Engaging Publics/Public Engagement – Amy Spiers’ Paper

Confounding and destabilising a town: Christoph Büchel’s Southdale at MONA

Coinciding with the 2014 Dark Mofo festival in Hobart, the Southdale exhibition opened with little announcement and much secrecy at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) on June 16, 2014.1 Following its appearance, visitors to the museum were progressively confounded and disoriented as MONA had mysteriously been made over to resemble a shopping mall. During the four month long exhibition,2 Southdale continued to confuse and agitate, with multiple elements of the exhibition attracting controversy.

I am an artist engaged in research into socially-engaged art’s ability to destabilise and agitate.3 Informed by philosopher Jacques Rancière’s idea of dissensus – a concept that refers to “a division inserted in ‘common sense’: a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we sense something is given”4 – I am interested in artworks that provoke unexpected questions, unsettle habits of thinking and generate vibrant public debate. For this reason, the Southdale exhibition enthralled and excited me as it had many of the disorienting affects that I seek in art that engages the public. However Southdale has also drawn some strong criticism from a number of people, unconvinced by the work’s unusual tactics.

In this essay, I want to reflect on the response to Southdale and examine what I think the work produced. In the first part of this paper, I will describe the exhibition and my encounter with the work. My aim in this section is to give a sense of the scale and scope of Southdale and the destabilising experience of viewing it. In the second part of this essay, I will discuss some of the controversy the work attracted and offer a reading of Southdale as an example of subversion through the means of overidentification. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek’s concept of overidentification and Rancière’s notion of dissensus, I will explore the strategy of mimicry in Southdale and the discursive public sphere the work generated.

Southdale Shopping Centre, coming soon!

On approaching the museum during the Southdale exhibition, the first indication that MONA had undertaken an unusual transformation was a lightbox sign prominently displaying the Southdale Shopping Centre logo at the museum entrance. In the museum’s forecourt, banners announced that “Southdale” was “Coming soon!” Once inside the gallery, ATMs and advertisements for Hugo Boss, Soda Stream and Estée Lauder adorned MONA’s entrance foyer. At the museum stairs, a lightbox showed a floor map of the gallery-cum-shopping centre and listed the stores and services available on each floor, with familiar brands like Max Brenner, Marks & Spencer and Chanel named alongside toilets, a Victor Gruen Court and a Wailing Wall. The museum’s café seemed to have been turned into an outlet of the Starbucks franchise.

MONA staff report that the alterations were persuasive enough that some museum visitors believed they had inadvertently entered a real shopping centre and asked for directions to the art
museum. Others turned up expectantly with shopping bags ready to purchase luxury goods and order their favourite Starbucks beverage, only to discover it was all a ruse.

To add to the consternation, there was no mention about Southdale on MONA’s website or portable interpretive O device, and the artist responsible was not named anywhere in the exhibition or the museum’s associated marketing material. When questioned about the purpose or intention of Southdale, MONA’s gallery invigilators could offer little information about the artwork as they claimed staff had been deliberately kept in the dark.

There were some mysterious precursors to the exhibition, however, with advertisements appearing in local papers that suggested a new shopping mall called “Southdale” was to be opened at MONA, with luxury brand names attached to the development. This had led locals to wonder if David Walsh, MONA’s eccentric millionaire founder, had sold out to corporate developers.

A puzzle

Jarrod Rawlins, one of MONA’s principal curators of Southdale, has described the work as a puzzle. Indeed when I first encountered Southdale on the 20th of June 2014, a few days after its launch, I had no prior awareness of the work and found myself searching “Southdale” on my phone to get to the bottom of it. All that surfaced was a place-holding website for the new shopping mall.

On the 21st of June, less than a week after the exhibition had opened, an arts journalist writing for The Australian newspaper disclosed some of the work’s secrets, revealing that the creator behind Southdale was provocative Swiss artist Christoph Büchel. The journalist, Matthew Westwood, also uncovered that the name Southdale was taken from the first modern shopping precinct in the US, the design of architect Victor Gruen, whose utopian vision for the shopping mall was that it would function as the ideal community hub for the suburbs. The overarching theme of the exhibition, Westwood surmised after some discussion with David Walsh and MONA’s curators, was utopianism and the single-mindedness that often accompanies the pursuit of an ideal.

