snowball*, *Blind Time*, suggested.



*Tribe Subtribe* 2013-2014 -- exhibition view -- The Dowse Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand





*Tribe Subtribe* 2013-2014 -- exhibition view -- The Dowse Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand





*Tribe Subtribe* 2013-2014 -- exhibition view -- The Dowse Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand



*Tribe Subtribe* 2013-2014 -- exhibition view -- The Dowse Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand





*Tribe Subtribe* 2013-2014 -- exhibition view -- The Dowse Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand



**PETER  
ROBINSON  
TRIBE  
SUBTRIBE**

*Tribe Subtribe* 2013-2014 -- exhibition view -- The Dowse Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand

Peter Robinson: *Cuts and Junctures*

Peter Robinson is one of New Zealand's leading artists. Since 2006 he has been exploring a history of modernist sculpture, reworking its forms and manoeuvres in unlikely materials such as polystyrene, felt, Perspex, and piano wire. Robinson's sculptural investigations ransack recent art history, referencing artists as various as Andre Cadere, Franz Erhard Walther, Eva Hesse, and John Pating, but they also inject suggestive cultural and narrative content to disrupt modernism's autonomy and its universalist claims.



*Cuts and Junctures* 2013 -- exhibition view -- Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand





*Cuts and Junctures 2013* -- exhibition view -- Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand





*Cuts and Junctures 2013 -- exhibition view -- Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand*



*Cuts and Junctures* 2013 -- exhibition view -- Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand



*Cuts and Junctures 2013 -- exhibition view -- Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand*





*Cuts and Junctions* 2013  
exhibition view -- Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand



*Cuts and Junctures 2013 -- exhibition view -- Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand*





*Cuts and Junctures* 2013 -- exhibition view -- Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

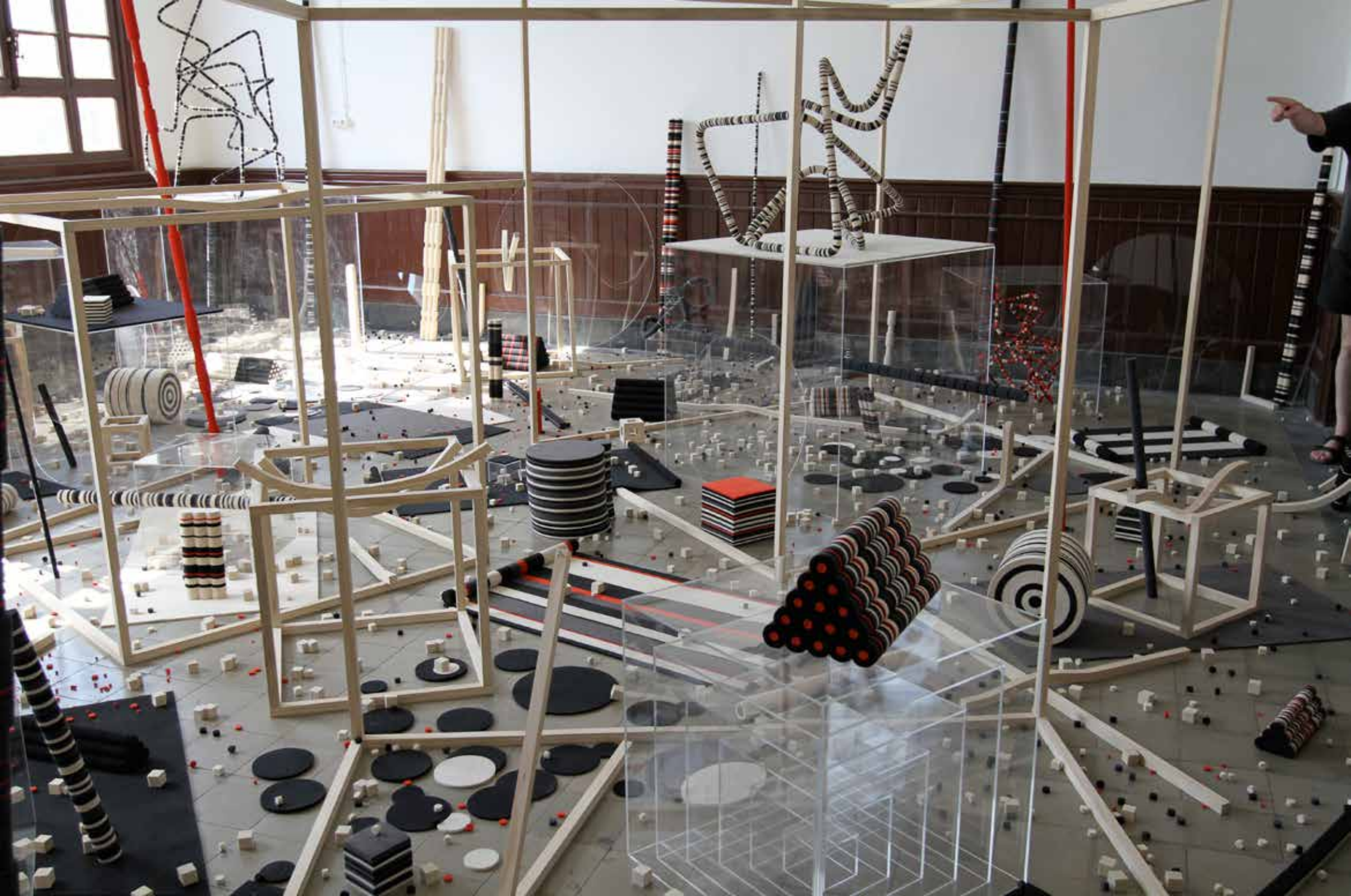
In *Ruses and Legacies* (2013) Robinson employs typical minimalist forms, such as cubes, cylinders, planes, and lines, to challenge the audience's perception. On first impression the installation is a disorganized array of primary forms borrowing from a literalist language of minimalism. However, things are not as they seem to be: hard, void are solids, solids are voids, multiple is singular, the disorganized is organized and random is intentional.

A densely installed collection of forms litter the space: oval and circular transparent Plexiglass discs rest against transparent cubes; felt poles lean against, on, or, inside cubes; poles of many sizes abut others (some stand erect and others fold). Each form acts in opposition to the next, veering away from any fixed position — they are circuits that loop rather than come to a conclusion. It becomes clear that each cluster of objects is intentionally grouped; however, the angular arrangement of objects suggests that this installation is incomplete. Objects lean against the walls as if their use is undecided or to suggest additional possibilities than those presented in the room, allowing the viewer to imaginatively extend the installation outside of the four walls of the space.

The 13th Istanbul Biennial focuses on the public domain and how different ways of occupying space can be conceived of politically. Robinson's installation is an index of forms that examine the ways in which they can be condensed into spatial models crafted from materials (felt, Plexiglass, and wood) that are themselves results of processes of compression and extension. In doing so the work alludes to ways in which public space also contains the ability to contact or amplify a context through or dependant upon its arrangement.

Danae Mossman and Sarah Hopkinson





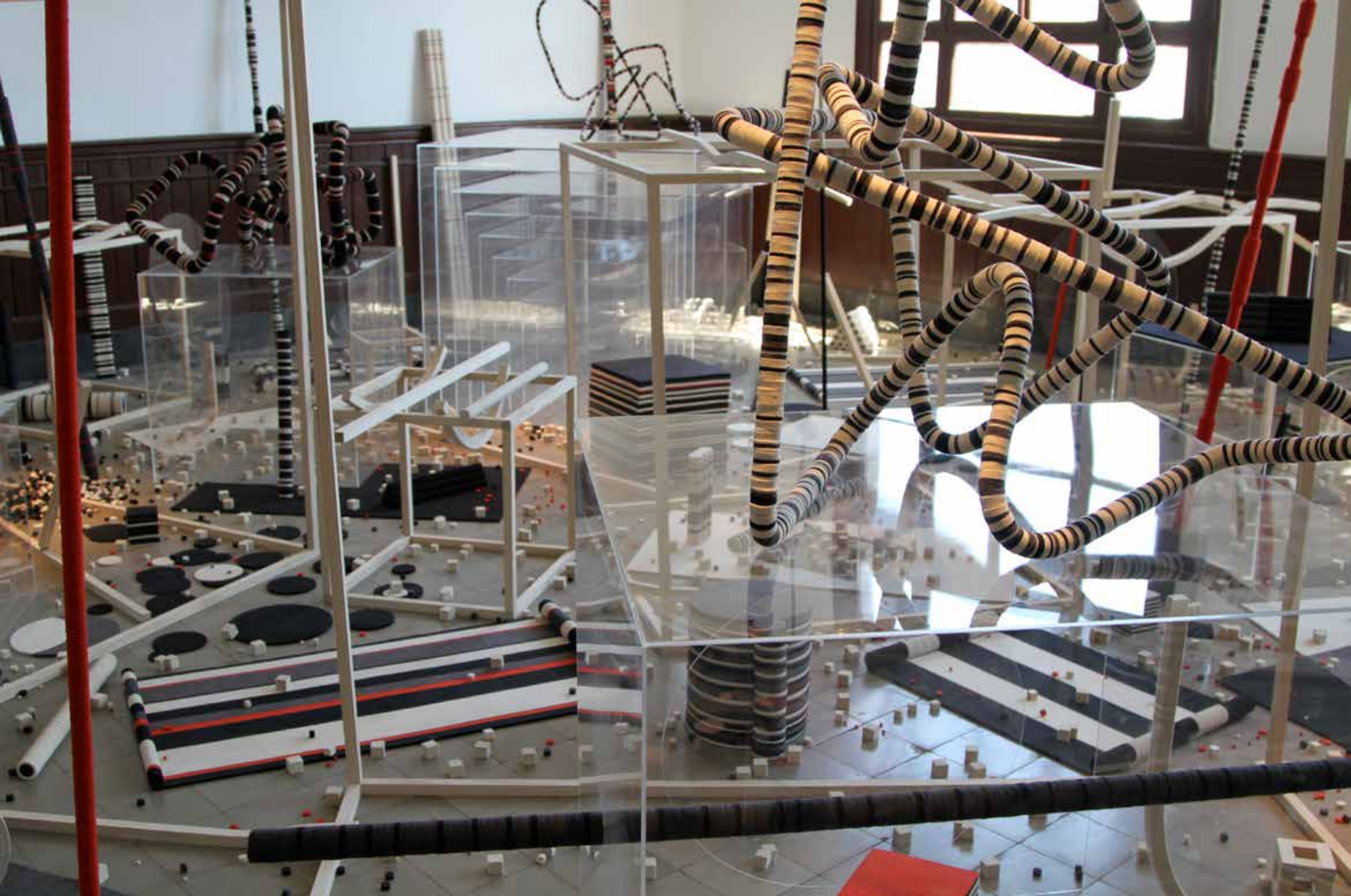
*Ruses & Legacies* 2013 -- exhibition view -- The 13th Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey





*Ruses & Legacies* 2013 -- exhibition view -- The 13th Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey





*Ruses & Legacies* 2013 -- exhibition view -- The 13th Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey





*Ruses & Legacies* 2013 -- exhibition view -- The 13th Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey

## Ritual and Formation



*Ritual and Formation*, 2013 -- Wool felt, aluminium rods -- 260 x 975 x 50 cm overall (installation dimensions variable)





*Ritual and Formation*, 2013 -- Wool felt, aluminium rods -- 260 x 975 x 50 cm overall (installation dimensions variable)

*Defunct Mnemonics*, 2012-2013  
wool felt, wood dowel  
dimensions vary



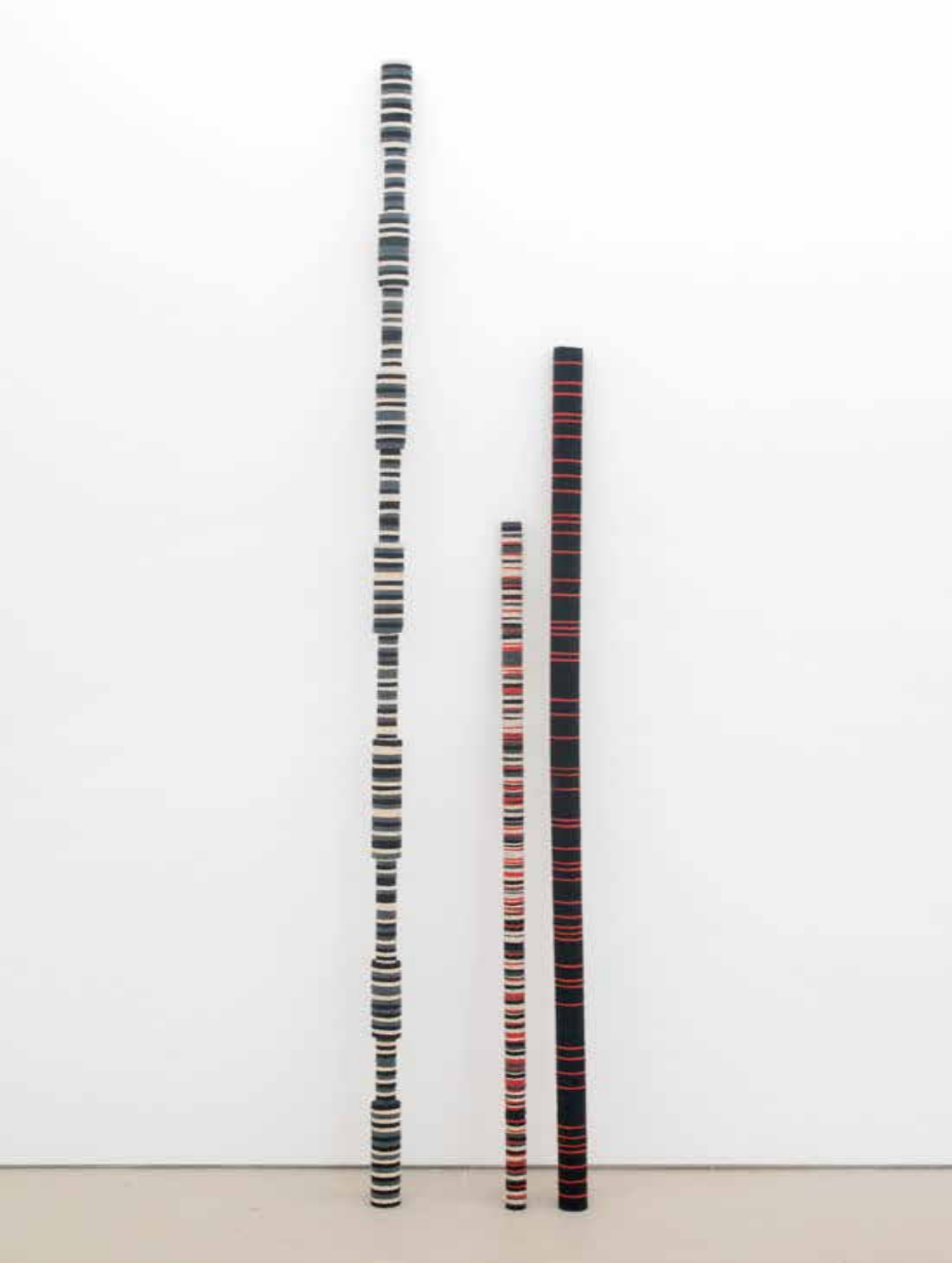


*Structure & Subjectivity*, 2012 -- Wool felt, aluminium rods -- 100 x 100 x 75 cm



*Defunct Mnemonics*, 2012  
wool felt, wood dowel  
235 x 5 x 5 cm





*Defunct Mnemonics*, 2012-2013  
wool felt, wood dowel  
dimensions vary

*Defunct Mnemonics*, 2012  
wool felt, wood dowel  
dimensions vary





Peter Robinson's recent work investigates both the materiality and metaphoric potential of his chosen medium. Whether it is the massive weightless volume of polystyrene forms or the densely contracted materiality of felt, Robinson's sculptural propositions play out various oppositions such as density and lightness, and dispersion and compression. His felt sticks reference the formalist legacies of minimalist, post-minimalist and conceptual art, conflating these iconic art-historical conventions with both traditional Māori abstraction and taonga (treasure) forms, and genetic or binary codes, to activate a contemporary recoding and recontextualisation.



*If You Were To Work Here: The Mood In The Museum 2013 -- exhibition view -- Auckland Triennial 'If You Were To Live Here', Auckland War Memorial Museum, Auckland, New Zealand*





*If You Were To Work Here: The Mood In The Museum* 2013 -- exhibition view -- Auckland Triennial 'If You Were To Live Here', Auckland War Memorial Museum, Auckland, New Zealand





*If You Were To Work Here: The Mood In The Museum* 2013 -- exhibition view -- Auckland Triennial 'If You Were To Live Here', Auckland War Memorial Museum, Auckland, New Zealand

### Acktion Painting / Acktion Sculpture

Acktion Painting / Acktion Sculpture, an exhibition of large-scale works by Peter Robinson from 2006-2008. As the title suggests, the Acktion Paintings are the result of a very physical process; of quick, immediate gestures in space. Some works contain an intense movement of loose fluid marks including sketches of figures, flowers, chains and genitals that ooze or burst from one another. Others are more abstract and present almost monochromatic colour as a lens of giant twisting brushstrokes. Shown together here for the first time, they reveal what appears to be a cathartic moment for the artist as ideas –old, new, borrowed, familiar and strange– spew forth on the canvas.

Where in earlier paintings Robinson acerbically tests the boundaries of political correctness, the Acktion Paintings tap into something rudimentary in an art historical lineage; an archetypal visual language that has been the domain of artists across the past century, from Joan Miro to Willem De Kooning, Barry Le Va to Jean-Michael Basquiat. Robinson's has a long-standing fascination with the politics of imported legacies and a shrewd ability to engage both the physical and cultural ramifications of his chosen references. In the Acktion Paintings, historic influences are reduced to signs and jumbled together to chart a liminal space in the artist's practice between formalism and the unconscious mind. As always, there is an element of comedy at play in Robinson's work. In this case, it lies in the absurdity or paradox of making self-conscious subconscious paintings. The surfaces betray this awkwardness – each is a battleground between the id's wild gestations, and the super ego's hyper-awareness of the formal legacies they invoke.

