



Meet the curators of The Red Queen at MONA

ARTSHUB

TUESDAY 4 JUNE, 2013

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Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne talk art, evolutionary biology, the O device and navigating MONA in search of *The Red Queen*.

They don't want to make big claims but the co-curators of *The Red Queen* think MONA's new exhibition may be the first ever anywhere to make its theme the question, why do we make art? 'There have been [related] exhibitions at the British Museum and so on, but we are pretty much the first to do it with contemporary artists and commissioning works around the theme. When we spoke to a few curators they were quite impressed by the idea,' says Olivier Varenne, who is not expecting any answers but is happy to 'open the conversation. It's an open-minded exhibition bringing the visitors into a new world and a new set of questions without trying to force them into any one way of thinking.' For Nicole Durling, 'instead of continuing along exploring a whole bunch of isms in art historical tropes, over the past two years since we've been open it seems these are more the questions that interest us.'

The concept came from MONA's founder David Walsh, who once said in an off-hand remark to the curators that he built the museum 'as an attempt to understand why people make art.' From that fell the job to Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne to curate an exhibition on that abstract topic, drawing from works in Walsh's collection that have yet to be seen at MONA, commissioned pieces from 15 artists and loans from the [National Gallery of Victoria](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/) (<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/>), [The Museum of Everything](http://www.museumofeverything.com/) (<http://www.museumofeverything.com/>) and [The Holmes à Court Collection](http://www.holmesacourtgallery.com.au/page/janet_holmes_court_collection.html) (http://www.holmesacourtgallery.com.au/page/janet_holmes_court_collection.html) in Perth.

The title comes from the evolutionary biologist Leigh Van Valen, who borrowed the character from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* to explain the theory of coevolution, whereby species are locked in a competitive dynamic of

escalating adaptations to survive. Those that can't keep up, die. 'Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place,' the Red Queen tells Alice.

Naturally, the form and composition of *The Red Queen* evolved since the curators began their work 11 months ago. 'In the beginning, creating an exhibition is a slow process,' explains Varenne. "You just don't have an idea (snaps his finger) showing up just like that, so we were interested in many topics and one of them was who was inside and outside the world of art. So we ask is art to be made by someone in a cave to be looked at only by himself or is it meant to be for an audience? Is it meant to be some transmission of knowledge, or for language or to hunt game?"

That question led Varenne to a point of entry. 'For me, the first step [in creating] the exhibition was to show works by [Henry] Darger

https://www.google.com.au/search?gs_rn=15&gs_ri=psy-ab&tok=Zh6CsUCj2Sv-IYcaIAAA&suggest=p&cp=5&gs_id=k&xhr=t&q=darger+family&bav=on.2.or.r.qf.&bvm=bv.47244034.d.dGI&biw=1527&bih=786&hl=en&tbm=isch&source=og&sa=N&tab=wi&ei=r0WtUbKbB4zckgWfwY#um=1&hl=en&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=darger+artist&oq=da1.1.0...0.0.0..1c.1.15.img.EpC4upvQqGU&bav=on.2.or.r.qf.&bvm=bv.47244034.d.dGI&fp=7b255f9fda590c60&biw=1527&bih=833), whose works were only discovered at his death so he had no audience at all in his life, and Rirkrit Tiravanija (https://www.google.com.au/search?gs_rn=15&gs_ri=psy-ab&tok=Zh6CsUCj2Sv-IYcaIAAA&suggest=p&cp=5&gs_id=k&xhr=t&q=darger+family&bav=on.2.or.r.qf.&bvm=bv.47244034.d.dGI&biw=1527&bih=786&hl=en&tbm=isch&source=og&sa=N&tab=wi&ei=r0WtUbKbB4zckgWfwY#um=1&hl=en&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=rirkrit+tiravanija+art&1.1.0...0.0.0..1c.1.15.img.srn5L7XpOZ8&bav=on.2.or.r.qf.&bvm=bv.47244034.d.dGI&fp=7b255f9fda590c60&biw=1527&bih=833), whose work only exists because of an audience.'

That sort of duality was a useful way to start but don't expect *The Red Queen* to behave like that when you visit. 'It's not so much pairings but groupings of work that have direct relationships with each other,' adds Durling. 'There are sometimes slippages between some of the works as we chose them, because there are so many reasons that drive human beings to create that the motivations and connections aren't always clear cut, so there aren't necessarily these [dual] distinctions between them.'

Working so closely together as MONA's senior curators, one will often finish another's point. Varenne continues: 'We thought that the motivations of artists today would maybe be the same as the motivations of artists 20,000 years ago. The words were different, the politics were different, but the deep emotions would be the same, so we've made a lot of counterparts. If we're showing old art we've tried to show a lot of new work, another installation, to speak about the [theoretical] topic.'

'There are some nice links back to video and newly created works that would be sitting next to an Egyptian sarcophagus,' says Durling to illustrate the juxtapositions.

Once you're at MONA, you might feel like Alice trying to make sense of the Red Queen. Don't expect it to have a dedicated space of its own. 'The exhibition will run across the whole museum,' Durling explains. 'We are re-hanging about 75% of the museum, so there will still be works from the *Monanism* (<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10150447349455577.636256.113535580576&type=3>) evolving exhibition and *The Red Queen* will work as chapters in a way across the whole museum.'