Due to the lack of interpretive material offered by MONA, Southdale was a vast, multi-sited installation that encouraged sleuthing and speculation. For example, on my visit I encountered a kit home in MONA’s forecourt. With no didactic panel announcing the building’s purpose, I used my phone to look up a website featured in the promotional video playing inside the house. The URL directed me to an Israeli company that made prefabricated homes. Adjacent was a banner that promoted Poynduk Holiday Villas, a development at Port Davey in Tasmania’s remote South West. Further googling revealed that another kit home had been controversially erected in Bathurst Harbour, near Port Davey in Tasmania’s Southwest National Park, as part of a secret project at MONA.
While Southdale's sheer scale and detail defied conclusive interpretations, it produced many unexpected connections and readings. Surprising linkages between Israel and Tasmania, for instance, continued throughout the exhibition. Inside the museum, MONA’s normally slick and minimal reception and ticketing area seemed overcome with tacky tourist information and promotions. Looking closely it became evident there were posters and pamphlets promoting travel destinations in Tasmania and Israel. In the gift shop, incongruous items such as a wailing wall puzzle and pro-Palestinian postcards were displayed alongside cheap souvenir didgeridoos and golliwog dolls.

To my mind, some awareness of current politics, both local and global, could assist viewers to surmise a subtle critical commentary encompassing Southdale. The work, playing on enjoyable and even humourous slippages between real and fake elements, confronted viewers with many of the contradictions and conflicts of the recent past in unusual assemblages.

In the museum foyer, for example, I recognised the controversial advertisement for SodaStream featuring Scarlett Johansson. Earlier in the year Johansson stepped down from her role as Ambassador for the humanitarian organisation Oxfam over her promotion of SodaStream, which until recently, operated out of an Israeli settlement in the West Bank. Nearby a poster promoted the Mount Wellington Cable Car, a proposed development that those with local knowledge would recognise as a highly charged issue in Hobart.

While the SodaStream advertisement was taken from reality, the cable car poster appeared to be a satirical fabrication. The Mount Wellington Cable Car logo and the words “environmental. economic. socially inclusive. experience.” were superimposed over John Glover’s painting, Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point. Dating from 1834, the painting depicts a group of Aboriginal people overlooking Mount Wellington and the early colony of Hobart. The proximity of seemingly unrelated promotions encouraged me to consider Israel’s occupation of Palestine in relation to Tasmania’s violent colonial past and especially what is known as the “Black War” between British settlers and Tasmanian Aboriginals.

In other places the exhibition drew attention to the Australian Government’s current asylum seeker policy. In the entrance foyer a poster, apparently for the Australian Liberal Party, depicted three white sheep kicking a brown sheep off an Australian flag above the words “Improving Security”. By the Starbucks café, a playpen encouraged children visiting the museum to sit and draw, with previous creations displayed on a nearby wall. On closer inspection the pictures depicted a scribbled G4S Security company logo, a scrawled “No Way” and sad children behind bars. This clearly referenced the drawings created by asylum seeker children detained in Australia’s offshore detention centres.

The basement of MONA was made over into a fully functioning community centre where I encountered groups of people weaving rope baskets. A whiteboard announced upcoming events
that included a drumming workshop and a "Community Health Knitting Group". On pinboards and wall mounted holders, numerous flyers promoted local community services and campaigns. One poster urged people to "Just be fair: celebrate diversity in our community" while another promoted a Tasmanian mountain adventure program for former refugees. Such community minded messages and services mentally jarred after viewing the asylum seeker children drawings upstairs. I was prompted to consider the care afforded to people in our community, which is not extended to those outside of it. Accordingly, a children's play area with a lockable gate in the community centre took on sinister connotations.

