The Making of MONA

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Extract

Just before Christmas 2010, I received a very large square black envelope. The word MONANISM stood out on it in black, and on the bottom left-hand side were two small symbols: a multiplication sign and an addition sign. Underneath those, in a tiny font, were the words MUSEUM OF OLD AND NEW ART.

Inside was a set of documents, the most eye-catching of which was a beautiful black-and-white photograph of an artwork – a large white neon multiplication and addition sign on floor stands, the cabling trailing off to their right on a polished floor in which the lit symbols were reflected. I couldn’t make out the space they were in very well, save that it was a large area one would instantly guess to be an empty museum – or was it a stage? On another card, there was a handwritten invitation to an opening reception on Friday, 21 January 2011.

This invitation was my first exposure to the soul of the new museum. It seemed like the most exciting thing to come to Tasmania. No, to come out of Tasmania.

About the only thing anyone knew about MONA back then was that the twin themes of the museum were going to be sex and death, and that the sedate, polite society of Hobart was bracing itself for a scandal.

Had the envelope not indicated that the two crosses were MONA’s logo, everyone would have assumed that the artwork was a centerpiece of the exhibition. I was impressed by the self-confidence, character and singularity of the gesture. It was ballsy and seemed to say, ‘We’re not a museum clone, we’re different – and this is what we’re about’.

The invitation focused on MONA as a concept. But what was the concept? It didn’t seem like sex or death.

And yet it could be. They were the same shape, both crosses, whose symbolic value related to one another simply through rotation (and they do indeed rotate on the MONA website). So this could easily encompass the cycle of life, driven by both sex and death. The relationship between sex/new and death/old is commonly recognised as a cycle by humans everywhere, and its polarities are matched by other cycles: the seasons, the stars, the menstrual cycle and the cycles of plenty and want, pleasure and pain. Spinning out of these is the notion of corporeal existence: that sex and death are embodied experiences and speak about power, emotion, drives and history, all articulated through the human body. Humans procreate and die strangely, violently and grotesquely. For social animals like us, sex and death are transformational: they provide for the orderings of birth, kinship, succession, status and rites of passage. Sex and death are potent, pregnant with implications. And yet for many of us they remain dark, secretive, undisclosed, repressed and anguished.

The cross has mathematical and religious symbolism too, relating to themes such as redemption, increase and multiplication. There’s hardly a more potent symbol of agonising death and rebirth; Western art constantly returns to these subjects, often suggesting how we can recover less repressed and fraught relationships with our own bodies (and lives). While religion has declined significantly in the West, art has become increasingly important as a social and moral barometer. For all its silliness and froth, contemporary art does speak to people about things that matter to them – things
that religion often draws a veil over. MONA was going to display old art as well, in the form of antiquities, and many of these pieces were produced for transformational purposes, both ceremonial and religious, and often referencing the ritual significance of sex and death. They, too, can speak to contemporary people, saying, ‘We lived like this’.

So, we could conclude that a logo of two crosses is referring to universal themes of the human condition: how to live our lives, how to ponder how we live our lives, experiencing turbulent social and technological change and yet also the unchanging life cycle of our bodies and world. Contemporary culture is predicated on change, and a lot of it is distressing; I wondered whether it might be cathartic to be confronted by its representation in art.

MONA is not a museum in the conventional sense. It’s a collection of one individual. Its owner, David Walsh, is personally interested in evolution, and the way that the prominence of sex and death in art suggests that art is implicated in evolutionary processes somehow. When MONA opened, he hadn’t advanced his thoughts much beyond this hypothesis, and in any case, the press were told at the launch that the museum had moved on from the sex and death theme. Some have thought that MONA is essentially a vehicle for Walsh’s naïve beliefs in evolutionary processes: ‘that human beings are simply bodies driven by basic impulses such as the desire for sex and the fear of death’.¹

The truth is, it’s possible to spend a long time at MONA without ever thinking it’s about evolution or picking up on the evolution theme at all. A lot of the art is clearly not related to it, revealing, instead, a collector with eclectic taste, easily distracted by multiple and changing themes – a polymath.

Walsh had come out of voluntary obscurity in 2007: The Age reporter Gabriella Coslovich broke the story. She asked what motivated him, and his answer is revealing: ‘My motives are complex and often internally contradictory. I don’t think I am capable of a consistent picture of myself. I am a mess of little boys fighting in a sack.’²

Walking around MONA, one doesn’t encounter a single voice of authority. In fact, it’s impossible to pick any voice at all if one chooses not to use their portable O tour guide system – and many don’t.

There are no labels anywhere. Even if you do use the O, it avoids suggesting that any of the perspectives it offers are more important than the others, and badges the information from the more conventional art-history authority as ‘artwank’. You can instead listen to the artists talk about their work, or David Walsh explain why he bought a piece or what it means to him, or look at the randomly assigned suggestions for discussion (which may well be different from the suggestions other visitors are given).