

Exhibition Critiques:

MONA, the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Australia

by Toni Roberts, Ed Rodley, and Bliss Jensen

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Hobart is no competition for Melbourne or Sydney as a centre of arts and culture, so MONA has really put Hobart on the cultural map.

MONA: An Homage to Personal Meaning-Making by Toni Roberts

For those with little knowledge of Australia, it is important to put the Museum of Old and New Art, or MONA, in context. It is situated on a peninsula on the outskirts of Hobart, the capital city of our least populous and southern-most island state, Tasmania. Renowned for its beautiful wild places, historic sites and excellent farm produce, Tasmania is popular with bushwalkers and gourmet travellers. With a population of just over 200,000, Hobart is no competition for Melbourne or Sydney as a centre of arts and culture, so MONA has really put Hobart on the cultural map.

I was intrigued by the idea of a privately funded gallery of this scale, driven by the personal taste and passion of the owner, David Walsh. Publicity has centred on the museum's shock value through art about sex and death and its state-of-the-art iPod-based interpretation. MONA's branding is brilliant: stylish and contemporary with powerful use of colour. The symbols + x create a distinctive and simple brand mark that reads as edgy and cool. The website is low on arty waffle and high on catering to visitor needs; visitors can book accommodation, car hire, ferry, and museum tickets through the site.

We had been advised to take the MONA ferry from Hobart, although it is easily accessible by road. The scenic river trip offered a different perspective on Hobart and built anticipation. We disembarked to climb a steep narrow stairway to the museum forecourt, which is actually a

small tennis court. A mirrored wall at the gallery entrance reflected the queuing visitors in distorted swirls of colour. So far, so good: fun, quirky and not too pretentious.

At the entry, a guide handed each visitor an iPod with headphones, providing a brief introduction to use of the 'O' app. This is the only form of interpretation in the museum; there is no text on the walls, no signage and no printed interpretation. Although advising us to start at the lowest level, basement 3, the guide emphasised that we were free to explore and shape our own experience as we wished. We headed to basement 3, emerging from the glass lift at a bar. I'm not a big drinker, but I loved this. A bar with a collection of lounge chairs in a gallery says, "Welcome. Looking at art is tiring, so we want to make it enjoyable. Relax, take your time and socialise." I felt reassured that this place would not expect me to feign tireless appreciation of the value of art and intellectual endeavour; it wanted me to have a good time.

Beyond the bar, a natural sandstone wall of impressive height and incredible beauty extends along a corridor. The entire building is cut into the earth, revealing beautiful stone with striations in golden tones. We are underground, in the earth. Time slows as we follow the wall, its drama providing a form of orientation and preparation for our journey. My first impression is an awareness of the spaces between, a sense of pacing and anticipation.

Throughout the museum I encountered works that I loved, hated, and some that left little impression. I loved that



Stone wall, Basement 3. Photo by Toni Roberts.

the collection included numerous interactive and experiential works and several involving living organisms that grow or decay. I preferred the theatrical environment of basement 3 to the more traditional gallery environments, though these also held some surprises. Overall, the art and artefacts were eclipsed by the architecture and exhibition design, the creation of sensual and sensory spaces, of constructed ways of looking into and through, of isolating and revealing and bringing together. One of the most beautiful design elements is a curved gold wall in the dimly lit basement 3 gallery. The gently undulating wall is pierced at intervals by small rectangular cavities, each with a view into a case holding a small artwork or ancient relic. This focused view added an aspect of reverence, implying that each piece is worthy of its own private viewing by a single visitor. By contrast, other works are displayed in an irreverent manner. Installation art is overlaid with paintings; a contemporary sculpture is placed atop an ancient stone carving; indigenous craft, contemporary video art, and a

