THEATRE OF THE WORLD

aAR's editor suggests a context for the remarkable cultural initiative of a mathematical savant.

When Nobel Prize-winning novelist Orhan Pamuk wrote *The Museum of Innocence* in 2008, it documented a doomed and obsessive love affair where the frustrated suitor resorts to pilfering and cataloguing anything the object of his affections has touched: a pepper shaker, a theatre ticket, a hairclip, a cigarette butt and so on — for decades. The novel was informed by the author's own decades of collecting and culminated in the creation of his own museum: Museum of Innocence — a documentation of life in Istanbul through an accumulation of the ephemera, fetish objects and bric-a-brac. It opened in April 2012.

Its catalogue, *The Innocence of Objects*, provides a visual guide to the museum's displays, but goes much further. It allows Pamuk to expand on subjects that have transfixed him: the temperamental make-up of the collector, the purpose of museums and the imperative to document ordinary lives in all their complexity and singularity — not just the escapades of kings and popes. His own museum with its accumulation of humble objects and artefacts will tell the visitor much about the lives and preoccupations of Istanbul residents from post-war to the 1980s.

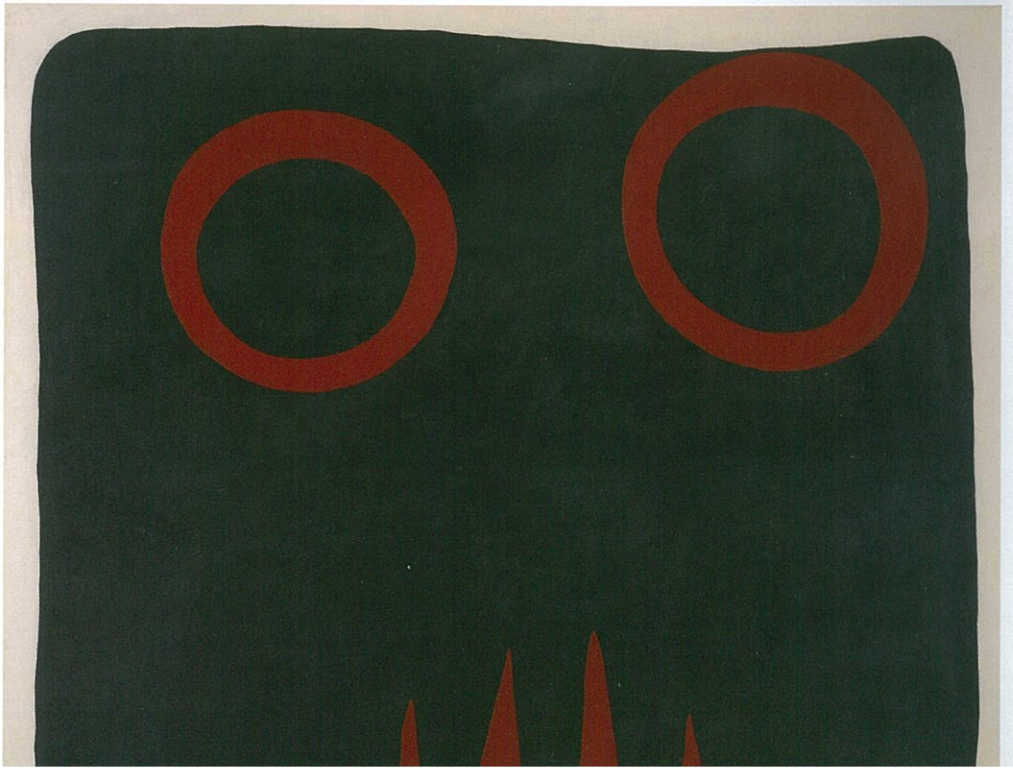
Perhaps David Walsh's MONA: Museum of the Old and New does something similar.

