

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

TOURISM

Art's wild child up and walking

BY GABRIELLA COSLOVICH

MANY things have been said about David Walsh, gambling millionaire and maverick owner of Hobart's astonishing Museum of Old and New Art. Among the less flattering was one critic's suggestion that MONA was little more than a monumental form of masturbation.

Not that Walsh has ever denied this. He launched MONA last January with an attention-grabbing exhibition titled *Monanisms*, a none-too-subtle play on "onanism", which, as you'll find in any respectable dictionary, is another name for the self-love that sends you blind.

But there is nothing onanistic about Walsh's prediction that if MONA were at risk of financial collapse, his fans would bail him out.

"People would start giving me money if I went broke, I suspect," Walsh says. "I honestly think people are invested in this."

For all his bravado, he may well be right. People do have a lot invested in MONA, especially the people of Hobart. Since its opening, the museum has single-handedly put Hobart on the map, transforming the city's image from sleepy backwater to playground for the hip and cultured. These days, everyone talks about the "MONA effect".

On a purely economic level, MONA spared Hobart from the worst of the tourism decline caused by the global financial crisis and exacerbated by the withdrawal of Tiger Airways flights between Melbourne and Hobart, as well as a reduction in airline seats in general.

During its first year, MONA attracted about 400,000 visitors (46 per cent of them from interstate), exceeding Walsh's expectations and proving there was a hunger for an art experience that was thrilling, uninhibited, liberal, playful, anti-didactic, surprising and adult (although kids have also taken to it in droves).

"It's already our No. 1 tourist attraction in the state," Tourism Industry Council Tasmania chief executive Luke Martin says.

"We think MONA has the potential to be the most significant game-changing tourism development since West Point casino, the first casino in the country, was built in the 1970s.

"Our perennial problem has always been that Tasmania is 'a place that I will get to one day'. MONA has given a reason for people to get there now."

MONA was named Tasmania's

best new tourism development of 2011, placing it in the running for the national tourism awards in March.

Almost a year ago, on January 21, MONA opened with a lavish, no-expenses-spared, absinth and oyster-fuelled party. The extravagance of the opening festivities masked Walsh's fear that after MONA opened he would be exposed as a fraud who hadn't a clue about exhibiting art. Instead, last October, Walsh was named 2011's most culturally powerful person by *The Australian Financial Review Magazine*.

He responds to the accolade by referring to one of his favourite subjects, biology: "I suspect that the 90 trillion bacteria in my body are in no way interested and the very few cells in my body that constitute me are a bit chuffed."

Nonetheless, the habitual contrarian admits the highlight of his 2011 was watching not only Tasmanians but Australians embrace MONA as their own.

"I love hearing it referred to as 'our MONA' and I hear it a lot; it gives me a lift," he says.

What's so fascinating — and wickedly relishable — about this success story is that it took an eccentric outsider, a gambling maths whiz and university dropout of working-class origins to give Australia its most remarkable private art museum. As Hobart academic and former co-host of ABC TV program *Collectors* Adrian Franklin has suggested, it takes a "choreographer", not a "developer", to unleash such carnivalesque madness into a city — and Walsh is the wildest choreographer of all.

He doesn't spring from old-school networks, doesn't feel the slightest need to conform or impress the establishment. He rocks up to work in jeans and a succession of T-shirts emblazoned with blasphemous statements. He managed to pull off an uncompromising and seemingly improbable vision: to build an \$80 million architecturally stunning gallery filled with works from his \$100 million private art collection. In the



Visitors view Wim Delvoye's current exhibition; (below) David Walsh.

PICTURES: PETER MATHEW, LOUISE KENNERLEY

process, he has become known as the anti-hero who turned the Australian art world on its head.

Many of the works at MONA are by now as famous as the museum itself, works such as *C---s* (a row of anatomically correct, hand-sculpted porcelain vulvas), *Cloaca Professional* (a machine engineered to mimic the human digestive system and produce faeces) and *Bit.Fall* (a cascading wall of water that spells out the most popular search words on Google that day).