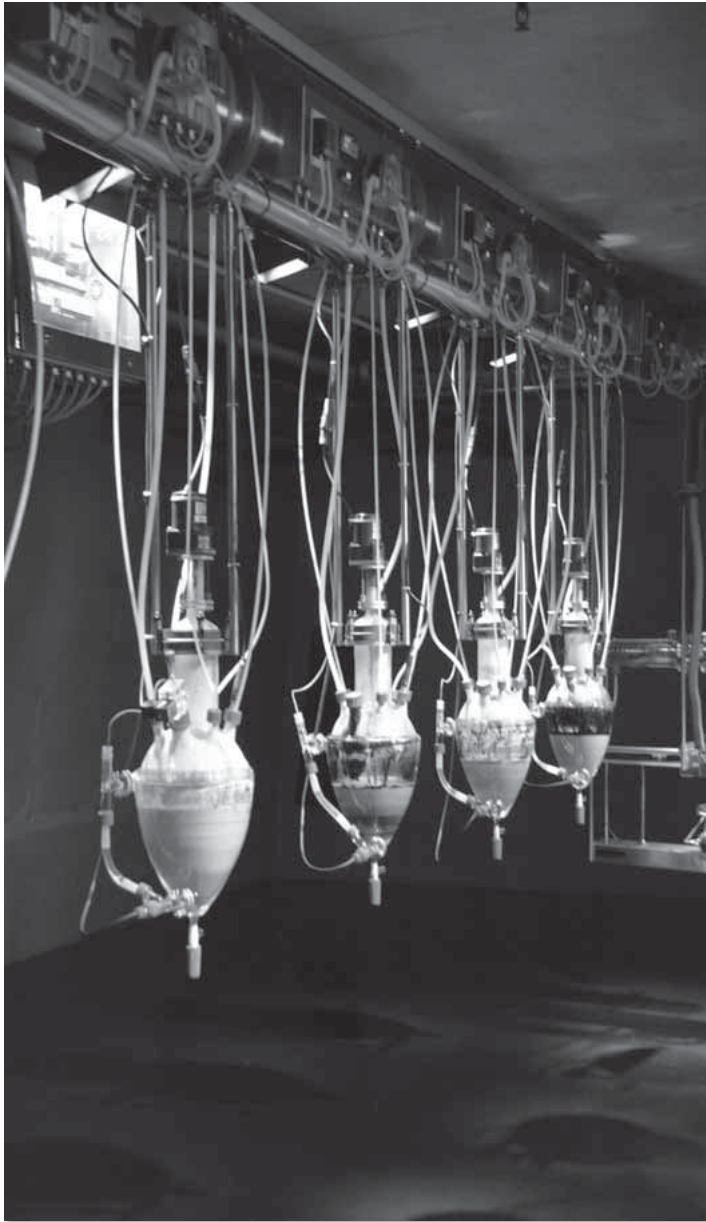
The website is low on arty waffle and high on catering to visitor needs; visitors can book accommodation, car hire, ferry, and museum tickets through the site.

chunk of coral are arranged together on a four poster bed. This said to me that art and culture are not always to be worshipped; we can be playful, toying with relationships and juxtapositions that in turn create something new. A repeated design feature was the low doorway, the most memorable of which was set into a long patterned wall. After bending to pass through, I stood upright to find myself enclosed in a darkened space, the bold stripes of Emily Kame Kngwarreye's painting resonating in the dim light. The visual isolation afforded focused viewing without distraction.

There was little that shocked. The wax model of a dead horse, the painting of a nude transsexual and the poo machine (Cloaca Professional) were provocative, but hardly shocking in the context of contemporary art. The combination of old and new art, often in the same



Gold wall, Basement 3. Photo by Toni Roberts.



Cloaca Professional, Wim Delvoye, 2010. Photo by Toni Roberts.

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Particularly in the centre of the building, the app would detect so many works that it became tiresome to scroll through a list to find the right one.

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case, was the most transgressive aspect of the museum. Exhibits mixed nature objects, handcrafted furniture, modern design, installation art, wall art, living art, ancient artefacts and indigenous art from numerous countries. Sometimes the combinations were a little forced, obviously incorporating items from the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, but in general they worked.

There were literally no signs, visitors relying on the O for all interpretation. Overall, the lack of signage encouraging looking, being and experiencing before thinking, knowing and judging. However, the O was not always accurate in identifying artworks in your proximity. Particularly in the centre of the building,

the app would detect so many works that it became tiresome to scroll through a list to find the right one. It was often hard to know which gallery you were in; perhaps the no signage rule could have been waived just to provide gallery names.