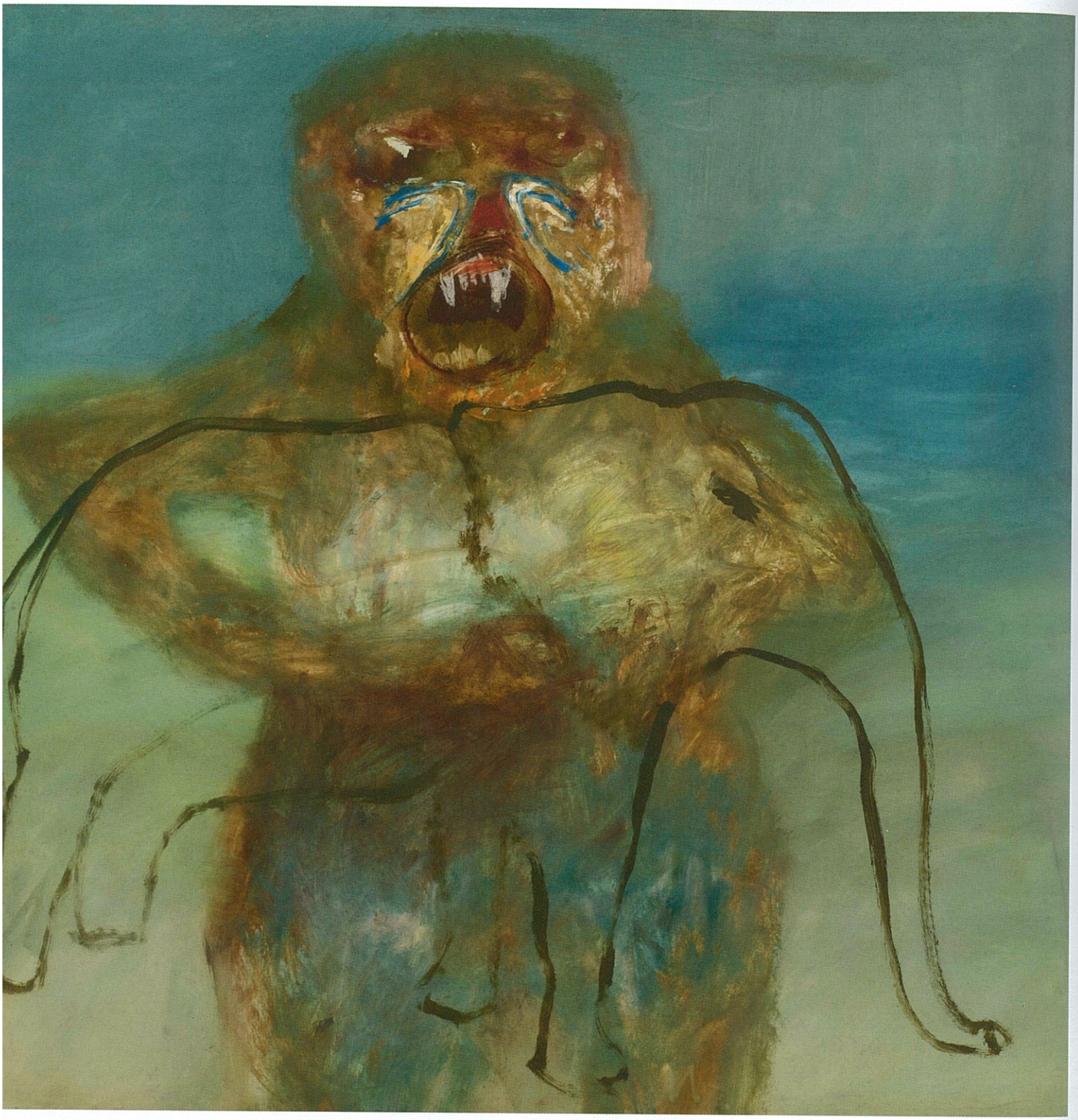
It is a theatre in which this wealthy collector and mathematical savant has eloquently distilled his own preoccupations and philosophical insights. These are delightfully Darwinian, or to be more precise, Jungian — with perhaps a salting and peppering of Larmarck.

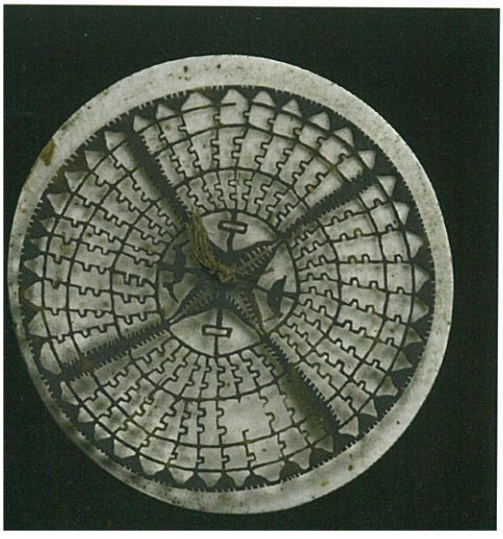
"No one makes art for art's sake," says Walsh. "... There are only two reasons to create art: to get laid or defy death."[1] This is all quite bracing — if not entirely original. Something similar finds expression in Denis Dutton's book, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure & Human Evolution*, proposing that our response to art and our desire to make it is rooted in our origins — that is to say, our 1.6-million-year-old cousins — and guided by our need to impress potential mating partners.

