

## News

# Eleven things at Dark Mofo that were worth the FOMO

Written by Dee Jefferson

Tuesday 20 June 2017



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We came, we saw, we MOFOd – and frankly, even *we* FOMOd. Here is what was worthy of the hype at this year's festival of Dark arts in Hobart.

## 1. Hermann Nitsch: 150.Action



Hermann Nitsch: 150.Action at Dark Mofo 2017

Photograph: Dark Mofo/Lusy Productions

Dark Mofo's most controversial show, a bloody 'action' by Viennese avant garde artist Hermann Nitsch, had a very tense start. We queued for half an hour, walking past animal rights protesters holding up mirrors urging us to "look at ourselves". Our identification was checked at four different points. We spent more time waiting. When the action commenced, many struggled to see, causing murmurs of consternation.

The work unfolded slowly and methodically. Participants – some naked, some in robes – were tied to crosses and stretchers. Gallons of blood and viscous-looking milk were poured into their mouths. At first this sight made me physically gag. But with repetition comes hardening, and eventually boredom. The banality of gore. Even when they brought out the carcass (which looked no different from the ones being flame-grilled at the Winter Feast, except for its size) and tugged at its entrails, the eye quickly adjusted.

Some of the rituals that were repeated in the action – a team in white robes hauling the giant carcass and blood-drenched faux-crucified participants around on a wooden platform – were quite beautiful, like medieval paintings of torture. As more rivulets of blood began to crawl across the floor, the smell became the show's most confronting element.

Watching Nitsch's actions on a screen has always felt surreal, staged and dissociated. In real life, these feelings don't vanish. They're just mingled with agitation, amazement and a lasting seediness that settles right inside you, ready to come back up hard when you least want or need it. It's not for everyone, but afterwards, you might know yourself a little better. *Alyx Gorman*

## 2. Welcome Stranger

Perhaps the most FOMO-inducing event of Dark Mofo was *Welcome Stranger*, a six hour progressive performance art party that stretched across an entire city block, including a Freemason lodge, tennis courts, a sandstone church and an RSL-style pub. Artist Jess Johnson's work was hung on banners and projected on walls inside the Masonic Lodge, while firepits blazed in some outdoor areas – but otherwise set dressing was fairly minimal.

In the church, Betty Grumble presented slivers of her ecosexual cabaret *Sex Clown Saves the World*, a mix of overtly sexual stripping (at one point she holds a lit sparkler in her anus for a full minute) and environmental call-to-action. Amrita Hepi's work 'An Occupation' saw her dance with and wrestle a giant, inflatable worm, a whirling galaxy projected against it. At times, she wrapped herself up like a Viktor and Rolf bride – in other moments, the inflatable appeared to swell with her breath. Elsewhere surf-ska-psych outfit Khun Narin churned out one of the highest energy, most universally danceable live sets we've ever seen. Later, New York rapper Le1f (**the man many would argue is responsible for *Thrift Shop***) delivered sweat-soaked, blazing sets in the church – complete with back-up dancers. A little later again, in a different location, Spike Fuck induced pub-wide slow-dancing with her cover of 'Bette Davis Eyes'.

Unfortunately, all of these moments were easy to miss. It took us two tours through the happening (on Thursday and Saturday) to enjoy these moments. Spontaneous discovery and free-range roaming was the point of the night, but there were only a couple of performances on at any given time. Many customers spent their nights hanging around less-than-vibey bar areas wondering where the 'mandatory art' was, because the event's staff weren't directive enough. If we'd been told to bounce back and forth from venue to venue seeking out action, those \$95 tickets would have felt like much better value for money. AG

### 3. Dark Park

I remember reading James Valentine's **opinion piece** in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last year that rightly pointed out how this kind of pitch black, wonky grounded, open fire pit, outdoor art experience would never be allowed in Sydney. In the flesh, it's a sort of anarchic Vivid, where navigating the installations is a clumsy walker's worst nightmare. I loved it. I had high expectations of high danger, hoping to see someone walk into a wall, or at least a puddle – and Dark Park did not disappoint. I saw terrified children, a man tripping over a shallow ditch, visibly pissed off people waiting in a queue and an exciting lack of supervisors. Sydney has been placated and herded into thinking art isn't worthwhile unless it's safely projected on a building, and Dark Park has this schtick galore, of course, but the undeniable 'danger' feeling makes it eons more thrilling. We stumbled through the multiple rooms of Daniel Boyd's *Hello Darkness* and were given the physical space to think about its resonance; we staggered into the ominous centre of 'iy\_project 136.1 Hz', Chris Levine's angular cage of 40 laser beams (not to be confused with his outdoor laser spectacular 'iy\_project' – also visually stunning); and we fell over and into the bar at the end of it all. No one ushered us along, no one lit the way for our tiny, coddled feet with a condescending torch – and everyone survived. Magic. **Claire Finneran**