Büchel is known for his immersive, total installations that have transformed whole galleries. However, Southdale's transformation of MONA was less absolute and did not come announced, which meant you encountered it repeatedly and unexpectedly at the gallery over time. There was also deliberate confusion over where Southdale began and ended, as the exhibition was not only dispersed throughout the museum but also insinuated itself across multiple sites in and around Hobart, such as the Southdale advertisements in Hobart's local newspaper and the kit home at Bathurst Harbour. This indeterminacy had an uncanny effect, encouraging me to read everything I encountered curiously, closely and critically.

It is unfortunate that much of the criticism of Southdale has fixated on the controversial aspects in isolation from the rest of the exhibition. It was the slippages and confusions across the multiple components of Southdale that produced satisfying subversions and new critical relationships between seemingly disparate elements. Indeed, much more could be said about the viewing experience of Southdale however it is beyond the scope of this paper so I will continue by focusing on the criticism that Southdale has attracted, particularly due to a controversial DNA testing stand in the installation.

Causing offence

Büchel's installation has caused much consternation and even offence. Hobart arts writer Sean Kelly wrote in an Artlink review of Southdale that: "Rarely in Tasmania has any art raised the level of public debate which arose around Büchel's recent installation at MONA". While there was much to cause offence in the exhibition – including framed anti-Semitic cartoons hanging in the MONA café and burnt Bibles and Korans in the museum's fireplace – the element of the exhibition that attracted the most criticism was a stand in the museum foyer that displayed the words "Are you of Aboriginal descent?" offering free DNA testing for aboriginality, sponsored by Roche and deCODE Genetics.

After the stand came to their attention, fierce objections were raised by members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who felt "they had been smacked in the face" and were being "taking the mickey out of". The stand was described as hurtful because it objectified Aboriginal people, and shocking because the community had not been consulted prior to its creation.
The furore led to David Walsh making an out of character public apology on MONA’s blog, and the removal of the stand from the exhibition. It was a highly risky move for MONA, who would be aware that in 2007 Büchel took successful legal action against Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, when they exhibited one of his installations in a form that the artist considered incomplete.

Following on from the DNA stand’s removal, a range of criticisms have been directed at Southdale. From talking to MONA staff and participating in discussions on social media, I surmised that the condemnation has revolved around some central objections:

- Büchel, it is claimed, causes offence for the sake of it, as cheap controversy draws attention to his work and adds to his international reputation as an “edgy” artist.
- As an international artist, unconnected to the context and sensitivities of Hobart, Büchel has been arrogant for thinking he can dabble in local politics that he has little understanding of.
- Büchel is unethical. He did not consult with Aboriginal people prior to making the DNA stand and unthinkingly revisited trauma on vulnerable people.
- If Southdale is a political critique of present society it is too ambiguous and can only be understood by an elite art audience who “get the joke”.
- Büchel refuses to do what should be expected of him as a responsible artist and provide a framework or context for understanding Southdale. By wishing to stay anonymous and providing no statement of his intentions, Büchel has shirked accountability for his work.

As someone who enjoyed Southdale and the critical content of the exhibition, I was disagreed with many of these objections. What was largely absent from the public debates fixated on prescribed ideas of an artist’s responsibilities and accountabilities was any close attention to the work’s unique concept, which involved an impressive level of research into local politics and challenged the usual ways viewers encounter artworks. A simplistic application of ethical criteria all too easily dismisses the subtlety and sophistication of Southdale’s subversions and forecloses consideration of what the work actually produced.

In response to the censure directed at Southdale, I argue that analysing the exhibition as an example of overidentification might serve to open up a more productive, sympathetic reading of the work. In what follows I will describe how Büchel is using a strategy of overidentification, comparing Southdale to other artworks who have employed this tactic, and why the omission of the artist’s identity and critical intentions is part of an attempt to generate a dissensual public sphere.

**Overidentification**
The concept of overidentification has been theorized by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, and can be defined as a strategy that takes the dominant ideology "more seriously than it takes itself". Žižek explains: "sometimes, at least— overidentifying with the explicit power discourse— ignoring this inherent obscene underside and simply taking the power discourse at its (public) word, acting as if it really means what it explicitly says (and promises)— can be the most effective way of disturbing its smooth functioning."

