

PETER
ROBINSON

point of infinite density

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Road to Nowhere

Felicity Milburn

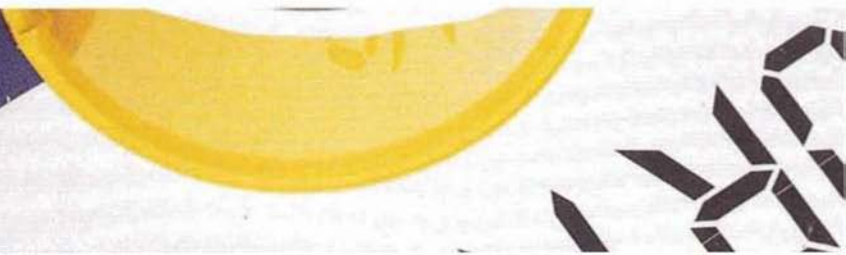
PS: You might want to tell Felicity that my net downloads consist of the following images - Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic, Clinton, Albright, aliens, Bill Gates, Lady Di, Marshall Applewhite, Jim Jones, Monica Lewinsky, Aum cult leader, Trenchcoat Mafia, Heaven's Gate, Waco, Oklahoma bombing incident, earthquakes and other disasters input, input, input. I think most of my texts will be from revelations (handpainted crudely) and commercial advertising (computer generated). Possibly the whole thing is about living in an age of anxiety, possibly.'



Evolving out of Peter Robinson's ongoing exploration of New Zealand's current societal climate, particularly in relation to ideas of cultural and personal alienation, *Point of Infinite Density* charts the paranoia and anxieties of late twentieth century existence. Like a traveller's rucksack, a blue tarpaulin unrolls to reveal a landing strip of debris, a 'cosmic garage sale'¹² full of the everyday wreckage of popular culture. Formed largely of downloads from the internet, this vast, uncatalogued swathe of imagery echoes the sensation of rummaging through sites on the world wide web. Like the internet, it is presented without explanation, inviting us to navigate our own course through the rubble and assemble a fresh narrative from a set of seemingly random associations.

No god only being and nothingness

Extending the sense of cultural dislocation explored in Robinson's sparingly annotated Big Bang paintings of 1997-8, *Point of Infinite Density* teems with references to loneliness, alienation and loss of faith. Bleak, handwritten phrases - "If thine eye offend thee pluck it out"- highlight the struggle to hold onto belief in a fin de siècle world full of information but short on substance. Within the chaotic configuration of references,





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the allusions to cults and doomsday groups, such as Heaven's Gate and the Branch Davidians of Waco, clearly reflect a contemporary crisis of confidence and identity. It is no coincidence that the 'higher level' that Heaven's Gate members died to attain (by abandoning their bodily



'containers' to hitch a ride on the next available spaceship) was presented to them by the cult's leaders as a place of "boundless nurturing and comfort".³

The ramshackle signposts dotted throughout the installation offer no spiritual harbour, directing us instead to nothing and nowhere, and illustrating an ongoing, and apparently fruitless, search for meaning. Everywhere is the suggestion of imminent disaster, of the balance shifting, threatening to tip. Given these images of confusion and desolation, where a plastic

replica of the Titanic steams toward her place in history, it is not difficult to accept the prediction of wide-eyed cult leader Marshall Applewhite, who predicted that "the end of the age is upon us".⁴

The moment of uncertainty evoked by Robinson's frenetic and fragmented assemblage is also indicative of his own artistic dilemma. While earlier works questioned the ready acceptance and promotion of his career by the art world, more recent paintings have seen him draw on his personal experiences, both as a New Zealander working in Europe, exiled from his own culture and language, and as an artist paralysed by creative and directional indecision.

Humans are social beings; modern citizens are individuals⁵

As the earth's population multiplies by the second, and the information superhighway offers instant global communication, the world is rapidly becoming a lonelier place. Increasingly, we are invited to play out our lives in the electronic spaces of television, cyberspace and virtual reality, weakening any sense of community or social responsibility. Paradoxically, the search for meaning is complicated by so-called 'Information Technology', which provides a barrage of content distracting enough to deceive us into mistaking information for knowledge, like a cross-lingual conversation where all substance is lost in translation.