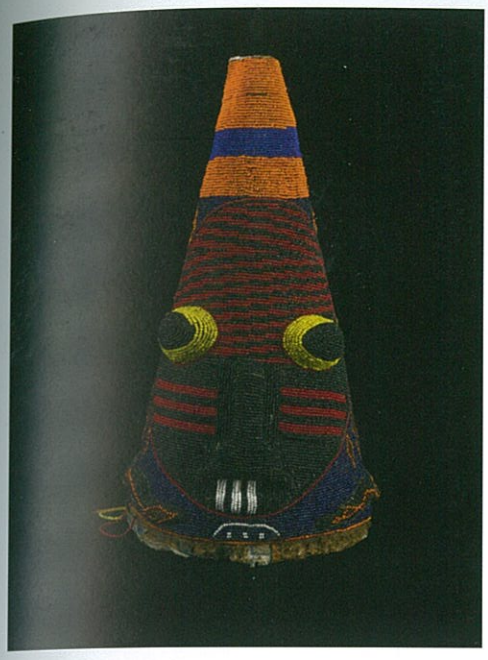
Much has been written about the physical presence of the museum itself, carved as it is into a sandstone cliff at waterline and constructed of concrete and rusted steel. With the possibility of water levels rising, there is some musing about it becoming a version of Atlantis in the millennia to come — a notion which would no doubt please Walsh with his interest in the ultimate finiteness of things.

You are required to surrender your orientation









cliff into the darkness of the subterranean galleries. The exhilarating disorientation means that the first confrontation with the exhibits is akin to seeing objects for the first time. *Theatre of the World* stitches together the whole history of human consciousness — making, as it does, visual connections across millennia and across cultures.

Walsh, an unabashed secularist, has encouraged an environment which both celebrates the extraordinary things people do while they are alive, and simultaneously reminds us that when life is extinguished, the creativity ends there. His views about human mortality and the human animal's place in the world give rise to an overarching agenda for the museum, one which visiting curators have been encouraged to give expression to.

It's a large metaphysical gesture — reinforced by his occasional musings and enjoyable public provocations — and a very expensive one.

An earlier exhibition, *Monanism*, which also has large servings of 'sex' 'decay' and 'death', may have been one of Walsh's little jokes. The biblically inclined will recall the definition of 'onanism' which Walsh has played with. It leaves open the possibility of doubt on his part — has he spread his seed over barren soil? This is Tasmania after all, an island whose inhabitants he once joked about as being identified by their two heads.

The guest curator, Jean-Hubert Martin (assisted by Mittijs Visser, Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling) rejects "the docile museum" (one assumes he means 'inert'). He has assembled hundreds of objects drawn from the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (which might rightly be considered a 'cabinet of curiosities' or 'wunderkammer' in its own right), Walsh's own collection and various state institutions from around Australia.

The wunderkammer or cabinet of curiosities precedes the idea of the museum by centuries. Renaissance scholars and collectors were able to embrace everything of the then-known world by assembling antiquities, relics, fragments, coins, ethnographic oddities, animals, shells, gemstones, rocks and minerals and so on.

The notes accompanying the exhibition suggest that Jean-Hubert Martin "has attracted international attention as a curator who challenges what he sees as the artificial boundaries in art — defined chronologies, cultures and technique". What this means for this exhibition is the absence of labels. The viewer is obliged to confront the objects before him or her without a single explanatory crutch — either historical, cultural or stylistic. Objects with thousands of years between their making are paired, according to how they echo each other's visual cues.

In a discussion with writers and journalists, Martin remarked: "I look for visual efficiency — there is a structure in the mind based on experiences before ..." Thus he has embarked on a collector's approach rather than a historian's perspective and explains that he wants the visitor to feel the same quickening he felt when he saw and assembled these objects.

This is both good and bad.

