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# Tasmania's Dark Mofo gets darker as MONA influence expands

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It was a showstopper that could have stopped the show. A slaughtered bull. Five hundred litres of animal blood. Sixty artists, academics and musicians in a three-hour ritual that builds to a frenzied free-for-all, performers plunging into the bull's carcass and writhing in its entrails. It was done in the name of art: a performance piece titled *150.Action* by Hermann Nitsch, on the bill of [Dark Mofo 2017](#)

[<https://darkmofo.net.au/previous-programs/2017/2017-program/>].

Appalled, more than 20,000 people signed a petition demanding the performance be cancelled. Animal rights activists threatened to kidnap the bull and take it to safety (ignoring the fact that the beast was sourced from a local abattoir and would die regardless). Leigh Carmichael, creative director of Dark Mofo, and his boss David Walsh, founder of Hobart's [Museum of Old and New Art](https://mona.net.au/) (MONA), received more than 100 threats; and that's just counting those serious enough to warrant police attention. "We were sent letters saying 'If the bull dies, you die,' that type of stuff," Carmichael says. "It was pretty confronting."

It also presented a potential crisis with a major sponsor. While MONA receives no government money, the Tasmanian government had pledged \$10.5 million over five years to help pay for Dark Mofo, doubling its previous contribution. The 2017 festival was the first to receive this hefty new slice of taxpayer funds and Carmichael was bracing for the Premier's office to call to advise he could have the cash, or the controversy, but he couldn't have both. Yet that call never came. "They said, 'if you want to ride this out, then we'll ride it out with you,'" Carmichael says. "I was so impressed because they had nothing to gain."



David Walsh inside MONA's new Pharos wing. "The joke is all the works deal with light in some way and light is the most transient phenomenon we know of." **NIC\_WALKER**

Tasmania's government better be buckled in. The storm over Nitsch's artwork may have clouded last year's Dark Mofo, but it has not dimmed Carmichael's appetite for risk. *The Australian Financial Review Magazine* can reveal that when this year's festival opens in June, [<https://darkmofo.net.au/>] it will kick off with an inaugural three-day talkfest called Dark and Dangerous Thoughts – or DDT, an acronym shared with the toxic pesticide. Carmichael declines to share all the details (the full program will be announced in April) but he says the themes will be “killing and f--king”. The line-up will feature a panel of “killers”: a sniper, an ex-jihadi and an advocate for Sharia law. Walsh, who funds Dark Mofo but otherwise allows Carmichael to run the show, has given it all his blessing with one proviso: “This cannot be a lefties love-in.”

## MONA about sex and death

Before opening MONA, Walsh told *The Age* that if people didn't picket and protest about his “sex and death”-laced museum, he would be hugely disappointed. “I want people to write letters to the paper. I want people to decry the loss of the moral fabric of our community,” he said. Instead, when MONA opened in 2011 it was met with international acclaim. An architectural sensation built into Triassic-era sandstone cliffs, and filled with Walsh's taboo-breaking art collection, MONA had 3000 people a day queueing in its first weeks.

Within months it became the second most-visited tourist attraction in Tasmania (Salamanca Market is top). In 2016 Walsh was made an Officer of the Order of Australia – not bad for a man whose museum includes a wall of porcelain vulvas and a machine that makes poo. Not to mention his long-running fight with the Australian Taxation Office. [<http://www.afr.com/business/on-punters-club-tax-office-backs-a-18bn-loser-20121026-jimr8>] He accepted the recognition with his usual disdain for pretence, pointing out that he had joined a club that once included Rolf Harris, Marcus Einfeld and Alan Bond. In the same year, Carmichael was appointed to the

board of the Australia Council for the Arts. For two artistic renegades, it's a fall *into* grace. "We started as the anti-establishment," says Carmichael. "Unfortunately we are now the establishment."