Robinson's use of phrases such as 'no linearity' and 'no boundary condition' emphasises the broadness of reference made possible by new technologies, specifically the internet, where surfers can swap seamlessly between subjects, disciplines and theologies.

Fragments of asphalt highways, resembling the remnants of some apocalyptic quake, indicate the shift from a single, 'absolute' path of research, with every net search turning up more possible directions than answers, and the breadth of attainable information limited only by imagination and attention span. These miniature roads to nowhere represent travel without conclusion and input without analysis. Their vivid, broken centre lines, simulating the anticipatory 'dot dot dot' of the comic book, represent the enticement of the unexplored, the lure of any new frontier.

Within this assemblage of technology, the written word stands out like a pariah from the rubble, contrasting the personal with the global, and the primitive with the sophisticated. Wordplay has always been an important element in Robinson's arsenal, and his Annex installation incorporates well-worn phrases such as "Abandon hope all ye who enter here" with his now characteristic 'germanese' and obscure scientific terms relating to quantum physics. Upside down, inverted and fragmented, the words emphasise the power of language to alienate as well as align, with the almost-intelligible letters leaving us teetering on the edge of understanding even as they ultimately frustrate meaning.

No here, nowhere

Gently manipulating the enigmatic qualities of the phrases, Robinson combines technical jargon drawn from black hole theory: 'point of infinite density', 'grand unified theory', 'absolute future', with references to popular science fiction and alien abductions.



Including a lifesized silver 'space suit', the installation operates in outer space as well as cyberspace, with the vast and incomprehensible reaches of the galaxies echoing the limitless possibilities for exploration implicit in the letters 'www'. Within Robinson's calculated constructions, 'no hair theory' is translated into 'no here theory' - a comment on the way that multiple alternate 'realities' can make the present seem less plausible.

This sense of paradox is compounded by the juxtaposition between a film still of David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and a stereotypical image of a bald, childlike alien. These contrasting images illustrate our ability to view visitors from outer space as both innocent and manipulative, enslavers and liberators, givers and takers of knowledge and life. Acknowledging the power of the black hole as a metaphor for both the unknown and the triumph of chaos over destiny, Robinson relates these all-consuming voids to the white noise that surrounds modern society, a whirlpool of superficiality which threatens to evaporate everything of substance and significance. Large '0%' signs and koru-like lines spiraling away into blackness indicate Robinson's desire to make work about everything... and nothing.

Artists eat artists

The ability of technology to accelerate the dissemination of information has also resulted in the increase of influence, appropriation and reinvention. Photographic images of a luridly gaping mouth, which occur throughout Robinson's installation, point to what he describes as the world of 'artist eat artist'⁶, in which few ideas are original, and connections and comparisons are inevitable.

