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MONA's decade of daring and Tasmanian devilry

Ten years after its opening by flamboyant collector David Walsh, Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art is still pushing the boundaries

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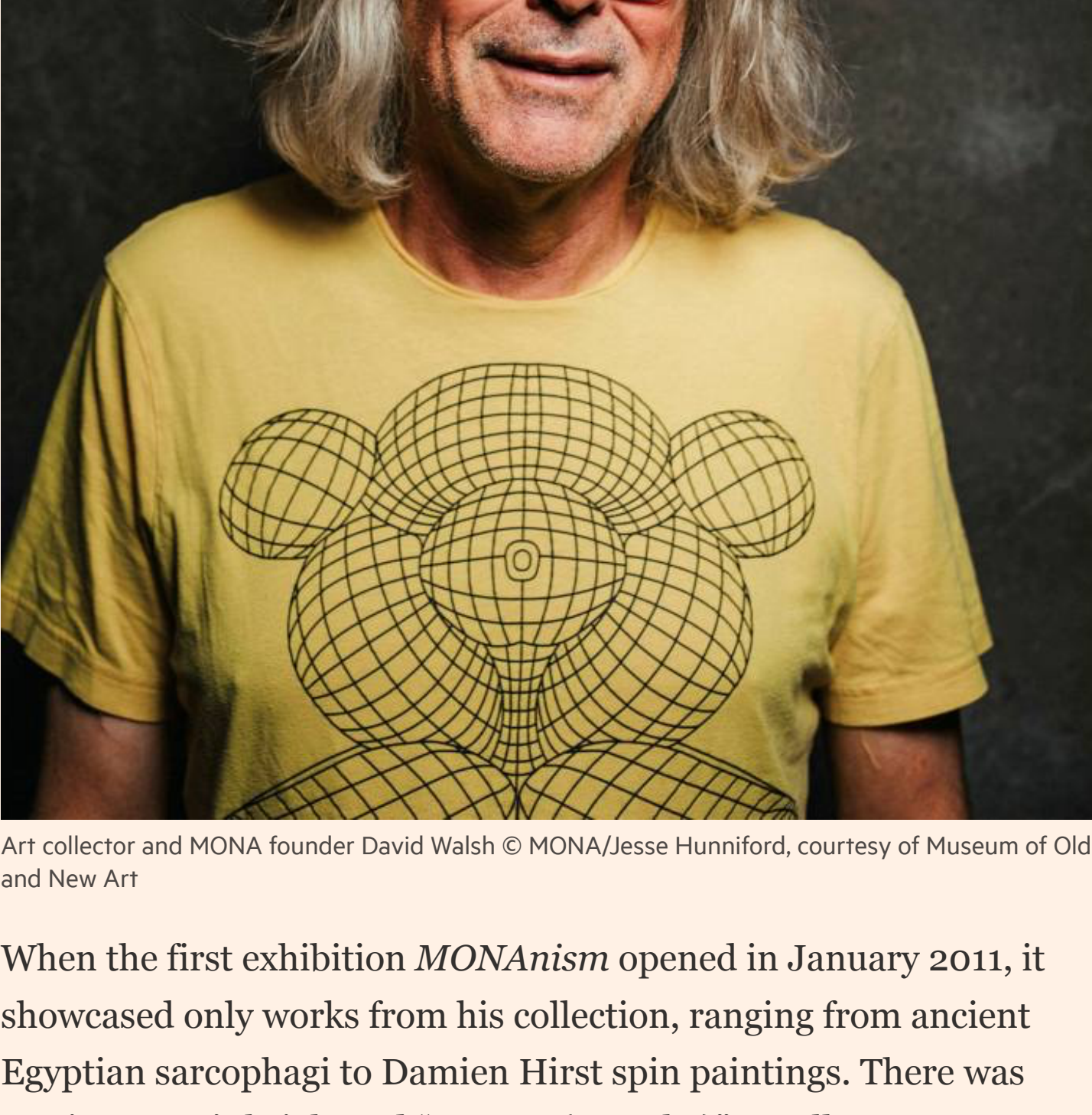
Peter Hill JANUARY 27, 2021



When MONA, Tasmania's Museum of Old and New Art, opened 10 years ago this month, its architecture — a vast and vastly ambitious labyrinthine, partly subterranean space — excited the whole art world. But because, according to lazy headlines, its owner and creator David Walsh is “a multi-millionaire gambler”, it was also dubbed “a museum of sex and death”, an art world “Disneyland”.

