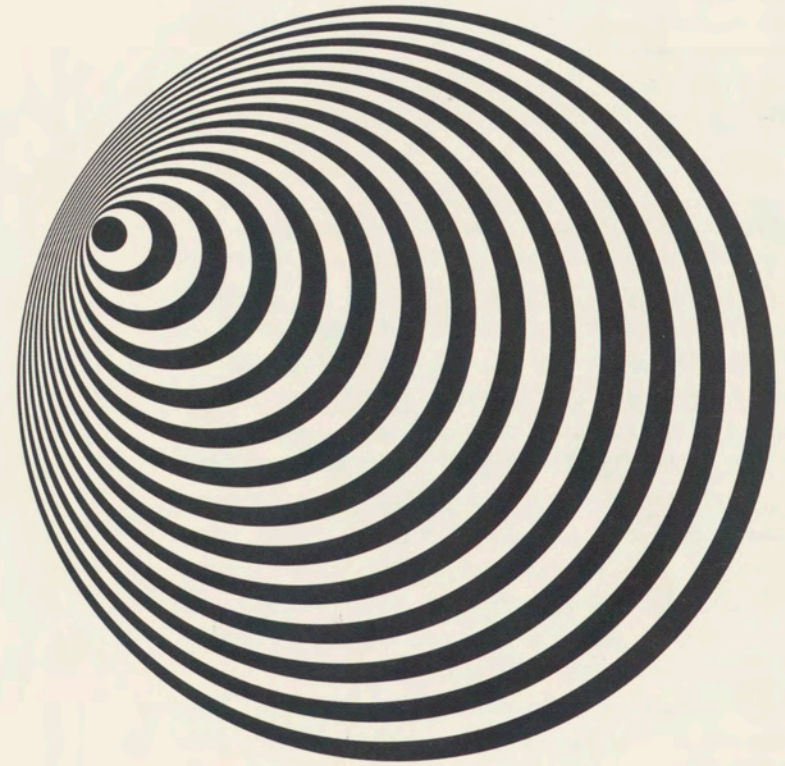


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**ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE**



**Divine Comedy**  
Peter Robinson

Published 2001 by Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in association with the exhibition *Divine comedy* 25 February – 26 April 2001. The exhibition resulted from the Taranaki Artist in Residence Programme, a partnership between the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and the Taranaki Polytechnic Te Kura Matatini o Taranaki. This project was generously supported by Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa.



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Peter Robinson is represented by Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, Kapinos Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Berlin and Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington.

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GOVETT BREWSTER ART GALLERY



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## Nothing shines: Peter Robinson's *Divine comedy*

Gregory Burke

*Every consciousness pursues its own death, every love-passion its own end, attracted by a black hole, and all the black holes resonate together.'*

The entrance wall to Peter Robinson's exhibition *Divine comedy* at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery seems to set the scene for a focus on medieval Christian beliefs on the nature of the universe. As well as the title, the white wall features a graphic of a 'black hole', surrounded by several off-centre circles increasing in radius so that they contain one another. Simultaneously mountain and whirlpool like, this graphic creates an oscillating perception between height and depth. The perception of depth links with the title's reference to the literary trilogy of Dante Alighieri and in particular to Dante's *Inferno*, which describes a descent through the 'circles' or layers of hell. Once inside, the exhibition's focus broadens to include existential concepts of 'being' and 'nothingness', and their relationship to contemporary cosmologies of the sort espoused by Stephen Hawking in his book *A brief history of time*. Indeed, Robinson's recent use of the phrase "All hope abandon, ye who enter here" is not borrowed directly from Dante, but via Hawking, who compares Dante's description of the warning placed at the entrance to hell to the effect of entering a black hole<sup>2</sup>. With this layered allusion, Robinson establishes a genealogy for current theories of the universe, bringing into question the relationship between culture and consciousness.

The minimalism of *Divine comedy* marks a distinct shift from Robinson's aesthetic of overload and maximum impact that has characterised his work in recent years, such as the installation he presented at the *Biennale d'art contemporain de Lyon* in 2000. Such works addressed Western constructs of exoticism, but also frequently included

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references to cosmology and concepts of nothingness. In *Divine comedy* Robinson makes such concepts his main focus, by linking a series of discrete works. In the work *Zero red shift* 2001 he forms a chain of stylistically distinct zeros, derived from the various fonts available in his computer. In *Null and void* 2001 he gives gravity and mass to the concept of nothingness, by stacking identical oval sheets, each of which is formed from the interior, negative space described by the numeral zero in *Gill sans* font.



