

# Memory Palaces

## JOHN KELLY

... I think that most artists are show-offs ... mainly trying to get laid by impressing with their creations. I see this as an evolutionary imperative, like peacocks' feathers attracting mates. I say ironically because it looks to me a lot like I am doing the same thing by building a museum ...'

David Walsh, 2010<sup>1</sup>

IN THE EARLY 1960s Albert Tucker painted *The Gamblers*. It was a stark and vivid image of earth-encrusted, beer-drinking card players, with one of the players holding the Ace of Spades, the card of death. The image became iconic partly because it was used to illustrate the cover of a seminal book of the 1960s, Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country*. Whilst the title of this book came to be used and abused over the next few decades, Tucker's image of the iconic ugly Australian, drinking a beer and playing cards for money, became a counterpoint to Sidney Nolan's far more rebellious and poetic Ned Kelly series of the forties.

In January, my journey to the 'Lucky Country' began at Heathrow Airport, and as the plane climbed I settled into the long flight by reading a book that explained how to memorise a deck of cards using a system of vivid images. Each card is associated with a graphic image: for example, the Ace of Spades becomes the Grim Reaper, and the Queen of clubs is a brothel madam. Using a combination of linking systems, the memorising of a deck of cards becomes possible. If you know what cards have already been played the odds swing back in your favour and the gambling changes from luck to skill. The more vivid the imagery the easier it is to remember, just like in art. The best place to create these images is in a known but imaginary 'memory palace' in which you create scenarios as a cue to recalling. If you do not remember Tucker's *Gamblers* take a look at it in the state memory palace that is the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) in Hobart. It is in the Australian room that flows around the walls, chronologically in clockwork direction, next to a Nolan painting of a tree, just over from Drysdale's abstracted Aboriginal subjects, not far from a Whitely figurative collage, and a ... (you get the picture).

I'm still thinking about these systems at 3.45am whilst sitting at a blackjack table in Hobart's Wrest Point Casino. I have just come from a very real palace and get to the tables late. With my dishevelled look I must resemble one of Tucker's card-carrying gamblers over at the TMAG. I play until the croupier calls time. The casino is closed. I stagger up to bed. I'm the lonely guy, drunk and a loser but I still have the taste of caviar on my tongue and enough



alcohol to transfer my counting system (or lack of it) to sheep. One, two ... Zzzzzz.

I arrived at the tables after the opening of David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art, or MONA as it is known. The connections between the casino and this extraordinary new art palace have become increasingly well known. Walsh himself has talked of his gambling talent which began when his mates asked him 'some questions about the mathematics of gambling'. Dropping out of university Walsh learnt the skills to become what is known as a 'player' and he seems to have been very good at it. From those early days he has developed a business based on sophisticated computerised gambling systems that have enabled him to become extremely wealthy, and from there the funds to build an incredible palace of the mind that is literally carved out of Triassic sandstone. Think '60s Bond films for the interior and the Thunderbird's Island for the exterior - Thunderbird 1 expertly camouflaged by a tennis court at the entrance that may be a work of art or simply a tennis court; the fact, however, it has no net in sight surely gives the game away!

The first artefact Walsh ever bought was a Yoruba palace door from northern Nigeria. His reasons for buying it were purely functional (you were not allowed to take your cash winnings out of South Africa) but one can imagine him metaphorically stepping through this palace door and into his collecting future on a journey that would eventually lead to Nonda Katsalidis, the architect who has designed this most impressive of buildings to house the collection. It incorporates the original modernist house of Roy Grounds as its gateway. You enter the mini-palace and then before you know it you are down the rabbit hole. The spiral staircase leads to a vast cave that has been gouged out of the earth as evidenced by the swirling scratches across the beautiful sedimentary layers pinned with massive bolts. It is a wonderful cathedral of rock that is as grand and impressive as any other statement in the museum. One could imagine Bruce Wayne living here, and the bat-mobile is present in the form of Erwin Wurm's bulbous red Porsche (*Fat Car*, 2006) in the gallery upstairs.

Walsh's eye and mind are eclectic and acute but he admits that he has not yet developed a collecting strategy for

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P14: Stephen J Shanabrook, *On the Road to Heaven The Highway to Hell* (detail), 2008, 'remnants' of the suicide bomber cast in dark chocolate, 74 x 30.5 x 89cm.