It was all far more complex than that, as the past decade has revealed. Yes, Walsh — who grew up in a single-parent family in Hobart's nearby working-class suburb of Moonah — is just such a millionaire. He studied maths and computing at university, but left before graduating. By then Walsh, who describes himself as being “on the spectrum”, realised he had a savant-like ability to count cards. He and his syndicate are now banned from all major casinos around the world. Undaunted, he has turned his skills to winning at horseracing, employing banks of computers and the algorithm-chasing maths graduates who operate them.

His total “brand” — a term he would hate — would probably now place him in the category of billionaire. It includes the award-winning cave-like museum campus, designed by Nonda Katsalidis, on several floors. His related businesses encompass vineyards, restaurants, music festivals, a brewery and a camouflage-liveried ferry service. Also planned is a (Covid-delayed) hotel, and an on-site boutique casino for Asia-Pacific high rollers. But it is the ever-increasing value of his permanent art collection that is at the heart of his personal wealth.

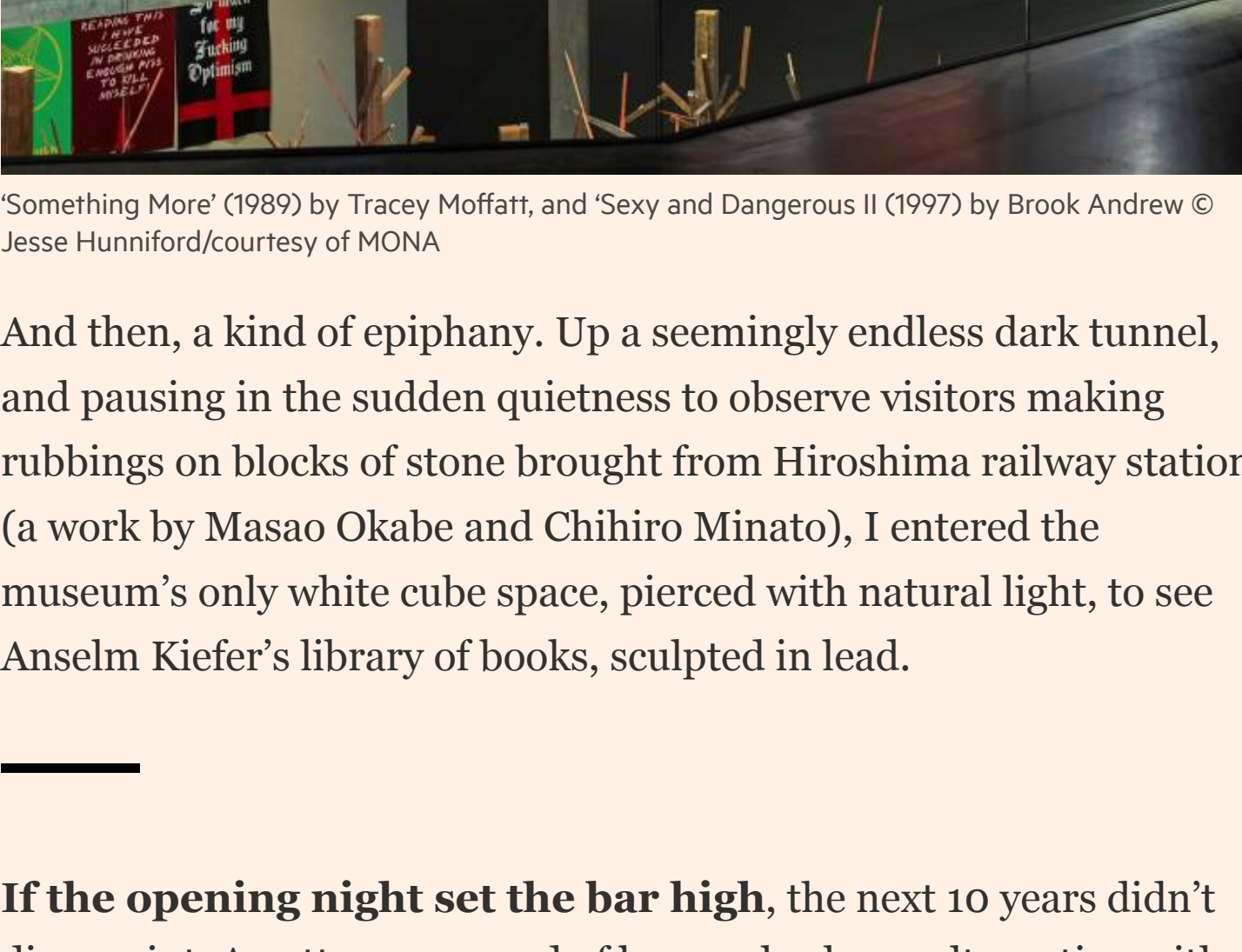


Art collector and MONA founder David Walsh © MONA/Jesse Hunniford/courtesy of Museum of Old and New Art

When the first exhibition *MONAnism* opened in January 2011, it showcased only works from his collection, ranging from ancient Egyptian sarcophagi to Damien Hirst spin paintings. There was Erwin Wurm's bright red “Fat Car (Porsche)”, swollen to grotesque proportions. A Jannis Kounellis steel-grid wall installation supported massive sides of red beef.

