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# AUSTRALIA CULTUREBLOG

## Mona's David Walsh: 'Now I'm the arbiter of good taste. The thing I abhor'

As his hugely popular museum celebrates its third birthday, Hobart's hero and the art world's darling bemoans his lost outsider status – and foresees the day when he gets the push

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**Vicky Frost**

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David Walsh at Mona: 'To operate effectively in my world – which means to be strongly motivated all the time – I have to be on the edge.'  
Photograph: Loic Le Guilly/Guardian Australia



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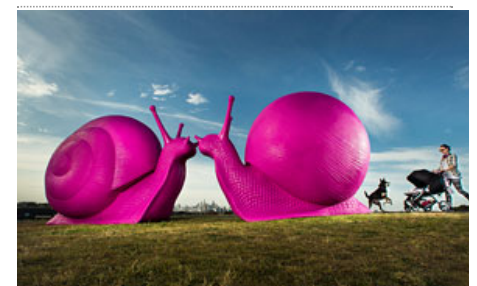
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"There will be a coup!" David Walsh is sitting backstage at his Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania and cheerfully outlining the manner of his deposition. "I'll have to be outed. I won't consciously out myself."

Three years ago, Walsh built an enormous art gallery with the proceeds of his gambling, filled it with controversial, confronting art, and buried it at the edge of the world. He created a sensation.

Crowds board special ferries from Hobart's pretty harbour for Mona's cavernous subterranean galleries, to embrace the dark and impolite. Curators and academics hail Mona for reinventing the gallery experience and bringing new audiences to art, in Australia and beyond. Tasmania's tourist economy has been [utterly transformed](#), its reinvention tied up with Mona's slick, sexy branding.

Now Walsh is contemplating his museum's future – and it doesn't necessarily include the gambler who built it. The Catholic atheist whose parking space is marked 'God', can foresee a day when he stops being its highest deity.

But then for David Walsh it seems that everything up for discussion – from losing the museum to nature or bureaucracy, to whether Mona is just marketing over substance, to the morality of his millions and how he spends them. Walsh considers everything, even the unpalatable notion that it is impossible to remain a maverick outsider when the art world is swooning at your feet.

"Now I am the bloody institution! Now I'm the arbiter of good taste. The thing I abhor," he wryly admits.

Sitting here with Walsh in a vast staff area on low, modern sofas that face a freestanding organ, it seems entirely unlikely that Mona could divorce itself from its creator. The museum is shaped by Walsh's taste in everything, from exhibits with an unashamed fascination with the sexual and the puerile – the headline-grabbing wall with hundred of casts of vulvas, and a device to allow you to view your own anus while on the loo have both featured – to the lack of any windows in its brooding, underground spaces, to the "O", an iPod device that guides visitors round the museum, allowing them to skip the so-called "art wank" if they so wish. He's gathered together works by Chris Ofili, Sidney Nolan, Jenny Saville, Damien Hirst, Mat Collishaw – but the names are not the point.

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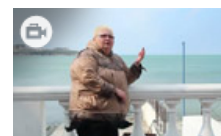
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It is all this – and, it must be said, a smart nose for what makes an interesting story – that takes Mona so completely outside a typical gallery experience, and that has brought it such success.

But Walsh introduces the idea of being dumped from his own grand project with barely a shrug: “When I built Mona I wasn’t particularly interested in where it went, now I’m sort of thinking about in the Guggenheim sense of creating a foundation, an institution,” he says.

“He lost the power to direct his creation, and he lost that power when he was still alive. So I suspect that will happen to me. And I don’t care.”



Walsh now keeps the museum afloat: the gallery’s significant shortfall is covered by its owner’s gambling profits. Photograph: Loic Le Guilly/Guardian Australia

This art revolutionary foresees his unseating will come at the hands of charity and democracy. Mona, now a fiefdom funded by Walsh and his creditors, will have to convert to a charity for tax purposes. That means an independent board. “And then what happens is the board spends about five years eating out the palm of your hand, and then they realise that they’ve got power and they get rid of you. It’s simple.”

He would try to resist: “But the consequence of the structure that would be in place would make it pretty easy for me to be railroaded, shafted, eviscerated.”

This is all posturing, surely. But Walsh insists not. “I can’t see why I should steer [Mona] forever, when I can’t steer me forever,” he protests, slightly impatiently.

