

PETER ROBINSON

Rock

ACK AND OTHER ABDICATIONS

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Contemporaneous paintings and drawings (unexhibited), 2006–2010

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Documentation of Ack, Artspace, Auckland, 2006



















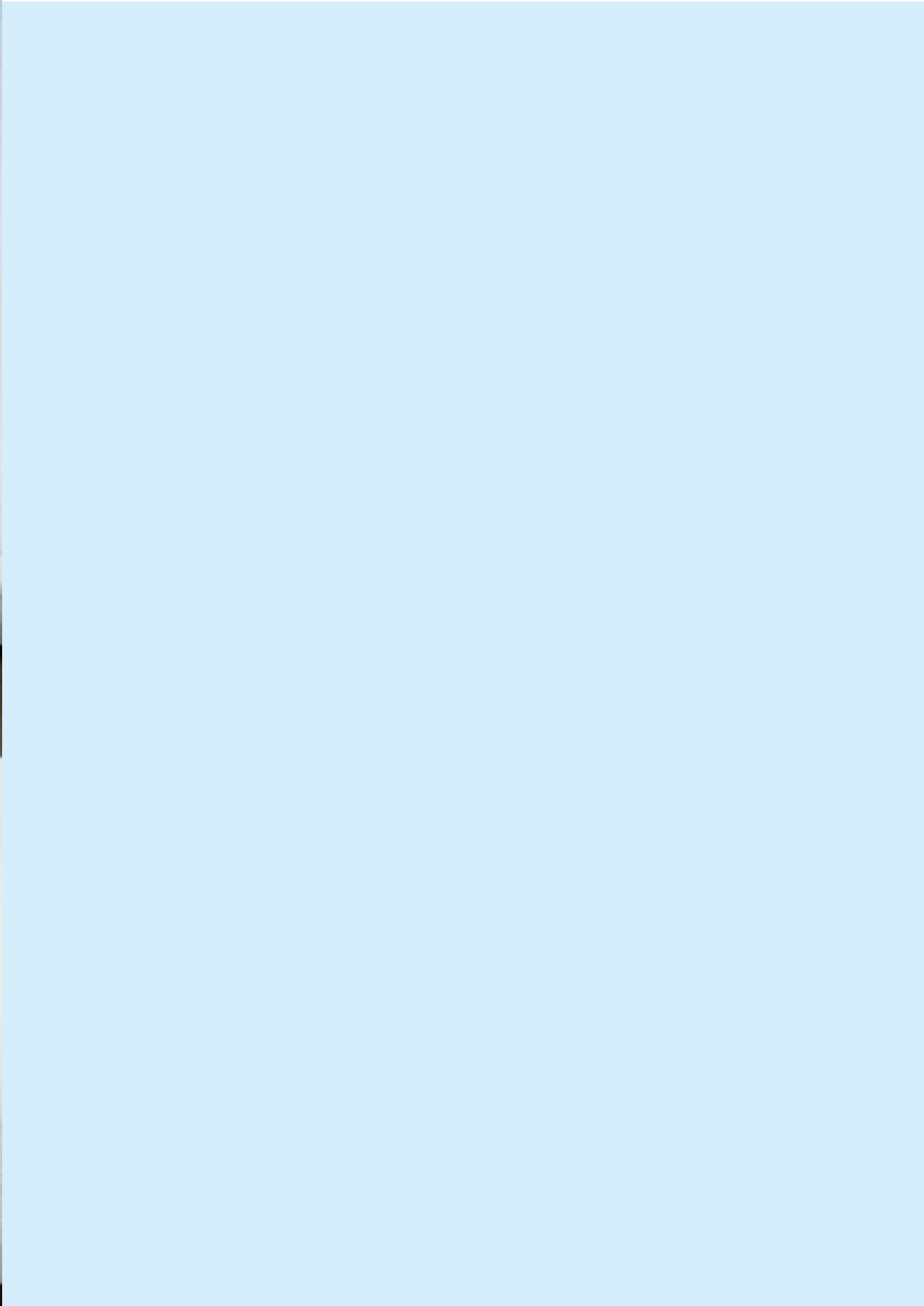












