“Vast, thematic surveys alternated with large solo shows featuring the likes of Marina Abramovic, Wim Delvoye and Gilbert & George

Walsh, a vegetarian, says he wants one day to install a fully functioning abattoir so that people could see “exactly how we treat animals”. An enormous Jenny Saville painting of a transgender nude dominated one space in the exhibition, alongside an exquisite Basquiat. Fifty fans of Madonna, in a soundproofed room, sang a *cappella* renditions of her greatest hits from the 1990 album *The Immaculate Collection*, a 2005 [video-work](#) by Candice Breitz.



'Something More' (1989) by Tracey Moffatt, and 'Sexy and Dangerous II' (1997) by Brook Andrew © Jesse Hunniford/courtesy of MONA

And then, a kind of epiphany. Up a seemingly endless dark tunnel, and pausing in the sudden quietness to observe visitors making rubbings on blocks of stone brought from Hiroshima railway station (a work by Masao Okabe and Chihiro Minato), I entered the museum's only white cube space, pierced with natural light, to see Anselm Kiefer's library of books, sculpted in lead.

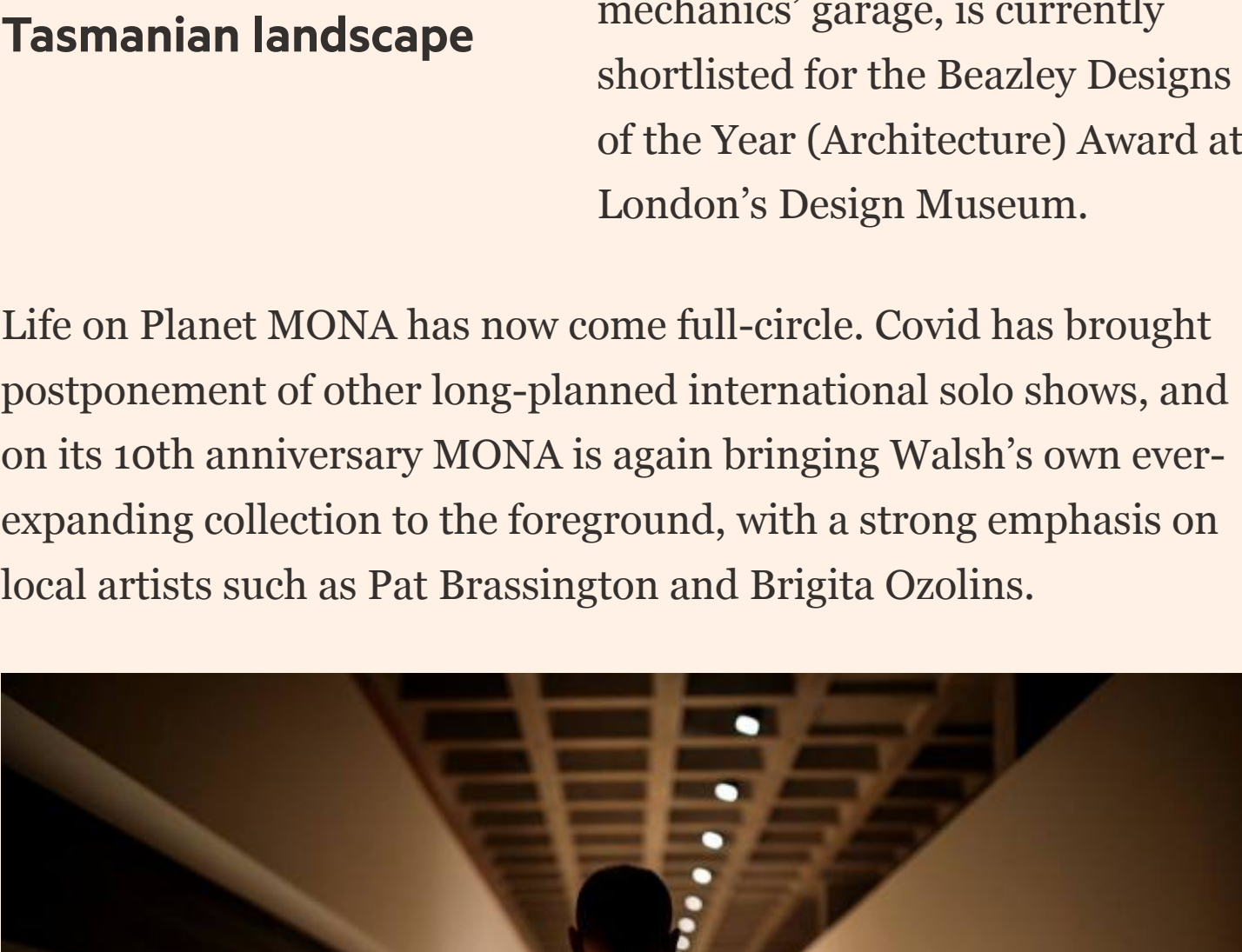
If the opening night set the bar high, the next 10 years didn't disappoint. A pattern emerged of large solo shows alternating with vast, thematic surveys. Marina Abramovic, Wim Delvoye, Matthew Barney and Gilbert & George have each had some of the biggest exhibitions of their careers. The controversy-seeking Christoph Büchel quickly got on the wrong side of the local indigenous peoples with his [DNA-testing kit for Aboriginality](#). Hermann Nitsch's blood-soaked animal “Actions” provoked ire from animal liberationists. An exhibition of the postwar European Zero group was of historical importance, and included works by Heinz Mack, Lucio Fontana, and the world's largest, swimming pool-sized Yves Klein blue floor piece.



