

MUSEUM OF OLD AND NEW ART

Meet David Walsh, the man behind the Museum of Old and New Art.

Daring, disrespectful even, Walsh has torn up the institutional rule book. But when your museum is set in a vineyard near Hobart, Tasmania, and far from pretty much everything else, perhaps that is what's called for. Will the gamble pay off?

WORDS: MARK RAPPOLT
PHOTOGRAPHY: FLORA HANITIJO

Where are you going?

Tasmania.

Crikey! And you say you've never been to Australia before?

Nope.

Crikey! If I may ask, why are you going there?

To see an art museum.

Near Hobart?

Uh-huh.

Aaaaahhh... you mean the Tasmanian Museum. There's not much art there, mate - it's tiny and mainly full of stuffed Tasmanian Devils.

No, it's a new one; private.

Oh, yeah? Who owns it?

This millionaire gambler guy.

Is he gay?

'WHEN THE WHITE MAN FIRST carried the burden and blessing of civilization to the shores of Australia, he found the land inhabited by a very primitive race of people.' That's modern Australia's founding moment as captured by W.J. Thomas in the introduction to his 1923 collection *Some Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines*. The conversation that precedes it was captured sometime during a 16-hour leg of the gruelling journey from London to Tasmania's capital, Hobart, the majority of which was spent in the company of a chatty doctor from Sydney. But while you might be thinking that I'm trying to suggest that, despite the 77 years of 'progress' that separates us, I felt something of a 'connection' with Thomas as I approached the shores of the smallest continent, that's not why I mention the Welshman's writing here.

The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) opened in January and is located 12km north of Hobart in the Moorilla winery (which also brews a range of beers under the Moo Brew label) on the banks of the Derwent River. Its campus includes a concert venue, eight guest pavilions (AUS\$580-950 a night) and two restaurants, while the museum itself contains everything from ancient arrowheads, an octadrachm of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (c. 265-246 BCE) and the door jamb from the tomb of Khnumhotep (c. 2345-2181 BCE), to Sidney Nolan's epic *Snake* (1970-2), a Damien Hirst spin painting, Tamy Ben-Tor's video performance *The End of Art* (2006) and commissioned works such as Christian Boltanski's *The Life of C.B.* (2010-). The last is a live streaming video of the next eight years of the artist's life, paid for in 96 instalments across that time: the collector bets that the artist will die soon, so he'll get a bargain; the sixty-six-year-old French artist presumes he's got at least another eight years to go and will be handsomely rewarded for his 'efforts'. Oh, yes. David Walsh, MONA's proprietor, is a professional gambler. And perhaps to Boltanski's eventual detriment, an extremely successful one.

But if ever civilisation felt like a burden, it does so here. With its somewhat-forbidding-yet-oddly-earthly Corten and concrete cladding,

MONA, designed by Nonda Katsalidis of Melbourne-based architects Fender Katsalidis, initially looks like the kind of hidden fortress you might find in an Akira Kurosawa film. Indeed, the museum's treasures are buried in 9,500sq m viewing spaces three-storeys deep in the Triassic Tasmanian rock, offering the jumble of exhibits (they're neither arranged chronologically nor absolutely thematically) as if it had been revealed by some archaeological dig – albeit one kept unbelievably clean and equipped with dramatic lighting, Willy Wonka's glass elevator and top-of-the-range environmental controls – waiting to be ordered and interpreted by some cultural historian. And that would be you and me.