Jacopetti effect - duck rock part I (Installation detail) 2000  
5th Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, photo courtesy of Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon

The four prints pinned to the walls quote existential texts written in ASCII binary code of ones and zeros using the same *Gill sans* font. One print, *Being and nothingness* 2001, quotes and repeats the title to the book by Jean-Paul Sartre, while *Sartre's worm* 2001 uses a direct Sartre quote: *nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being like a worm*, with the coded text repeated in both red and white to form a double coil. Each work in the installation presents a paradox. Collectively, the works engage multiple shifts in signification, thereby establishing a chain of paradoxical relationships between being and nothingness.

Robinson's idea of a chain relates also to concepts of evolution and genealogy, concepts that underpin current theories of the universe. The work *Inflation theory I* 2001 illustrates the idea of an expanding universe as a kind of parent begetting more and more generations of parallel universes. For some time physicists have been trying to unify all theories of the universe by merging quantum and general relativity theories into 'a theory of everything'. The name they have given to this elusive theory is M theory, with M standing for mother. Paradoxically, this mother of all theories is yet to be fully realised and therefore lies in the future, whereas scientific convention postulates that current theories on the absolute nature of the universe evolved gradually through refinement, at least

from Ptolemy's theory that Earth is the centre of the universe. The absolute nature of M theory may be considered to be outside of or beyond culture, but its origins lie within a cultural history.

While Western scientific theories of the universe have become increasingly de-centred, Robinson's reference to Dante via Hawking reminds us that Christian thought is embedded in the history and evolution of science. In *A brief history of time*, Hawking frequently diverts from his topic to consider the possibility of God. Ironically, Ptolemy is one of a number of mathematicians and philosophers that Dante locates in limbo, the circle at the edge of the abyss. Dante's list includes not only ancient theorists such as Aristotle and Euclid, but also Averroes, an Islamic thinker influential in medieval Europe. Averroes proposed that while a body may die, rational ideas or truths may live on and achieve immortality, and furthermore, that consciousness may be shared and even transferred. It is not a big jump from this proposition to suggest that once an idea has been registered within consciousness, it cannot be destroyed without eliminating consciousness itself. Robinson addresses this conundrum in the print *The presence and absence of God* 2001. The print spells out in ASCII code *there is no god, only being and nothingness*, a text that registers the idea of God through its disavowal. The fourth print relates in coded text another philosophical paradox: *nothing can spring into existence from the void; nothing can vanish into the void from existence*. If we accept this proposition and we also accept that concepts and rational truths exist in a shared consciousness, then we must also accept that they have always existed, regardless of when they were registered. Conversely, the proposition can also imply that neither ideas nor consciousness can vanish into the void.

The inclusion of Averroes in Dante's *Inferno* is interesting to consider also in relation to Robinson's *Divine comedy* as an example of Western tradition accepting, and being influenced by, the ideas and thereby the potential consciousness of an outsider. For Robinson, who now spends most of his year based in Germany, this possibility of external influence on a culture is important, given that his previous work addressed cultural issues in New Zealand, and in particular, his own Maori genealogy. In Europe, Robinson came to the conclusion



LASCIATE OGNE  
SPERANZA. VOI  
C'INTRATE



that his work failed to “make much sense” there. This led him “to a void”<sup>3</sup> in terms of the focus of his work, a crisis that provided one impetus for exploring the concept of nothingness as a non-cultural construct. Looking for a truly international language he chose digital code, the simplest and most pan-cultural of possible languages, consisting only of rudimentary numerical signs for presence and absence. However, in attempting to address the ‘black hole’ of nothingness in *Divine comedy*, he consistently encounters a plurality of ‘black holes’, concepts that have both a genealogy and a sense of cultural specificity. This can be seen even in the digital code itself, for the digits 10 can also be read as the word *lo*, which relates to Maori concepts of creation and to the concept of *kore*. The closest translation of *kore* means nothing, but isn’t nothing, for Maori cosmology does not include a concept for nothing as an absolute. *lo* itself has been translated as ‘the parentless one’, indicating the point of genealogical origin, the being from which all beings descend.