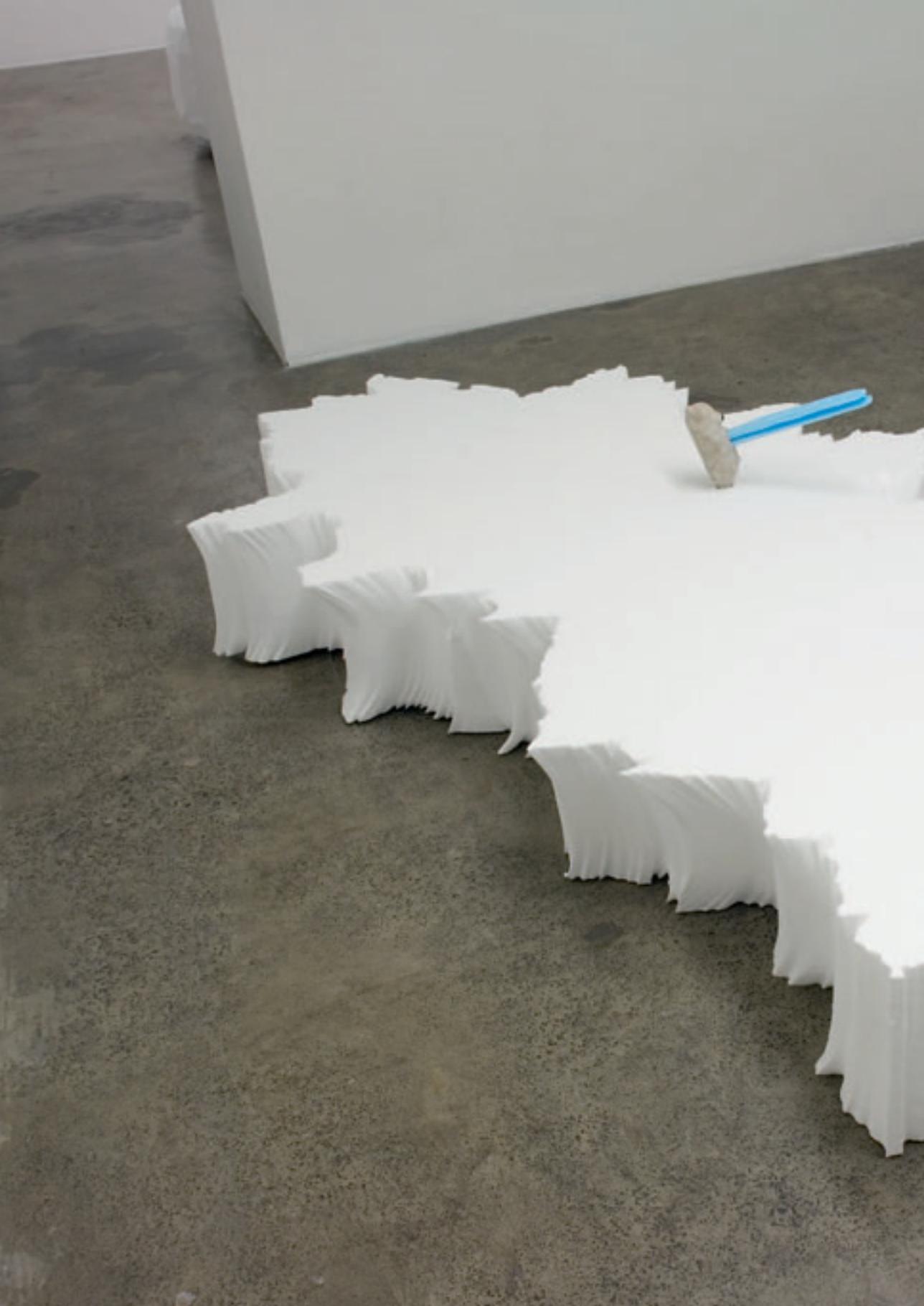




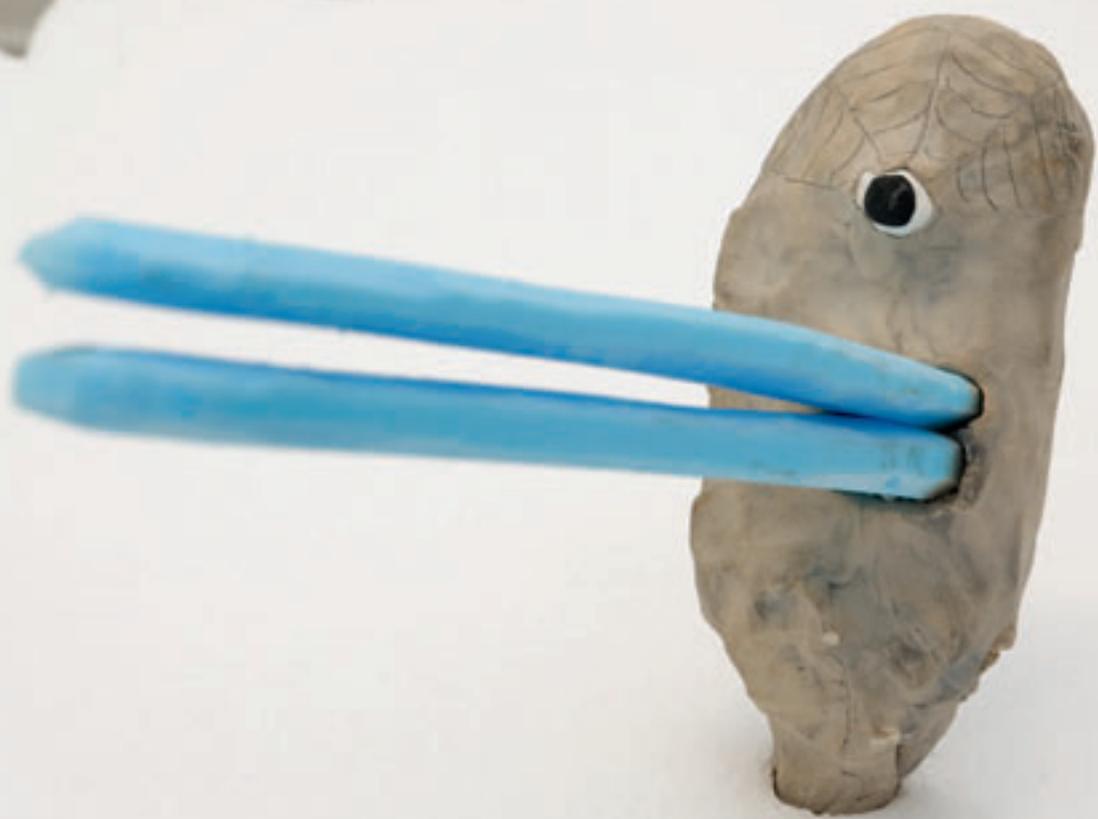
















**Documentation of Ack,
Auckland Art Gallery
Toi o Tāmaki, 2008**





























Post-Ack, 2009























Finding Base in Absurdity: Peter Robinson – Back from Ack

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 non-biodegradability.)