### 4. The Second Woman

This 24-hour endurance work by Sydney performer Nat Randall (a member of queer collective Hissy Fit and co-presenter of **FBI Radio's Canvas**) became a cult hit of Dark Mofo. The word spread by mouth and by Instagram and Facebook: head to Peacock Theatre, something amazing is happening. First performed at Next Wave Festival in 2016, *The Second Woman* sees Randall repeat a short scene on a loop, for 24 hours (from 3pm on Saturday June 17 to 3pm the following afternoon). Running at about 13 minutes, the scene involves a woman (Randall) who is visited by a man (played by a different man each time, all chosen from a casting call-out) called Marty, who is obviously her lover, or has been. Dialogue is exchanged (her lines are the same each time; the men have the same set lines, which also include small spaces for improvisation). The dialogue largely concerns his perception of her.

The scene is taken from (or more accurately, inspired by) John Cassavetes' 1977 film *Opening Night*, which is about an actress (played by Cassavetes' wife, Gena Rowlands) who has a breakdown while preparing for the New York opening of a play called *The Second Woman* (which is in turn about woman who is confronted by her aging, and the concomitant loss of visibility and even 'personhood'). Like Cassavetes' film, Randall's show explores the experience of being a woman and an actress, and uses camera close-ups to powerful effect. Unlike the film, which was written, directed and produced by men, this fusion of live art, theatre and film uses a two-woman camera crew to capture the protagonist's encounters with each male visitor (in fact the whole creative team and crew are women). And as a theatre work, it is the audience gaze that is central. We become obsessive voyeurs, closely reading each encounter for alterations in her delivery, and for different vocal inflections and performance choices made by each male performer. We worried about her; we judged them. People (myself included) sat in *The Second Woman* for hours at a time, and upon leaving they could be heard saying "we have to come back."

At the end, Randall emerged for her curtain call as an almost heroic figure: stoically enduring the male gaze (and touch) and the audience gaze while forging and reforging the so-called 'second sex' into an indomitable being. *Dee Jefferson*

## 5. Häxan with Maria Moles

After a big couple of days hiking around Dark Mofo and after the pretty underwhelming Ulver performance earlier in the evening, returning to the Odeon theatre at 11pm to see this film was a bit of a test in stamina. The comfy vinyl seats and ramped up thermostat were at intoxicating levels of nap factor perfection. But as much as I was struggling to keep my eyes open, the visual and aural experience that followed had a psychological '*Clockwork Orange* effect' on my eyelids. *Häxan* is a silent film from 1922 about witchcraft, and for 104 minutes of silence it is surprisingly captivating. This rare screening was accompanied live by experimental drummer Maria Moles. Created by Benjamin Christensen in Sweden, the film places itself as a documentary about witches, though it's largely comprised of acted scenes. Unintentionally feminist, *Häxan* touches on the oppressive 'hysteria' myths of the past and has a great comical dig at the church. It's also visually insane: beautiful and dark and scary and sexy. Black and white has never looked so fresh and wicked, and we left repeating "1922!" in disbelief. Moles' score was understated and calmly pleasant, picking up for dramatic effect slightly but perhaps not enough to really punch home some the film's more intense scenes (of which there were many). I'm really glad I stayed awake for this, it would've certainly been a case of you snooze you lose. *CF*

## 6. Siren Song

This collaboration between sound artist Byron J Scullin and duo Supple Fox (previously behind *Dark Mofo's Bass Bath*) was one of the most transformative works of the festival, harnessing the power of the sun's rise and fall to cast the whole city into a dreamscape with its call – delivered at dawn and sunset each day, via banks of speakers embedded on buildings and (for the evening performances) a helicopter. Scullin created the eerie, ethereal soundscape, part human and part animal, playing with vocals by Tanya Tagaq, Deborah Cheetham and Carolyn Connors. On the final night at the pier, after the song had concluded, the helicopter came roaring back into sight, blasting Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries' in an *Apocalypse Now* call out so perfect it seemed like the pilot had been planning it his whole career. He proceeded to do some stomach-churning stunts. None of which would have been nearly as impressive (or funny) if the rest of the work had been less moving. *AG*