The O is a brilliant concept with a simple interface, and the interpretive content is wonderfully pluralist. Visitors can choose from Summary, Ideas, Art Wank, Gonzo, and Media. The Ideas icon links to propositions and questions relating to the work. Art Wank offers the sort of content you might expect at other major galleries, although in a more casual tone. Walsh's anecdotes in the Gonzo interpretation are often amusing and personal, provoking visitor responses and opinions. Curator introductions and interviews with artists are provided as Media content. Through such selections, each visitor creates a unique interpretive experience. For example, my daughter and I were looking at the same work and reading interpretation about it on our iPods. We shared a knowing look that we both found it amusing. It was not until hours later that we realised we had been reading different interpretations of the same artwork and had been enjoying completely different stories. The O privileges personal meaning-making over shared understandings and social interaction, but its diversity of content is probably worth the sacrifice.

The O enables visitors to click on a 'love' or 'hate' icon for each work. Each time I 'loved' something, the O displayed statistics about other visitors' responses, which I found insufficient reward to bother continuing. There is room for the O to incorporate more meaningful visitor interaction by recording their stories and opinions about the works to share with others; this seems a natural extension of



The Mice and Me, Meghan Boody, 2008. Photo by Toni Roberts.

the iPod interface. It would help to include a camera in the O app or for visitors to download the app onto their own device. I use glasses for reading so the combination of glasses, headphone, camera and the O became rather unwieldy.

Knowing that I could save my visit through the O, I felt more relaxed about not having to read or listen to all the interpretive content, so I could focus on looking, sensing and exploring. This reduced my fatigue level and made my visit more enjoyable. Post-visit review of content resonates with interpretation theory about learning, reflecting and making meaning over time. It is especially useful for interstate and international visitors who cannot easily revisit. Better search tools would be helpful, but I can easily navigate my tour by location, viewing order, or by scrolling through works viewed. I can also explore works not viewed during my visit.

MONA is an homage to personal meaning-making. Driven so clearly by one person's passion and personal collection, MONA is a place for visitors to make choices, explore their interests and think about ideas. It is an extravagant display of wealth, but a generous one, as Walsh has chosen to share it with the public and we are made to feel welcome. An essential aspect of the meaning I gained from my visit is a profound sense of place, of being

situated in the earth. The building design and the inclusion of natural objects as companions to works of art, proclaim a connection between nature and culture. MONA is for me a celebration of life and art and creativity, perhaps the flip side of an obsession with sex and death.

MONA: Less is More

By Ed Rodley

It's been a long time since a single new museum captured as much media attention as the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, Australia. MONA is the perfect post-modern art museum. Its founder, David Walsh, has deconstructed the narrative of the art museum visit to its barest essential: looking at the art and reacting to it emotionally. The design makes it difficult to even tell what's old and what's new. The objects exist only in the context of the gallery and the juxtapositions between objects. Walsh doesn't want you to come and see the highlights; he wants you to look at art and see what moves you. One of the most controversial manifestations of this philosophy is the complete absence of labels in the museum.

No labels.

None.

MONA is interesting both for its philosophy and its inventive, ambitious use of digital media. And on both counts, I think I think it delivers an experience that merits study from the rest of the museum field.

This critique is based on three longer posts with many more photographs that appeared on Ed Rodley's blog, [Thinking About Museums](#), in August 2012.
The Editor.



MONA from the ferry, the way David Walsh wants visitors to approach the museum. Photo by Ed Rodley.

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MONA spends a lot of institutional energy on customer service, and it shows.

All the interpretation is carried in customized iPod Touches called “the O,” which are handed out free to every visitor. One of the primary features of the O allows visitors to express their feelings about works in the museum by choosing to “Love” or “Hate” particular artworks. By making the voting so central to the experience MONA gives all its visitors explicit permission to have an opinion. You’re allowed to love or hate (or not feel anything about) a work of art without knowing anything about it other than your personal experience of it. So MONA is interesting both for its philosophy and its inventive, ambitious use of digital media. And on both counts, I think I think it delivers an experience that merits study from the rest of the museum field.