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 ghost patterns 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"¹.

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 long-term 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"².



Peter Robinson, *Sweet Thing*, 2005, polyurethane, pigment, Fimo, Plasticine, dimensions variable. Collection Te Papa Tongarewa The Museum of New Zealand, Wellington. Photograph courtesy Michael Lett.

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*

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.



Peter Robinson, *Das Es*, 2005-6, mixed media, 3500 x 1500 x 1500mm. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph Bill Nichol, courtesy Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

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.

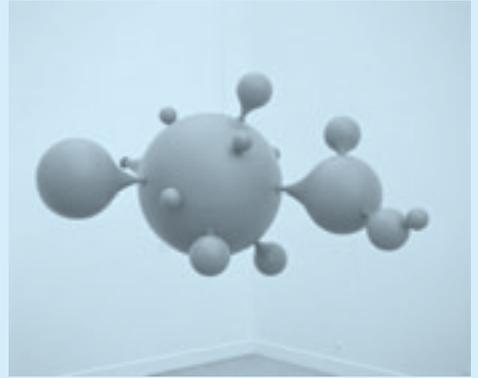
Deceptive in its minimal veneer, *Divine Comedy* employed an abstraction that accumulated and accelerated theories of the structure of the universe, sucking all its content into the void of visual surface. Part of a continuum of concern for Robinson, the theories of time and space explored in *Divine 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"³.

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.

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."⁴ 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 multi-stranded works – and it seems 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

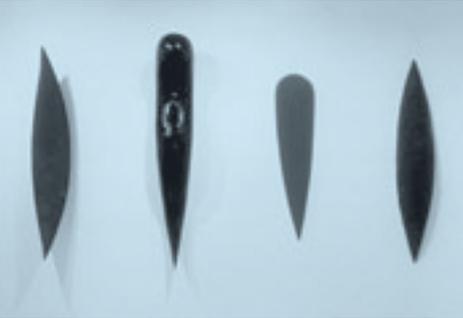


Peter Robinson, *Inflation Theory 1* from *Divine Comedy*, 2001, fibreglass, aluminium, enamel paint, 1060 x 1640 x 1500mm. Collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photograph Bryan James, courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.



Peter Robinson, *Fag Time*, 2004, papier-mâché, wire, polyurethane, pigment, steel, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph Sarah Smuts-Kennedy.

4 Ibid., p9.



Peter Robinson, *Tongue of the False Prophet*, 1992, tar, wax, earth, pasta, glass, wool, fibreglass, polystyrene, 4 units: 1350 x 300 x 210mm; 1700 x 300 x 220mm; 1800 x 300 x 450mm, 1650 x 300 x 300mm. Collection Te Papa Tongarewa The Museum of New Zealand, Wellington. Photograph Michael Roth, courtesy City Gallery Wellington.

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"⁵.

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

5 William McAloon, *Tract: Shane Cotton and Peter Robinson*, Auckland: Claybrook Gallery, 1992, np.

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.



Peter Robinson, *Untitled*, 1994, polystyrene, fibreglass, glass, wool, velvet, linen, 1620 x 4500 x 4100mm. Photograph courtesy City Gallery Wellington. Collection Te Papa Tongarewa The Museum of New Zealand, Wellington. Photograph Michael Roth, courtesy City Gallery Wellington.

Playing God and its Pitfalls

The Golem, in Jewish legend, is an animate creature fashioned from clay which can be brought to life by applying inscriptions of various (according to any given version of the legend) holy words or names. These creatures may be the servants or guardians of learned or holy figures, or of a community, but, as in the 16th Century legend of Rabbi Leow of Prague, they sometimes turn bad, and can run amok. This presages a number of threads in European mythology and literature, including Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: from an apparently good seed, from good intentions (starting anew) comes the proliferating monster who quickly develops an identity of its own. And while the intentions behind the creation of the monster may be noble, the outcome is invariably mis-read, and the effects are aggravated and compound upon themselves – in *Frankenstein*, it starts with the monster's demands of its creator for a mate, which implies the creation of a whole new race such creatures who have already demonstrated their destructive capacity – a direct challenge to Victor Frankenstein's initial abdication of his responsibilities and a cautionary tale for the creative spirit.

Echoing (or possibly anticipating) her husband's sentiments, Mary Shelley has the monster exclaim, "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?" When Paul de Man, a commentator with a compromising history of his own, reflected on this Romanticist introspection as it exhibited itself in Percy Bysshe Shelley's own work¹ his fascination was with our own role in the wider scheme and of what we now call existential questions: the moral choices that *free will* presents to man, and with what he sends out into the world. Indeed, one of the most enduring motifs from Nineteenth Century literature has been the conflict between good and evil, or purity and corruption, as manifested in a split personality; it is no accident that *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, even Trilby and her mesmeric transfiguration under Svengali, have, alongside *Frankenstein*, persisted in popular imagination.