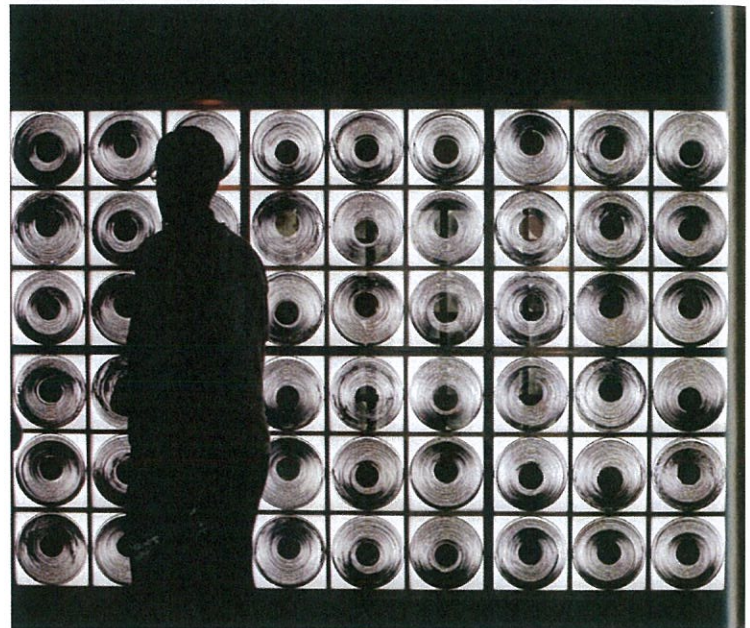
So what are we to make of all this stuff? If it wasn't already obvious, that question is articulated rather loudly by the fact that MONA has no labels. But helpfully, it does provide a sleek-looking device called 'the O' – a sort of iPod, operating by GPS and offering everything from basic information about the works to 'Art Wank' (the institution's term for what others might broadly frame as art history), the odd artist interview and some personal notes from Walsh himself – sometimes a story about his encounter with the work, sometimes biographical stories that more or less relate to it. All of which is a neat way of setting up potential terms of engagement with the museum. The items exist as more-or-less simple material objects, as records of certain moments in history, as attempts to communicate their makers' meditations and as a collection of items that might possibly equate to the biography – via its expression of particular tastes and interests – of a man called Walsh.

It's clear that my host delights in being controversial: indeed it would be fair to say that he holds as true the Oscar Wilde maxim that 'the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about'. *Monanism*, as MONA's inaugural exhibition is titled, is a term derived from the actions of a minor biblical character who became infamous for wasting his seed. It's presumably not just because he likes the colours that Walsh owns Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), the work that was famously removed from the Brooklyn Museum's iteration of Charles Saatchi's *Sensation* show. And he's very pleased with *Locus Focis* (2010), an installation by Austrian collective Gelitin that allows you to admire your excretions as you sit on one of the museum's toilets. Indeed, given that Walsh also owns one of Belgian artist Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* machines – which mimic the digestive process to turn food into shit – there's a positive affluence of effluent on show here. But as my plane buddy suggested, if you want to be talked about and you choose to live near Hobart, you really do have to make an effort. And not just the AUS\$180 million of effort that the museum and the art it houses reportedly cost Walsh. Even when there is no controversy, Walsh and his team set out to make one. The catalogue entry for Candice Breitz's video installation *Queen (A Portrait of Madonna)* (2005) lacks the customary image because the artist refused to grant the museum permission to use it. The artist, we're told, hated the catalogue entry: 'Madonna fans, separately filmed, sing unaccompanied the entire *Immaculate Collection*. It's the funniest creepiest thing.' As with much of the *Monanism* catalogue, the end result is that it's not the work that's in focus at all.

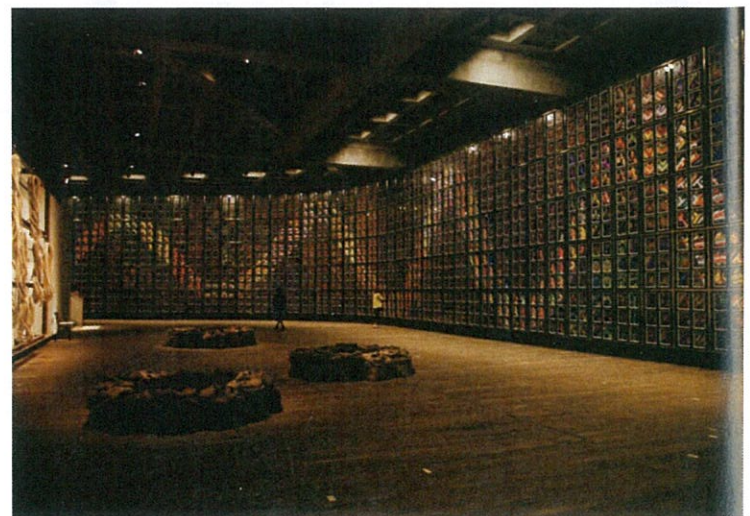
So what is? Well, here's how the local press treated the museum's gala opening. 'Not One Complaint', squawked the *Sunday Tasmanian's* front page over a picture of people queuing to get their first glimpse of MONA. Below that, a larger headline pimped an 'exclusive', complaining about how the state bureaucrats were busy bugging up Tasmania's chances of getting its own Australian-rules football franchise. All of which, I guess, tells us something about the way things in Tasmania generally go. Meanwhile, the front cover of the altogether more excitable *Mercury* ('The Voice of Tasmania') boomed 'The Art of Shock' as it documented – across its first five pages – the night's festivities. The