MONA is not a temple to secular culture as envisioned by writers like Alain de Botton (2012). If it’s any kind of temple,

it’s more an oracular cave than an edifice of orthodoxy. A visit is a total immersion experience in a way that most museum visits aren’t. MONA delights (and sometimes assaults) all the senses. It is devious, theatrical, and all-consuming. Unlike most museums, which bend over backwards to make sure you know where you are, MONA is a place in which you get lost. You get unlost when you come out, and that’s the important thing. The following are some of the impressions I took away from my visit to MONA.

Key Impressions

MONA spends a lot of institutional energy on customer service, and it shows. I was very impressed with the front of house staff, from the ticket sellers to gallery attendants. I was particularly struck with how engaged the gallery attendants were. Again and again, the staff were solicitous, friendly, and

More than once I looked at something because I didn't know what it was, and upon looking it up on my O, found it was something I have previously told myself I don't like.

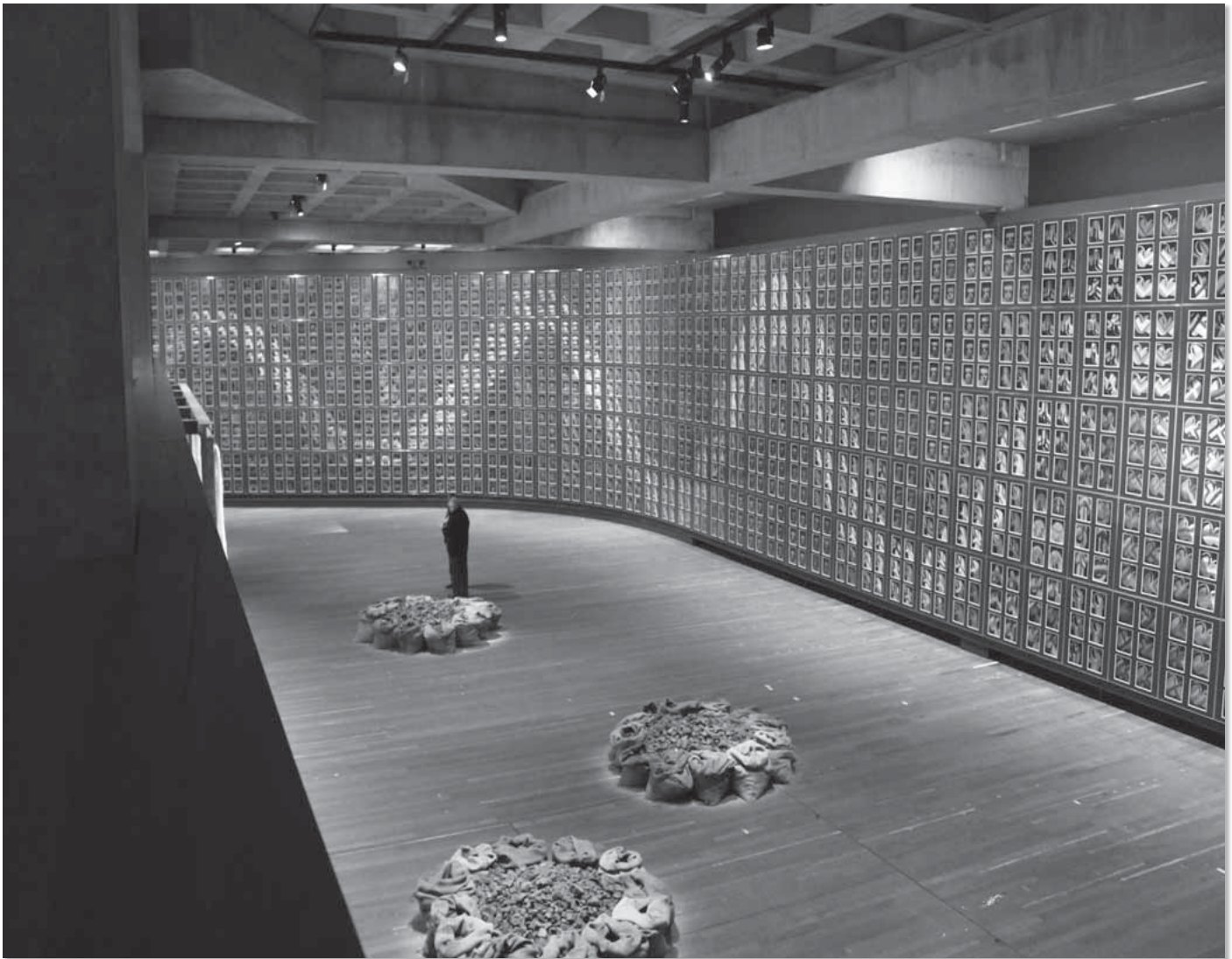
interested in how my visit was proceeding. I can't remember the last time a gallery attendant in an art museum asked me what I thought of an artwork.