Yet risk-taking is everything for MONA. Walsh craves debate, champions the odd, loathes the swamp of "groupthink". With Walsh's money and imprimatur, Carmichael helps stoke the fires of dissent. And as well as betting on Carmichael, Walsh is doubling his investment in MONA in the next five years, with a new hotel and casino which might just stop MONA losing money so that it has a life beyond his. Having made his fortune from gambling, [<http://www.afr.com/news/australias-most-successful-gambling-syndicate-and-its-humble-premises-20140124-iy77t>] Walsh knows a thing or two about calculating one's chances. Somehow, against the odds, he's still winning. As Tasmania keeps basking in MONA's runaway success, the Dark Mofo festival has given Hobart a whole new hit. And not even a conservative-minded premier is going to interfere.

"Last year was a test for all of us, but we got through it and it has taken the thing to the next level," says Tasmanian Premier Will Hodgman, referring to the Nitsch controversy. "I don't believe governments should be stepping in and censoring or determining creative content in events that are as successful as these are. As long as they don't break any laws."

## Leigh Carmichael, ex graphic designer

Sitting on a dusky-pink suede couch and wearing layer upon layer of rock'n'roll black, including skull print T-shirt, Leigh Carmichael does not look particularly establishment. With his long, wavy hair, chiselled face and intense, deep-set eyes, he recalls Tom Cruise in his *Magnolia* phase.



David Walsh (right) is betting on Dark MOFO festival director Leigh Carmichael (left) to ratchet up the outrage factor of the already out-there Tasmanian event, demonstrating that hedonistic MONA can maintain its mojo as it expands.

Twelve years ago, Carmichael was a struggling graphic designer on the cusp of moving to the mainland and Walsh was looking for someone with a cool, ironic edge to design the labels for his new craft beer, Moo Brew. Back then, Walsh's anti-museum was still a twinkle in his unorthodox eye. "I had never heard of David," Carmichael says. "I almost didn't bother putting in for the gig because in my mind I was packing up and thinking about looking for work in Melbourne and Sydney. I put in a quote late, got the gig, and it changed my life."

His office on the third floor of Hobart's Old Mercury Building, an art deco marvel and former newspaper hive, is like a shrine to the museum that winched him from the banality of wedding magazines. On a curved black wall hovers a central black cross. On another wall hangs an ominous black and white photograph of MONA's logo: an "x", or multiplication sign, next to a "+" that could be an addition sign, or a crucifix.

The two symbols encapsulate the museum's philosophical foundations: Walsh's facility and fascination with mathematics, and his questioning of religion. A Catholic school upbringing and deeply devout mother turned him off religion and into a "Catholic atheist", as he puts it in his autobiography, *A Bone of Fact*. Less known is that Carmichael too is a convert, an ex-Mormon who sought refuge in godlessness. "I needed to get out, and I did, at 16," he says of the faith that his parents still follow. "It wasn't for me, and I'm not sure I was ever a true believer."

## Pagan-like Dark Mofo

These days, the 42-year-old places his faith in the arts. Fire, flesh, nudity, noise, nature, dazzling lights and menacing darkness are staples of Dark Mofo, which Carmichael has directed since its inception in 2013. Culminating with the winter solstice, the pagan-like festival celebrates and probes Hobart's chill and gloom; ritual is used as a means of experiencing the sublime.

"One of the first things David did when I started working with him was to make me read Richard Dawkins," Carmichael says, speaking of the evolutionary biologist who is a favourite of Walsh's. "But I got bored with Dawkins quite quickly. What it left for me was a hole. So what does it look like without a god? If you take that to its conclusion then suicide is a real option," he says, taking logic to a rather extreme end. That conclusion has been famously reached before – and ditched – by Albert Camus in his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and it was from Camus, rather than Dawkins, that Carmichael ultimately took direction.

