

Dark Mofo 2016 (MONA)

The streets of Hobart are especially cold and quiet on the longest night of the year. Those out and about are simply commuting from place to place, wrapped in scarves, hats, and jackets. Some head towards St David's Cathedral to attend *Heart of Darkness*, the penultimate performance of Tasmania's annual winter solstice festival, [Dark Mofo](#) – possibly also for sanctuary from the Antarctic winds.

David Walsh takes a seat on a heated pew two rows from the front. People behind him murmur, pointing discretely towards him. Walsh wears his trademark rectangular black-rimmed glasses and a suit jacket as speckled-grey as his stubble and wavy locks. This is a somewhat dour look for the enigmatic owner of Hobart's [Museum of New and Old Art \(MONA\)](#), who was spotted a few days prior, strolling by the cellar door of his Moorilla winery in a fine suit of fluorescent orange.

The professional gambler-turned-cultural philanthropist's emergent festival of darkness, sound, fire, blood-red lighting, and performance art is every bit as eccentric as the man who conceived it, and more. This year's program (which ran from 8 to 21 June, the latter half of which Arts Update attended) comprised eleven exhibitions and 400 avant-garde performance artists and musical acts from around the world. They formed a 'stormy' celebration of 'turmoil', 'emotional upheaval', and 'rebirth', as described by the festival's artistic director, Leigh Carmichael.



Photograph by Rémi Chauvin, image courtesy of MONA

One of the Dark Mofo's major musical revelations was the Denver-based punk-percussionists, Itchy-O, who were ubiquitous across the festival, lending their crashing drumbeats and electronica to numerous gigs and marquee events, such as the paganistic annual burning of the 'Ogoh-ogoh' effigy, and the late-night dance party *Blacklist*, held at Hobart City Hall. Described as a 'guerrilla' marching band (one that performs impromptu gigs in public spaces, and 'crashes' other shows), with North African, Middle-Eastern, and Brazilian undertones to their music, Itchy-O began with bandleader Scott Banning, who produced their first recording *Pulmonic* in 2005 using as track layers irregular animal heartbeat sounds sourced from a veterinarian school. From these humble, curious beginnings, the outfit grew to a thirty-piece troupe, which now includes a battalion of taiko drummers, guitarists, vocalists, synthesiser and Theremin players, and provocateurs, who roved and weaved their way among the *Blacklist* revelers, dressed in a mixture of mariachi outfits, black motorcycle helmets lined with LED lights, lucha libre masks, sombreros, and stylised burqas – an eclectic mix, to say the least, but one that invoked a thunderous, carnivalesque atmosphere in the small venue.



Itchy-O (photograph by Rémi Chauvin, image courtesy of MONA)

The culinary heart of the festival, *Winter Feast*, was situated between the docks and sandstone buildings that overlook the famed Salamanca Market strip, its entrance marked with a large neon sign bearing the festival's name, and flanked by flame-belching pyramids – a fiery welcome to the smorgasbord within. Despite the inevitable overcrowding of indoor venues following inclement weather, the nearly seventy stallholders gleefully plied their wares to the hungry, slow-moving throng, who agonised over whether or not to select the wallaby burrito, the stuffed and crumbed olives, or the slow roasted pork buns from Matthew Evans's (of the television series *Gourmet Farmer*) Fat Pig Farm, and wash it all down with a hot chocolate coconut rum, mulled wine, or warm spiced cider. Outside, under hundreds of red light bulbs strung across tree branches, small groups huddled around open braziers, warming their hands and discussing the events of the day with their fellow heat-seekers, while barbecues crackled and smoked and guitarists gently strummed away, their music only interrupted by the occasional burst of fireworks. But for the darkness and bitter cold, one could call this scene idyllic.