The idea of a putting all your content in a mobile device and letting visitors choose when and if they want to interact with it has merit. I was half ready to write off the absence of labels as a gimmick, but I found it strangely appealing. More

than once I looked at something because I didn't know what it was, and upon looking it up on my O, found it was something I have previously told myself I don't like. The lack of information staring me in the face, combined with the powerful combinations and juxtapositions of the exhibition design forced me to confront the objects with an intentionality I usually lack because I let the texts lead me along. I was free to ignore objects that



The entrance to the museum is a distorted mirror surface. I was unsure if the tennis court with the interesting stools was an artwork or an amenity. MOCA is that kind of place. Photo by Ed Rodley.



Sidney Nolan's "Snake" fills almost an entire gallery. Photo by Ed Rodley.

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didn't appeal to me, which I would've felt compelled to study because of their "importance" had they been labeled. That thing over there that looks like an ugly Picasso? Turns out it IS a Picasso, and I don't fancy it much.

Friends have complained about the coarseness of boiling down the complicated relationship between viewer and art to either "love" or "hate," but I thought it served as an interesting starting point for visitors who might not feel like they knew enough to have an opinion. I "loved" things, I "hated" some others, and by the end of my visit I was approaching pieces thinking "How does this art make me feel?" so I guess the scaffolding of the voting worked for me. Aside from that, the content isn't all that

different from traditional art museums, only the delivery mechanism.

A lot of the art at MONA is challenging, but so is a lot of contemporary art. No surprise there. When I called up the summary and the "curator's wank," which is what the longer interpretive texts are called, the major difference I found was that they were more personal, often first person meditations on the object. My biggest surprise was how unsurprised I was by the content on the O. I don't know what I was expecting, but I didn't find it. I found an intriguing collection of texts, many of which wouldn't seem at all out of place in an art museum or gallery setting. The explicit emphasis on getting visitors to think about art in emotional terms, and to feel that their personal experience

What turned out to be revolutionary was not the presence of the device, but what the absence of labels made possible.



Taiyo Kimura's "Untitled (stool for guard)" scared me silly when I first encountered it. Photo by Ed Rodley.

of the art was the most important thing, was novel. But what turned out to be revolutionary was not the presence of the device, but what the absence of labels made possible. The O is at heart a way to augment the experience of what you're looking at in MONA. I wanted more content, but I think the basic premise is sound. I can tell you a lot about what I looked at while in MONA, and I already feel like I need to go back.

The long and the short of it was that the O didn't really usurp my experience of looking at the art, which is always the danger with interpretive media. If the interpretation is more engaging than the object, then you wind up with a room full

of people looking down at their screens instead of looking around. I found myself using the device less and less frequently as I went along, and "loving" and "hating" things less often as I grew accustomed to what awaited me. I could have the internal conversation without the external act of choosing. I even found myself asking objects, "Do I like you enough to want to bother to find out more?" and deciding the answer was no fairly often. And that freedom to choose what I wanted to engage with and how deeply I wanted to engage with it had everything to do with the information residing in the O and not on the wall.

