

Peter Robinson Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand
By Justin Paton in Frieze, Issue 121, March 2009

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Peter Robinson

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

Flying home to Dunedin in November 2006, I saw something astonishing floating off the coast of New Zealand's South Island. Uncannily white, surrounded by emerald water and big enough for tourist companies to land helicopters on, an enormous piece of Antarctica had broken off and drifted north. It made for mesmerising viewing, especially when you considered the disturbing environmental conditions that very likely set the iceberg loose.

That iceberg ended up with an honorary position in New Zealand art history when curator Brian Butler put an image of it on the cover of *Speculation* – a book he compiled to represent New Zealand at the 2007 Venice Biennale. The choice smartly encapsulated both local anxieties (somewhere drifting off the map) and international presumptions (somewhere for tourists to visit) about this country's place in the world. Simultaneously, the cover image posed a fierce and unenviable challenge for the included artists; nothing on the pages within managed to rival its chilling grandeur.

I had begun to wonder if anything could, until I flew in to another coastal town to see the latest work by one of those artists, Peter Robinson. As Govett-Brewster's publicity relentlessly informed us, Robinson's *Snow Ball Blind Time* (2008) is only the second artist's project since 1970 to occupy the entire gallery space, and it does so with six tonnes of piled, crumbled and chain-linked polystyrene.

Harping on art's size in this way can seem tacky, like a restaurant promoting its meals by quantity rather than quality. But *Snow Ball Blind Time* is the right kind of big. Climbing the stairs, you enter a world of weightless volume and piled white light. Sound goes strange. Chips of polystyrene squeak underfoot. Light bounces weirdly between the largest chains, each one taller than an adult, while the thinner chains sway slightly in the air-conditioning. It takes some exploring, but eventually you realize you're looking at a single chain – a 250-metre-long tapeworm winching and knuckling its way through the gallery's many stairways and levels.

Metaphors surface and subside as you go. First you're in some kind of frozen foundry, industrial innards spilling over the balconies. Next it's an art-historical junkyard, where memories of sculpture's white-marble origins and recent minimalist past pile up. Then you're amidst the ruins of the

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Peter Robinson, *Snow Ball Blind Time* (2008)

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information age, with strings of weightless code heaped like rubble. But all this is just a warm-up for the largest room, where a tangle of chains piles into and over a gouged berg of polystyrene that is itself higher than a house. It looks less like an art work than some kind of unnatural disaster.

Here the memory of that drifting iceberg came back in force. As bad news about climate change proliferates, art has begun to undergo spasms of environmental conscience, but that's not what Robinson offers. Snow Ball Blind Time refuses to preach the artist's concerns. W.H. Auden once remarked, 'All poets adore explosions, thunderstorms, tornadoes, conflagrations, ruins, scenes of spectacular carnage,' and Robinson's show is both thrilling and scary because it owns up to this strange allure. Rather than 'commenting upon' the problems, it wants to put us right inside them.

Environmental commentators urge us to notice that all things are intertwined. But with his chosen motif of the chain, Robinson does justice to a contemporary state of mind that might be called connection anxiety, or eco-paralysis – the feeling that there are so many connections, so many facts ready to tip disastrously into other facts, that the only viable response is fearful awe. Potentially endless yet always bound to itself, the chain is Robinson's persistent image of the limits of art, and he cranks up this tension by carving his mortal coil from a 'throwaway' modern material. When the show ends, all six tonnes of sculpture are due for recycling. Like that iceberg, it's a see-it-while-it-lasts affair.

This ought to be dismaying, but in fact it gives the show an amazing sense of lightness and occasion: you have to be there, and once you are, you don't want to leave. This prompts a final thought about art's life in public institutions: currently two of New Zealand's four largest public galleries are out of service due to new building projects. When so much money and energy are being spent on new institutional hardware, Snow Ball Blind Time makes a compelling case for investing in what artists provide – the software. Especially when the software, like Robinson's vast viral chain, devours itself.

Justin Paton

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3-4 Hardwick Street, London EC1R 4RB, 020 7833 7270