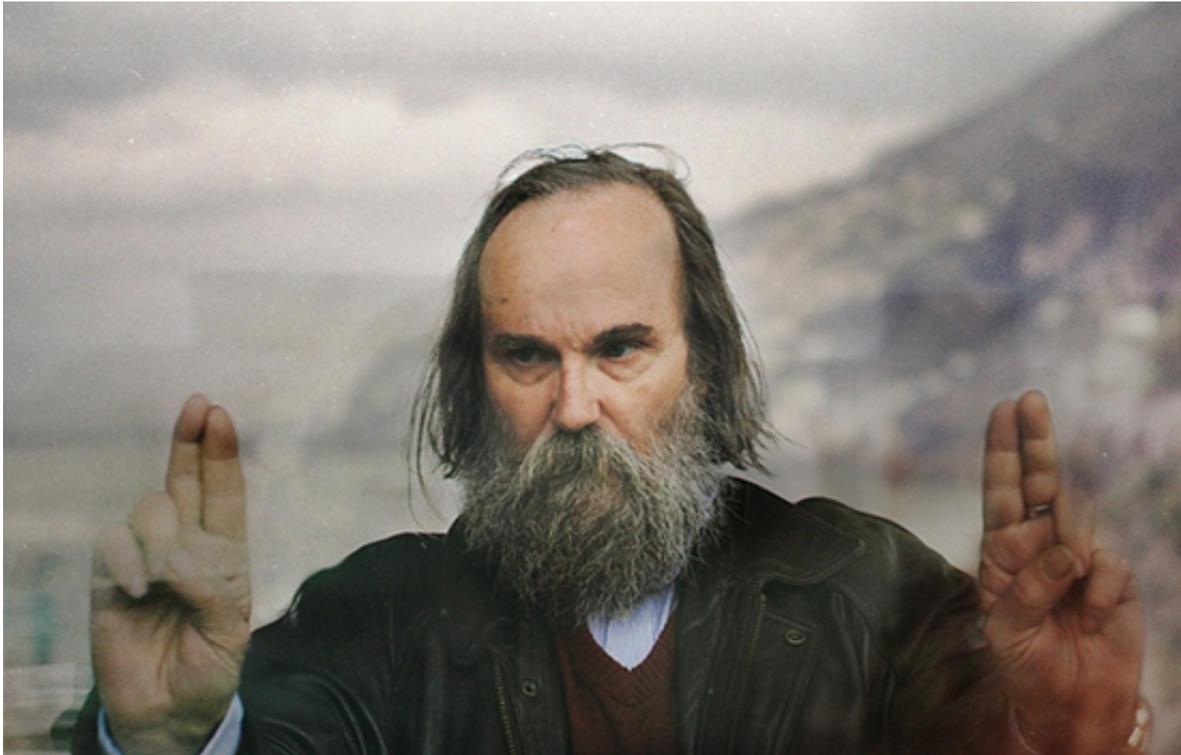


Winter Feast (photograph by Rémi Chauvin, image courtesy of MONA)

When the Ukrainian-Canadian pianist and composer Lubomyr Melnyk spoke to an enraptured audience at Hobart's Federation Concert Hall before his recital, his voice was surprisingly soft and youthful, tinged with an almost mournful passion for his craft, of which he was the pioneer and is quite possibly its last master practitioner. His 'continuous music' technique involves playing rapid, complex arrangements, often while holding down the sustain pedal to produce overtones. The result is a cascade of bittersweet melodies, at times chaotic and at times meditative, but played with tremendous heart and technical aplomb – he is also the fastest pianist in the world, playing at an average of 19.5 notes per second. '[Butterfly](#)', one of three compositions he performed, grew from an improvisational piece produced while entertaining guests and their children on a grand piano at the Hotel Barcello in Cologne. Before the piece, Melnyk spoke enthusiastically about the purity of sound that vinyl records produce; he fears that much of his work has been watered down due to its transfer to digital formats. 'You see, I'm a bit of a hippie,' he confesses with a shrug, and then jokingly proceeds to list various contributions to the world made by 'his kind'.

'Butterfly' can be interpreted as an allegory for the turbulence of youth,

beginning with innocence and wonderment, before becoming more dense and tempestuous. Overall, it is a supreme composition, imbued with Melnyk's grandfatherly warmth and humour. As Ernest Hemingway wrote, 'There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.' One gets the sense that Melnyk's apparently effortless solos are purely instinctive expressions, and not due to decades of meticulous practice. He approaches the microphone as the applause dies down: 'Hippies invented granola too, you know.'



Pianist and composer, Lubomyr Melnyk (image courtesy of Moorilla Gallery)

The derelict Royal Derwent Hospital (formerly known as the New Norfolk Insane Asylum) lies half an hour north-west of Hobart in the picturesque township of New Norfolk. It closed in 2000 and has not been sanitised since. Entry to the site for the duration of Dark Mofu carried the following disclaimer: 'both the exhibition and performance contain disturbing content and themes, and may not be suitable for children. You must wear closed-toe shoes.' The reason for this became apparent soon after entering. The entire complex was littered with mirrors of all shapes and sizes, some whole, some simply shards, some not mirrors at all (CDs, clocks, silverware). They rested on windowsills, hung from trees, and were spread

out haphazardly on the ground. This was the site of Mike Parr's seventy-two hour art piece, *Asylum*, which was performed as a cathartic tribute to his deceased brother, Tim, who suffered from mental illness throughout most of his life. Entry to the performance, which ran from 9 to 12 June, was by mirror only, and visitors were asked to place them anywhere they desired within the grounds. Parr's remit was to produce art within the claustrophobic confines of the asylum, inhabiting the role of a patient for the duration of the performance.