Overidentification is a form of subtle or indirect criticism – what at first appearance seem to be affirmations or identifications with repressive regimes and systems of inequality, are actually aimed at undermining them. Büchel's DNA stand can be seen as an example of such subversive affirmation. The stand amplifies a "real world" process that currently exists to an intolerable extreme, in order for us to consider and re-view the conditions that make it possible.

I have found it instructive to compare the furore surrounding Büchel's DNA stand, with the dissensus generated by German artist Christoph Schlingensief's work Please Love Austria. Please Love Austria was a work staged in the centre of Vienna in 2000. Twelve asylum seekers were placed in a shipping container where for seven days they were under constant video surveillance. The footage was streamed to a live audience over the internet. Over the course of the work, the audience could telephone in, and Big Brother-style, vote off inmates for deportation. Schlingensief advertised the event as an action by the far-right nationalist Freedom Party of Austria, led by Jörg Haider, who had been successful in recent elections using campaigns that employed overtly xenophobic slogans.

Please Love Austria has been celebrated as a successful employment of overidentification. Schlingensief himself claimed he wanted to take seriously Haider's "solutions" to the "foreigner problem". Schlingensief's work, like Büchel's, attracted much consternation because it was unclear who the target of the criticism was. Art historian Claire Bishop, discussing Please Love Austria in her book Artificial Hells, writes:

Although in retrospect [...] it is evident that the work is a critique of xenophobia and its institutions, in Vienna the event [...] was ambiguous enough to receive approval and condemnation from all sides of the political spectrum.

[...]

Schlingensief's project draws attention to the contradictions of political discourse in Austria at that moment. The shocking fact is that Schlingensief's container caused more public agitation and distress than the presence of a real deportation centre a few miles outside Vienna. The disturbing lesson of Please Love Austria is that an artistic representation of detention has more power to attract dissensus than an actual institution of detention.
I would argue that Büchel’s DNA stand produced similar contradictions. Public debate condemned Büchel’s stand as hurtful but did not go on to criticise the actual circumstances that made DNA testing necessary.

**Generating dissensus**

Sean Kelly, writing in *Artlink*, states that one of the successes of Büchel’s stand is that it hit a nerve. It dared to speak of “the elephant in the room in Tasmanian Aboriginal politics – the ongoing dispute about who actually qualifies as Aboriginal and who determines that”.[33] Kelly is referring to a protracted dispute amongst the Tasmanian Aboriginal community over what constitutes Aboriginality. In recent decades, the number of people identifying as Indigenous in Tasmania has soared, leading to conflicts over how Aboriginal descent might be verified.[34] Former president of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, Michael Mansell, has been vocally critical of people who turn to DNA testing to claim distant and tenuous connections to Aboriginal heritage.[35] It is doubtful that DNA testing is a reliable method for determining Aboriginality. Conversely, however, it is difficult to determine connections based on oral history and many Aboriginal descendants practically cannot produce direct documentary evidence of their heritage. More generally it also remains deeply problematic that “proof” should be required to identify as an Indigenous person.[36]

I believe that the very contested and intractable nature of this situation is one issue that Büchel’s DNA stand speaks to. Aboriginal Art Historian, Greg Lehman, is of a similar view. In an informative article for Hobart’s *Mercury* newspaper, Lehman explains that the design for Büchel’s DNA stand was modelled on a Jewish genealogical website. [37] Büchel has substituted “Aboriginal” for “Jewish”, Lehman writes, “to expose common processes at work across the world”.[38] The intended target of criticism, Lehman asserts, was “not the aboriginal community” but these “common processes” that require DNA verification of descent in order to prove a long-standing connection with land. Lehman also notes the stand names the companies Roche and deCODE Genetics, linking the work to debates about “who generates profits from asserting ownership of, and merchandising genetic information”.[39] Lehman suggests that Büchel’s stand “is a reminder of the role the notion of race continues to play” in both twenty-first century Australia and Israel.[40]