Ack (re-Ack), the polystyrene and foam sculpture that occupies the small gallery, is a reincarnation of Ack; a condensed version of the huge form that snaked through Artspace in 2006 and subsequently in the Auckland Art Gallery for the 2008 Walters Prize exhibition. As with all Robinson's polystyrene forms, Ack (re-Ack) is a metaphorical iceberg with much lurking beneath the waterline. The messy politics of the paintings are here played out in space through a comically aggressive occupation of the gallery. Appendages punch through space from the insidious white, weightless volume of polystyrene, while blue foam beaks protrude from head-like forms or sprout directly from the gallery wall.



*Aktion Painting / Aktion Sculpture 2013 -- exhibition view -- Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, New Zealand*





*Aktion Painting / Aktion Sculpture 2013 -- exhibition view -- Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, New Zealand*



*Aktion Painting / Aktion Sculpture 2013 -- exhibition view -- Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, New Zealand*

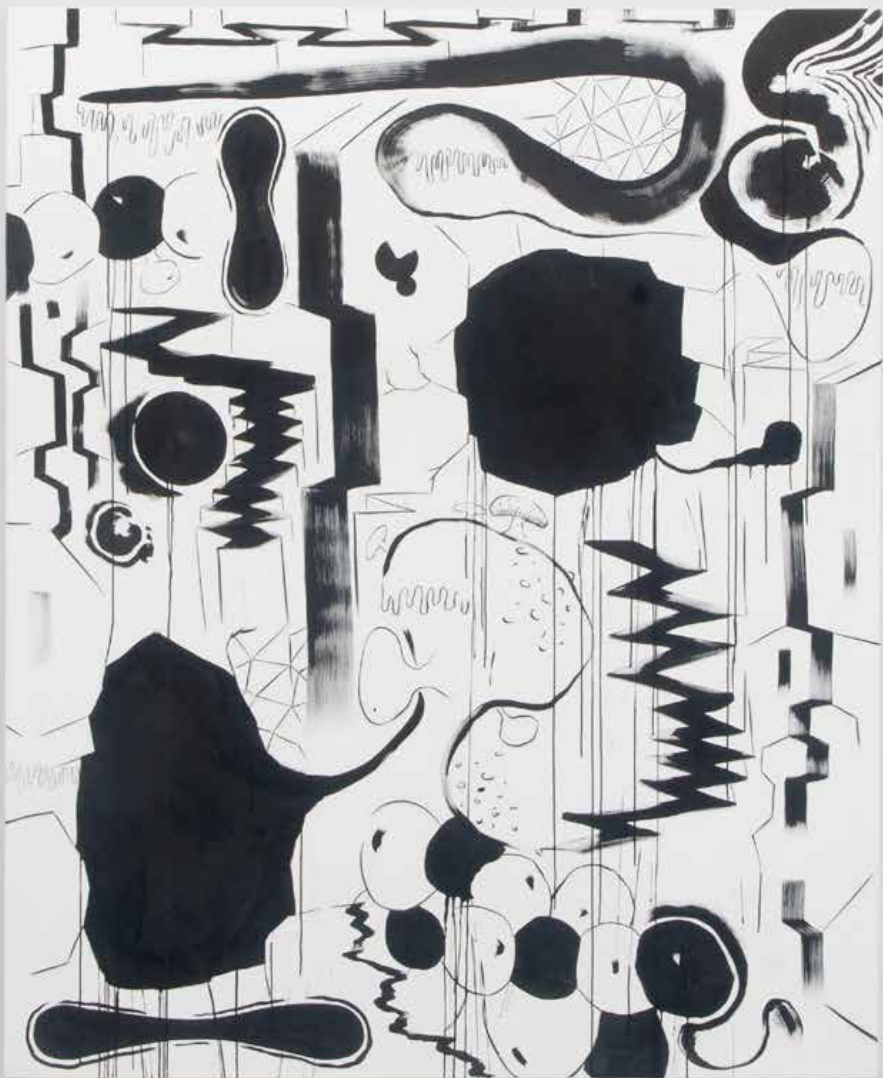


*Aktion Painting / Aktion Sculpture 2013 -- exhibition view -- Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, New Zealand*





*Aktion Painting* , 2006-2008 -- oil on canvas -- 220 x 180 cm



*Aktion Painting* , 2006-2008 -- oil on canvas -- 220 x 180 cm

*Defunct Mnemonics*





*Defunct Mnemonics 2012* -- exhibition view -- Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand



*Defunct Mnemonics 2012 -- exhibition view -- Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand*





*Defunct Mnemonics 2012* -- exhibition view -- Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand



*Structure and Subjectivity*



*Structure and Subjectivity 2012 -- exhibition view -- Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand*



*Structure and Subjectivity 2012 -- exhibition view -- Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand*



*Essential Security*



*Essential Security 2011 -- exhibition view -- Sutton Gallery , Melbourne, Australia*



*Essential Security 2011 -- exhibition view -- Sutton Gallery , Melbourne, Australia*



*Modern Standards*



*Modern Standards 2010 -- exhibition view -- Auckland Art Gallery , Auckland, New Zealand*



*Modern Standards 2010* -- exhibition view -- Auckland Art Gallery , Auckland, New Zealand





*Modern Standards 2010 -- exhibition view -- Auckland Art Gallery , Auckland, New Zealand*



*Modern Standards 2010 -- exhibition view -- Auckland Art Gallery , Auckland, New Zealand*



*Modern Standards 2010 -- exhibition view -- Auckland Art Gallery , Auckland, New Zealand*



## Hegel, Negation, and How to Levitate the Minimalist Object

ALLAN SMITH

*For we are wagering here that thinking never has done with the conjuring impulse . . .*

*And since this becoming-immaterial of matter seems to take no time and to operate its transmutation in the magic of an instant, in a single glance, through the omnipotence of a thought, we might also be tempted to describe it as the projection of an animism or a spiritism . . . It goes into trances, it levitates, it appears relieved of its body . . . delirious, capricious, and unpredictable.*

—Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

When the narrator of Saul Bellow's novel *Henderson the Rain King* looks back to his fifty-fifth year, to a time when he felt the world 'so mighty an oppressor', the 'facts begin to crowd [him]'. He feels the pressure in his chest as the 'disorderly rush' of his life rises up against him: his parents, his wives, his girls, his children, his habits, his drunkenness, his brutality, his soul, his teeth, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, we labour under our own payload of besetting impediments—a genetic disposition to obesity, a crippling financial debt, an intransigent colleague, a fear of lifts, a reluctance to suffer silently. But what if our endemic impotence beneath the world's overbearing weight underwent a sudden reversal and became instead an exceptional capacity to act effectively? What if we could suddenly do more than just rearrange the furniture of our lives? What if we could redesign the world to attain a frictionless commerce with it? What if Atlas's mythic burden turned into a sphere of infinite levity? It would be as if the oppressive bulk, the stubborn blockages, and the haughty poundage of it all had become as light as polystyrene. That is, as light as air you could get a grip on.

Peter Robinson has been working with polystyrene since 2006. Discussing his recent polystyrene monoliths, Robinson said he wanted to counter a typically disorganised and inchoate interior world of half-formed thoughts, indecisions, and feelings with a measure of formal coherence and organisational shape.<sup>3</sup> He also said he wanted his monoliths to 'surge up' and indirectly bring their surrounding space into presence while remaining somewhat mute and reticent themselves.<sup>4</sup> Whereas his first formulation asserts the artist's agency, the primacy of decisive action, the second credits the object with its own forms of initiative. Robinson's stagey formalism pits the idealist notion of the world as passive, manipulable material (completely susceptible to thought) against an idea of the material world as uncanny and independent (with a mind of its own).

The aspiration to displace the arbitrary with the motivated, the vague with the determined—to give the amorphousness and fickle anarchy of our lives a specific structure—is hardly new. But what interests me about Robinson's polystyrene sculptures, his monoliths in particular, is how they dramatise a tenacious but precarious will-to-form, which parallels contradictions at the heart of the historical minimalist object. His luminous virtual objects are provisional caprices, condensates of bright ideas. This is sculpture as wish-fulfillment, as speculative assertion. Robinson's minimalism simultaneously acknowledges and undermines the popular perception of minimalism as a signifier of inviolable institutional power. There is a crucial element of comedy in Robinson's minimalist forms and formats—an inversion of generic minimalism's supposed heroic seriousness. However, he is not merely fashioning clever one-liners from the safe distance of an ironic postmodernism. While Robinson may be cruel to one-dimensional understandings of minimalism, he is kindly attentive to strange complexities within the historical things themselves.

