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Entertainment

What lies beneath

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Creativity and science meet in an exhibition that abandons the dry conventions of traditional museums.

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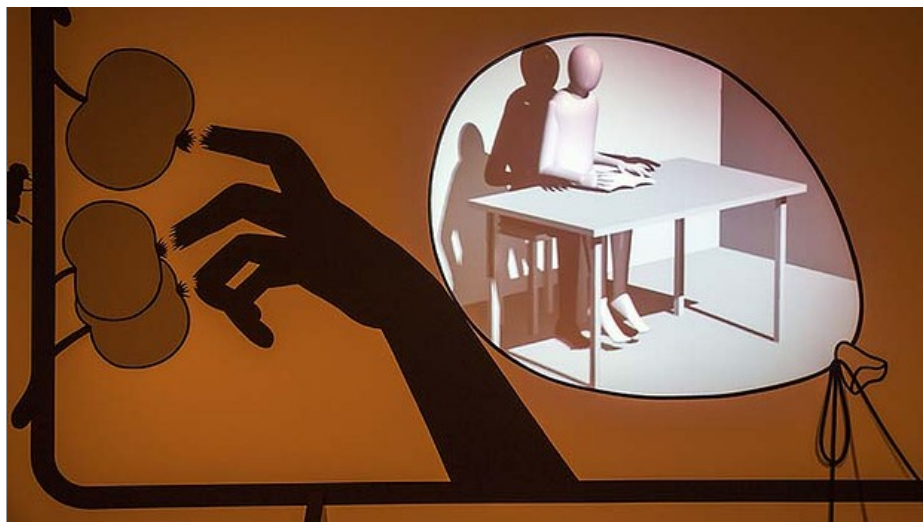


Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling in front of an installation by Yves Netzhammer. Photo: Peter Mathew

It's becoming difficult to remember what Hobart was like before David Walsh started his Museum of Old and New Art (MONA). Within two-and-a-half years this Gothic fortress of sex and death has eaten up the city more effectively than any movie monster ever ate Detroit. Every day a steady procession of tourists from all over the world makes its way to the museum via the MONA ferry or the MONA bus. Well-heeled guests stay on-site in the luxury chalets, and dine in the restaurant or cafe.

The third instalment of a successful annual festival of music and performance has just concluded. The aim of the evocatively titled *Dark Mofo* was to bring people to Tasmania in winter, a time when the island is believed to be cold, gloomy and inhospitable. No wonder Tasmanians have embraced MONA so enthusiastically, confounding Walsh's early expectations they would be shocked and offended.

Despite its undying popularity with self-styled avant-gardists, there is something puerile in the idea that art must always be flabbergasting the bourgeoisie. MONA seems to have got the message, because a new exhibition, *The Red Queen*, takes us into the realms of science. The starting point is an evolutionary hypothesis put forward by biologist Leigh Van Valen in 1973. The idea - in a nutshell - is that a species has to keep adapting and evolving not to prosper but merely to survive.



The Subjectivisation of Repetition 2007–13 by Yves Netzhammer at The Red Queen exhibition at MONA (Museum of Old and New Art) in Hobart. Photo: Peter Mathew

The title comes from an episode in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, when the Red Queen tells Alice: "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."

Van Valen characterised evolution as an "arms race" in which a species is forced to change in response to increasing pressures exerted by a predator or parasite.

Later biologists would use these ideas to try to solve the puzzle of sexual reproduction, which has always appeared to be a highly inefficient way of propagating a species. The theory is that the genetic lottery generated by sex allows organisms to stay one step ahead of destructive parasites.

If you're beginning to wonder how this relates to an art exhibition, it has to be admitted the link is a general one. Walsh and his curators have used the Red Queen hypothesis as an excuse for putting together a typical MONA mixture of contemporary art and ancient artefacts, including a number of pieces specially commissioned for this event.

There is an appealing aspect to the title when one considers that MONA itself is a kind of subterranean Wonderland, accessed by descending through a hole in the ground. Like Lewis Carroll's creation, it is a place where the usual laws and conventions no longer apply. The walls are painted black, not white; there are no labels, only a hand-held "O device" that offers up an unpredictable mash of fact and opinion.

The driving force behind this show seems to be David Walsh's fascination with evolutionary theory and the biological roots of art. This is more stimulating than the usual nest of half-digested theories that pollute the pages of contemporary art catalogues, but it hardly allows for a closely focused exhibition. The points made in relation to one work of art may be made - with suitable variations - in relation to each and every work.