MONA's circular elevator shaft



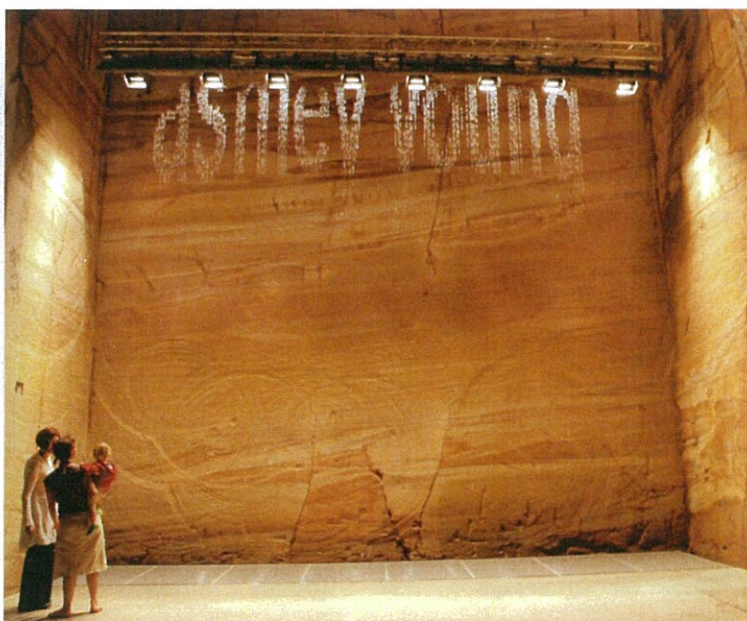
Patrick Hall, *When My Heart Stops Beating*, 2008-10, mixed media, dimensions variable



Sidney Nolan, *Snake*, 1970-2, mixed media on paper, 1,620 sheets, 560 x 4428 cm



The museum's entrance



Julius Popp, *Bit.Fall*, 2006-7, computer, electronic devices, pump, 320 magnetic valves, stainless steel basin, water, dimensions variable, edition 2 of 4



Mat Collishaw, *Bullet Hole*, 1988-93, Cibachrome mounted on 15 lightboxes

newspaper could barely contain its delight at the display of 'devices that make excrement, cattle carcasses and a collection of sculptures of human vaginas', although it has to be said that the paper rather let the state down with this summary: 'While there were no A-list celebrities in sight, it was a who's who of eminent Tasmanian personalities'. Perhaps they'd been overheated by FOMA – the annual music festival that Walsh funds and which took place the week before he unleashed MONA on the world. Nick Cave's *Grinderman* had been headlining the night before.

Despite what you've just read, if sex and death are themes most people prefer to explore in the privacy of their own double-bolted bedrooms, then Walsh is no exception. He's built one, in the midst of a three-room apartment in the middle of the museum. Apparently it's a secret, but in true Walsh style, someone made sure that every newspaper knew about it. Walking around the opening in a handpainted frock coat, he cultivates a certain mystique; part ringmaster, part clown, but definitely a man who can pull a circus around him. Catalogues signed by Walsh were going for AUS\$300 in the gift shop, and an urn containing the ashes of his father features as an exhibit. There's no doubt that a large part of what it's about is Walsh. So perhaps it's time to hear from the man himself.

...?

While I'm trying to be subversive and be unlike all other museums, I had a moment of connection, which was quite odd: people coming in, people at the coffee shop, people buying bullshit at the gift shop – all that sort of crap. And just thinking, well, you know, we have the Lego pieces of a real museum, but we've put them together a bit wonky.

Surely it's only as wonky as you are?

No. I've had time to think about the wonkiness and maximise the wonkiality. Hopefully I'm not that askew.

Is there a difference between the art you collected before you had the idea of having a museum and the stuff you've collected after?

Unfortunately the answer is yes. Beyond just art, I go to museums and find myself looking at the air-conditioning ducts. I want to get back to reality, but I don't know if I can. In relation to the art, I find myself thinking about if I could place it, what I could do with it – so playing a curatorial game that I would, if I were being dishonest, claim to abhor.

What about all the video art?

The total myth of video art – that they can say 'we're only going to produce six of these patches of electrons', even though they're perfectly duplicatable – I find very hard to understand. How have I been subverted to believe in such a ridiculous process? But in relation to a museum, you're effectively purchasing permission to show it to the public, so video art makes more sense, whereas other media makes less sense...

Do you feel a responsibility now you've got a museum? Because for some people this is going to form part of their education in art.