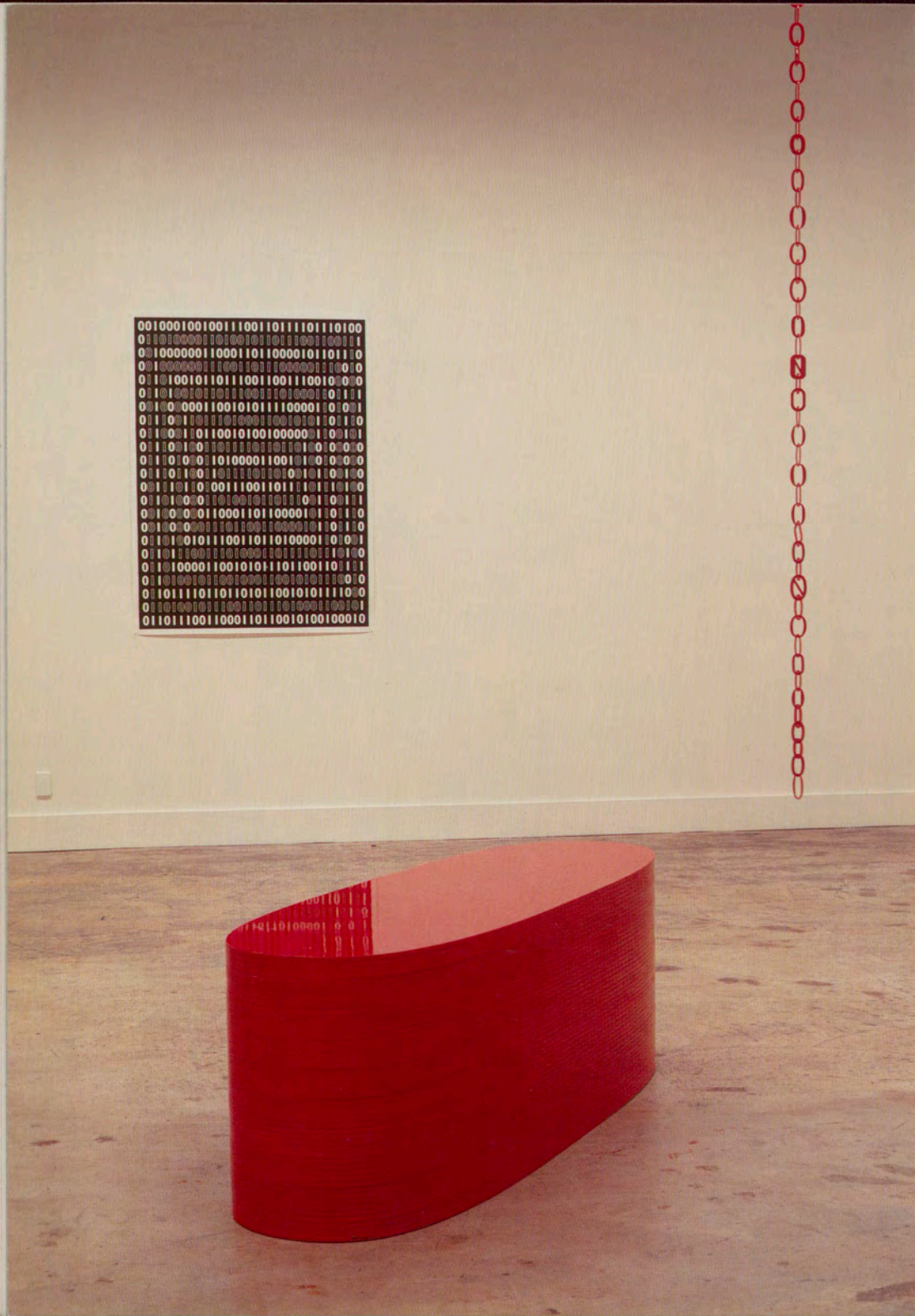
In his attempt to describe nothingness outside of cultural constructs, Robinson encounters boundary conditions. As a comparison to his own failure to bypass such conditions, he cites scientific and philosophic traditions based on notions of rationalism, that allow for the possibility of limitlessness and of eternal consciousness, but that fail to get beyond a point of origin. Robinson proposes this conundrum as a dilemma for contemporary art that attempts to free itself from a sense of origin, place and tradition. This dilemma might be thought of as a conspiracy of consciousness. Nevertheless, for Robinson, the point at which consciousness can be comprehended as existing beyond culture is a moment of divine comedy, a place where nothing shines.