Corporate culture has frozen the equivocality and contradictoriness of the historical minimalist object into the haughty calm of the right design choice. It has thereby effaced the extraordinary strangeness and instability at work in the minimalist sculpture of artists such as Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Donald Judd, and Eva Hesse. The power of the business-as-usual residing in minimalist corporate aesthetics—the office blocks, fine-lined boardrooms, and the sleek black-box technologies of contemporary capitalism—is about displaying an effortless assumption of rules and secrets inscrutable to outsiders. Capitalism is constituted by—and depends on disguising—the unruly contradictions at the heart of commodities. However, the visual and physical arts, and philosophical reflection thereon, have a history of exacerbating the incongruities at the heart of objects, which—even when for sale in art's showrooms—resist reduction to commodities. In part, this is what Anna Chave's essay 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power'<sup>5</sup> fails to acknowledge: the aporias, negations, and ambiguities that made the minimalist object something non-identical with itself, dramatising its own contradictions to an acute degree. Minimalism's perplexing indifference or inaccessibility is not primarily a reference to the blank face of power, but is about the way we can never really control or fully access the world of objects.

Chave's essay begins with an anecdote that she uses to chastise Judd's sculpture for its rigidly policed culture of dominance and control. Two young girls grace a polished-brass Judd box with their ambivalent attentions. One kicks it while the other stoops to conquer its mirrored surface with a kiss. Rather than seeing the girls' response as vindicating her conviction that Judd's box got what it deserved for being so damned intransigent, I take Chave's anecdote as beautifully illustrating the maddening contradictions at the object's heart. A shiny Judd box is simultaneously a relentlessly economic demonstration of fabricational logic and chromatically, luminously alluring. Narcissistically groomed to both seduce the viewer and remain aggressively distinct from all that gets near it, its implacability is over-wrought. For all its vaunted unity, the conflicting internal pressures of a Judd box split it into polarised facets. Robert Smithson saw this clearly when he compared a stainless-steel-and-pink-plexiglass Judd box to a giant crystal that had fallen from outer space—a Lovcraftian thing of impenetrable and alien beauty. Judd's assertive formal logic notwithstanding, Smithson makes the crucial point that 'What seems so solid and final in Judd's work is at the same time elusive and brittle.'<sup>6</sup> Even more pertinent for understanding what Robinson is up to is Smithson's identifying an 'uncanny materiality' in the appearance of Judd's objects. This produces a concept

1 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 25, 152.

2 Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 3.

3 The artist has been working with polystyrene for the last five years.

4 I am paraphrasing from notes made after a conversation with the artist in July 2010.

5 Anna C. Chave, 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power', *Arts*, no. 64, January 1990; 44–63.

6 Robert Smithson, 'Donald Judd', *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 22.

of ‘anti-matter’ . . . [that] fills everything, making these very definite works verge on the notion of disappearance. The important phenomenon is always the basic lack of substance at the core of the ‘facts’.<sup>7</sup>

Philosopher Graham Harman’s recent books on the divided life of objects present greedily inventive arguments that I hope will have a bearing on the continuing discussion of modernist and minimalist objects. Harman constantly refers to the dark turbulence at the heart of any object, the ‘ontological fissure’ that arises from every object’s existence—‘a slumbering brute force irreducible to any experience we may have of it’, and always intrinsically alien to ‘the tangible object of some sort of perception or discussion’.<sup>8</sup> When Michael Fried said that Tony Smith’s steel *Die* (1962–8) was something you could never ‘come to the end of’—and that, in the presence of the minimalist/literalist work, the viewer’s body turned ‘vaguely monstrous’—he was acknowledging the effect of the independent object’s uncanny agency upon us.<sup>9</sup>

With his monoliths, Robinson points to the reversibility of initiative between subject and object, artist and material form. In previous shows, Robinson played up his role as an improvisational manipulator of accented form. That he included a large stack of unmodified and naturally weathered polystyrene blocks in his *Polymer Monoliths* exhibition at Brisbane’s Institute of Modern Art implicitly acknowledges the object’s own conatus independent of any human will to organise. Equally to the point is Robinson’s allusion to Michaelangelo’s unfinished slaves, who emerge from their cradles of coarsely chiselled marble, endeavouring to shrug off the overbearing weight of their material constraints. First presented at Sydney’s Artspace, Robinson’s massive blocks of polystyrene are roughly ‘dressed’, with the resulting flakes of litter left to build up around them on the floor, as if the artist, in good neo-platonic style, had shaved away the external crust to let the true form of the block reveal itself. The neo-platonic myth of the artist seeing and releasing the form hidden in the marble block is usually understood as valorising the artist’s formal initiative. In Hegelian terms, this idealist capacity to render the material world commensurate to thought demonstrates that ‘thought is the constitutive substance of external things’.<sup>10</sup> The figure’s emergence from its material matrix is equally attributable to the generative potential of matter—to the ‘innate vibrancy’ of matter, to use Jane Bennett’s term. From the perspective of an inorganic vitalism, as Bennett says, ‘In this strange, vital materialism, there is no point of pure stillness, no indivisible atom that is not itself aquiver with virtual force.’<sup>11</sup>

Like Marx’s commodity-with-a-secret, the classic minimalist object could appear at first to be ‘extremely obvious’—if not a ‘trivial thing’, at least a sober, earnest, and reliable kind of thing. However, ‘analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’.<sup>12</sup> Marx offers, as an example, a table that appears to dance and ‘stand on its head’.<sup>13</sup> With their dry, glinting whiteness, Robinson’s massive colloidal blocks of aerated and fused styrene bubbles seem equally ready to display the ‘mystical character of the commodity’ that compelled Marx to reach into the ‘misty realm of religion’ to find analogies for the ‘fantastic form of a relation between things’, for strange inversions between the sensuous and the super-sensuous, the thinking object and the objectified subject.<sup>14</sup>

As large blocks of specially cut or found polystyrene, Robinson’s monoliths are innately stagey. Resembling theatrical props in an archaic set-piece, they remind me of *Harmonic 33*, a book I read in the early 1970s. Its author, New Zealand commercial-airline pilot Bruce Cathie, discusses UFOs, global power grids, and gravity-distortion fields. Published in the same year as Erich von Däniken’s *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968), *Harmonic 33* speculates on ancient ruins and masonry structures from Egyptian, Incan, Mayan, Aztec, and Easter Island sites.<sup>15</sup> Cathie hypothesises that only an unknown master race of extraterrestrial engineers could possibly have co-ordinated such mysterious, sophisticated, and similar structures worldwide. He writes:

Whatever their use, there is no doubt at all that they are constructed of stone and marble blocks, some of them weighing hundreds of tons each, and each is hewn and placed in position with a precision that would be the envy of any engineer today.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from the precise geometry required to construct such monuments as The Great Pyramid, Cathie is most keen to account for the transportation of enormous quantities of stone from quarry to construction site:

It is inconceivable that the thousands of stone blocks, each weighing many tons, that were used in the construction of the Great Pyramid, were dragged hundreds of miles by slaves, then fitted together with such precision that a visiting card cannot be pushed between them . . . The blocks of red granite which form the roof of the King’s Chamber, weigh up to 70 tons and were brought from a quarry 600 miles away.<sup>17</sup>

---

7 Ibid., 23.

8 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2002), 31, 32. See also Harman’s *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2005); *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010); *Circus Philosophicus* (Winchester: O-Books, 2010).

9 Michael Fried, cited in Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figuration, Modernism, Minimalism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 196, 191.

10 Hegel, quoted in Robert Stern, *Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object* (London, Routledge, 1990), 112.

11 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 57.

12 Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 163.

13 Keeping the Sorcerer’s Apprentice sequence of Disney’s *Fantasia* of 1940 in mind, we also recall that, in his ambivalent eulogy to the productive forces of the bourgeois age, Marx claimed that, while the bourgeoisie had ‘accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids’, it had also ‘conjured up such gigantic means of production and exchange’ that it had become ‘like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells’.

14 Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 164, 165.

15 Bruce Cathie, *Harmonic 33* (Wellington: A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1971).

16 Ibid., 140.

17 Ibid., 141.

Cathie goes on to recount an Arab legend about the transfer of huge stones from a distant location. It explains that stone blocks were laid on sections of symbolically inscribed papyrus. The blocks were then ‘struck by a rod, whereupon they would move through the air «the distance of one bowshot. In this way they came eventually to the building site.’ Cathie surmises:

It is quite possible that these massive blocks are cut to certain dimensions so that frequencies are set up when they are struck and made to vibrate, thus causing a loss of weight . . . The placing of the papyrus beneath the stones before they are struck, could be a type of insulation between the stone and the Earth. This would prevent the vibrations from being attenuated into the Earth before a reaction with the grid takes place, causing the weight loss.<sup>18</sup>

From ancient Egypt fast-forward to the fantasy future of Pixar’s animated film *The Incredibles* (2004). Here, we find a similar frequency-altering technology—a ‘zero-point energy’ device—in the hands of the evil-genius inventor Syndrome. Aiming his technologically enhanced gauntlet at an individual or a group, Syndrome can freeze his targets and flick them around like fish on a line. Unwittingly, both Cathie’s Arabic wand of power and Syndrome’s immobilisation gadget suggest themselves as emblems for the extravagant efficacy of thought, for the concept at work as a power of negation. In Cathie’s story, the inscribed papyrus that the resonating block sits on may stand in for the interpretive text as it animates and propels the object of critique in one direction or another—what Robert Morris dubbed ‘the anti-matter of commentary’.<sup>19</sup> Syndrome’s point-freeze-and-shift technology attests to the omnipotent caprice of conceptualisation, conjecture, speculation, description, or definition going to work on anything within range. While recalling the terrifying usurpation of the external world by his vivid mental life as a child, Wordsworth asserts a renewed enthrallment to the allure of idealist projections that support his life as a poet. He seizes on Archimedes’s claim that he could move the world if he had a point whereon to rest his machine. Who has not felt the same aspirations as regards the world of his own mind?<sup>20</sup>