THIS PAGE: 1/ Portrait gallery, installation view, Museum of Old and New Art.  
 2/ Callum Morton, *Babylonia* (detail of entrance), 2005, wood, polystyrene, epoxy resin, acrylic paint, light, carpet, mirror and sound, 320 x 1300 x 750cm.  
 All images this article courtesy the artists and the Museum of Old and New Art; all photographs by Leigh Carmichael.

his museum. Rather than being detrimental this leads to fission, and the energy release is impressive. You only begin to appreciate how right he has it when you think of how terribly wrong he could have got it – maybe rich kitsch (think Las Vegas) or dry academic. Either would have been a tragedy. Instead he gives us a physical experience that is the equivalent of channel surfing, with Walsh holding the remote. From mummies to shit machines, from Greek coins to disembowelled chocolate suicide bombers to a massive Nolan work that sweeps us through his memory palace that for Walsh must bring back vivid encounters and conversations with artists from all over the world – including negotiating the rest of Christian Boltanski's life!

The unexpected juxtapositions tell us that this memory palace is the antithesis of conformity. Walsh is not preaching a doctrinaire historical approach to art, instead he is asking us to revel in the diversity of creativity that is life itself whether contemporary or not. There is no God delusion here nor are there labels in his museum. Instead you are given a hand-held device that is mathematically driven to inform you via GPS as to where you are and what you are looking at. It is the way of the future ... No, what am I thinking? It is the here and now. Labelling is dead! I should fess up my corruption for Walsh once asked me to paint him some works for his beer label, Moo Brew. At first he wanted my 'Dobell's Cows' work and I metaphorically told him to fuck off. We talked some more and he quickly understood my Australia Council 'Branding the Arts' work in a way that not many others have before or since, and then commissioned me to do a six-pack. It was the culmination of that project where a small state grant turned into a winning pot. My gamble paid off and I'm the only artist at MONA still with a label.

I miss my 12.45am ferry back to Hobart and I am now stuck in the gin palace that allows me to drink beer and



eat caviar in an environment that, like a casino, has no windows and no clocks but where time moves from ancient Egypt to the present. The food is sumptuous – sashimi, more caviar and game terrine all washed down with vodka, wine and beer amongst the most important museum people, commercial dealers and arts bureaucrats in Australia. Walsh has dropped his lawless MONA on top of their cultural heads and then invited them over for a drink, and there will be a hangover. For the art establishment will struggle to compete with something so free and anarchic as MONA. Our state galleries and museums are built on 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial and pedagogical foundations with their international wings creating cultural apartheid systems, segregating artists by race and placed in a linear timeframe. If they insist on this chronological and racial cataloguing then surely they can now just do it online in a digitised virtual palace, and allow the real palaces to become conversations across time and between peoples who interact without boundaries. After all that might be a more accurate reflection of Australian culture – MONA has shown how it can be done. Most of the gathered establishment looked like they were from another era as they exited the rabbit hole and headed back to their comfortable culture-state.<sup>2</sup>

Greg Taylor is an artist who has never conformed to the memory palaces of the state. Taylor was chucked out of art college in Melbourne, is not represented in any state or regional gallery, has never received an Arts Council grant and has no representation in the commercial gallery scene yet at MONA he outshines his brethren that includes Damian Hirst and the Chapman Brothers amongst others.

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One of his works is titled *Cunts and other conversations* (2008-9). If it was all a ploy to get laid then casting 150 vaginas from life may have been an effective one but the result is actually a beautiful work with a strong link back to the French artist Gustave Courbet who used the same subject matter in his painting *The Origin of the World* (1866).

Taylor's other work in the collection is *My Beautiful Chair*. This is an installation of a laptop, a rug, a couch, a lamp and a table that looks simply domestic, that is until you realise the box on the table is a real DIY suicide machine (apparently a prototype for those now used in Switzerland). Sit down, relax and the computer takes you through the steps to end your life. My stomach is unsettled when I do, like waiting for a roller coaster to take off and at the end of it I am dead. It really does take you to another place and offended somebody to the point that the day the museum opened they tried to damage it. If Taylor had been in London for the past twenty years he might have been a very famous YBA. Instead he has spent that time being ignored and isolated by our cultural elite to the point he has created a suicide installation. Who could blame him?