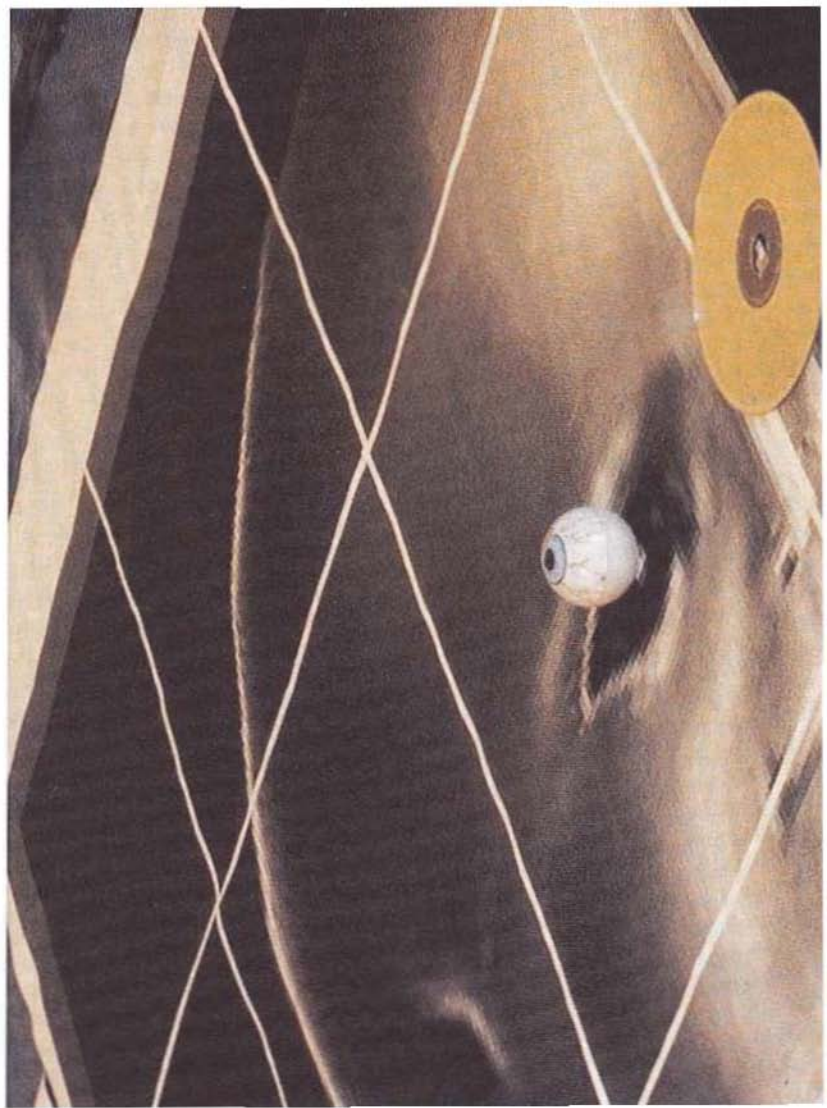


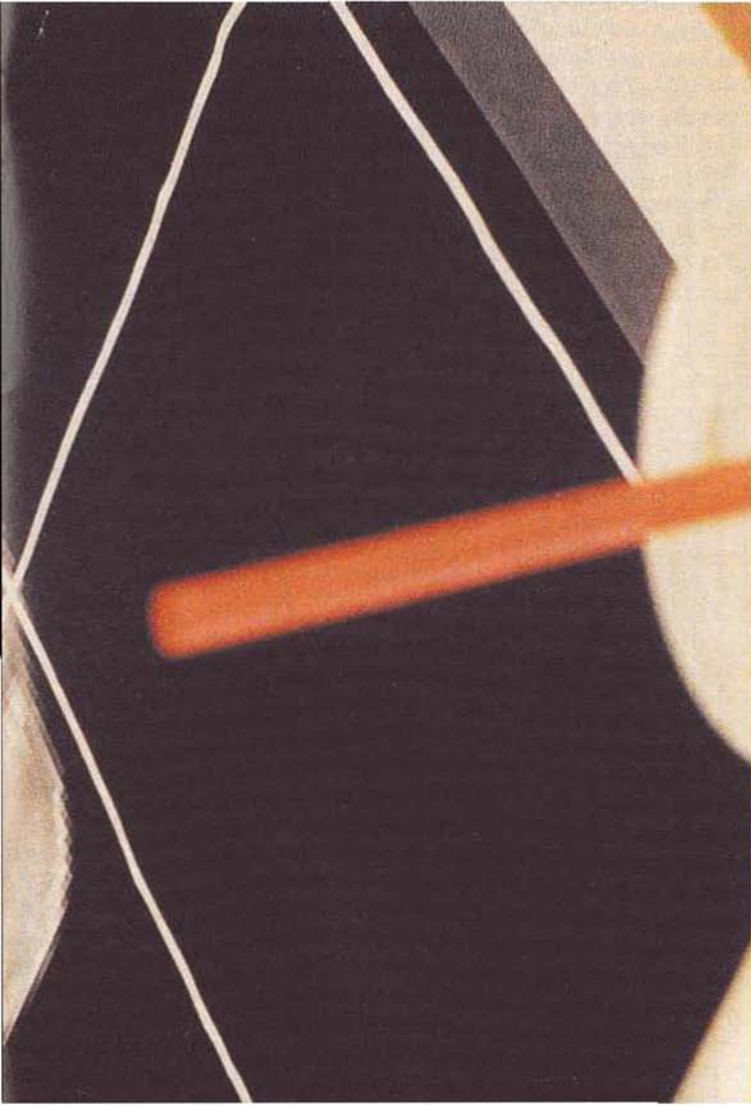
Point of Infinite Density is full of overt and less obvious homages to many different artists. Robinson lists Mondrian, Andy Warhol, Frans West, Bridget Riley and Jean-Michel Basquiat as just some of his creative 'down-loads'.