**Invisible critique**

In the essay “Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance”, theorists Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse describe the strategy of overidentification as a form of invisible critique that employs “methods of: imitation, simulation, mimicry and camouflage”. Arns and Sasse explain how strategies of overidentification were first developed from the 1960s in socialist Eastern Europe by way of necessity in response to openly repressive totalitarian systems. It is in this context that we can understand why overidentification was designed to be an ambiguous and disarmingly invisible style of subversion.
An example of this radically ambiguous form of overidentification can be found in the work of Laibach, an avant-garde music group from Slovenia and former Yugoslavia, who mimic the visual styles of totalitarian regimes. Laibach have been reproached for espousing both far left and far right political positions, but notoriously refuse to issue any statement declaring where they really stand. This uncertainty regarding their position is what Žižek believes to be the strength of Laibach’s use of overidentification. He writes:

The ultimate expedient of Laibach is their deft manipulation of transferrance: their public (especially intellectuals) is obsessed with the “desire of the Other” – what is Laibach’s actual position, are they truly totalitarians or not? – i.e., they address Laibach with a question and expect from them an answer, failing to notice that Laibach itself does not function as an answer, but as a question. By means of the elusive character of their desire, of the undecidability as to “where they actually stand”, Laibach compels us to take up our position and decide upon our desire.42

In light of this, we might be able to begin to understand Büchel’s attempt to detach his identity from the Southdale exhibition. Büchel did not want his name or artistic intention associated with the exhibition in an attempt to sustain as long as possible a level of radical undecidability and ambiguity at the core of Southdale. Without the reassuring signposts that this is “art”, and indeed “critical art”, the viewer is destabilised and left to decide the purpose of Southdale for themselves. This ambiguity also generates the possibility for multiple interpretations and disensus.

One outcome of this tactic was that David Walsh had to declare his position in relation to the artwork. In the vacuum left by the absent artist, Walsh had to step in and make an apology. The apology was described by reviewer Sean Kelly as an unusual position for a man who has heretofore seemed oblivious to public opinion.43 A journalist described Walsh’s decision to remove the DNA stand as “surprising self-censorship”.44 For anyone who is familiar with MONA’s brand, and its posturing as an institution that seeks to shock and challenge, Walsh’s apology drew an unusually ethical line. Büchel’s strategy succeeded in showing that even MONA has its limits.

**Triggering meaning**

Arns and Sasse have suggested that while overidentification is “possibly the most effective contemporary method of subversion” it is “also the most risky and potentially dangerous tactic as it can easily be misunderstood”.45 Theorist Camilla Reestorff, a Danish academic whose research is focused on the “unruly artist”, has also asserted that the stakes are high for artists employing strategies of overidentification.46 Reestorff observes that “the strategy reproduces inequality, and
if this reproduction is to be justified, it must be embedded in dissensus and be mediatised”. Büchel asserts that “the success of the project depends on its circulation and mediatised afterlife”.

Büchel has made a work that knowingly accounts for the reception of Southdale in the mediatised public sphere – a mediatised work being in Reestorff’s words, one whose “form is adapted to accommodating media logics such as news criteria and circulation”. Zoning in on topical issues and deliberately confounding and provoking people, his work has stimulated vibrant discourse and inspired countless news articles, letters to the editor, radio debates, commentaries on forums, blog posts and Facebook discussions.

Büchel has stated that artworks are “machines that trigger meaning”, asserting that the public’s responses make the artwork. Southdale deliberately unsettles our relationship to uneasy realities that we would prefer to overlook, reframing and reinvigorating intractable questions and contradictions (i.e. Why must people prove Aboriginality? Why is care afforded to vulnerable people in our community, but not the ones offshore? Why does the occupation of Palestine go uncensured and the “Black War” unacknowledged?) through the strategy of overidentification so it is impossible for us not to confront them. In what could be read as a radically democratic gesture, we are also assigned the responsibility to make sense of the material in Southdale and determine our own position. It is through the subsequent debates in the mediatised public sphere that Southdale thus produces its meaning.