The question is, how long will it take? Walsh now keeps the museum afloat: the gallery’s significant shortfall is covered by the profits from its owner’s gambling (a sum in the millions). It will be some time before it is self-sustaining – although there are plans

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for a hotel, possible Mona shops or commercial deals involving the “O”, and perhaps an expansion into China.

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Talking to Walsh is not a gentle activity. He is a striking figure in skinny black jeans, his silver hair growing long, with heavy framed glasses that could do with a polish. I'd assumed from the few interviews he's given he would be prickly or difficult. Instead he is open but intense, sometimes veering off on tangents but never ducking a question.

Mona will have been open for three years on January 21, 2014. The clocking is ticking down on the building's natural lifespan: Walsh built down to the line of the tide, aware that it would cause long-term problems. (“I don't think heritage is a destructive thing, but it was giving me the shits at the time,” he says.)

In 50 years time, it will be giving someone else the shits. “It will be an evaluation of whether it has actually achieved anything,” he reasons. “If everyone says, ‘Ah fuck it, let's leave it – let's just let the ground floor flood,’ that would be a good result because it would mean whatever the structure or system that makes choices – which I assume will be somehow democratic in 50 years – has expressed its opinion.”

This idea of a democratic structure is interesting, given the current set-up in which Walsh is undeniably king – nearly as much an object of curiosity as his museum. A change of direction would not be a bad thing, he suggests: “If new ideas are going to be strongly expressed, and they're going to come from elsewhere, it will probably happen more easily if I wasn't there to say at meetings, as I often do, ‘Fuck that.’ ”

But that tendency is perhaps what has made Mona different, as Walsh is aware. “Of course there's always the danger that just means it turns into every other museum in the world. There you go.”

That seems to be an important struggle for both Walsh and Mona, and one that will only become more difficult as the gallery grows in popularity and maturity. Walsh has always worn his outsider status proudly. Now he is Hobart's hero and the art world's darling – the subject of passionate praise from local cab drivers and New Yorker profile writers.

The museum's uncompromising philosophy still exerts an irresistible pull. Regardless of what you make of the art, who could have conceived of an underground



gallery on the outskirts of Hobart housing a [poo machine](#), an [obese Porsche](#) and Egyptian mummies, with a tennis court stuck on the top of it? (“A lot of people try to figure out if it’s a work of art. Well I don’t know, if you’ve got a good backhand it’s a work of art. But it’s a tennis court: that’s all it is, and all it will ever be.”)

There’s an argument that Mona is all showmanship and theatre. But the museum’s popularity shows no sign of waning: it has already welcomed more than a million visitors. People have responded to Walsh’s rebuttal of what a gallery should do: “Essentially before you enter the door you’re told what to think: we are judges of all that is good and great, grovel and be humble in front of our power ... So how do you subvert that and be democratic? The idea is to give no cues at all about what to expect.”

Yet few people now arrive in Hobart with no idea of what Mona might hold: the gallery has a seemingly unshakeable cool factor, practically its own mythology. (It’s something of a relief to find that it has security guards who make you sign in, and weekly fire alarm tests like any other workplace.)

“I suspect that our marketing is probably better than our museum,” says Walsh, as an explanation. Does he really believe that? “Yes, in a sense ... My rule was we’ll never spend any money on advertising, we’ll do stuff that attracts attention.”

Walsh is similarly pragmatic about how Mona’s Hobart location helps the museum’s compelling narrative thanks to the lack of competition and element of surprise – and the benefits of making people travel to see his creation.

“If this was in Melbourne and you had to walk around the corner, you’d probably pop in every now and again. But people come here, the average visitor time is something like three hours and 20 minutes ... Here they’ve made the effort so they make the effort.”

All of which makes Mona’s conception sound more calculated than Walsh says it was – he claims to have built downwards into the earth only to preserve the facades of existing modernist houses on the Mona site – but the question of attracting visitors wasn’t entirely disregarded.

“If no one came it would have bankrupted me. I can sustain it to a certain extent but ...” he corrects

himself.

“Well it depends what you mean by no one. If absolutely no one came it's sustainable because then I don't have to have staff. But if the exact wrong number of people came, like 60,000-70,000, then we're stuffed because we get no income but still need staff.”