Wordsworth cites Archimedes to argue for the fictionalising power gained through employing myths, conceits, and analogies as fulcrums for lifting the heaviest weights. For Archimedes, Syndrome, and Cathie’s Egyptian engineer, it’s all about position. It’s about aligning or highlighting things to shift them—taking up the right position in relation to what one wants to move. So much art—especially modern and contemporary art, especially sculpture, especially sculpture in the minimalist tradition—is predicated on heightened scenarios of positioning, of placement, of determining appropriate and specific angles of approach. The implicit philosophical content—what Marx might call the ‘metaphysical subtleties’—of the minimalist object is foregrounded through positing the object as something that requires determination, interrogation, and a particular kind of evaluation. The minimalist object is set up in order to be put through its ontological paces. Referring to the Hegelian methodology of ‘positing’ that which is to be considered, Frederic Jameson suggests:

rather than thinking in terms of axioms, belief, presuppositions, and other such conceptual ballast, it might be better to try to convey the specificity of positing in terms of theatrical settings or pro-filmic arrangements, in which, ahead of time, a certain number of things are placed on stage, certain depths are calculated, and an optical centre also carefully provided, the laws of perspective invoked in order to strengthen the illusion to be achieved. Even though the suggestion of fictionality and of calculated illusion remains very strong in this example, it might well help to convey the kind of analysis necessary to explain the effects of a spectacle provided in advance: how the sets were put together, what the lines of flight are, the illusion of specific depths, the lighting in the foreground and background, etc.<sup>21</sup>

In this theatrical ‘sketch-up’, Jameson indicates how quickly the positing—the setting up—produces a set of calculated conditions and effects that could always be otherwise. The vividness of the stage set is increased by the obviousness of its temporary, improvised nature. This exacerbated capacity of the ensemble to change, to be different from itself—to exceed itself—is the power of negation. Borrowing from Hegel via Jean-Luc Nancy, we can call it the ‘restlessness of the negative’.<sup>22</sup> The specificity of each determinate part of the stage set, each determinate feature of the object under scrutiny, is shadowed and constantly ghosted by its negations. The more specifically and directly something declares or foregrounds what it is, the more precarious its identity appears, and the more it looks like a cartoon or working diagram of itself. The more assertively a thing is staged, the more it registers its differences from other possibilities. However, it still contains these possibilities as forms, options, and alternatives that constantly undermine and hollow out the density of its self-identity.

Polystyrene seems ideally suited to model such metaphysical restlessness and self-negation. Anything made from polystyrene always looks like a working hypothesis—a ghost of something real. Polystyrene’s uniformly bland, white sparkle makes every form it assumes like a 3-D version of that cheap dematerialisation effect used in sci-fi films to depict teleportation static or dying aliens revealing their anomalous materiality. In keeping with Jameson’s theatrical trope, polystyrene comes into its own in TV workshops and film-prop construction, as it gets carved into rusticated medieval stonework or exotic cliff faces. Alternatively, used as insulation and filler in building technology, as packaging for white goods, or for conference cups, polystyrene is the interstitial and pre-eminently disposable material. Whether Robinson used it to fashion ostentatiously baroque configurations—as in several previous projects—or the ancient-monolith-cum-primary-industrial units seen recently, polystyrene readily takes to the stage of its own abnegation.

Robinson’s first polystyrene installation *Ack* (2006) had a restless organicism, with slumping and twisting sinuosities, whimsical sprouting off-shoot ‘limbs’, a slow-motion punch through a wall, and some delicate ice-cake detail. Numerous polystyrene works followed, featuring enmeshed proliferations of trailing chains and crumbled polystyrene clumps and Barry Le Va-like scatterings of cylinder stumps, rods, and small cubes. *Ack* and the promethean chain works presented Robinson as a romantic impresario-of-form. Their wayward inventiveness, scalar involutions, and elaborate textures declared an accumulating, allite-

---

18 Ibid., 142.

19 Robert Morris, ‘Some Spashes in the Ebb Tide’, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 22.

20 William Wordsworth, *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 162.

21 Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Verso, 2010), 28.

22 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).



rative form language. Although still alliterative, relying on repeated formal accents, the Le Va-like installations were more circumspect. They played off underlying linear geometries of placement, displacement, and arrangement. In retrospect, they seem closer to the monoliths. The monoliths distance themselves from the model of expressive-romantic form generation, yet retain a sense of performance, of speculation in action. They cast the gallery space as a workshop, a mental workspace, with building blocks to use in conjectural diagramming of abstract relations between objects and subjects, people and things. The monoliths stand by as primary (though disposable) components for conceptual exercises.

In Hegel: *The Restlessness of the Negative*, Nancy considers the generative instability that animates Hegel's philosophy. Nancy runs through numerous formulations of how the movement of negativity produces a constant passage of self-differing transformations that determine the subject's relational incompleteness and the world's self-dividing concreteness. Appropriately for our abridged polystyrene ontology, Nancy says that the operations of thought in and through the world (as the 'power of appropriating form') and the continual movement of the self through its cancellations of self-certainty demonstrate above all 'that the world is precisely what does not remain an inert weight, but what manifests itself as a restlessness'.<sup>23</sup> 'Thought in thinking penetrates the object', Hegel says.<sup>24</sup> Nancy explains: Thought penetrates the thing and invades it with separation: its penetration is an emptying. The thing thought is the thing hollowed out, voided of its simple compact adherence in insignificant being.<sup>25</sup>

Carl Andre said 'A thing is a hole in a thing it is not.' Less pithily, Smithson said, 'A site is a place where a piece should be but isn't.'<sup>26</sup> Michael Fried worried about the way the literalist-minimal object 'theatricalised the body, put it endlessly on stage, made it uncanny or opaque to itself, hollowed it out'.<sup>27</sup> Judd made rigid boxes, which were intensely, emphatically empty. Perhaps the most archetypal minimalist object, Smith's Die, is an echoing, hollow steel cube. In reviewing the new sculpture of the early 1960s, Clement Greenberg puzzled over the way such large constructed forms, instead of confronting the viewer as substantial things, 'now offered the illusion of modalities: namely that matter is incorporeal, weightless and exists only optically like a mirage'.<sup>28</sup> Robert Morris said, 'I never set out to affirm so much as to negate (finding that the former flowed from the latter in any case)'.<sup>29</sup> Referring to Freud's suggestion that the levity of wit negates suffering, Morris conjectures:

It may be that this ironic negation is akin to quantum physics' fabled vacuum, out of which such astonishing things as the universe itself roar. For into that 'vacuum' of nonmeaning, that hole of absence made by negation, can rush a new freedom and daring, an intoxication with incongruity, hypothesis, permutation, and invention. It is at this tumultuous and unstable site that otherness itself is momentarily seized. As in the quantum world, so perhaps in art, energy can be borrowed momentarily in and from the state of nothingness.<sup>30</sup>

Robinson's monoliths are like materialised ghosts of minimalist monuments, which, as Smithson understood, were already stranded in some equivocal existence between the archaic, the futuristic, and the 'lethargy' of a present turned euphoric to a 'most glorious magnitude'.<sup>31</sup> Both Robinson's monoliths and Smithson's new monuments occupy, if not a vacuum, at least a fictionalised time comparable to the one Stanley Kubrick created for the appearance of his sleek black monolith to a prehistoric audience of australopithecines in 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968). Referring to Kubrick's film, Edward Strickland adopts an ironically apocalyptic tone as he describes how the nonhuman arrived at last in utterly nonhuman form: black monoliths ten feet tall. They were not invaders from Mars . . . or Planet X . . . It was the invasion of the Minimalist sculptures and if not civilization, anthropomorphic art as we knew it was at an end.<sup>32</sup>

Robinson's current polystyrene work returns us to the scene of this strange time when objects concentrate both an intensity of self-occulted significance and an utter indifference to their mesmerised viewers. Kubrick's apes and astronauts reach out to the apparently sentient slab, which appears and disappears according to its own mysterious logic.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, as the minimalists, as artists and writers, tried to apprehend or assert an indubitable physicality in their forms, the more evasive and unstable those forms became. All of which is to say: the minimalist object, despite its obvious allegiance to the hardware of American pragmatism and its insistent materialities, is a very ambivalent thing. It starts to levitate, just as we think we've got it fixed by mass, volume, gravity, and touch. Seen slantwise, the specific object behaves like a phantasmal one.

---

23 Ibid., 78.

24 Hegel, cited in *ibid.*, 17.

25 Ibid., 22.

26 Carl Andre and Robert Smithson cited in Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art After Babel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 77.