1 Paul de Man's analysis of Shelley's poem 'The Triumph of Life', has, with its inclusion in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, become one of the seminal texts of the Deconstruction movement. It predates the controversy which erupted following the discovery of De Man's collaborationist writings in wartime Brussels, which remained hidden during the remainder of his life. He writes this of the poem's narrator, the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, "[his] self-narrated history provides no answer to his true identity, although he himself is shown in quest of such an answer. Questions of origin, of direction and of identity punctuate the text without ever receiving a clear answer. They always lead back to a new scene of questioning which merely repeats the quest and recedes in infinite regress..." (Paul de Man, 'Shelley Disfigured' in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Deconstruction and Criticism*, London: Continuum Books, 2004, p36.)

A kind of inversion of the horrors of Shelley's original cautionary tale have occurred in the two centuries since her book came out. Atrocities of the physical, experienced world have proved a more fearsome proposition than mere fantasy seems capable of conceiving. But what does remain consistent is the way in which we look for a culprit for our insecurities. What are presented as "villains" may themselves be fabrications, but nurture the belief of a concealed threat among (or within) us, which erupts periodically: today the nebulous and ill-defined concept of "terror," in the past, AIDS, communism, Jews, Freemasons, witches.

In such circumstances is it any surprise that a creative response should take the form of such a grand gesture of implosion? Is there really anywhere else to go but the agoraphobic shock at the enormity of history, of total consciousness? The climactic eruption through the wall is an inevitable conclusion, the work finally meeting itself on the way back. It is a runaway train, carrying its payload of artistic reference to the buffers, except there are no buffers, merely the other end of the train – a cliff-hanger ending, freeze-framed at the moment of collision. If the lesson of Frankenstein is in the creation of a consciousness which turns evil by its rejection, does the creation of an artwork, a mirror to the conscious, produce a multitude of potential monsters, each one contained in the respective onlooker? In other words, while the work may assume a passive role in space, it exists in the consciousness of those who engage with it, forming a germ of an idea which will one day return to haunt the creator.

Something monstrous, perhaps, oblivious to all obstacles, bursting through walls...

Ninety Per Cent Air

A nebulous, rambling form occupies the gallery space. Cold colours: white, electric blue. The main room of the space is largely taken up by this presence, texturally like some sort of mutant glacier, starting from the centre it spews out various forms, some of which have been modelled to appear “natural” and irregular. Others are straight-edged, “manufactured,” resembling beams or girders; they run along the floor. In some of these outcrops, an arc of trajectory is described. Forms stand proud of the main body of the work: a beaked figure above a cubic plinth-like form, bulbous, featureless head-like figures, blue vertical projections like frozen water-streams or petrified phalluses. And from the outcroppings spurt other, tributary outcroppings. This work is throwing its teddies out of the pram.

And then, in the adjacent space, a kind of resurgence: a snake-like figure through the long, narrow, closed-off space. Foot-like appendages here, attached only by the thinnest tendrils of blue, tempting some to step through them. At one point, though, the tension is too much. A vast projection bursts through the wall, as if seeking the original body of the work. Is this secondary component of the work looking to reconnect with its main body? The sexual imagery is so blatant it seems redundant to mention it, but this work doesn't seem to be about copulation. It seems more to be seeking requital, or some sort of recompense, from its main body.

In the animated film *Tintin and the Lake of Sharks* (1972), the climactic scene features a stolen invention of Professor Cuthbert Calculus, namely a machine which can duplicate objects in three dimensions. The simulacra are ‘grown’ from a special paste. Arch villain Rastapopoulos, having captured both the invention and, of course, Tintin and his friends, proceeds to try out this machine by duplicating a box of cigars. However, the prototype he has captured malfunctions, and the duplicate cigar box continues to grow and mutate, until eventually it has engulfed and expanded into every corner of the villain's sub-marine lair. Of course it allows Tintin and his friends to escape and the bad guys get their just desserts. It also illustrates an underlying fear of the simulacrum, that it will not merely replace the original, usurping its meaning, but will continue to proliferate as a kind of corrupt monstrosity which hyper-inflates (and dissipates) the significance of the original. More is – ultimately – less.

There are illusions at work in *Ack*. Tensions between the cool colours and crisp edges, and the heat-reflective quality of polystyrene. The volume: giant blocks like marble, reminiscent of the great marble quarries and ruins of antiquity, and its lack

of weight – polystyrene, the very stuff of interstices is, Peter tells me, ninety percent air. Throughout the work there are these synecdochal cues, allusions to historical moments and art movements. There are tensions throughout: tensions on the surface, tensions of cold and warmth, of substance and insubstantiality, of references between conflicting art historical traditions; and perhaps – the greatest tension of all – between history and fiction.

Dying is easy, comedy is hard

I am left with the impression of white asparagus. Or of other plant shoots growing in a slow vegetable panic under plastic sheeting or concrete blocks, trying to find the light. Of something caught inside a closed system; or there electively, hiding from openness. I like how the French like their asparagus fat and white. They pile dirt up over the emerging spears to starve them of light and blanch them.

This material has an arctic whiteness that deafens the ears as snow muffles speech; its cells like places where symbols rest. Polystyrene is also up-to-its-ears involved in the present obsession with establishing more and more security, so adept is it at cushioning fragile times against blows in transit. This acute need for security is also a thought retardant given that new-idea thinking requires risk and feeds off chance.