A selection of objects and works in MONA's recent museum rehang © Jesse Hunniford/courtesy of MONA

The themed exhibitions have ranged from thought-provoking to spectacular. For one, *On The Origin Of Art*, Walsh asked some of his “scientist buddies” the question — “We need art. But for what?” The result was an exhibition curated by a range of neuroscientists and philosophers — Steven Pinker, Geoffrey Miller, Brian Boyd and Mark Changizi. They illustrated their interdisciplinary arguments with a suitably eclectic group of artists: Cindy Sherman, Bridget Riley, François Morelet, Jeff Koons, Yayoi Kusama, Fiona Pardington and Renoir.

Similarly creative in his thinking — and Walsh thinks more like an artist than a museum director — was his invitation to Jean-Hubert Martin to *extend the ideas* behind his ground-breaking Pompidou exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris. After many years of planning, *Theatre of the World* was born. Martin brought together works from Walsh's collection with artefacts from the [Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery](#). One of the highlights was walking into a large, rectangular gallery — beautifully lit by legendary museum lighting designer Tijs Visser — to see a big Giacometti “nose” sculpture facing an upright Egyptian coffin, the walls hung with Pacific Tapa cloths from Samoa.



Tom Otterness's sculpture 'Girls Rule' (2016-18) © Jesse Hunniford/courtesy of MONA

MONA's website ([mona.net.au](#)) has always been a fascinating playground of ideas to visit — and curator Kirsha Kaechele, “Kirsha's [portal](#)”, on the MONA homepage, takes you into a parallel universe to Walsh's own, but with delicious intersections. Her projects include a MONA show, and a luxurious book, both titled *Eat the Problem*.