27 Michael Fried cited in Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, 191.

28 Clement Greenberg cited in *ibid.*, 181.

29 Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, ix.

30 Ibid., 283.

31 Robert Smithson, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 9, 12.

32 Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 257.

33 'Left alone in the spaceship, Bowman sees the monolith slab floating in space in Jupiter's atmosphere and takes off in a pod to follow it; knowing by now the properties of the pod, we can conjure images of the mechanical arms controlled by Bowman reaching to touch the monolith as did the australopithecines and the humans. The nine moons of Jupiter are in orbital conjunction (a near-impossible astronomical occurrence) and the monolith floats into that orbit and disappears. Bowman follows it and enters what Clarke calls the timespace warp, a zone «beyond the infinite» conceived cinematically as a five-minute three-part light show, and intercut with frozen details of Bowman's reactions.' Tim Hunter, with Stephen Kaplan and Peter Jaszi, 'The Harvard Crimson Review of 2001', n.d., [www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/0038.html](http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/0038.html).



*Polymer Monoliths* 2009 -- exhibition view -- Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia



*Polymer Monoliths* 2009 -- exhibition view -- Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia



*ACK*



ACK 2008 -- exhibition view -- Artspace, Auckland, New Zealand



*ACK 2008* -- exhibition view -- Artspace, Auckland, New Zealand





ACK 2008 -- exhibition view -- Artspace, Auckland, New Zealand



*ACK 2008 -- exhibition view -- Artspace, Auckland, New Zealand*

## Finding Base in Absurdity: Peter Robinson – Back from Ack

LAURA PRESTON

For more than twenty years Peter Robinson has been creating scenarios that seek out the limits of material and form. He has focused his explorations on how form can inflect space with narratives of the consumption of culture and the culture of consumption, and their aftermath. Robinson's work understands the language of sculpture and the various accounts that art history tells of this medium. His exploration is invested in the cycle of consumption as a way to find a base to these times – from the desire to ingest, to the process of digestion and to the production that completes the cycle back to further insatiable feeding.

Robinson's work exhibits a reflexive understanding of the process that went into its making, and allows this to be seen somewhat performatively, although he ensures that the work never simply has one definable strategy. His work is formal, yet extends beyond a pursuit of pure abstraction. Meaning, here, is a function of the form given to the residue, the peripheral, the unseen and intangible – certain experiential dynamics are wrought from gallery spaces that are as personal as the internal body and as unfathomable as the universe.

Navigating the formal arrangement of his work inspires consideration of the way that systems are built on the desire to consume – be it the lived experience of enacted economic theories and political systems of governance or the moral rules that underpin social relations. In turn, the work reflects on the state of being a consumer – including a consumer of art – during the time described as modernity (which is both now and then, and has had many different iterations in between). However, instead of sculpting form to represent these ideas, Robinson has been building an understanding of the work's meaning as a function of the form itself. It's this reflexivity that continues to make Robinson's project complex, and that reveals its alignment with the characteristics of Modernism: a conscious embrace of dissonance across a lineage of incessant experimentation.

More recently Robinson has been investigating the formal possibilities of polystyrene as a material. The realisation of the exhibition *Ack* was the beginning of this particular material exploration. The work was a cohesive installation that engaged directly with the gallery space, extending the environment and its architectural parameters. Crossing over the three galleries of Artspace, the anthropomorphic forms, white and light, projected from the walls, each room containing a sculptural assertion that filled the gallery space to its edges. As a whole, its form was that of an organic, anthropomorphic, quasi-archetypal entity that continued to confound representation, redirecting the viewers' consideration back to the formal properties of the work.

Every large form was produced by carving a polystyrene block with a chainsaw, while smaller, more detailed forms were wilted into shape. To experience the installation was to reflect on the act of perception – the form of *Ack* became unformed and reformed; shapes shifted in and out of focus, yet always back to the properties of the material. A substance ubiquitously associated with the packaging of consumer goods, polystyrene is also used, more generally, as a space filler and insulator. (It is also a material commonly used by the film and theatre industries to create tableaux, and is a substance of highly-publicised toxicity and nonbiodegradability.)

To narrate the scene: The work seemed to speak to us as viewers about our drive for visual consumption. Similar to a Rorschach test – where shapes shift in and out of representation and reform into a myriad of possible images dependent on the viewer's associations – the work gave play to the idea of interpretation as an act of re-production. The installation's theatre allowed it to be about everything and nothing: another take, and it was as though the forms became the extension of the collected residue of prior activity in the gallery; its whispered pasts and ghostpatterns of thought. Citing British sculptor Anthony Caro as an influence on the *Ack* installation, it seems Robinson located his framework of enquiry in a formalist study of negative space and the void. In the late 1950s Caro moved sculpture off the plinth placing it directly on the ground, and built up a language of abstraction from linear elements to describe negative space. This framing of form by the edge was taken up by Robinson in his employment of negative or unseen space to make the formal give frame to the political. The stuff of it, polystyrene, could be seen as a reminder that the ice caps are melting and that we must look elsewhere to find an intimate, personal space away from consumerism.

These connotations were most evident in the smallest gallery – a room often treated as an annex space – where the form of the work became dioramic, in effect presenting a single iceberg with a mounted duck head. Consideration of this vignette led to a reading of the work as a nod to the history of industrialisation, and of colonisation, a major project of the former. Further, it could be seen as an environmentalist comment on the effects of capitalism's incessant production and its destructive lack of regard for consequences – that is, other than the generation of economic surplus, a process in which we are all implicated to one extent or another.

The abstract shaping of the material also obliquely indicates the tendencies of the work's direct context – the colonising function of the institution. Echoing conceptual art's concern with the frame of the institution and with deconstructing the power of the white cube, the gallery became implicated, altered, and its frame brought into focus by Robinson's amorphous forms. Robinson's installation produced an anarchistic sketch on the possibility of the gallery to fragment as a result of material excess, the white cube becoming a splintered cubist form of itself. It was almost as though *Ack* gave license to the gallery to return to its internal 'animal' so to speak.



An examination into the ‘base’ processes of consumption and production is evident in Robinson’s 2005 works *The Humours* and *Sweet Thing*. Leading up to *Ack*, these works apparently explored another scape – the unseen spaces of our bodily insides, the fluids within them and the body’s by-products. *Sweet Thing*, particularly, extended sculpture through a painterly engagement with form, these floor works collecting an accumulation of defecated paint spots and shapes – a deliberate mess. Or, as Jonathan Bywater put it, “This abdication of sculptural control seems to have encouraged some impolite, infantile behaviour where forms have been fashioned, they encode the basest of symbols: simultaneously faecal and phallic”<sup>1</sup>.

Constituting a definite shift in his practice, this work began to let materials loose to behave as they will. It was as though Robinson was seeking sculptural rendering’s lowest common denominator, drawing on the most fundamental and visceral relationship to material, the process of ingestion and digestion. This could be seen partly to contend with the weight of history – be it the residue of historical events, the linear narrative told of Modernist art history, the longterm effects of consumerist behavior, or indeed the relationship of the artist to his own exhibition history. As Bywater observed, this work reflects on the way “our attitudes to and experience of consumption and reproduction are reproduced by material social conditions. Both in our body chemistry, and in the larger flows of history, the material, like Robinson’s runaway plastics, may always escape complete control”<sup>2</sup>.

The structural framework, the conceptual mise-en-scène in which Robinson chose to play out the material explorations of *The Humours*, was the ancient Greek philosophy of bodily constitutions. ‘The humours’ were four fluids thought to course through the human body and determine a person’s temper, imbalance among the humours supposedly creating a similarly imbalanced personality. *The Humours* became an intense layering and anarchic overflow of material, which layered up a flux of connections that continually fed back into the work’s concern. Attentive to the dysfunction, the seduction and the compulsion of excessive consumption, Robinson seemingly created a mash-up of deliberate imbalance as a comment on the unobtainability of relational balance and bodily equilibrium. This work also appeared to show an understanding of knowledge as predicated on a confluence of indirect and untranslatable forces. While *The Humours* worked within the framework of a philosophical theory, his shake-up and manifestation of excess in both *The Humours* and *Sweet Thing* was a formal sketch towards discovering a way out of direct representation and an understanding of how the visceral can engender material with meaning.

For the Venice Biennale exhibition *Divine Comedy* in 2001, negative space was also the focus of Robinson’s study of form via an acknowledged didacticism in which the numerical form of zero became a graphic sign, rendered through the slickness of photographic paper, enamel and fibreglass. Tightly controlled and focused, these sculptural and graphic studies took as their premise the binary code that forms the basis of digital communication and, by extension, the pursuit of a globalised network of free-market economies.

Deceptive in its minimal veneer, *Divine Comedy* employed an abstraction that accumulated and accelerated theories of the structure of the universe, sucking all its content into the void of visual surface. Part of a continuum of concern for Robinson, the theories of time and space explored in *Divine Comedy* drew on multiple cultural and philosophical contexts, conceptualising ideas as vast as genealogy and evolution. The installation shifted registers perpetually under this weight of reference, its elements seeming disconnected and the relationship of figure and ground continually changing. Or, as Gregory Burke remarked, “rather than reserving the direction of Modernism, Robinson takes it to the limit and beyond. Calling on contemporary cosmologies, the elements of his installation act as figures of abstraction that reference different theoretical depictions of time, space and matter”<sup>3</sup>.