## 7. Ulver x TSO

There were moments of the awesome and sublime in this concert that made up for its overall patchiness. Norwegians Ulver ('wolves') were in Hobart for two Dark Mofo gigs, one as a band and the other this concert with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra (or rather, a cut down version of it), performing their 2013 album *Messe I.X-VI.X*: a neo-Gothic 'mass' in six parts

that melds the electronic and acoustic, and which, despite the title, is more instrumental than choral. The bits without voice are arguably the best bits – and in fact Ulver were all-but invisible, at the back of the stage. But the bits where the orchestra and band blend into one beautifully engineered wall of sound are the real knock-outs ([listen to the first three movements](#) to get a sense). There are also some beautiful cello solos, and deployment of French horn and piano. Two things let the concert down: the imperfect structure of the album, which fails to build a compelling journey (there are frequent lulls where you tune out, and the interstitial spaces between the ‘movements’ undermine a sense of momentum), and the under-developed visual narrative: crucifixes, the blank-eyed Klieg-lit faces of young girls in the dark, close-ups of an eye, footage of clouds and the forest canopy above – all strong when used sparingly, but presented as a sort of overwrought melange here. But those knock-out moments? Really worth the ticket price. *DJ*

## 8. Xiu Xiu plays the music of Twin Peaks

The *Twin Peaks* soundtrack is very repetitive – but that never hurt the show, and in Xiu Xiu’s hands, it’s an asset. They took the most familiar phrases and transformed them – making them nursery cute on xylophones, or dark, loud and hard on guitar. The sound was diverse and entrancing. Angela Seo, Shayna Dunkelman and Jamie Stewart’s stylish performance, which is clearly informed by the TV shows’ characters, added an extra element of delight and occasionally of menace. It’s a strange concept, but the result was beauty, not pastiche. Good thing their Sydney and Melbourne shows both have [tickets available](#). *AG*

## 9. Einstürzende Neubauten

Walking up to the Odeon Theatre we saw a pretty sloshed busker playing a durr into a microphone and all laughed. A couple of hours later, Blixa Bargeld, the striking lead singer of 1980s German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten, would be doing the very same thing on the song ‘Silence is Sexy’ and aside from a few nervous giggles, we were more in awe than amused. This was bound to be an entertaining show, but I didn’t expect to be this entertained. The variety of hand-made weird instruments – bent metal sheets and pvc pipes being thwacked – made for an engaging round of ‘spot that sound that isn’t made by a computer but sounds like it is’. A very analogue Kraftwerk-meets-*Cabaret* kind of show that was far from the screams I was anticipating. Heaps of fun. *CF*

## 10. The Winter Feast

There was probably bad food at the Winter Feast – we just never found it. Over the course of three nights, we had no dud bites. Particular standouts included crispy-skinned, fall-apart tender hoggart, prepared by [Fred’s](#) Danielle Alvarez, who was guest chef at the Heavy Metal Kitchen; star-anise heavy hot gin punch from Tasmanian distillery Poltergeist; and smoky, tender oysters Kilpatrick from Get Shucked on Bruny Island. The folk-focused live music programming, canopy of red and yellow fairy lights and plentiful open fires contributed to an overall atmosphere of merriment it was very hard to leave behind. Great food isn’t enough – it’s the live music and photogenic set-dressing that give the feast its magic. *AG*

## 11. The Museum of Everything

You’ve never seen anything like MONA’s latest exhibition, we’re willing to bet; for sure, there’s never been an Australian exhibition of this kind, and the London project is relatively recent – just seven iterations deep, since its debut exhibition in 2009. The Museum of Everything is a roving British non-profit project that uncovers, collects and exhibits the artwork of artists who – for the most part – are ‘non-professional’: not trained, not making art for public consumption, not ‘represented’. Some would call this ‘outsider’ art, but James Brett, who heads the project (he doesn’t like the title ‘curator’)

prefers not to use that term. For their seventh exhibition, the Museum has set up camp in Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art, where they'll stay for 10 months (the longest exhibition yet). Within 30 small rooms, designed like a rabbit warren and decorated to look like domestic interiors of different periods and styles, almost 2000 works by around 100 artists, from the 19th century to the 21st, are arranged and displayed to a degree of proximity that is overwhelming. The best known name is Henry Darger, with his Vivian Girls epic; visitors may also recognise the psychedelic cats of Louis Wain. But much of this exhibition consists of work never previously exhibited, by artists you wouldn't otherwise discover. Not all of it will pique your interest – and there's way too much of it to digest in one sitting – but it's rife with images, ideas and technical execution that will take your breath away. *DJ*

***Dark Mofo 2017** ran from June 8-21, but the festival happens every June. Hobart is there forever. If you're thinking of making the trip, check out our **guide to Tasmania**, including a hit-list for dining, drinking, sleeping and seeing in Hobart.*

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