"It's seeing the joy in the smaller things: when you're swimming, the water on your body, the sun rays on your body, they become what it's all about. Dawkins was important but it opened up a whole new interest for me and Dark Mofo is an exploration into that," he says. Revolt rather than suicide was Camus' answer to the absurdity of life and while "revolt" might be too strong a description of Dark Mofo,

“edgy” certainly applies: from mass nude swims in the Derwent River, to speakers booming dirge-like songs across Hobart at dawn and dusk, to people being “abducted” from nightclubs and taken off on mysterious night adventures.

Sensual, theatrical and unruly, Dark Mofo fills Hobart’s hotels, Airbnbs and restaurants in the dead of winter, stimulating the economy in what used to be the tourist off-season. Ticket sales for the festival jumped by almost 60 per cent to \$2.1 million for the 2017 festival and attendance figures soared from 300,000 to almost 450,000 (although this counts people who attended multiple events multiple times). It’s become so popular that this year the festival will add a third weekend to its schedule.

## **Creative tension behind MONA**

In his 2014 book *The Making of MONA*, Adrian Franklin argues that it was the push and pull of creative clashes and conflicting visions that made MONA what it is today. Walsh is the source of ideas, and those in his inner circle are tasked with translating them into reality – not always an easy thing. In the early days, when there was no clear sense what MONA would be, Carmichael strained to put into words and images what Walsh wanted to say about his museum. They rubbed up against each other, creating friction that helped MONA retain its spark.

In 2016 Carmichael left his role as creative director at MONA to focus entirely on Dark Mofo and other entrepreneurial ventures that Walsh is prepared to back. He is now the creative director of DarkLab, a MONA subsidiary hatched in October 2016 as a think tank for new projects – and, it appears, as a way of giving him and Walsh some breathing space.

“It was his suggestion for me that we break away,” Carmichael says. “I made some remarks about maybe letting go of some of the commercial stuff because it was getting too much for me. David and I had a fairly heated meeting and, for whatever reason, he decided it was time to separate Dark Mofo from MONA. So he created this company, and I had to pick a name out really quickly, and it was DarkLab, and the mandate was to work on Dark Mofo and see what other opportunities there are around.”

Walsh is one of the most original minds in Australia, but, as anyone who has dealt with him knows, that mind is not always easy to contend with. Carmichael has his own quirks and passions, and his ideas don’t always concur with Walsh’s. Their current friction is over the very evolution of Hobart. Carmichael would like to see the city’s sluggish central business district invigorated and has been working with Melbourne-based property developers Riverlee on plans for a \$250 million cultural precinct, centred on saving the historic Odeon theatre, a regular Dark Mofo venue. A 200-metre “art spire” has been mooted as part of that vision – an idea Walsh does not support (which will come as a relief to the Hobart Not Highrise lobby group).

# Walsh building hotel ...

Walsh's focus is instead on expanding the footprint of MONA on its peninsula at Berriedale, 20 minutes north of the CBD, with a monumental development more than four times the size of the original museum, a \$300 million-plus, 172-room five-star-hotel (working title HOMO – HOtel at MOna), dramatically cantilevered over the Derwent River, [<http://www.afr.com/real-estate/more-mona-david-walsh-to-build-hotel-with-conference-centre-library-theatre-20170705-gx5nuq>]and including a 1075-seat theatre, conference and spa centres, an outdoor stage and a three-level library. Walsh has suggested a loose opening date of 2022. He's also planning a boutique “anti-casino” called Monaco, for high-rollers only, poker-machine-free, and off limits to Tasmanians.



The cover story in our annual Arts issue: David Walsh (right) is betting on Dark Mofo festival director Leigh Carmichael (left) to ratchet up the outrage factor, demonstrating that hedonistic MONA can maintain its mojo as it expands. **Nic Walker**

While Walsh is no fan of Carmichael's “art spire”, he raves about the vision he and Carmichael worked on for the city's Macquarie Point on the edge of Hobart's CBD. Every winter, the abandoned industrial area becomes Dark Mofo's gritty Dark Park, ablaze with open fires, dazzling with lasers, and throbbing with noise. MONA's design for the site's future has been embraced by the state government and will become Tasmania's largest private-public project, costing \$2 billion over 30 years (although thus far it has attracted just \$45 million of federal funding). Created with the input of Tasmanian Aboriginal writer Greg Lehman, the design includes a nationally significant Truth and Reconciliation Art Park, featuring a fire and light installation celebrating 40,000 continuous years of Aboriginal culture and the atrocities of the frontier wars.