This continually reforming state of meaning could also be seen to model the internet’s hyper-linked passageways of information. Furthermore, it was an intended overload that gave a particular and reflexive commentary on the accelerating market for the consumption of art and its attendant industries. In one of the installation spaces a glass model – a series of spheres figuring concentric expanding universes suspended in space – gave form to this ceaseless production of meaning.

In this apparent attempt to bridge quantum physics with Einstein’s relativity, Robinson it seems was commenting on the inevitable failure to control meaning, and the implausibility of producing unified theories. As Burke observed, “If Robinson’s installation de-scales the universe, it also flattens time by tracing Modernism’s trajectory as a form of manic convolution. . . Wall prints show fields of one and zeros and models of expanding universes that are in the process of begetting further parallel universes.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the binary code of digital communication presented in the related ASCII prints also spun a connection to tukutuku patterning and to the Maori conceptualisation of creation – the on/off of the binary formed Io, the name of the supreme being from which everything descends.

Often, critical commentary would formulate a reductive reading of these works, positioning his exhaustive referencing as nihilism in reaction to cultural construction, and, in the context of the Venice Biennale, to the pressures of national representation. Being Maori is an ever-present concern for Robinson – it is one of the underlying threads that make up his complex and multistranded works – and it seems

---

1 Jonathan Bywater, ‘On the Genealogy of the Sugar Buzz: \*\*\*SPAM\*\*\* get all the mads you need in one place’ in Peter Robinson, Auckland: Michael Lett Gallery, 2005, np.

2 Ibid.

3 Gregory Burke, ‘Bi-Polar: Divine comedy and a demure portrait of the artist strip-searched’ in Bi-Polar: Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson, Wellington: Creative New Zealand, 2001, p14.

4 Ibid., p9.

that he certainly reflected on these complexities in the exhibition premise of *Divine Comedy*. Knowing that the promotion of his identity was, in part, motive for his selection, he juxtaposed philosophical theories of existence with cultural constructs, the optical with the textual, creating a disjunctive visual encounter. By emphasising contradiction as a strategy he actively resisted the meaning of his work being subsumed by the political agenda of others.

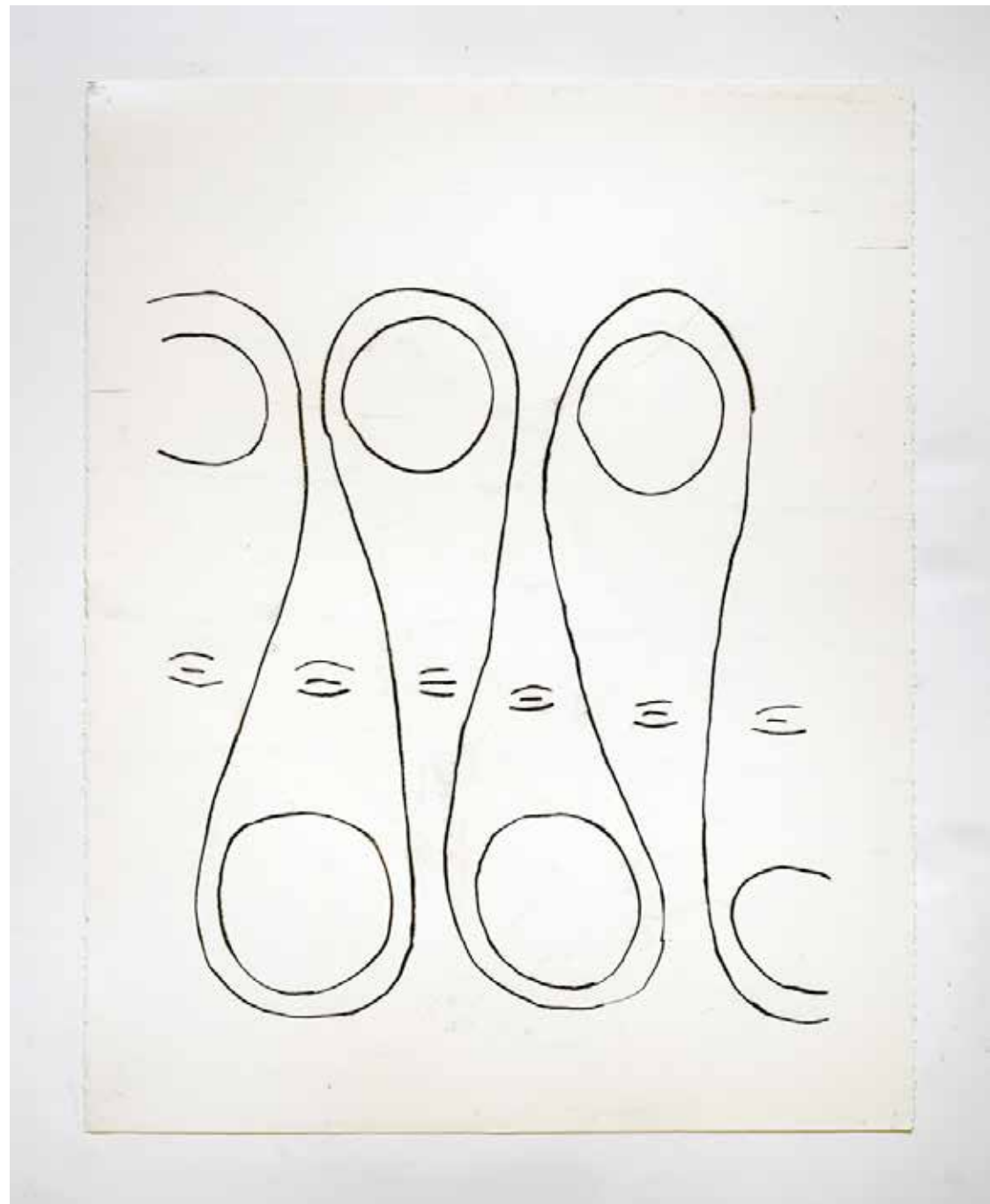
Robinson's practice is motivated by, and has developed from, a process of moving from one particular material to another, enacting his own cycles of consumption. This methodology is rooted in one of his first series of works – his tar paintings, first shown in 1992 at the Claybrook Gallery in Auckland, alongside works by Shane Cotton in an exhibition entitled *Tract*. This work connoted the measurement of vast time and history, of the unnamed and the immeasurable, their canvasses mounded up with a thickness and dimension that propelled their plural political message forward. When William McAloon wrote about this work at the time, he recognised Robinson's engagement with the visceral nature of substance and how he would exhaust the material's potential: "Robinson's work remains on this point of cataclysm, re-enacting it"<sup>5</sup>

In the early nineties Robinson was interested in stirring up debate about what he saw as political complacency in contemporary art by bringing peripheral issues to the centre. His work soon became vernacular assaults that confounded and critiqued modernist primitivism via an ambiguous mimicry of New Zealand abstraction. Establishing a conceptual distance from the easily consumable identity politics of the day, Robinson took up a renegade position from which he could tackle the hard realities of representation, through investing in the surface value of the statement.

Moreover, despite this period of issue-related assertion, you could see the impetus for Robinson's future practice and his accumulating anxiety of being codified. For example, the self-aware 3.125% painting, its numerals spelled out in thick tar, created commentary on the added value that the art market placed on him as a Maori artist, ironically teasing out the nonsensical measurement of identity in terms of fractions. The 'strategic plan' paintings of 1996, in which inverted European monuments attached to indistinct corporate-style messages, were overt critiques of the establishment and its insidious hegemonies. The sculptural red-white-and-black patchwork surface of the plane in *Untitled* (1994) was a direct reference to the veneer of cultural production, and became a marker of Robinson's enquiry into the inevitable readjustment and repositioning of cultural values.

It is as though Robinson's practice as a whole is a constant re-enactment of his early workings with tar – his consumption of material until it is no longer useful feeding into his excavation of the operations of Modernism. By delving into vast philosophical and cultural concepts, the history of art and politics, and how these ideas relate to an act of consumerism, Robinson has found an apparent framework or tableau in which to pursue form and its distillation.

In the attempt to understand Modernism and find a way out of its frame – with an escapist laugh – Robinson has been getting closer to its experimental basis and dissonance. *Ack*, and his work since, has been a way to get beyond instructive meaning and the weight of historical reference. It is work that is loose, malleable, speaks to its present, yet acknowledges that the power of representation lies in residual depths, in unseen spaces. It is in these spaces that he locates the possibility of reinventing both personal and collective histories of modernity and colonialism. By ingesting these relayed accounts, and, in turn, making a cipher of his own lived experience, Robinson has been increasingly making form speak; and coaxing us, as consumers of the work, to re-produce its meaning through the immediacy of a visceral relationship with material stuff.