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guatarri *A thousand plateaus; capitalism and schizophrenia* (translation by Brian Massumi) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 p 133

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Hawking *A brief history of time* London: Bantam Books, 1988 p 94

<sup>3</sup> Peter Robinson, interview with the author, February 2001





## List of works

All works courtesy of Kapinos Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Berlin and Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington  
All works measured in millimetres, height before width before depth

### Being and nothingness 2001

lambda print  
1200 x 2195

### Dante's door 2001

wood, acrylic lacquer, vinyl  
2010 x 810 x 35

### Inflation theory 1 2001

fibreglass, acrylic paint  
1060 x 1640 x 1500

### Inflation theory 2 2001

(p 16) glass  
450 x 500 x 450

### Into the void 2001

(p 11) lambda print  
1750 x 1200

### Memory flower 2001

(p 15) acrylic sheet, paint  
280 x 280

### Null and void 2001

customwood, paint  
585 x 585 x 1940

### Sartre's worm 2001

(back cover) lambda print  
1600 x 1200

### The presence and absence of God 2001

(p 4-5) lambda print  
1200 x 4550

### Zero red shift 2001

acrylic sheet  
5000 x 100 x 100



## Peter Robinson (Ngai Tahu, born 1966)

### Selected solo exhibitions

- 2001 *Divine Comedy* 49th Venice Biennale, Museo di Sant'Appolonia, Venice  
2000 *No reading allowed here* Kapinos Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Berlin  
*The end of the twentieth century* Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington  
1999 *Point of infinite density* Robert McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch

### Selected group exhibitions

- 2001 *49th Venice Biennale* Museo di Sant'Appolonia, Venice  
*Troubler l'écho du temps, œuvres de la collection* Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, Lyon  
*Superman in bed* Museum am Ostwall, Dortmund  
2000 *Partage d'exotismes* Biennale d'art contemporain de Lyon, Lyon  
*Continental shift* Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen  
*Heimat kunst* Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin  
*Drive: power>progress>desire* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth  
1999 *Kunst-welten im dialog* Museum Ludwig, Köln  
*Toi Toi Toi* Museum Fridericianum, Kassel and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland  
1998 *Entropy zu Hause* Suermondt-Ludwig Museum, Aachen  
*Everyday* 11th Biennale of Sydney, Sydney  
1997 *Trade routes: history and geography* 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, Johannesburg  
1996 *Inklusion/Exklusion* Künstlerhaus Graz, Graz  
*23a Bienal de São Paulo*, São Paulo  
*2nd Asia-Pacific Triennale of Contemporary Art* Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane  
1995 *Cultural safety* Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt and City Gallery, Wellington

### Selected bibliography

- 2001 Burke, Gregory 'Bi-Polar' *Bi-polar* Creative New Zealand, Wellington, pp 7-16  
Miles, Anna 'Au contraire' *Bi-polar* Creative New Zealand, Wellington, pp 56-60  
2000 Burke, Gregory and Hanna Scott *Drive: power>progress>desire* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth  
Leonard, Robert 'Peter Robinson' *Kunst-welten im dialog* Dumont, Köln, pp 472-473  
*Partage d'exotismes* 5th Biennale d'art contemporain de Lyon, Réunion des Musées v2, pp 18-19  
'Continental shift' *Modo* Freiburg, pp 36-37  
1999 Miles, Anna 'Peter Robinson' *Toi Toi Toi* Museum Fridericianum, Kassel and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, pp 160-167  
Miles, Anna 'Peter Robinson, Gordon Walters and the corporate koru: redesigning a New Zealand identity' *Art Asia Pacific* 23 Sydney, pp 77-81  
O'Regan, Hana 'Peter Robinson' *Home and away: contemporary Australian and New Zealand art from the Chartwell Collection* Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki and David Bateman, Auckland, pp 56-57  
Puvogel, Renate 'Toi toi toi' *Kunstforum International* 147 Ruppichterth, pp 346-348  
1998 Leonard, Robert 'Peter Robinson' *Everyday* 11th Biennale of Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, pp 186-187  
Milburn, Felicity *Point of infinite density* Robert McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch  
1997 Leonard, Robert 'Peter Robinson's strategic plan' *Art Asia Pacific* 16 Sydney, pp 70-75  
*Trade routes: history and geography* 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, South Africa and the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, The Netherlands  
1996 Martin, Jean-Hubert 'The strangement towards the other and perversity of Western influences' *Universalis Bienal de São Paulo*, pp 89, 92-93  
Tamati-Quennell, Megan 'Peter Robinson' (interview) *Universalis Bienal de São Paulo*, pp 124-129  
1995 Burke, Gregory *Cultural safety: contemporary art from New Zealand* City Gallery, Wellington  
Leonard, Robert '3.125% pure: Peter Robinson plays the numbers game' *Art +Text* 50 Sydney, pp 18-20  
Leonard, Robert 'Peter Robinson' *Inklusion/Exklusion* Künstlerhaus Graz, Graz, pp 320-323





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