“I think that's a triumph and we will do what we can to get that up,” Walsh says. “DarkLab will justify its existence if all it ever does is provide support and vision for



Mac Point and keeps Dark Mofo being an engaging and slightly dangerous spectacle.”

Walsh and I are talking in a sombre, spot-lit conference room somewhere in the MONA labyrinth. He is wearing burgundy jeans, multicoloured sneakers and an unusually nondescript T-shirt. (The first time I interviewed Walsh, in 2007, he was sporting a red Damien Hirst T-shirt declaring the death of God.) His thick, shoulder-length hair is silvery-grey, his spectacle frames blue and he has lost none of his knack for a good quote. His publicist sits in on us but never reins him in. He’s at his unshackled best, taking time out from supervising the construction of his \$32 million museum extension, Pharos, named after the Greek word for lighthouse.

## **... and a museum extension**

At the time of our interview, two weeks before Christmas, Pharos is heaving with builders in hard-hats. In a week’s time, the glass-enclosed, light-filled space, which hovers over the Derwent River like a slope-roofed chalet, or a giant piece of Toblerone, will be buzzing with art world types in the required “white” dress code, having paid \$500 each to be entertained in over-the-top Walsh style, dining on tiny squares of sashimi tuna topped with gold leaf and presented on small mirrored platters worn like oversized rings. A few lucky locals will also indulge. Walsh had 1200 chocolate bars – dubbed “Walshie bars” – dropped into the letterboxes of neighbouring homes; 40 of the bars contained a “golden ticket” to one of five glamorous opening nights. Walsh’s enclosed letter stated: “I’d like to thank you for your patience while we build Pharos. And actually, I’d like to thank you for putting up with our shenanigans generally. Not everybody likes MONA. But in my experience, everybody likes chocolate.”

Yet there’s a lot to like. Since MONA opened in 2011, tourist numbers to Tasmania have climbed 44 per cent. Almost 1.3 million people visited in 2017, up 8 per cent on the previous year. MONA Foma, the museum’s summer music and art festival, attracts more than 10,000 visitors over three days and this year expanded into Launceston, with a 6000-strong block party and three sold-out performances by Gotye. (In a show of team spirit, Premier Hodgman played guitar on stage with the festival’s creative director Brian Ritchie, bassist for the Violent Femmes, and hinted at extra funding to move the festival permanently to Launceston in 2019).

International tourism is growing at a faster rate in Tasmania than any other Australian state and Walsh attributes the growth entirely to MONA. “I believe it is entirely but it might be an overstatement. That doesn’t mean that we had a plan; that was a complete fluke,” he says. “I didn’t give a fuck about tourism. There were already 800,000 people coming to Tasmania. It wasn’t like I didn’t have a ready-made market.” Contrariness is Walsh’s default position. It’s rare for him to answer a question without firstly picking apart its supposed flaws and biases, which makes interviewing him often exasperating – and always enlivening.

One of MONA's most important functions, Walsh says, is providing jobs for artists. MONA's wage bill (for the museum and associated businesses and festivals) is \$17 million, and that in itself is creating social change, he says. "There are hundreds of people who get to spend money who otherwise might not. All of that \$17 million is extracted outside Tasmania and ends up in Tasmania, because the money we make from Tasmanians is negligible, we don't charge them and they don't particularly come to the restaurants."