Australian performance artist, Mike Parr (photograph by Rémi Chauvin, image courtesy MONA)

Now in his seventies, Parr is renowned for extreme self-mutilation and endurance art pieces, including *A Stitch in Time* (2003), where he sewed his face shut in a demonstration of solidarity with asylum seekers. Footage of the disconcerting piece played on screens installed throughout the main building, and the sounds of him retching and grunting echoed down the dark, grey halls, where visitors silently navigated through animal droppings, broken furniture, and glass, peering into dank cells with a slight look of bewilderment or disgust on their faces. In the capacious prison yard, now overgrown with grass and weeds, and enclosed by ten-metre-high concrete walls, a distorted recording of 'Für Elise' crackled over the

PA system, playing in a loop. *Asylum* was a nauseating experience, but one that was neither gratuitous nor gimmicky. Its organisers successfully captured the overwhelming sense of dread and sadness that pervades derelict sites with deeply troubled histories; they combined it with Parr's poignant homage to his brother to create a nightmarish, full-scale diorama.



Mike Parr's *Asylum*, entry by mirror only (photograph by Rémi Chauvin, image courtesy MONA)

Dark Mofo's 'interactive public art playground', *Dark Park*, featured a series of exhibits and installations – many of which were interactive – inside industrial warehouses located in Hobart's wharf district. Highlights included Grupo EmpreZa's *Bodystorm*, which featured a number of performance artists; some dressed in office attire, some naked, writhing in brick dust to the constant sound of a mortar and pestle, the effect of which invoked a frighteningly plausible post-apocalyptic scene, and Patrick Hall's eerie installation *The Cloud*, a ceiling of embedded bottles imprinted with faces that 'wept' a thin film of water onto the floor below.



Grupo EmpreZa's *Bodystorm* (photograph by Rémi Chauvin, image courtesy MONA)

On *Dark Park*'s final night, *The Purging*, a Balinese-inspired ritualistic burning of the spectacular papier-mâché sea dragon 'Ogoh-ogoh', took place, where visitors were encouraged to place their fears and regrets inside the dragon on pieces of paper, in the hopes that they would be expunged in the resulting bonfire. Indonesian dancer I Ketut Rina performed the ritual's exorcism dance, and the haunting, frenetic music that accompanied it was supplied by a local choir and the ever-present Itchy-O.



Indonesian dancer, I Ketut Rina performs at *The Purging* (photograph by Rémi Chauvin, image courtesy MONA)



The 'Ogoh-ogoh' in flames at *The Purging* (photograph by Rémi Chauvin, image courtesy MONA)

The longest and darkest night of the year, and the final night of Dark Mofo, begins with *Heart of Darkness* at St David's Cathedral, a night of soaring

strings and song, including John Tavener's *Akhmatova Songs for Soprano and Cello*, Peter Sculthorpe's *String Quartet No.12 (from Ubirr)*, and Arnold Schoenberg's *String Quartet No. 2, Op.10*. Soprano Allison Bell describes the three dark pieces as 'turning points to where the light begins', and invites listeners to 'think on the deepest fears and thoughts that haunt us during our darkest hours'. Tavener's composition is drawn from the poems of Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, whose work addresses themes of 'existence, persecution, and oblivion'.



St. David's Cathedral, Hobart, Tasmania (photograph by Dilan Gunawardana)

As the Akhmatova song 'Boris Pasternak' concludes, one can only speculate about the thoughts of David Walsh seated in a cathedral that shares his name. In 2007 he described himself as an inconsistent, contradictory 'mess of little boys fighting in a sack'. He is now Tasmania's cultural doyen, the owner of the 'world's best art gallery' (according to *Lonely Planet* in 2015), and an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) to boot. But he is not entirely satisfied. In the festival's program notes, he muses on the potential Faustian pact he has forged with the state government of Tasmania, which has provided \$2.1 million in funding this year for the festival. Despite Walsh's reservations about censorship and meddling, the state has left the

festival to its own devices and has supported a thought-provoking event of significant cultural and economic value to the place once quaintly known as the 'Apple Isle'.

Endowed with some eternal childhood,
He shone open-handed, clean of sight.
The whole earth was his heritage
And this with all he shared.

'Boris Pasternak' by Anna Akhmatova

Dark Mofo ran from 10-21 June, 2016.

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