It reflects a development in museums worldwide in which curators sever an object from anything as banal as anthropological or cultural underpinnings, so that the viewer has no moorings in which to locate it. The objects are released into new relationships which might be suggested by material or purpose. This means it becomes an entirely visual exercise — and perhaps a liberating one — but this approach can only take us so far. In isolation these objects might engage us, but what gives them lasting significance is the context in which they arose, and only an understanding of the particular culture and its place in mankind's chronology can flesh out the story.

Tribal artefacts are given an exhilarating presence, somewhat reminiscent of the arrangements at the Musée Branly in Paris, and one is reminded that objects in fugitive media — wood, clay, bone, shell, fibre, pigment, teeth and hair — would disappear without trace were it not for the 'sheltering sky' of the museums worldwide.

One entire room is devoted to woven bark cloths: tapa, from Polynesia and Melanesia — which are ranged around walls which bring to mind the sloping monoliths of the Temple of Edfu in Egypt. These

Previous pages:

Left: Manolo Millares, ***Homonculo***, 1959, oil, twine, burlap bags, wood. 163 x 130cm. Collection MONA. Image courtesy MONA.

Right top: Felice Varini, ***Painting in Situ***, 2012, site-specific installation, MONA. Photograph credit: MONA/Remi Chauvin. Image courtesy MONA.

Right bottom: John Kelly, ***Bubbles***, 2005, oil on linen, 168 x 213cm. Image courtesy MONA.

Opposite page:

Top: Sidney Nolan, ***Ape and Elephant***, 1963, oil on hardboard, 120 x 120cm. Collection MONA. Image courtesy MONA.

Bottom left: ***Dala***, (head ornament), Guadalcanal Island, 19th–early 20th c., Tridacna clam, tortoiseshell, fibre, largest dimension 12cm. Collection Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Image courtesy MONA/TMAG.

Bottom centre: ***Zoomorphic ring***, Ghana, 20th c., cast gold, largest dimension 8cm. Collection MONA. Image courtesy MONA.

Bottom right ***Divination Tray***, (Opon Ifa), Nigeria, Yoruba people, 19th–early 20th c., wood, diameter 39.5cm. Collection MONA. Image courtesy MONA.

This page:

Left: ***Beaded crown with two faces***, Nigeria, Yoruba people, 20th c., glass beads, fabric, woven reeds, largest dimension 42cm. Image courtesy MONA.

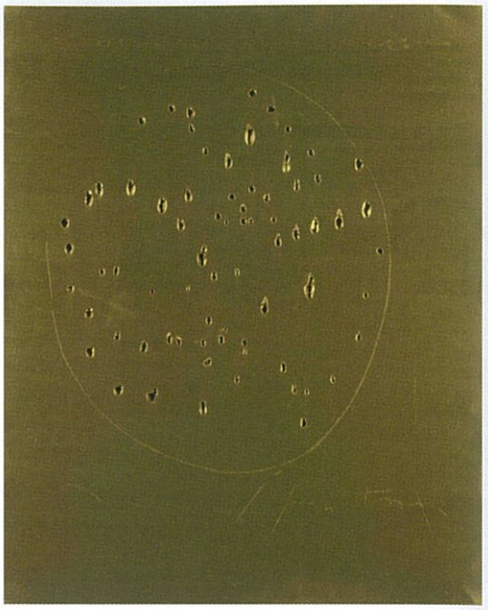
Right: ***Collection of Barkcloths***, from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tahiti, Tonga, Vanuatu. ***Coffin of Iret-Heru-ru***, Egypt, late 26th Dynasty, c.600-525 BC., wood, gesso, pigment, largest dimension 172cm. Collection MONA. Photo credit: MONA/Remi Chauvin. Image courtesy MONA.