## MONA and money

For all the acclaim and economists studying the "MONA effect", there's one nagging problem to solve. MONA is deeply unprofitable. "It's losing more than ever, probably," Walsh readily acknowledges. "If I died now, it would take some clever decision from Zeljko to keep the funding in place, but it would be possible," he says, referring to his long-time gambling mate Zeljko Ranogajec, a major funder of MONA. "But I don't want it to be possible, I want it to be certain."



A performance piece titled 150.Action and involving a slaughtered bull, on the bill of Dark Mofo 2017, appalled animal rights activists. **Dark Mofo/Lusy Productions, 2017**

The museum, and its associated festivals and community programs, loses about \$10 million to \$15 million a year, and its lifeline is gambling money. It's funded, essentially, by the millions Walsh reaps each year as part of a mathematically gifted syndicate that uses a form of saturation gambling on selected sports to maximise its chances of winning.

Walsh started charging an entry fee to non-Tasmanians in 2011 in an effort to cover some of MONA's cost, but the museum is still haemorrhaging. Walsh's aim is to make it self-sufficient with revenue from his new hotel and casino, with enough left over for future expansion and art purchases. Whereas once he wasn't that



concerned about what would happen to MONA after he died, these days the museum's future is front of mind.

"I care more about the legacy of MONA than I did because there's a level of community ownership that I didn't anticipate, and also I've got another small kid," he says, referring to two-year-old daughter Sunday with his wife, American artist and curator Kirsha Kaechele. Walsh, who is 56, also has two other daughters, Grace, 13, and Jamie-Lee, 27, from previous relationships.

"It makes you think about what happens when the lights are extinguished. When they're extinguished within me perhaps now I don't want them to be extinguished inside MONA. Originally, it might have been a 10-year whim."

## Safe and sorry

Walsh is also motivated by the fear of his museum sliding towards the safe and conventional as it grows. "I am concerned about the push to the centre," he says. "Within our enterprise I think that is a huge issue, and there are a lot of smart people that would immediately push us to the centre if they were allowed."

MONA's research curator and senior writer Elizabeth Pearce is one person who keeps the place honest, funny and slightly mad. "She is the entity that at least intellectually holds that focus most closely," Walsh says. "She resists MONA turning into the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art]. I certainly don't want to be the MCA or the Tate Modern."

And what about Carmichael? "Leigh does resist. He's an interesting character at times. He's abrasive, he's extremely creative, he will take a lot of the burden off me as a target," Walsh replies.

It's a cryptic description from a man known for his candour, and perhaps it's reflective of the new working relationship the two are still ironing out. Walsh says that Carmichael was "grumpy as all shit" when he was carved off from MONA. "It took him about two days to reconcile. The way you put it is exactly the way he interpreted it, that he was being pushed out of it. And maybe it was," he says, letting the ambiguity hang.



The pagan-like festival celebrates and probes Hobart's chill and gloom. **Dark Mofo/Lusy Productions, 2017**

At the end of our interview Walsh indulges me in a sneak preview of his new Pharos wing. He pulls off his sneakers without undoing the shoelaces and leads me down a long, fluorescent tunnel, one of four large-scale works by American artist James Turrell, known for his hypnotic light installations. The tunnel leads into Pharos' main room, a glasshouse suspended over the river, water lapping around it – it's rivetingly beautiful – as light and exposed to the elements as the main MONA building is dark and concealed.

"I'm pretty excited about Pharos," Walsh says. "The joke is all the works deal with light in some way and light is the most transient phenomenon we know of, in the fastest, upper speed limit of the universe. But I see permanence in it."

## Dangerous ideas welcomed

Last October the board of the Australia Council triggered an art establishment tantrum when it announced that Australia's representative artist at the Venice Biennale would no longer be chosen by a panel of elites, but rather, from an open pool of artists' submissions. The idea didn't originate from Carmichael, who joined the board in 2016, but he certainly backed it.