Varenne concludes: 'There is a logical progression from *Monanism* to *The Red Queen* so we couldn't really separate them.'

Helping you separate them will be the MONA O device

(http://www.computerworld.com.au/article/444906/why_mona_went_mobile_technology_behind_hobart_museum_old_new_art/), the iPod Touch that runs custom software to serve as your electronic guide to the museum. 'There will be an option there for our visitors to select *Red Queen* works only and that way they can be led across the museum within *The Red Queen* itself,' Durling advises.

The information on the O device will be renewed over the life of the exhibition too. 'That's exactly the point,' Durling emphasises. 'It will be a conversation that will continue to evolve. We are constantly learning new things that will give us a new way of interpreting what we are surrounded by. [The Red Queen] is a big idea, it can be quite complex.'

By way of example to explain the presence of the Indigenous painter Rover Thomas in *The Red Queen*, she references Brian Boyd, the author of *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition and Fiction*. 'He talks about play and hypothesising about potentials for futures, so you can work out the best outcomes to be more successful. The two particular works [by Rover Thomas] are part of his Rainbow Serpent dreaming and they're about storytelling. That story was passed on to him by another member of his family and that whole idea of passing on information is part of that planning for the future and understanding where to be cautious. We have made a link between that and a contemporary video work that is being created on site.' From ideas to art to a related work, that's the way *The Red Queen* rolls.

Varenne returns to the original question. 'Why is art all over the world? In every culture in the world it is constant, in every civilization, in every tribe. Some art is better than another one but this is not what we are really trying to discuss; it's how come there's so much art. Since the beginning of humanity art exists.'

Durling takes her cue. 'As soon as humans have food and shelter, they start creating in whatever form that is, whether it is dance or music or drawing pictures in the sand. Personally, I'd be happy if visitors come in and start thinking about what is creativity or what part of them is creative. Artists might create just to learn. As a curator, making this exhibition is a creative process for me, because I am curious, I want to learn and understand and I want to engage with an audience and I want to be challenged and to share stories.'

That idea of audience returns. Durling muses, 'People say that Darger didn't make his work for an audience but he did, he had to have ...'

Varenne jumps in mid-sentence. 'Instinctively, but he never wanted to show it to anyone.' Then he stops and reflects. 'But deep down you always want that.'

Despite spending the best part of a year developing *The Red Queen*, the curators are still animated in their conversations. This is a theme that can give and give and give. 'This is really the reason David built this museum to start with,' says Durling. 'He didn't know it overtly at the time but I think this is very much a natural progression about understanding what his motivations are and for me it's a unique opportunity to be part of this very big conversation that we've all been allowed here at MONA to participate in. *The Red Queen* is a first step to what we hope will be a series of exhibitions that will open this discussion up and refine it even further. It's a long commitment we've got. We've just dipped our toe in it.'

Varenne agrees. 'When we started, we were starting from scratch with a few ideas, but it started to tickle us with different ideas. The plan is to have a three-part exhibition eventually.'

A three-parter with a double act. Durling and Varenne.

The artists below were selected for *The Red Queen*. The names in bold are artists who had work commissioned or reworked for *The Red Queen*.

Shachiko Abe (Japan), Marina Abramović (Serbia/USA), Francis Alÿs (Belgium), **Kutlug Ataman** (Turkey), Pierre Bismuth (France/USA), Mircea Cantor (Romania), Chen Zhen (China/France, 1955–2000), David Claerbout (Belgium), Henry Joseph Darger (USA, 1892–1973), Hubert Duprat (France), **Tessa Farmer** (UK), Michel François (Belgium), Anna Halprin (USA), Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (Mexico/Canada), **Ryoji Ikeda** (Japan/France), Ali Kazma (Turkey), Joseph Kosuth (USA), **Laith McGregor** (Australia), **Yves Netzhammer** (Switzerland), Chris Ofili (UK), Yazid Oulab (Algeria/France), **Brigita Ozolins** (Australia), Mike Parr (Australia), Julius Popp (Germany), **Sam Porritt** (UK), Alex Rabus, Léopold Rabus, Renate Rabus, Till Rabus (Switzerland), **Cameron Robbins** (Australia), Leni Riefenstahl (Germany, 1902–2003), **Sarkis** (Turkish-born Armenian/France), **Lindsay Seers** (UK), **Chiharu Shiota** (Japan/Germany), Roman Signer (Switzerland), Taryn Simon (USA), Simon Starling (UK), Sung Hwan Kim (South Korea/USA), **Tamuna Sirbiladze** (Georgia/Austria), **Rirkrit Tiravanija** (Argentina/USA), Rover Thomas (Australia, 1926–1998), Uta Uta Tjangala (Australia, 1926–1990), Wang Jianwei (China), Erwin Wurm (Austria), Zang Huan (China/USA) and **Toby Ziegler** (UK).

The clip below takes a tour of *Monanism* in February this year.

The Red Queen (<http://www.mona.net.au/what's-on/exhibitions/>) opens at MONA on June 18. It runs to April 21, 2014.

The Red Queen opening night (<http://www.darkmofo.net.au/program/the-red-queen/>) is free to all on June 18 from 6.00pm till midnight. To get there, take the MR-1 Fast Ferry, \$20 return. For bookings call (03) 6223 6064.

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