MONA is a very singular place, and

References:

For an overview of the founding of the museums and its founder, David Walsh, visit: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Walsh_%28art_collector%29 www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2011/01/21/3118505.htm and www.smh.com.au/travel/tasmanias-controversial-mona-launches-new-exhibition-20120622-20t7j.html. Retrieved March, 2012

De Botton, A. (2012). Why our museums of art have failed us and what they might learn from religions. *The Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alain-de-botton/why-our-museums-of-art-ha_b_1327694.html. Retrieved March 20, 2012

The one thing you learn about MONA is that they are not afraid of the dark. They are not afraid of going where other museums haven't yet dared to tread.

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finding generalizable lessons can be challenging. One thing is clear to me, though. After 4+ hours touring the museum, I wasn't tired, and I wasn't ready to leave, even though our ferry was departing. Do I wish all art museums were like MONA? No. Am I glad MONA exists? Yes. Most importantly, would I go back? In a heartbeat...or after 20+ hours on three planes.

MONA—The New Museum Vernacular *by Bliss Jensen*

I have heard all the hype for a while now. I've read the articles, I've endured all the museum colleagues from across Australia visiting and speaking so highly of their experience, "It's really different; there are no labels; you really should go and see it for yourself. What? You haven't been yet? Really?" Yes, I missed the very first version of Monanism, and have suffered great embarrassment, catching up with every colleague back from professional duties/visiting MONA since its opening in 2010. To be honest I also haven't much been paying attention to others' opinions, which I realise on the plane into Hobart: I am a clean slate, ready for new impressions.

I arrived on Saturday afternoon realising it was "market day" (apparently every Saturday in summer). To avoid the ferry passenger queue already at a standstill at the main museum entry, I decided to wander the grounds for an orientation to the site itself. I managed to get quite distracted for over an hour by the mini-festival up on the lawns.

Fear of the Dark

I finally arrived inside and quickly realised this casual sophistication I witnessed outside also translated to inside. Bubbly staff at the entrance ushered me to receive my iPod, called an "O," and explained that the device was the labelling system. A very quick tutorial, and a glance at the galleries map (hard copy) and I was on my way. So far my journey was effortless; I was equipped and already intuitively flicking through screens familiarising myself with the iPod touch format. Descending in the glass lift I prepared myself in the few moments of calm silence after the throngs upstairs. Once in the lower void, the gigantic sandstone rock face escalated to what seemed five storeys above. It was stunning and appeared to have an immediate impact on everyone who entered. The scale of the museum was revealed (in parts), hanging off the rock face—pinned lightly to it, to create the cavernous void. It was spectacular and daunting as I craned my head to see other visitors poking their heads over a wall above, pointing downward and across at something they could see, (and I could not) yet another floor or so above me. I started to get the sheer enormity of the exercise ahead of me and almost immediately went into a panicky head spin. Where do I start? How long will this take me? I'm running out of time to see it all! Julius Popp's *Bit. Fall* is a perfect introduction to what lies beyond in the darkness; it is pop culture, provocative and a comment on our technology driven society. The one thing you learn about MONA is that they are not afraid of the dark. They are not afraid of going where other museums haven't yet dared to tread.



Large pink bean bags remain on the lawn after the crowds have departed. Photo by Bliss Jensen.