If I drive people to become artists, that would be a terrible thing, because there are a lot more artists struggling for a meal than there are accountants, for example. In 20 years there will be world-class artists who became interested in art because of MONA, nonetheless I hope that I still answer no. Because I'll have probably created a lot of bad ones or at least a lot of good ones that didn't become successful. It's a way of creating tough lives: artists, art and music enrich a culture, but individually they struggle. So the group effect is attractive, but the individual effect is a counterpoint.

Is there anything in your collection that you regret buying?

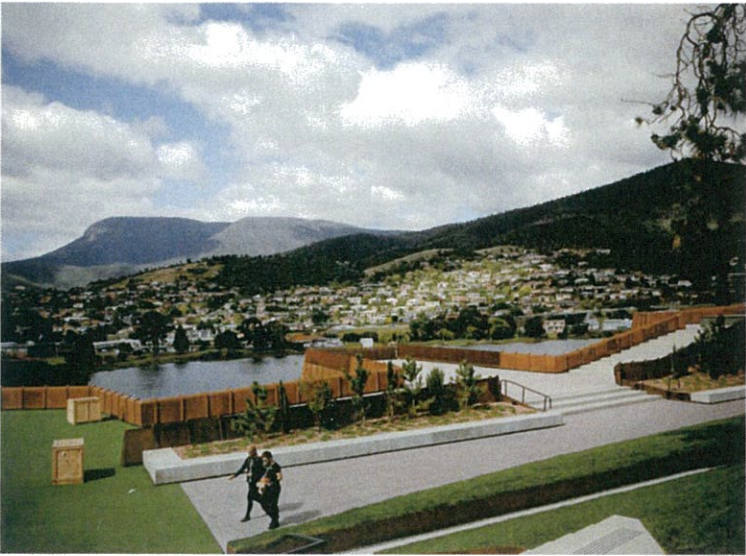
There's one absolute atrocity – I mean, I must have liked it at some point, but when they put it up, I just could not believe how ugly and bereft of merit it was.



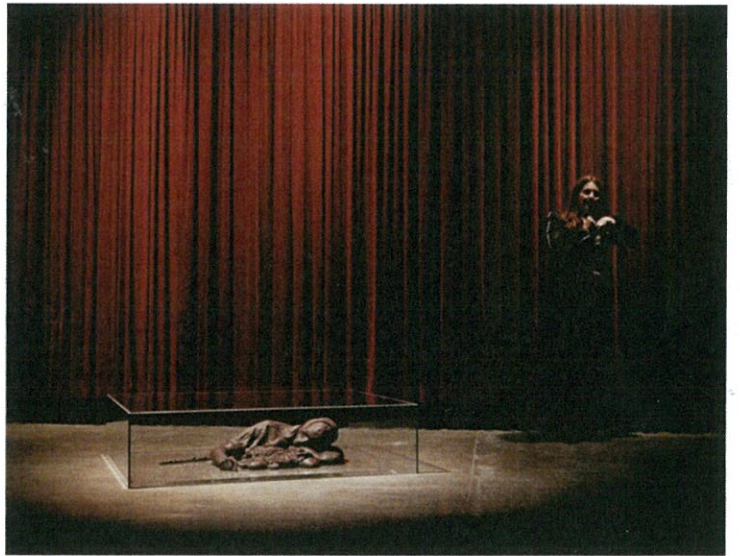
MONA bar



Coins from the museum's collection



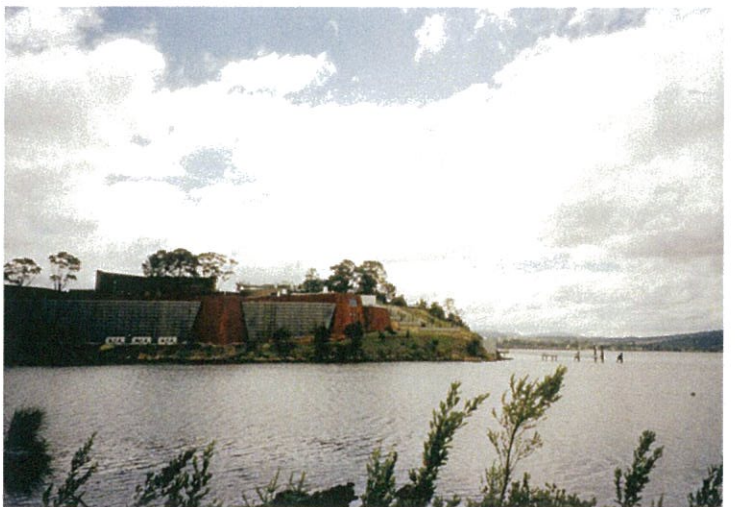
MONA exterior



Stephen Shanbrook, *On the Road to Heaven the Highway to Hell*, 2008, dark chocolate, 74 x 31 x 89 cm, edition 2 of 5