Walsh is precise when it comes to numbers, which makes his approach to building Mona, in which he behaved like a man for whom budgets are meaningless (“I got carried away”) all the more curious. He had to borrow \$80m from his business partner Zeljko Ranogajec to get it finished and says he owes money all over the place – to the banks and, more recently, to the tax office.

Given his great wealth, it all seems rather unnecessary. Why didn't he just build an amazing museum he could afford? “I don't know what amazing is. It's not the way that I see the world. Fundamentally, I'm a gambler.”

Because if the controversial art and the underground lair and the Tasmanian location weren't enough in this story worthy of a movie script, then comes the fact that Walsh earns his money as part of the gambling syndicate the Bank Roll, staking (and making) the millions that paid for Mona.

“The museum isn't my only motivation,” he says. “I really enjoy the gambling and the mathematics and the scheming, but if I've got millions of dollars in the bank there's not much purpose in doing any of that. How is it gambling when you're taking no risk?”

“So to operate effectively in my world – which means to be strongly motivated all the time – I have to be on the edge.”

That sounds a pretty stressful way to live – although admittedly Walsh doesn't look exactly overburdened by it. He talks at length about the benefits to society of individuals taking risks, and the need for a system that encourages and protects them if they do so. But I wonder if there's been a point when the risk was too much. He gestures to the museum: “The risk was too much and I got lucky. But you wouldn't be here talking to me if I hadn't.”

A rare morning of streaming sunshine and balmy warmth in Hobart feels the right time to be meeting a man who steadfastly attributes much of his success to

luck – there are a million potential galleries out there, he says, but at some point one of them gets lucky. Notably, of course, he hasn't got unlucky.



Walsh looks out over Glenorchy, the working-class suburb he grew up in, from Mona's ramparts. Photograph: Loic Le Guilly/Guardian Australia

He didn't have the most obviously promising start. Mona sits in the working-class suburb of Glenorchy, where Walsh grew up. As a child he'd go to the local two-room library and read the books in order. He is pretty certain he is on the autistic spectrum, or has Asperger's.

"If you had met me when I was 20 you would have had no doubt. Or even 30. I was unable to make eye contact, I didn't communicate with anyone, I had few friends and they were similar to me."

Now the whole of Hobart refers to him in hushed tones. Is he aware of that? He grins: "I don't hear them." He considers his influence: "It means I can get tickets to shows, that's about the fundamental change in my life. I don't have to worry about sold-out concerts any more."

He's also about to publish a memoir, fulfilling a childhood dream. Then, he could never understand why anyone would want to read it. Now he thinks a certain audience might be interested.

When I arrived to talk to him, I assumed that regardless of its artistic worth, Mona was essentially a temple to Walsh's ego: a very expensive form of showing off the art he has bought and the collections he has gathered. (He remains as passionate a collector as ever: his latest obsession is medieval altars.) But he says: "Those who make money without creating anything should feel the most social pressure and personal pressure, be the most [susceptible] to moral judgment if they don't do something with the

money.”

He has talked of repaying a debt for getting lucky. There is an imperative to spend his money made gambling if not wisely, then at least in a way others might benefit from.

Which is not to say that Walsh hasn't benefited from Mona: there's the acclaim, of course, which, no matter how rational he is about the museum's hype – “If a state had somehow built the exact same institution, in the same place and run it the same way, I would think they would justly receive a great deal of criticism” – is inevitably pleasing.

But this unlikely art bunker has also given something unexpected to Walsh. While visitors might be changed by the art, it seems Walsh has been changed by their reaction to the works.

“I'd never really explored human nature as a conglomerate,” he muses. “But from what I can see it's pretty tolerant. People are pretty tolerant in general ... it's been a very positive experience.”

- Mona's five-day festival Mofa 2014 – fusing art, music, food, wine and chaos – is at venues across Hobart from January 15 to 19. [Buy tickets here](#)

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**Blu Lustre**

92

14 January 2014 5:20am

I've been there twice, saw Parliment/Funkadelic play a four hour set on the green above the gallery. Went the next day to look at the collection. It takes at least eight hours to see all the art.

It's all fucking fantastic. I've been to galleries, happenings and freaky deaky shit all around the world and there is NOTHING like this. Can't wait to go back there. 11 stars.

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