ACK, 2006-2010 -- Mixed media on Paper -- 100 x 70 cm





ACK, 2006-2010 -- Mixed media on Paper -- 100 x 70 cm

## Peter ROBINSON

Born in 1966 in Ashburton (New Zealand) — lives and works in Auckland (New Zealand)

### Education

1989 — Bachelor of Fine Arts, Ilam School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

1990 — Diploma of Teaching, Christchurch College of Education, Christchurch

### Solo exhibitions

2014 — Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, New Zealand

2014 — *Pair et Impair*, galerie Emmanuel Hervé, Paris, France

2014 — *Pair et Impair*, Art-O-Rama, galerie Emmanuel Hervé, Marseille, France

2014 — *The Piranesi Effect*: Peter Robinson & Simon Terrill, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

2013 — *Tribe Subtribe*, The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand

2013 — *Acktion Painting / Acktion Sculpture*, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, New Zealand

2012 — *Defunct Mnemonics*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

2012 — *Structure and Subjectivity*, Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

2011 — *Essential Security*, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia

2010 — *The Influence of Anxiety*, The Centre for Drawing Project Space, London, UK

2009 — *Polymer Monoliths*, Artspace, Sydney and Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia

2008 — *Line Works*, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia

2008 — *Snow Ball Blind Time*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand

2008 — *Promethean Dreams*, Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

2007 — *Concatenation and Dispersion*, Sutton Gallery Project Space, Melbourne, Australia

2007 — Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

2007 — Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

2006 — *ACK!*, Artspace, Auckland, New Zealand

2006 — Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

2005 — *The Humours*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, New Zealand

2004 — *Neo Conceptual Primitivism*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

2003 — Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand

2003 — *Divine Comedy*, Wellington City Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

2002 — *The Return of The Hand*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

2002 — *Black Holes Suck And So Do I*, Kapinos Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Berlin, Germany

2002 — *Joytwotimesex*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

2002 — *Divine Comedy*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, New Zealand

2002 — *Divine Comedy*, Ilam School of Fine Arts Gallery, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

2001 — *Cipher*, 5th Gallery, Dublin, Ireland

2001 — *Divine Comedy*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand

2000 — *No reading allowed here*, Kapinos Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Berlin, Germany

2000 — *The end of the twentieth century*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

1999 — *No Boundary Condition*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

1999 — *Point of infinite density*, McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch, New Zealand

1998 — *I know nothing*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

1998 — *The big crunch*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand  
 1998 — Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
 1997 — *NZPR*, Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1997 — *Nice paintings*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand  
 1997 — *Canon fodder*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand  
 1996 — *Peter Robinson*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand  
 1996 — *Home and away*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand  
 1995 — *Opus operandi*, Ghent, Belgium  
 1995 — *Bad Aachen ideas*, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Germany  
 1994 — *100%*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand  
 1994 — *New Lines/Old Stock*, Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1993 — *9 Paintings of 1993*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand  
 1992 — *The spaces between*, Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1990 — *Nature, forms, myth*, Last Decade Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand (with Shane Cotton)

### Selected group exhibitions

2013 — *Cuts and Junctures*, Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand  
 2013 — *Ruses & Legacies, Mom am I a Barbarian?:* 13th Istanbul Biennale, Istanbul, Turkey  
 2013 — *If You Were to Work Here (The Mood in the Museum)*, The 5th Auckland Triennial, Auckland Art Gallery and Auckland War Memorial Museum, Auckland, Australia — curator Hou Hanru  
 2013 — *Light Sweet Crude*, Hopkinson Cundy, Auckland, New Zealand  
 2012 — *Contact: Artists from Aotearoa*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, Germany  
 2012 — *Gravitas Lite, All our relations*, 18th Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, Australia  
 2011 — *De-Building*, Christchurch Art Gallery, New Zealand  
 2008 — The Walters Prize, Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand  
 2006 — Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand  
 2006 — *The Walters Prize*, Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand  
 2004 — *Three Colours: Gordon Bennett and Peter Robinson*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne (toured to Bendigo Art Gallery; Academy Gallery, University of Tasmania; Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania; Shepparton Art Gallery; Ballarat Fine Art Gallery; Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; Christchurch Art Gallery)  
 2004 — *Termite Art Against White Elephant, Actual behaviour of drawing*, Museo Colecciones ICO, Madrid, Spain  
 2003 — *The Sky is the Limit*, Kunstverein, Langenhagen, Germany  
 2002 — *Iconoclash*, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany  
 2002 — *Centre of Attraction*, 8th Baltic Triennale of International Art, Vilnius, Lithuania  
 2002 — *Media City Seoul*, Museum of Modern Art, Seoul, South Korea  
 2002 — *Rest In Space*, Kunstnerhus Oslo, Norway  
 2002 — *Profiler*, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery; New Zealand; University of Kent Gallery, England — co-curated with Astrid Mania  
 2001 — *bi-polar*, 49th Venice Biennale, New Zealand Pavilion, Museo di Sant'Apollonia, Venice, Italy  
 2001 — *Superman in Bed* - Collection Schürmann Kunst für Gegenwart und Fotografie,  
 2001 — Museum am Ostwall, Dortmund, Germany  
 2001 — *...troubler l'écho du temps, oeuvres de la collection*, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, Lyon, France  
 2000 — *Partage d'exotismes*, 5th Biennale d'art contemporain de Lyon 2000, Lyon, France  
 2000 — *Continental shift*, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Germany (toured to Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, The Netherlands; Stadsgalerij, Heerlen, The Netherlands; Musée d'Art moderne, Lüttich, Belgium)  
 2000 — *Heimat kunst*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany  
 2000 — *Drive: power, progress, desire*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand  
 1999 — *Kunstwelten im dialog*, Museum Ludwig, Köln, Germany



1999 — *Toi Toi Toi: three generations of artists from New Zealand*, Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, New Zealand  
 1999 — *Home and away: Contemporary Australian and New Zealand art from the Chartwell Collection*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand  
 1999 — *What I photographed this summer*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand  
 1998 — *Entropy zu hause*, Suermondt-Ludwig Museum, Aachen, Germany  
 1998 — *Everyday*, 11th Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia  
 1998 — *Necessary protection*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand  
 1998 — *Blood brothers*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand  
 1998 — *What we do here*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand  
 1997 — *Trade routes: history and geography*, 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, billboard and page art projects, Johannesburg, South Africa  
 1998 — Seppelt Art Awards, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia  
 1998 — *McCahon to Robinson*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand  
 1998 — *Family values*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand  
 1998 — *Sky writers and earth movers*, McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1996 — *Inclusion/Exclusion: Art in the Age of Post Colonialism and Global Migration*, Künstlerhaus Burgring, Graz, Austria  
 1996 — *23rd International Biennale of Sao Paulo*, Biennale Pavilion, São Paulo, Brazil  
 1996 — *2nd Asia-Pacific Triennale of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia  
 1995 — *Cultural safety: contemporary art from New Zealand*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, Germany and City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand (toured to Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Germany; Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton and Dunedin Public Art Gallery)  
 1995 — *Hangover*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and Waikato Museum of Art and History, New Zealand  
 1995 — *Korurangi*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, New Zealand  
 1994 — *Localities of desire*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia  
 1994 — *Parallel lines: Gordon Walters in context*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, New Zealand  
 1994 — *Art Now*, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand  
 1994 — *Aoraki/Hikurangi*, McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1993 — *Cartel*, Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1993 — *Te Hau a Taonga*, Te Taumata Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand  
 1993 — *Groundswell*, Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, New Zealand  
 1992 — *Te Kupenga*, CSA Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1992 — *ARX 3*, Artist Regional Exchange Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth, Australia  
 1992 — *Shadow of style: eight new artists*, City Gallery, Wellington and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand  
 1992 — *Vogue/Vague*, CSA Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1992 — *A comfortable environment*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand  
 1992 — *Prospect Canterbury*, McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1991 — *Kohia Ko Taikaka Anake*, National Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand  
 1991 — *Recognitions*, McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1991 — *Peter Robinson, Euan McLeod and Shane Cotton*, Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1991 — *He Toi Na Ngaa Toa O Te Whare Waanaga O Waitaha*, School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1990 — *Goodman/Suter Biennale*, Suter Art Gallery, Nelson, New Zealand  
 1990 — *On task*, CSA Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand  
 1990 — *Te Atinga - contemporary Maori art*, Uenuku Marae, Moeraki, New Zealand

## Residencies

2008 — The Walters Art Prize, Auckland, New Zealand  
 2001 — Creative New Zealand Residency, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany  
 1999 — Künstlerhaus Bethanien Residency, Berlin, Germany

1998 — Artspace Residency, Sydney, Australia

1996 — Goethe Institut Residency, Düsseldorf, Germany

1995 — Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst Residency, Aachen, Germany

### **Collections**

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, New Zealand

Denver Art Museum, United States

Dunedin Public Art Gallery, New Zealand

FRAC Lorraine – Metz, France

Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, France

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand

PROP Foundation, Montana, USA

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Peter Robinson is represented by Galerie Emmanuel Hervé



[www.emmanuelherve.com](http://www.emmanuelherve.com)