I once had a dog that had never seen snow before. It snows every five years or so where I was living, and when it did, we went to have a look at it, she and I – we lived alone – in the dark of the early morning. She stood on the Victorian verandah – built to British plans, facing the south – and barked at the snow. Her bark was muted like we had been listening to very loud music but without any ringing. She tried to bark louder but it didn't help and she probably made her own ears ring in doing so.

This space is very white, but its relationship to light is ambiguous. It could be the white of the blanched in a light-starved space; but it could also be the white of the over-exposed in a light-saturated situation. But both bear a possible relationship to the condition of being observed, *over time*.

If this space is a dark passage, what is this darkness – the space of the literature, which is allegedly surrounded by darkness? This could be the opening scene of a novel, a magical one, where a duck can live happily, free, in the ice, without the need for warmth, nourishment, company. Like the pre-adolescent space before one realises a need for friends.

American artist Meg Cranston said at the time of this icy project – her show was next – that the experience of women working in the art world is of being perpetually

on the outside of something. Men, then, are they always stuck on the inside? Perhaps the over-exposed scenario described above represents the full disclosure and high definition the patriarchal set-up demands.

The resisting subject, however, demands curtains, formlessness and silence, which must put men in somewhat of a double-bind – stuck in an illuminated closed system (the self, masculinity, work, the institution, the gallery...) yet seeking darker, more female opacities. This compounded by the tendency people have to run headlong towards what they are most afraid of.

Here I am mindful of a diagram David Cooper, an anti-psychiatric psychiatrist, drew in his book *The Language of Madness*. It is a spiral that goes downward, getting smaller as it goes, representing the way language breaks down from 'the thinking subject', down a little further to 'words', and then much further down, beyond concepts, to 'the last word':

"On the 'perimeter' of the last spiral before the inexpressible are the scarcely articulated words of the language of madness and also the scarcely more articulated words of poetry. And then the plunge into nothing that has no more of a place than a place that can only begin to find a place in a transformed world. On the final perimeter idealist philosophy is finally silenced because it cannot bear what cannot be articulated – it can make nothing of a nothing that is nowhere 'else'."

The depressed subject (popular culture) may experience a falling out of words, but it is a fall to a quiet place beyond the reach of science, the institution, reason. What is protected is the meandering line of dribbling thought that bumps and bumbles in lines that look like tastebuds, the backs of bird's heads, duckbills, testes; from thought, to lower-grade thought, to not-knowing and wherever.

The doltish duck here could be easily dismissed as dim, stupid, and morally lacking for it, but it has been convincingly argued that evil is less a matter of stupidity than a by-product of the process of truth taken too far, eradicating the unnameable. As Alain Badiou has it, "Evil is the will to name, *at any price*".

Avian analogies see words pecking, and sense exploding as they flock. But this duck looks particularly digestive, as if it is, in farming terms, a turner, in that all it does

is turn perfectly good food into shit. It is of no use to someone who wants it to perform a service. On the ground, its flight is still a weak potential.

There is language at play here, but a primitive sort, one mired in a silent present between thoughts. Given the economy of words we are involved in, language perpetually removes us from the present, effecting losses and gains as we use it. In equal measure there is the disintegration of purpose as we struggle with dualism and other clunky abstractions, yet the mobilisation of desire lifting us upward when we seek to leave.

There is something comforting about cold air in that it cools the hands, feet, and face, contracting the capillaries, drawing the blood further in, lowering the blood pressure and promoting relaxation and sleep. Perhaps we should only use language in direct proportion to the amount we dream, thoughts then balanced by the undecidable.

The other day I was the beholder of a peculiar instance.

If you have ever had the experience of reading Mark Twain's stories you will know the ease with which he uses the characteristics of his protagonists to create a superstructure of humorous tension that elevates the stories from fables to events. The style of Twain's writing is not flowery and adorned, but carries the simple frankness of a storyteller interested in stories. A reference to architecture is crucial, as literary space is created using depths and elevations of mood and opinion, framing events and scenarios in a striking and candid light. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* this treatment of content through form is so intertwined that they carry each other along... form begets content begets form, ad infinitum.

In front of me, about ten metres distant and heading in the same direction walked a young man. There were few people about as it was relatively late at night.

Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer find themselves oftentimes in collusion, and push each other in attaining objectives that they may otherwise abandon without the other there to bolster the spirit, or to rebuke the pride. They propel themselves into exceptional circumstances, bearing witness to numerous occasions of devilry, subterfuge and folly; yet each character is compelled to view these events amid an ongoing and constantly unfolding fantasy – engaging with the concepts from a few distinct angles, exaggerating hugely some feature whilst ignoring others. It is this selective exaggeration that creates such a vivid structure of interaction whose features change with the temperament of the youths' spirits. Narrative happens in segments, fragmented and formatted by the natural breaks of existence – sleep, changes in circumstance and structure – and this in turn leads to the existence of the story past both the beginning and end of the book; the characters carry idiosyncrasies and histories that are not dependent upon the particular narrative they are engaged in.

The young man slipped!

Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is of course not easily comparable, but there are similar issues to the continuities of space as well as of

engagement. Inside is a translator's note that explains how the text has been through periodic update, to change terms used amongst colloquial banter from their original translations into things that inspire a less startling reading. This means that terms such as 'gay' are turned to 'merry', that 'ejaculated' is replaced by 'blurted'.