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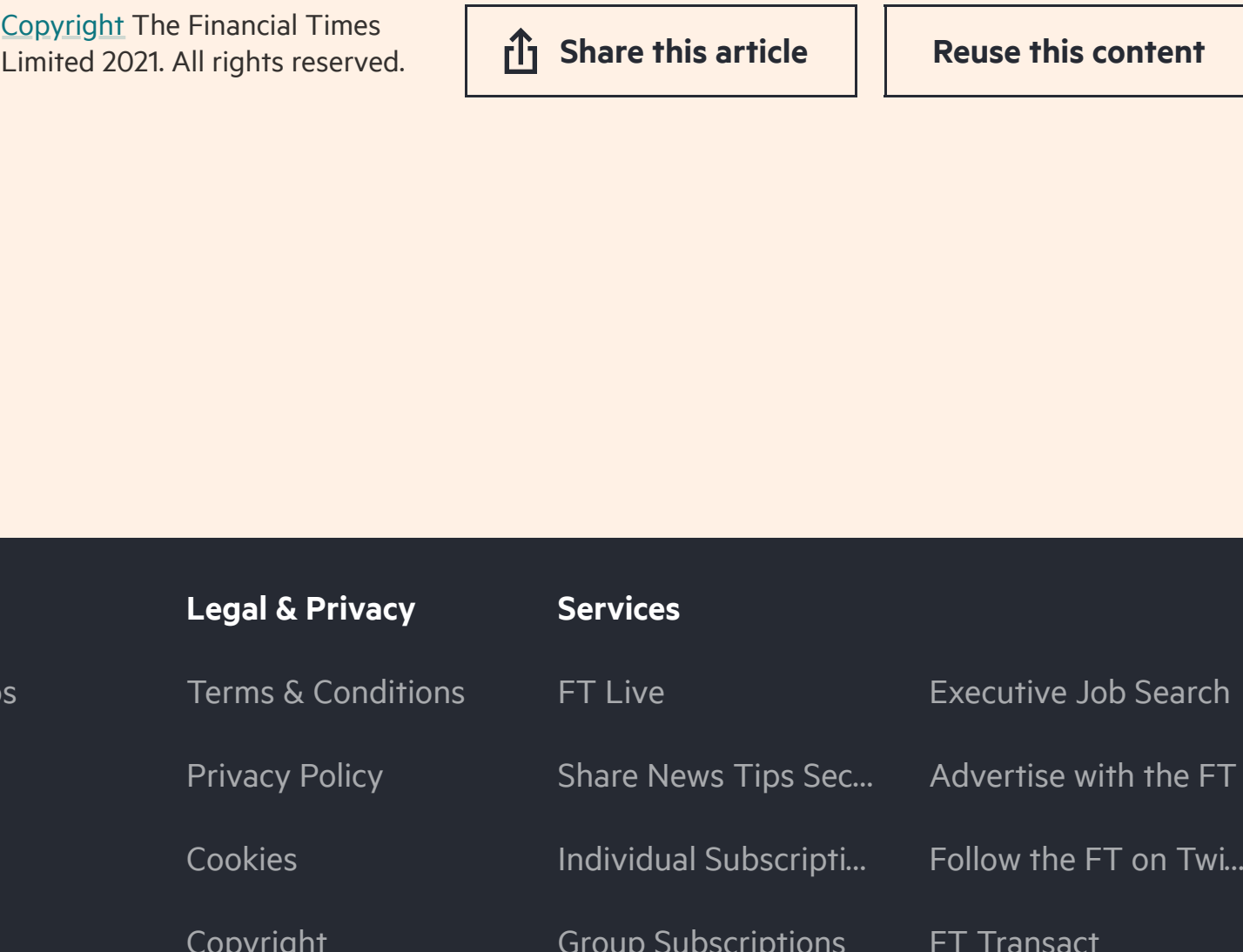
The Material Institute is her fashion school for disadvantaged kids in New Orleans, co-founded by Turner Prize-winning architectural group Assemble. This project, seeded within a former car mechanics' garage, is currently shortlisted for the Beazley Designs of the Year (Architecture) Award at London's Design Museum.

Life on Planet MONA has now come full-circle. Covid has brought postponement of other long-planned international solo shows, and on its 10th anniversary MONA is again, with Walsh's own ever-expanding collection to the fore, bringing a strong emphasis on local artists such as Pat Brassington and Brigita Ozolins.



'Tim' (2006) by Wim Delvoye © Jesse Hunniford/courtesy of MONA

So what has been added to the collection since 2011? Outdoors, there is an enormous James Turrell light [pavilion](#), best viewed at dawn and dusk against the backdrop of the rugged Tasmanian landscape. In the museum's lowest levels, exquisite ever-changing light and sound corridors, named “Siloam” after the ancient tunnels in Jerusalem, transport you from one gallery to the next. Richard Wilson's “20:50” oil installation, bought from Charles Saatchi, can be found near here.



The 'Siloam' tunnels at MONA © Jesse Hunniford/courtesy of MONA

Not far away is Ai Weiwei's “White House” (2015). Steep steps lead up from it, and here you can experience Alfredo Jaar's three-chamber interpretation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, incorporating a video work by Joan Jonas. True to the sublime tenets of beauty and terror, you are physically and emotionally moved by this great installation. Anselm Kiefer, meanwhile, is periodically spotted around the streets of Hobart. He is working on transplanting a series of his monolithic towers from his French studio complex to the grounds of MONA.

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With his rock star appearance, Walsh has eclectic tastes in music, reflected twice a year in his solstice festivals. Summer's MONA Foma, in January (curated by Hobart-based Brian Ritchie, bass player with Violent Femmes), and Dark Mofo, in the bleak June midwinter, have variously brought to Tasmania Philip Glass, St Vincent, John Cale, The Dresden Dolls, Laibach (from Slovenia), Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds; PJ Harvey and the late Genesis Breyer P-Orridge of Throbbing Gristle.

These are all part of MONA's wider offerings, with its wonderful collections and undeniable moral ambiguities, its deep respect for the past — and its desire to shock the present.

[mona.net.au](#)

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