

**CHRISTOPH BÜCHEL:  
SOUTHDALE/C-MONA**

MONA (Museum of Old and New Art), Hobart  
June – December 2014

**R**arely in Tasmania has any art raised the level of public debate which arose around Swiss artist Christoph Büchel's recent installation at MONA.

*Southdale/C-MONA* follows the pattern of Büchel's previous interventions such as his takeover of the Hauser and Wirth Gallery in Piccadilly and transforming it into a Piccadilly Community Centre (2011). Büchel is no stranger to controversy having withdrawn from a major installation at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in 2007 citing moral rights violations by the Gallery, the legal battle continues in that case.

*Southdale/C-MONA* consists of two entirely separate installations within MONA. The former is installed in the main entrance area of the gallery, announced by a large sign at the gallery entrance proclaiming Southdale (in homage to the first ever shopping mall, conceived idealistically as the visionary herald of the future of shopping by Austrian Victor Gruen). On entering the space the regular MONA shop and café are balanced by tacky tourist souvenir displays, flashy video and still ads for Hugo Boss, Audi and other major corporates. The line between these interventions and the 'real' or familiar MONA high tone become blurred on many levels. Located at the very bottom of the building in the long gallery is C-MONA where the space has been transformed into a play area for kids and temporary offices and selling points for local charities. Again confusion arises as to what this intervention represents.

Cold calling with no knowledge of Büchel's practice creates confusion as to the intent of these interventions. Many visitors, particularly first-timers, were largely unaware that this was not the



Christoph Büchel Southdale Shopping Centre 2014, installation detail. Photo: Peter Mathew.

regular MONA environment, even the sophisticated interstate visitors who finally 'got it' failed to realise that the Starbucks coffees they were sipping were also part of the intervention.

The most contentious piece in the Southdale component was a poster which exhorted people to test their DNA to determine their level of Aboriginality, (a device Büchel had previously utilised within a Jewish context and adapted to this purpose). Many Aboriginal people were horrified by this component referring to the sad history of Aboriginal remains being sent all over the world to major universities and museum collections. This was removed following these complaints sparking the final rift between Büchel and MONA.

What flowed from this point was a many-sided set of public debates around issues such as 'Art and Offence', artists' responsibilities and accountabilities, Relational Aesthetics and even censorship – all of them lively and potentially very useful. What was largely absent from many of these debates was the ironic positioning of Büchel's work. I found the many slippages between the 'actual' and the intervention to be highly stimulating and even amusing. Büchel had (I am sure knowingly) hit two nerves very specifically namely the future of MONA after David Walsh and the elephant

in the room in Tasmanian Aboriginal politics – the ongoing dispute about who actually qualifies as Aboriginal and who determines that.

Büchel's initial preferred position of anonymity was uncovered by *The Australian* newspaper and later David Walsh posted a mild apology in response to the DNA furore, if somewhat equivocal in its tone – an unusual position for a man who has heretofore seemed oblivious to public opinion. Nonetheless the question remains, can something be a conceit and a reality simultaneously? Some in the Community Arts sector regarded *C-MONA* as cynical tokenism yet it still functioned actively and even gave rise to discussion about how it may influence MONA's future programming.

Irony is the key to this experience and it is irony in a positive sense neither sarcastic nor cynical but merely provocative. That these installations not only provoke confusion regarding our experience but serious consideration of both their internal conceptual proposals and external debates about key issues in art and society make this work a very stimulating and valuable experience.

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