Everything was completely commonplace until the young man slipped. In a second all of his limbs were humorously askance like the chalk outline of a murder victim. The young man had slipped and all his limbs were humorous!

Despite the translator's update, there is the plain fact that about 150 years separate writing and reception, indeed almost 200 between the book's setting and today. This means that regardless of the wealth of plot and intrigue there is a constant alienation-effect of a fundamentally different structure of interaction. Things that would once perhaps have been absorbed more readily by a reader now stick out as anomalies: the accepted lust of cousins for one another; the subservience of desire in respect of convoluted hierarchy and so on. Reading *War and Peace* is an undertaking not just for the girth of the book – some 1400 pages and in excess of 500 important characters – but because to really invest in the story one is required to overlook such instances that instantly appear as social artefacts where once they would have had a simple utilitarian function.

Everything had been completely commonplace until the young man slipped!

To extract anything profitable out of the exercise requires a multiple commitment. You have to invest memory to remember names and plots and dates and the macrocosmic setting, as well as the microcosmic instances. You have to invest significant time to the actual physical undertaking of scrolling your eyes over that many words. And you have to invest in the act of immersion and acquiescence of will. This is to say that to interact with the book you have to accept that your own position is not omnipotent like in so many other literary experiences, but is actually contingent upon an acquiescence of ego that allows you to interact with the changing scenery in a less deterministic way.

The young man slipped.

What *Ack* allows us is to entertain ourselves in moments of absurdity – events of potential meaning, things that occupy a certain space and time no less than the tasks and products upon which we traditionally bestow worth. It creates a question of value on a path that may otherwise consist solely in the pursuit of a destination. The experience of *Ack* is kind of simple in a complex way; it's bigger than you, and whichever way you look at it, it's different. It's kind of like reading an old book in a new place or laughing at your self in public.

*Everything was commonplace and the young man slipped.
After a second, where all his limbs were humorously askance like
the chalk outline of a murder victim, he resumed his stride and
continued on as if nothing untoward had happened.*

Killed by Death

I thought it might be the old Wittgenstein Duck/Rabbit problem again. The problem of how language wants to cut things up into neat little categories – one thing at a time, thanks – when the world comes at you all at once in a rush. But maybe W's diagram is too polite. Here we would need a chainsaw to separate out the possibilities.

All through high school, I doodled in my exercise books. One phase that I never really finished with was drawing ducks. I like ducks because they have bills, a complex 3D shape that is described by a kind of swooshing line. A duck walks in to a pharmacy, and asks for a condom. Response: "How you going to pay for that buddy?" "Just put it on my bill."

I was thinking about Donald Duck, and Uncle Scrooge, and the poster I remember from school of Huey, Duey and Louie smoking a joint with "stoned again" written beneath it. Donald has this rage; he flails and babbles; a man-child-duck. Uncle Scrooge is swimming in his money again. The way he moves through solid matter shows that he really understands the power of money, liquidity, freedom of movement. Capital flows. In the dumb there is some serious smart.

Dumbness might be something to strive for. I have the sense that if you do something smart that looks good, then how could it not succeed? And then if it doesn't I get all depressed about it, but if you aim for dumb and ugly and that doesn't succeed then I can still feel good about it because it is dumb and ugly. But then if dumb and ugly is the goal and then it succeeds then I've achieved something. Success has got to be a positive thing. I'm for success at all costs. Stuck in my head, for weeks now: Malcolm McClaren, or his stand-in, in a faux-bluegrass-style from the album *Duck Rock*: "Duck for oyster, duck, duck, duck. Dig for the clam, dig, dig, dig. Poke a hole in the old tin can."

There is a moment in *The Simpsons* where Sideshow Bob is trying to sneak around in someone's backyard. He stands on a rake and the handle whacks him on the nose. Then he takes another step and stands on another rake. The camera zooms out; there is a field of rakes. The rakes I guess represent a field of singularities; the one, one after another, always calling itself into question: is this the one? No. What about this one? No. The field of rakes looks infinite.

No wait. It is a cow eating grass. It has eaten all the grass and wandered off. That's why the picture is all white. There is no emoticon for the way that I am feeling. I'm going to need enough polystyrene to make a raft. There is an area in the Pacific Ocean where the mass of floating plastic rubbish and industrial waste is greater than the bio-mass of plankton and algae. The currents are causing it to congeal into a kind of floating island. I want to ride the raft to the plastic vortex in the middle of the Pacific. I will establish a colony. I am ambitious for my island.

Ambitiousness is vulgar. Vulgarity is addictive. We are in a trap. It is snowballing, like those metaphorical life problems in the ad for Lifeline that goes on after all the programmes finish and the infomercials kick in (implied message: what are you some kind of loser, go to bed already). You can just stumble into that trap and the next minute you're on a treadmill or something. It is going to get bigger and bigger and bigger. We will go down the down the rabbit hole...

OF COCK .

And you don't necessarily know in the beginning that you're on that path. My friend Jack Condom used to have this joke where he would draw a squirting penis and then turn it into a bunny rabbit. Fuck, what am I, thirteen? I should probably grow up and get some new jokes.