I am the Island⁷

Placed within this futuristic wasteland the pieces of a fun-fur 'Robinson Crusoe' suit and a series of disembodied footprints allude to the overwhelming sense of exile Robinson experienced during his time spent as an artist in Germany. The littered tarpaulins take on the appearance of flotsam and jetsam washed up and arranged by some deranged inhabitant of a desert island. Magpie pieces of culture, the cluttered paraphernalia of the present, are retrieved and stored as talismans against loneliness.

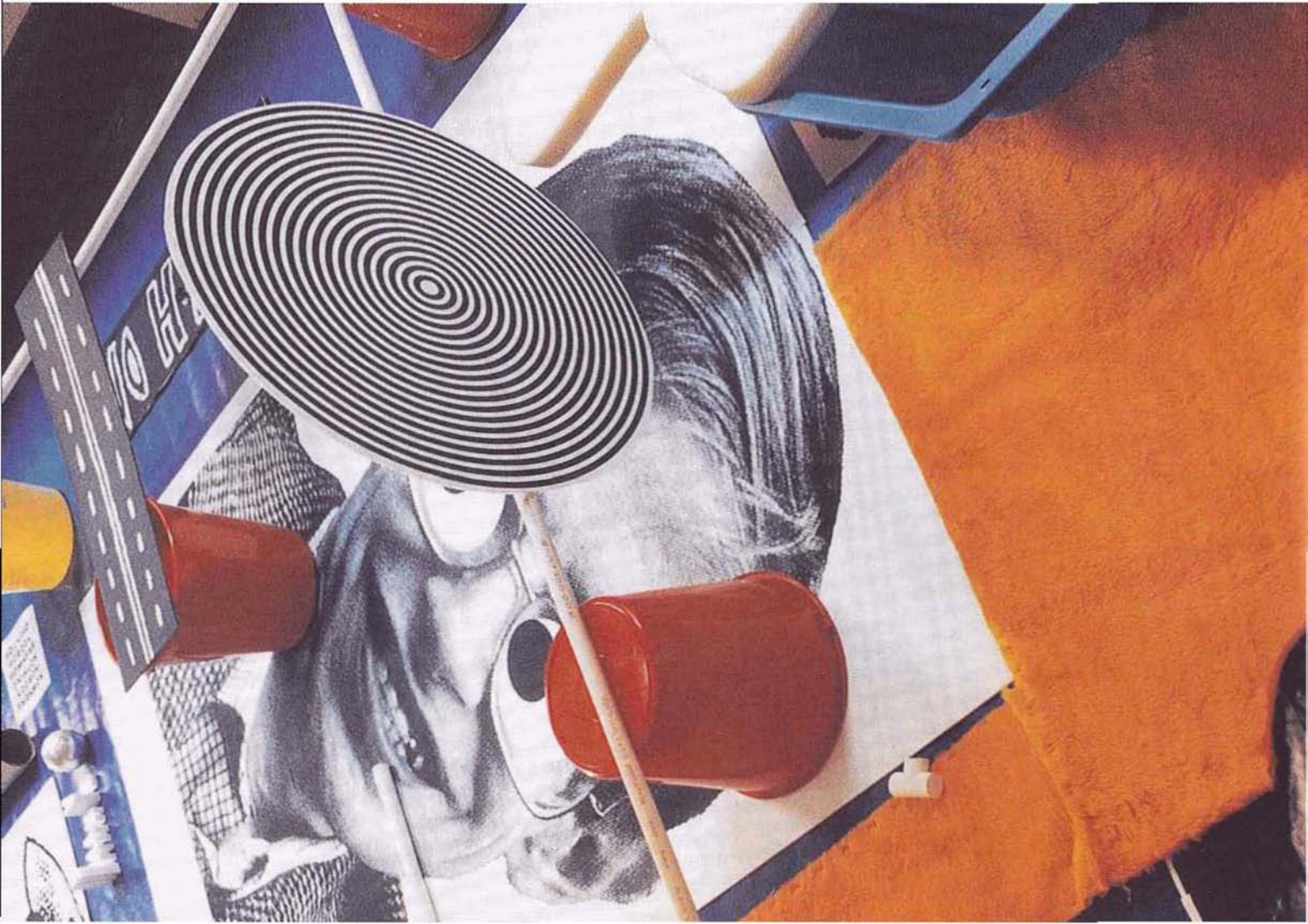
Unlike Daniel Defoe's enterprising and industrious Crusoe, who furnished himself with