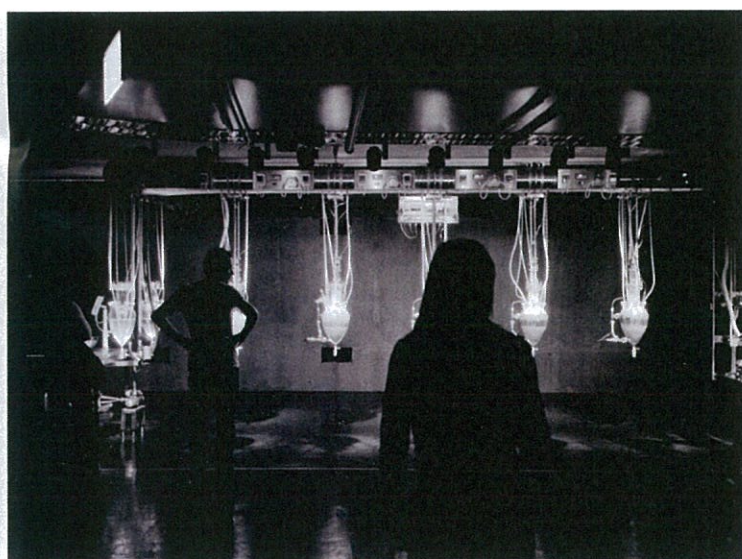
Urn containing the ashes of David Walsh's father



MONA exterior



MONA campus

Wim Delvoye, *Cloaca Professional*, 2010, mixed media installation, dimensions variable

Museum approach

Does that happen often?

It's happened a few times.

So what do you look for in a work of art?

I like parsimony; I like it to be as simple as it possibly can be. I like it to express whatever it is that's enclosed within it, and sometimes I like it to be flagrantly breaking that rule. I'm a bit Marshall McLuhan about it: a painting could be about anything, but some media are tailored to particular ideas.

Does the character of an artist matter to you? I mean, if you met an artist and absolutely hated them, would that carry through to your ideas about their work?

That has happened. There are two categories here: there are artists that are absolutely annoying but who still make great work and I'd probably buy it; but there are also, and it happens quite often, artists who I meet and find that their work lacks the depth and interest that I thought it had because they are vacuous tossers. I used to read poets and occasionally used to listen to poets reading poetry, and it often undermined my experience. There's every reason if you're a famous person to be a damaged person. One is that you've been driven all your life and you've been thinking, *I'm a genius, I'm a genius, I'm a genius*. And then someone tells you you're a genius, so you start to believe the myth. And the other one is you're pampered – if you're a bloke, beautiful girls want to jump you and everything starts to go right in your life, so you start to think you've got a right to expect that. So success and this notion of genius and the ability to believe in yourself actually undermines you, it actually makes you less likely to be a pleasant human being.

Did the museum come out exactly as you expected it to?

I honestly have to say that having got to this point, it's much better than I would have thought. It's like when I write; I'm no great writer, but when I read someone who's a really good writer – a lot better than me, a million times better than me, like Nabokov – I'm absolutely flabbergasted that it's possible. I immediately think about genius. When I write myself, I write a lot better than I think. So there is a process that you go through to get what you want to come out. I'm sure that's the case with him. There's no such thing as genius – some of these artists capture ideas that they're not even capable of thinking. That's fine with me, but I don't want to deify artists or things... And if I can figure out a way of making money out of all of this – and I honestly believe I can – then...

Do you see MONA as a business, then?

Not in the way that people think of business. Businesses have business plans: here's how we're going to make money. But that sort of thing annoys me – that's like marketing, and I hate marketers. What I want to do is simply build what I want, get it to be as interesting as it can be, to the point where it makes me happy, and then figure out if I might be able to make a few bucks out of it. If it turns out to be nothing, so be it.

So that's it, then. MONA – take it or leave it. But perhaps that's exactly why it will be a success. That it gives you the feeling that anything goes (OK – as long as you've got the money). In a way, all the paths Walsh and 'the O' might offer through the museum are just so much bullshit, so much crap. The only way to really find your way through it is to turn the device off, block your ears, stop reading articles like this one, cast off the burden of civilisation, go primitive and make up your own narrative. Oh, dear. Now I'm sounding like David Walsh. •

Monanism is on view at the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, until 19 July