On Deutsche Welle TV everyone is relentlessly cheerful. But not very smart. There is the sense that if you are watching it then you must be up in the middle of the night, even if it's during the daytime. Everyone is informative, but about things I don't care about. Most of my head is taken by useless facts – the fuel efficiency of the new Volkswagen, what cool gimmicky techno-installation is happening in Berlin, what is it like to live in a monastery. The presenter stands in a field of white light, with a modernist looking lectern. This is some high-tech shit right here.

Local breakfast TV is a little bit more homely. The sets feel like they are made of gib or something. They seem to be wobbling a bit. It is always artificially sunny on the set and that makes me happy. Rage sits just below the surface. "Is that a moustache on a lady?": Paul Henry's angry morning-TV tirade at a Greenpeace activist last year. Archival footage of him campaigning against Georgina Beyer, the first transsexual MP elected anywhere. No wonder the crazy end of The National Party rail against what they called the "Liar -bore-dyke-ocracy". Alison Mau is looking awkward, smiling trying to not react. That's why she's paid the big bucks. She would look like that no matter what happened. Is the silent grimacing co-host the model audience for this show? Is that our grimace as well? Grin and bear it.

OK, enough of this, I need to relax. The sun is up and the intense morning sun washes out the colours on my TV. Paul Henry is full of seething dumbness, talking some inane crap. The set is yellow with touches of light blue; cheerful. I think maybe I need to drop all rationalisation for everything. Let's not worry about why we do these things, we can just do them if we want. Production is good, let's quit making distinctions. The artist becomes a particular kind of perpetual-motion device, running on the energy generated by production, motivation, rejecting things, whatever the answer is to make more. Again with the field of rakes, the only solution is to take another step. Is this the one?

How can I approach the motivations and thoughts that are radically outside of me? On *Police 10/7*, trying to escape arrest, a skinhead rams his skull through a stained-green fence. Shouting obscenities, delighted, speaking in tongues, screaming FUUUUUCCCCCKKKK YOOOUUUU, like a wannabe Charlie Manson, writhing on the ground handcuffed, cracking jokes with his skin-buddy. What is it with speaking in tongues anyway? An excuse to make no sense, a somehow institutionally-sanctioned regression to a preverbal state. I mis-spelled tongues: I prefer it this way though, speaking in lounges is much more comfortable.

The late lamented Ol' Dirty Bastard, on "All together now" from *Nigger Please* (an album that celebrates at various times VD, school teachers, crack cocaine, submarine drivers, ugly girls, and himself in a croaky drug-soaked stream of consciousness): "I'm a Dalmatian, I'm white and I'm black, you can't understand it, then fuck you,

I love this" ... "Black people getting hot in here, white people getting hot in here, yellow people getting hot in here, red people getting hot in here, blue people getting hot in here, aliens getting hot in here" ... "I'm getting paid, dress for the weather now" ... "I white out then I white in. I black out then I black in."

Old mister potato head, endlessly being rearranged. Stupid jokes about blank paper. A picture of a cow eating grass. A polar bear in a snowstorm. Another sausage factory, perpetual motion, endless rearranging, no distinctions no more, no end in sight...