He has his eye on another area that he feels needs shaking up: the funding of major performing arts companies. Twenty-eight companies, including Opera Australia, state symphony orchestras and state theatre companies account for roughly 60 per cent of Australia Council funds, he says, and while he doesn't accept all the criticism that is made of that arrangement, or of these companies, he does believe it is the "next big piece of work" that needs to happen. "The Venice changes are minor in comparison," he says.

For now, though, his focus is on Dark Mofo. The Sydney Opera House's 2016 decision to axe its own Festival of Dangerous Ideas has allowed Carmichael to leap into the breach. (The Festival of Dangerous Ideas also had its share of controversies. In 2014 a talk titled *Honour Killings are Morally Justified*, by Muslim activist Uthman Badar, was cancelled following public outrage. As Sydney moves on from dangerous ideas, Hobart is just getting started.)

"We feel there's a space in Australia to be able to have discussions about really confronting philosophies and ideas, and we're going to step in," Carmichael says. "We're not doing shock for shock's sake. We do believe in what we are doing. This isn't about trying to create a nightmare for ourselves."

## Overtly political questions

Overseeing the DDT program is Laura Kroetsch, who was born and raised in upstate New York. Kroetsch, the outgoing director of Adelaide Writers' Week, joined Dark Mofo in late 2017, seeing it as an opportunity to ask more overtly political questions. "The ambition is not just to preach to the converted, but to have a conversation between people who don't necessarily agree with each other," she says of DDT.

As well as asking who has the right to kill, DDT will look at the rise of the "Alt-Right" and "Alt-Left" and the use of violence by both. Discussions will surround home-grown terrorism, the Islamic State, the psychology of the soldier, the hyper-masculinity of war and its consequences for women and children. "It's interesting that the left has decided that violence is the way to answer the extreme right, and it's interesting that neo-fascists are moving into the mainstream, even in Australia," Kroetsch says.



Ticket sales for Dark MOFO jumped by almost 60 per cent to \$2.1 million in 2017. Attendance figures soared from 300,000 to almost 450,000. **Dark Mofo/Lusy Productions, 2017**

On another, lighter note, Carmichael wants to show what can be done to revitalise Hobart's city centre with a huge all-night "block party" that is also new to this year's festival. Called "Night Mass" it will take place for five nights of music and performance, across a dozen bars and a dozen more venues. It promises to be a crowded, all-in event, much like the enormous Winter Feast, a Dark Mofo staple with its communal tables at Princes Wharf where people can sup on artisanal ciders and beers and dine on Tasmanian oysters, cheese, salmon and more, or the collective skinny dip in the freezing waters of the Derwent.

For a festival that flirts with death, Dark Mofo is deeply life-affirming, luring people out to revel in the cold, under the stars, away from their screens, stirring their senses, laying bare the sacred in the everyday. Camus would approve. Night Mass will be held on the block on which the Odeon theatre sits, and where Carmichael would like to see a cultural precinct developed.

Which brings us back to those competing visions. While Walsh does not want to see a 200-metre tower in the CBD, he is being paid to consult on the proposed Riverlee development for a year, "scheming and seeing if we can come up with anything that's culturally sensitive, but also, from Riverlee's point of view, viable," as he puts it. Carmichael will of course, defer to the boss.

"We've had a fairly difficult few years, and I would like to see us working together again rather [than] in competition," Carmichael says. "It's not good for me if I'm in competition with David, because I'd lose. There is no competition. My projects are better for having him in on them and across them. And he's proved with Pharos that he doesn't need me."



*Dark Mofo runs from 8 June to 24 June.*

*The Arts issue of AFR Magazine [<http://www.afr.com/afr-magazine>] is out on Friday, February 23 inside *The Australian Financial Review* [<http://www.afr.com/>].*

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A mass nude swim in the Derwent River is one of the festival events. **Dark Mofo/Lusy Productions, 2017**



An artist's impression of the five-star hotel David Walsh is building over the Derwent River.





External view of Pharos, the new wing Walsh spent \$32 million constructing. **MONA**