Claire Bishop has conceptualised art’s political potential as deriving from its ability to agitate and disrupt, to generate “the destabilising action that produces dissensus about what is sayable and thinkable in the world”. To my mind, Büchel’s Southdale is an exemplary instance of an artwork that intentionally generates disputes over the given: a dissensus over what is thinkable and sayable. It suggests new ways of conceptualising the capacities of socially-engaged art: rather than the artist determining what the social problems are and how they should be addressed in advance, the meaning-making and implications are queried collectively through vibrant public debate.

In what I believe to be the work’s most exciting gesture, it has been left up to us to debate the ultimate objectives and implications of Southdale. This prompts the question: why has debate largely fixated on condemning the artist’s methods and motives rather than addressing the uneasy contradictions that Southdale produces? Perhaps because it is the most resolvable part of the Southdale puzzle to address: to condemn an artist’s approach rather than consider the shortcomings of our society that Büchel’s work urges us to re-examine.

Amy Spiers, 2014.

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5 As part of my research for this article I discussed the exhibition with a number of MONA’s investigating staff who have requested not to be named. On 25 August 2014, I also interviewed one of MONA’s principal curators of Southdale, Jarrod Rawlins.


11 Westwood, “David Walsh at MONA: the god of mall things”.

12 Ibid.


17 A recent article by Jeff Sparrow actually makes compelling connections between the Israeli occupation of Palestine and Tasmania’s Black War, saying both share a settler colonialism that is dependent on denying the legitimacy of the native population. See Jeff Sparrow, “When Settler’s Dream”, Jacobin Online (website), 9 August 2014, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/09/when-settlers-dream/.


19 It is likely numerous people encountered aspects of Southdale in and around Hobart without realising it. I recall that on my arrival to Hobart Airport for Dark Mofo, I noticed a cast iron seal promoting seal sightings inexplicably on the airport luggage conveyor that on reflection was quite probably connected to the tourist promotions in MONA’s foyer. Another Dark Mofo attendee noticed the seal too, see Nick Finch, “Graveyard Train’s guide to creepy Hobart”, Faster Louder, 4 June 2014.
During our interview, Rawlins also mentioned that the Australian Government's "No Way You Will Not Make Australia Home" campaign videos played on monitors on MONA's passenger ferry. Rawlins also described many parts of Southdale as "invisible'.

In reference to theseStand offerin for free DNA testing for Aboriginality included in Southdale with little reference to the restoration of the exhibition. See "MONA removes Aboriginal DNA test exhibit from art installation", *ABC News* Australia, last updated 25 June 2014.

Kelly, "Christoph Bükel: Southdale/C-MONA".


In reference to the avant-garde music group Laibach, Žižek has described the strategy of overidentification in the documentary film, *Predictions of Fire*: "The only way to be really subversive is not to develop critical potentials and ironic distance but precisely to take the system more seriously than it takes itself." Slavoj Žižek in *Predictions of Fire*, documentary film, directed by Michael Bensen, Kinetikon Pictures, 1996.


Arns and Sasse, "Subversive Affirmation", 453.


Kelly, "Christoph Büchel: Southdale/C-MONA".


In a radio interview Michael Mansell stated "It's a question of how much sympathy you can give for these 30 people who are trying to use some laboratory test to show they've got some distant connection with Aborigines and then on the basis of that they would then seek to impose themselves on Aboriginal people". Michael Mansell in "Tasmanian DNA tests halted", transcript of *The World Today* ABC Radio National, 3 September 2002, [www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/stories/s666117.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/stories/s666117.htm).


Lehman, "Sunday Soapbox: Artwork sparks heartache".

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Arns and Sasse, "Subversive Affirmation", 445.


Kelly, "Christoph Bükel: Southdale/C-MONA".

45 Arns and Sasse, “Subversive Affirmation”, 455.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Büchel quoted in Lehman, “Sunday Soapbox: Artwork sparks heartache”.
51 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 36.