Works that were denounced by conservative politicians and denied exhibition in Australia — such as Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, part of the infamous *Sensation* show that was set to tour Australia in 2000 but was cancelled at the 11th hour by the National Gallery of Australia's then director Brian Kennedy — are being shown at MONA with no public outcry.

Instead, the people who went in their thousands to see his collection made up their own minds and decided that even if they didn't like everything they saw, they appreciated

Walsh's gesture and generosity.

"I can't believe I still get letters daily, probably a higher frequency than daily, and people still send me gifts, bottles of wine, books; it's a complete shock to me," he says.

"I've had a number of people say they had no context for contemporary art until they saw this and this made sense to them and now they can go to other contemporary art galleries and enjoy them."

"I hate using this sort of language but I feel that if you give people the chance they will rise to whatever level is required of them but if you don't give them the chance, they won't."

When in Hobart, the conversation invariably shifts to the city's prodigal son. And it's not just the locals who rave about him. A Melbourne couple sitting next to me at a communal table at one of Hobart's hip new eateries, in town for a return visit to MONA, told me of their son's frustration that one of his favourite works — Callum Morton's *Babylonia* — was not on display. It had been moved to make way for the new exhibition by Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, the *Cloaca* man.

"Dad, where's the mountain with the hotel in it?" the young boy had complained.

Patrick Hall's popular and darkly whimsical work *When My Heart Stops Beating* — which features drawers that say "I love you" when

opened — is at the entrance of MONA's so-called "sex and death" section. The Tasmanian artist says MONA has given Hobart an "international air".

"Your work is being seen in a global context, rather than a local one," he says.

MONA is also a magnet for Hobart's art school graduates, a source of employment that stops them disappearing to the mainland. "The Tasmanian diaspora is huge, so it's nice to hold them here," says Hall.

Franklin sees MONA as the proverbial goose that laid the golden egg and has applied for a research grant to study why it has been so successful and how its lessons can be used to invigorate Tasmania's creative industries and consolidate art tourism earnings.

Already, MONA's success has prompted the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery to update its image. The state museum is undergoing a \$30 million redevelopment and will reopen early next year.

"The MONA effect can't be underestimated," says the curator of contemporary art at TMAG, Bryony Nainby. "It has demonstrated to governments the pulling power that art and architecture have."

But the big question is whether MONA's novelty will wear off. Can Walsh keep up the momentum and the level of excitement generated by the museum in its first year?

"That's a valid question," Walsh says. "How do we keep being relevant when most of the things I want to say have been said? Well, that's the potency of democracy. Having plundered my brain we can now plunder others. Jean-Hubert [Martin] is not a bad one to start with," he says, referring to the renowned French curator who is part of the MONA team and a former director of the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Paris Musee National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie.

The other unknown is whether MONA, which is funded by gambling money, can be financially sustainable. Walsh and his computer-geek friends have devised a mathematical system that stacks the odds in their favour. No system is foolproof, however, and MONA is a hungry beast: it costs about \$15 million a year to run. Last year, it had a \$10 million deficit, prompting Walsh to start charging interstate visitors; museum entry remains free for Tasmanians. The charge has brought in a couple of extra million, which is not enough to cover the shortfall.

"I'd like MONA to eventually be self-sufficient. I can see that happening in [long pause] five years," Walsh says. "The real plan to make money is selling the technology," he says, referring to the "O", the super-smart, iPod-like machine that, in the absence of wall labels, provides information about artworks when pointed at them, and tracks visitors' movements in the gallery.

"We haven't actually made a sale but we've got some considerable interest," Walsh says.

For now, though, it is still halcyon days for MONA. Walsh says: "The nicest thing I said about this, and it's never been printed, Tasmania needs MONA like California needs the San Andreas [Fault] because they're both conservative places that need to be shaken up a bit."

Not just Tasmania, I suggest. Walsh agrees. In short, it's the kick up the arts we had to have.

■ *Wim Delvoye* runs until April 2. MONA is now open daily. mona.net.au