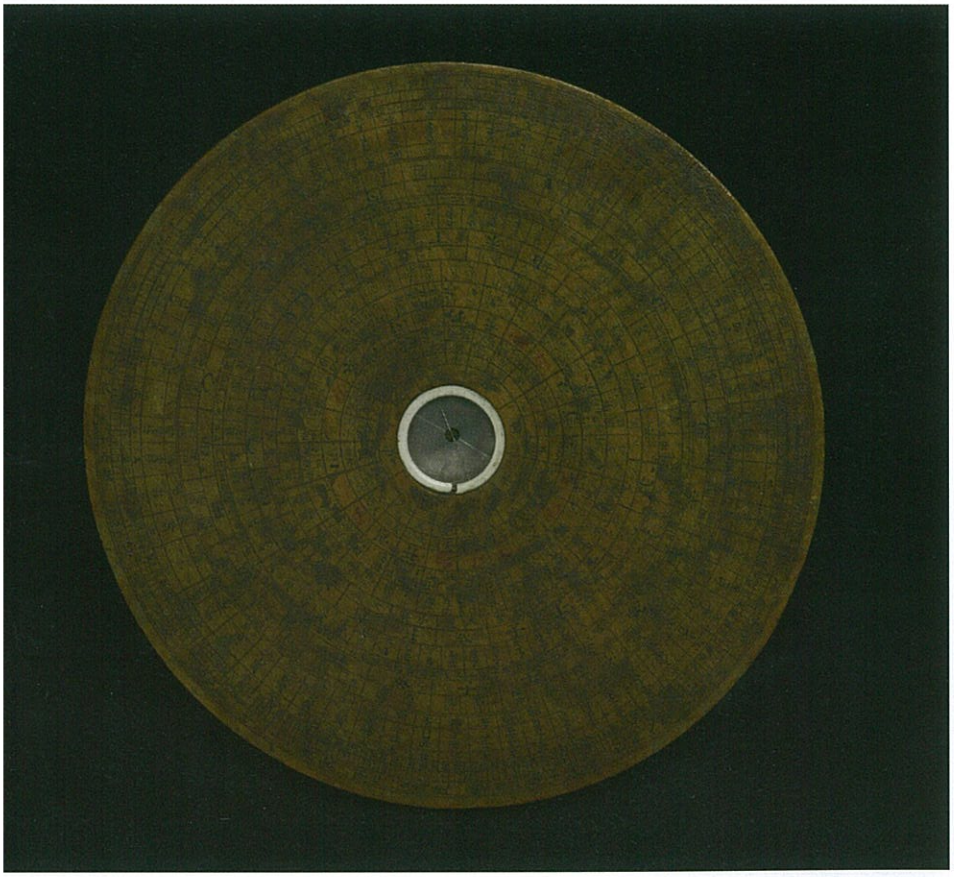
Following page:

Top left: ***Mummy Portrait***, Egypt, Roman Period, 100–300 AD, encaustic on wood, largest dimension 36.5cm. Collection MONA. Image courtesy MONA.

Top right: Lucio Fontana, ***Concetto spaziale***, (Spatial Concept), 1964–65, metallic paint on canvas, 91 x 73.5cm. Collection National Gallery of Victoria. Photograph credit: MONA/Remi Chauvin. Image courtesy MONA.

Bottom: ***Geomancer's compass***, China, c. 19th c., wood, metal, largest dimension 20cm. Collection Tasmanian





tapa, all recently unearthed (as it were) from the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, are a clear reminder that all over the world — at the very least around 40,000 thousand years ago — man's first impulse (perhaps after recording the silhouette of his hand on a cave wall) was to establish a visual vocabulary of dots, dashes, chevrons, lozenges, circles, parallel lines and concentric rings.

There are all manner of surprises which testify to the breadth of Walsh's collecting imperatives. For example, a painting by the Spaniard Manolo Millares, who influenced a number of Australian abstractionists in the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as John Olsen and Elwyn Lynn, and the enigmatic painting *A Dream* by Adelaide Ironside, who, at twenty-four, travelled from Australia to London with her mother in 1855, where she met John Ruskin, corresponded with him and painted a number of religious paintings in Rome.

The exhibition boasts some of the best works Sidney Nolan ever produced: his South African animal series: *Ape and Elephant* (1963) and *African Monkey* (1963) look as fresh as the day they were painted. A Jean-Michel Basquiat canvas stands up vividly and robustly, in defiance of art critic Robert Hughes's dismissal of his oeuvre at large.

Walsh has a refreshing view of art and money (having it in abundance — and hopefully keeping it, if the Tax department should show an uncharacteristically human and cultural face): "A number of the works I buy are without any resale value at all. ... I also don't think the art market (like all financial markets) is particularly forecastable so whether work appreciates in value is unknown to me ..."[2] He also has a refreshing view of much curatorial activity undertaken around the world today. "I believe most curation (sic) is bullshit ... curators tie together a bunch of stuff they can get their hands on ... and the upshot is that about 30% of the art is just there to fill space." □