In a yet-to-be-published essay, Walsh states his case in suitably broad terms, saying that all the artists in this show "can trace their capacity for creativity to random events, but random events that are channelled into survival strategies by evolution. Indeed ... all of human creativity, and the creative mind itself, may have as its generator the fact that creativity aids survival and stimulates cognition."

In brief, the pleasure we take in viewing works of art is reinforcing our capacity for judgment and pattern recognition. Whatever improves our cognitive abilities must ipso facto enhance our chances of survival in a constantly changing environment.

Such ideas have complex elaborations and can be dealt with only glancingly in this column. Whatever the biological underpinnings of art, there are numerous cultural factors at play in each form of expression. We cannot discount the role of ritual and religion, fashion and convention. It may all boil down to a sublimated urge to make oneself attractive to others for procreative purposes, like birds with their plumage. Yet such a reading tends to strip art of the complexities and ambiguities that render it so attractive.

The most striking example comes from the work of Henry Darger, prominently displayed at the beginning of *The Red Queen*. Darger is one of the most famous "outsider" artists in history, known for producing a 15,000-page, illustrated manuscript called *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. This story, produced in the isolation of a room in a Chicago boarding house, featured armies of small girls (many with penises) locked in combat with murderous, sadistic adults.

Walsh can find a biological imperative in Darger's art, but acknowledges that he remains a psychological conundrum. He may, however, be no less of a mystery than Leni Riefenstahl, whose two-part film *Olympia* (1938) is screening in the next room. This documentary on the Berlin Olympics of 1938 is a celebration of the body beautiful and a love letter to Hitler, who presides over the games like a deity. In Riefenstahl's elegant frames we can recognise the unnaturally perfect patterns of athletics and ideology.

One steps into this room from an entrance foyer that features a full-scale trampoline by Chen Zhen, and two ping pong tables - a heavily inscribed one by Laith McGregor and an utterly dysfunctional variant by Wang Jianwei. Some primal biological impulse sees people trying to play on each of these contraptions.

The major large-scale installation commissioned for this show is *The Subjectivisation of Repetition* (2007-13) by Swiss artist Yves Netzhammer, a

multi-channel video piece set inside a series of specially designed panels. Each video is a computer-generated animation, representing a kind of dream sequence. I would've liked to have read something specific about this work but the only text included on the O device was a piece of vapid self-indulgence. This is one of the constant irritations with the museum's house style. In trying to avoid the dry, formal style of a museum catalogue, too often a writer ends up writing only about him or herself.

Another commission, by British artist Lindsay Seers, called *Nowhere Less Now*, features videos projected onto two circular screens installed inside the frame of an upturned boat built especially for this venue. The images are quietly compelling, and appear to be in dialogue with each other, yet it seems hard to justify the space-consuming size of the installation.

In between these monsters one finds a huge variety of small pieces, including the ancient coins and Egyptian artefacts that have featured in previous MONA exhibitions. As usual there is an interchange between the ancient times and the present, the familiar and the unknown.

The cavernous space previously occupied by the 1620 panels of Sidney Nolan's *Snake* (1970) is now given over to the projections of Ryoji Ikeda, who turns volumes of data into flickering visual displays, as a dramatisation of the information age. Ironically this represents another complete failure of information on the O device, which has little to tell us about Ikeda. As he is an artist with a booming international profile perhaps the curators assumed we could simply look him up on Google.

The ambition of *The Red Queen* and the sophistication of the hang are undermined by the frequent failure of the O device to contribute anything but frustration. This is a matter of sheer complacency that could easily be rectified. By all means include the "artwanks" and "tweedledums", but personal opinions are cheap. There must be a lot of uncool people, such as me, desperate for some solid information.

As if MONA alone wasn't sufficient, Walsh is also hosting a satellite show, *Beam in Thine Own Eye*, at a harbourside warehouse called M2 (until July 28). This exhibition features work on the theme of seeing with the mind's eye rather than the physical eye. The most spectacular is a 12-minute smoke-and-light extravaganza by Austrian Kurt Henschlager, called *Zee*. This is a piece of total sensory deprivation - or perhaps sensory overload - that has the capacity to induce attacks in susceptible individuals. The day I was there, one audience member collapsed after three minutes, bringing the performance to an abrupt end. It provided an excellent example of the impact of biology on art.

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THE RED QUEEN

Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, until April 21, 2014

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