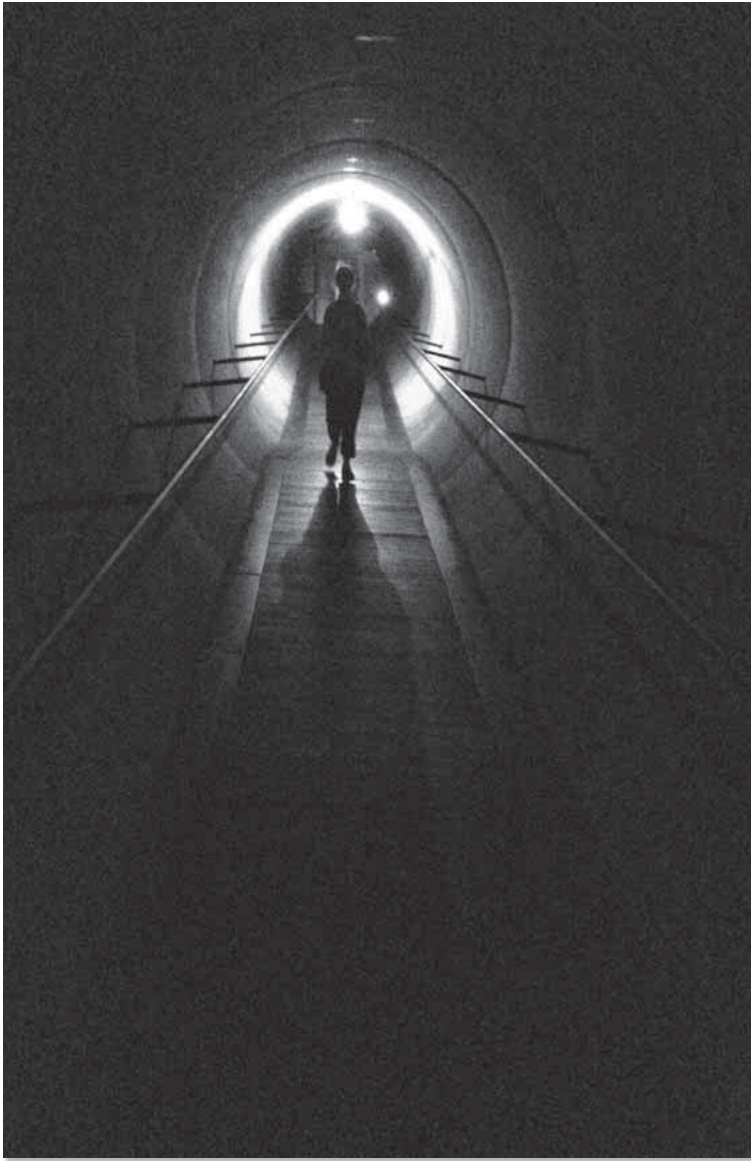
I took the advice of the attendant upstairs and went to the entrance of the new exhibition *Theatre of the World*. I engaged with the O straight away and touched the update button to find an introduction audio from the curator. As I stood in the darkened threshold I viewed the display of random and unconnected objects and was invited by the narrator to look at the objects and reflect on the art of looking and ways of seeing. In fact this introduction was perfect for setting the tone of the whole museum. You had to have your eyes peeled to navigate the dark spaces but also an open mind for the installations ahead.

Room after room contained iconic contemporary and conceptual pieces juxtaposed with the historical (tribal dance masks, carved statues, coral specimens, Egyptian sarcophagus, ancient Greek and Roman coins, Neolithic flints

and mortuary amulets). Every nook and cranny had surprises: something up high, down low, around corners like a labyrinth.

The iPod touch application was intuitive from the outset. Just hit the update button and wait for the works around you to upload, select the image relating to what you were viewing, and find all the information. You could read basic data, listen to audio interviews with the artists, read the Gonzo (David Walsh ramblings) and the whimsically termed “Art Wank” if you fancied something more traditionally ‘discursive.’ The format was easy to navigate and convenient, just updating as you went along to select from the nearby works to explore on screen. It could also be flicked to landscape orientation for a more accessible font size and a slightly revised, more gestural scrolling interface much like viewing

The iPod touch application was intuitive from the outset.



Dark spaces: Christopher Townsend's sound installation 2010 is custom made for the dimly lit concrete tunnel. Photo by Bliss Jensen.

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album covers in an iTunes library. But where was the map showing my location and the routes ahead? I was lost in the dark—which way was out?

Fear of Missing Out

There was one frustrating part for me some way through the *Theatre of the World*: I just couldn't at all find the data of the object in front of me. Instead I got objects I had just viewed or others that didn't resemble the piece at all, (or any in the vicinity). Giving up after scrolling through the list of objects, I just ventured ahead. Turning a corner, it dawned on me that the device may have been trying to locate an object that seemed to be on the other side of the gallery but in fact was just behind a

wall where I had been standing moments before. This happened on a couple of other occasions where I couldn't immediately find the object in the list of "nearby works." As perplexing and slightly frustrating as it was at the time I quickly got absorbed in exploring more interviews, or random gonzo anecdotes, musings on the work or behind the scenes chit chat or the "Art Wank" button.