all the comforts of home, even a useful valet (the 'noble savage' Man Friday), our present-day Robinson has surrounded himself with objects whose value is dubious and entirely subject to interpretation.

The collapse of communication and dislocation from society symbolised by Robinson's self-contained island reflect the situation of the protagonist Robert Maitland in J.G. Ballard's 1973 novel *Concrete Island*. Literally marooned amid a sea of transportation after crashing onto a small traffic island beneath a seething motorway system, Maitland begins to acknowledge the part he has played in his downfall by intentionally and progressively distancing himself from meaningful human contact. Robinson's island is an ambiguous metaphor; a place of sanctuary, but also one of emptiness. The familiar relics we gather around us offer little in the way of knowledge or protection, serving instead to shield and separate us from reality.



With its randomly constructed grid network and ever-changing network of associations, Robinson's futuristic island-city is a landscape of transit, a point of negotiation between the past, the present and the future. The images invite connections and numerous random dialogues exist, but this is not a simple exploration. On the cusp of a new century, a voyage of discovery can begin (and end) with a road to nowhere.



¹ Email from Peter Robinson to Simon Mulligan, 28 April 1999

² Conversation with the artist, June 1999

³ Heaven's Gate Website, 1999

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Howard Rheingold, *Transit Lounge*, Bookwise International, 1997

⁶ Conversation between Peter Robinson and Peter McLeavey

⁷ *Concrete Island*, J.G. Ballard, Jonathan Cape Ltd, London, 1973

Peter Robinson

Peter Robinson was born in Ashburton in 1966. He studied at Canterbury University between 1985 - 1988, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1989. Robinson has exhibited extensively both within New Zealand and overseas, and has undertaken residencies at the Ludwig Forum, Aachen (1995), the Goethe Institut, Dusseldorf (1996), Artspace, Sydney (1998) and is this year's recipient of the Künstlerhaus Bethanien scholarship in Berlin. Robinson lives and works in Christchurch, New Zealand and Berlin, Germany.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

One Love, Artspace, Auckland, 1998
I Know Nothing, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Auckland, 1998
The Big Crunch, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, 1998
Canon Fodder, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, 1997
NZPR, Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, 1997
Nice Paintings, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, 1997
Home and Away, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, 1996
Bad Aachen Ideas, Ludwig Forum, Aachen, 1995
New Lines/Old Stock, Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, 1994

Selected Group Exhibitions

Toi Toi Toi, Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, 1999
Sydney Biennale, Sydney 1998
Entropy Zu Haus, Suermondt-Ludwig Museum, Aachen, 1998
Take-away Symbols, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1998
Seppelt Contemporary Art Awards, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1997
Johannesburg Biennale, Johannesburg, 1997
Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996
Sao Paulo Bienal, Sao Paulo, 1996
Inclusion/Exclusion, Künstlerhaus, Graz, 1996
Cultural Safety, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, 1995
Localities of Desire, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1994

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