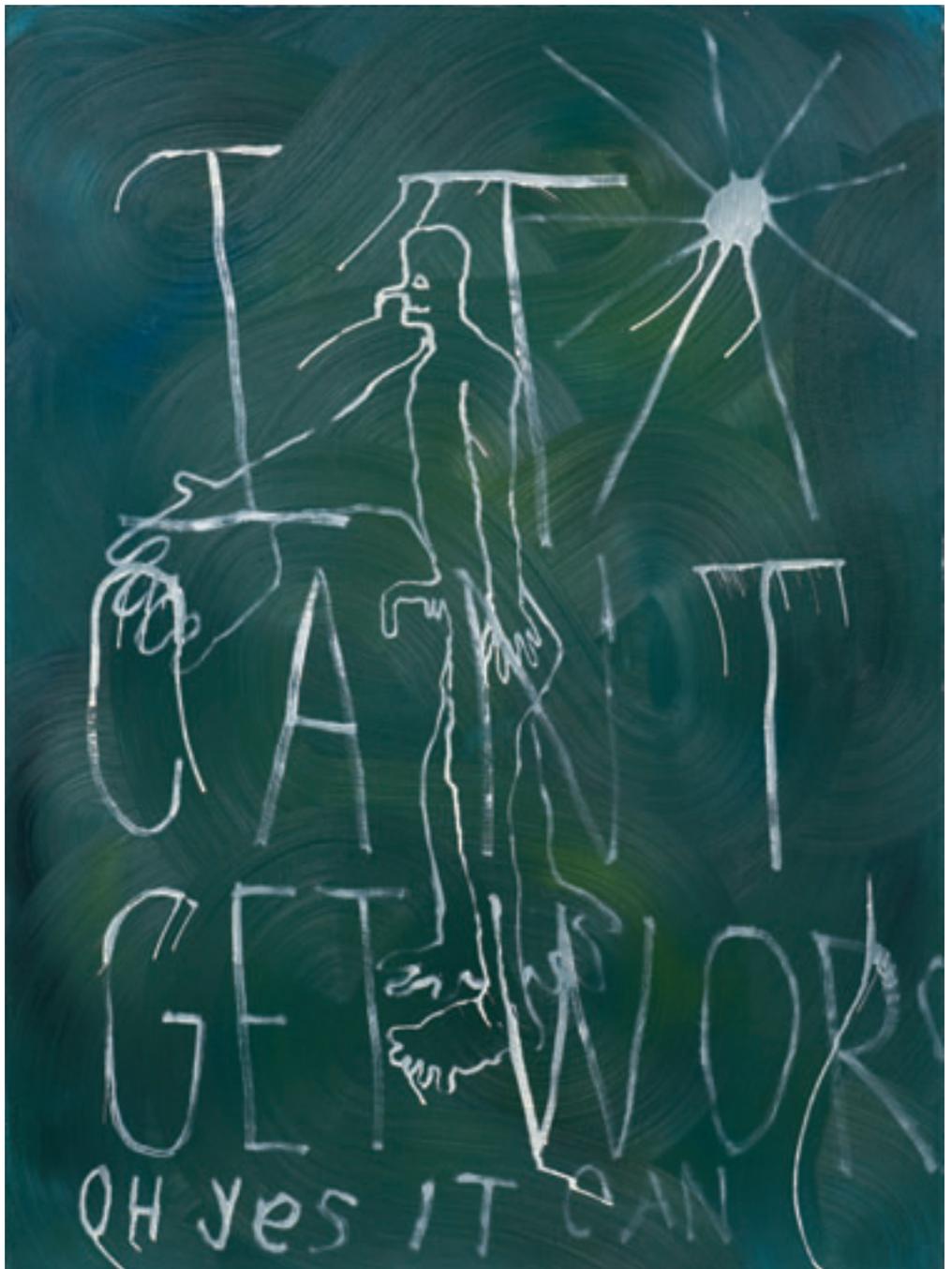


































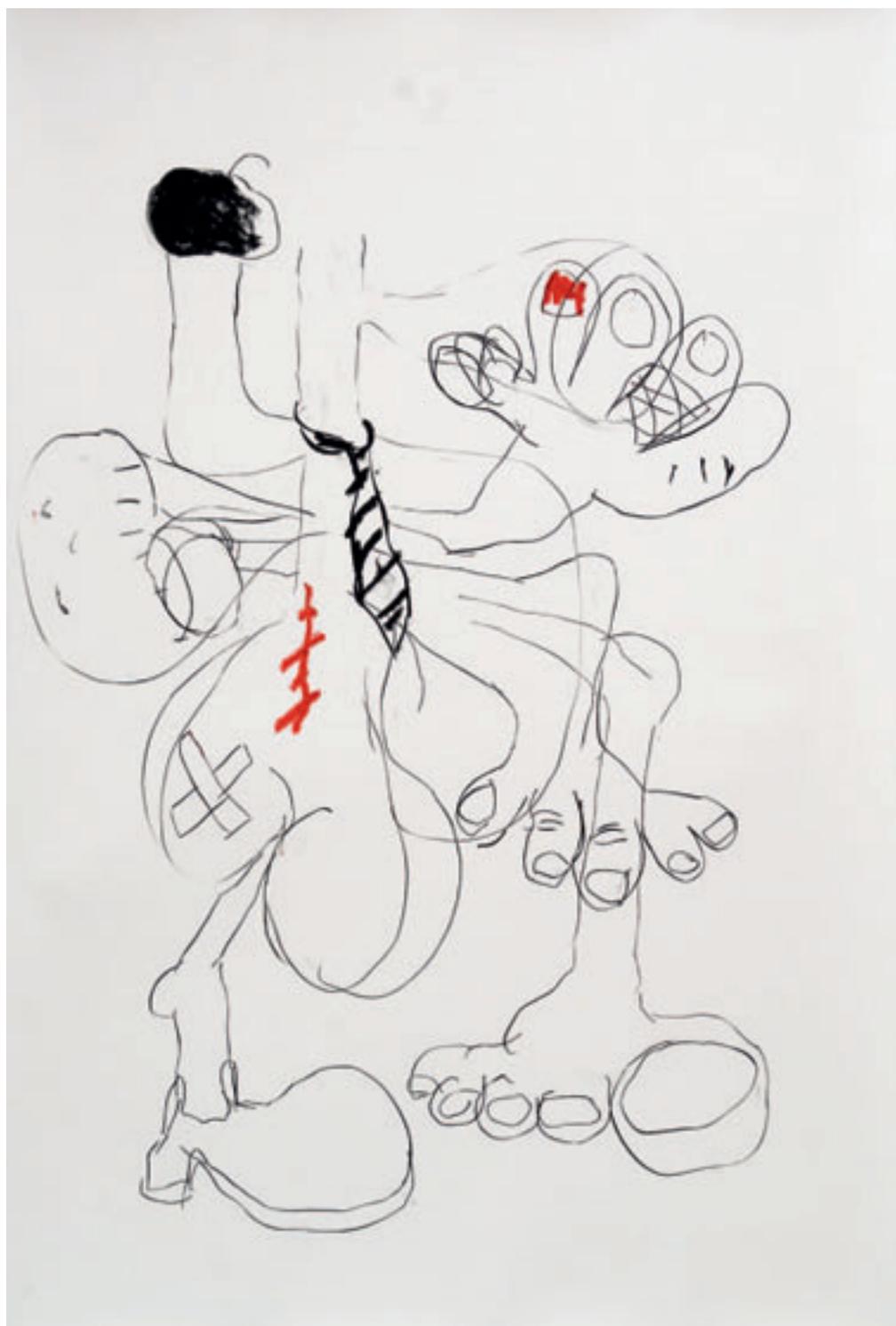






























ALL
WRONG



