Art wank? Some might call it vulgar, but I found this colloquial labelling very refreshing; so much so that I read the room brochure from cover to cover, (with a good deal of amusement). When was the last time anyone read a room brochure from cover to cover? I believe this casual and conversational tone relaxes the visitor and creates a more receptive ambience in which to engage with the content, particularly the difficult content. Standing by yourself looking at a photograph of a dog copulating with a man is no easy feat in a public situation, but standing with a stranger looking at said work does become slightly...awkward. I found security in the O, and in wearing the headphones a sense of displacement from others, which helped overcome uncomfortable feelings while viewing confrontational content with others.

The content was generally a bit more lo-fi than I had expected (poor quality sound recordings of the interviews) but all worked together as a package. It all seemed really so effortless until I remembered the gallery host instructions: "Simply upload your email address when cued by the system, and your journey is saved." So why has it asked me four times to retype my email address? Have I got concurrent tours going at the same time? Finally at the exit I

Art wank? Some might call it vulgar, but I found this colloquial labelling very refreshing; so much so that I read the room brochure from cover to cover, (with a good deal of amusement).

asked the attendant to check I had signed out properly, and just as well I did as she explained “now your tour is saved.” At this point I left feeling slightly sceptical of my success to save my tour.

Fear of Falling

After checking my email on Sunday morning, lo and behold my MONA tour was there and in one neat file. I had a new-found respect for the O and felt slightly guilty that the night before I had decided to confront MONA with a complaint about the technology the next day. Instead, I happily returned for a second visit. This time, I took less time to navigate the system (and the galleries) and settled in to cruising around without such a huge agenda. Everything seemed far more effortless than the day before. I couldn't help but notice quite a few visitors abandoned the O device altogether. I even overheard one female explaining to a gallery attendant “it's frustrating, I'm too focussed on using the thing and not looking at the art properly.” I have to admit that my first day was a bit fatiguing taking in the ‘whole’ MONA experience, reading the small screen text, while also trying to take in the whole of the building and the art piece by piece. I did have to remind myself to look where I was walking at times. That said, I couldn't help but feel that visitors who weren't using the O were missing half the fun. The *Zizi the affectionate couch* label explained that if you patted and stroked the furry upholstery Zizi would respond. The purring and mews were interactivity at its best. As I was sitting another visitor joined for respite; without her O, she missed the surprise of the vibrating responses until I explained it was no ordinary gallery seating.



Dark spaces: a black rope curtain shrouds a car coffin creating discretionary viewing and interaction. Photo by Bliss Jensen.

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MONA creates an atmosphere that is astoundingly different and in your face....

Most contemporary art galleries create similar experiences and environments, where the visitor enters a magical place and forgets about the daily humdrum and is truly absorbed in an ‘other-worldliness.’ This experience isn’t unique to MONA. But, there is something...compelling and truly exceptional about the place. What is it about MONA that creates this? I believe it is the sheer single mindedness of David Walsh. He has created a new language, a casual, conversational tone that puts the visitor at ease with the highly sophisticated displays and allows meaningful engagement on a number of levels.

MONA creates an atmosphere that is astoundingly different and in your face (dark spaces, confronting art, offensive smells, disorienting walkways, poor quality audio interviews, indulgent bars and sloppy language, and loud music) and yet completely accessible.

This new language, “the new museum vernacular,” is a complex formula where collection, curatorial direction, vocabulary, programming, technology, and environment all come together in a seamless unison.

Fear of Failing

Visiting MONA has highlighted for me that museums should take more of a leap of faith: give their audiences the benefit of the doubt, let them wonder. Don’t get too preoccupied with “interpreting” everything. Be bold and try new approaches. Some people will get it and others won’t... and that’s OK! With these principles, MONA goes a great way to democratise the experience, is inclusive and promotes inquiry, provokes responses, and provides a range of engagement. Funding permitting, other museums should be quick to follow a few examples from MONA and soon the world will be “monanised” ✨