Just as the Guggenheims and Henry Tate changed the face of museum culture in America and Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Walsh is on his way to doing likewise here. His MONA museum is first past the postcolonial in Australia. Gone is the cultural cringe, gone is the fawning to governments for funding, gone is the political correctness and international stylistic consistencies. There is no curatorial team creating an agenda that takes them to their next overseas job. Instead we have a museum channel surfing across history. Walsh's daring is the equivalent of a Ned Kelly bank raid, and he is sharing the takings with the entire town of Hobart if not Australia. His museum is a contemporary physical manifestation of Ned's Jerilderie Letter. It is exciting, beautiful, mischievous, upsetting, joyful and challenging, and heralds a new era in Australian culture. We are very lucky to have this mind amongst us, very lucky indeed. 🐦



1. Taken from an interview Walsh sent to the author.
2. See Guy Rundle's recent essay, 'Culturestate', in *Meanjin*, Vol. 69, No. 2, June 2010. Rundle's essay contends: 'Today, what confronts the questing artist is not the indifference of society and the state, but its embrace, and the requirements associated with it. The process of making art now brings with it induction into the business of grant applications, job applications, CV composition and folio preparation.'

In 2005, Moo Brew, which is owned by David Walsh, commissioned the author to complete six paintings for the beer label. John Kelly flew to Hobart from London at his own expense. He stayed at the Wrest Point Casino at his own expense and any losses incurred at the gaming tables were his own.

**John Kelly** is an Australian, British and Irish artist who lives in Cork, Ireland. [www.johnkellyartist.com](http://www.johnkellyartist.com)

Greg Taylor, (left) *My Beautiful Chair*, and (right) *Cunts and other conversations* (detail), (2008-9), a work comprising '150 life-size porcelain portrait sculptures of women's cunts'. The centre of this installation shot opens into Wilfredo Prieto's *Untitled* (White Library), (2004 - 2006).

Images courtesy the artists and the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania. Photographs by Leigh Carmichael.

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# The MONA Manifesto

SARAH SCOTT

THE RECENTLY OPENED Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) – located in the Hobart suburb of Berridale, is the manifesto of David Walsh, the owner and driving force behind its creation. MONA declares to the world that art should be accessible to everyone and should not be limited to an elite. The museum also highlights Tasmania as a ‘destination’, complete with spectacular scenery, luxury accommodation and a vibrant and diverse arts community. MONA, then, is a symbol of the extraordinary transitions that Tasmania has undergone over the last twenty-five years.

When I was growing up in Hobart, the island was generally perceived as insular, isolated, inbred and freezing. My art school class of the early nineties could only occasionally afford the cost of going to the ‘mainland’ where, on trips organised by the school, we would self-consciously visit galleries in Melbourne in order to try and get an idea of what was happening in ‘the art world’ beyond our island. Expatriate and Oxford scholar Peter Conrad’s autobiography *Down Home* (1987) only served to reinforce the image of Tasmania as ‘the Appalachia of the Antarctic’, and a place that one escaped from. Conrad bitterly lamented that his childhood in working-class Goodwood ‘was not the life I wanted; somehow I’d been given the wrong one’. In contrast, Walsh, who also grew up in a working-class suburb near Goodwood, not only chose to return, but to build a museum in the vicinity of the very neighbourhood that Conrad so despised.

This museum is a vote of confidence in a Tasmanian community that, despite suffering from a lack of resources, has both forged and attracted creative people. Disputes surrounding the Franklin Dam, gay rights and, most

recently, the Gunns pulp mills were bitter but also fuelled vibrant and passionate creative activity.

Increasingly, Tasmania has become *de rigueur*, as marked by the expanding number of writers who have chosen to live there. In the 1980s, Richard Flanagan, unlike Conrad, resolutely stayed in Tasmania. Then writers such as Robert Dessaix, Peter Timms and Nicholas Shakespeare crossed the Strait. Expatriate Tasmanians who had previously fled the island started to return including historian Henry Reynolds and former National Gallery of Australia curator of Australian art Daniel Thomas. But the increasing recognition of Tasmania as a ‘sea change’ destination has generated a bitter divide. Parts of the island have become a boutique state for the rich – serving the leisure and ecotourism industries – whilst Tasmania’s younger generation (my relatives included) still suffer from high unemployment and limited opportunities.

Does MONA reinforce this divide by responding to the rise of global, boutique tourism? Like the exclusive Retretti Art Centre in Finland, it is underground, remote and absorbed into a web of music festivals – in this case the annual MONA FOMA (Festival of Music and Art). MONA also recalls the Benesse Art Site on Naoshima in the Seto Inland Sea in Japan, a destination complete with a luxury hotel and two art museums designed by the architect Tedeo Ando in conjunction with businessman and art collector Soichiro Fukatake [see related articles in AMA # 235, November 2010].

But Walsh has been careful to ensure that local people are part of his enterprise. The museum itself is free. You can catch the \$15 ferry, ride a bike there, or catch a

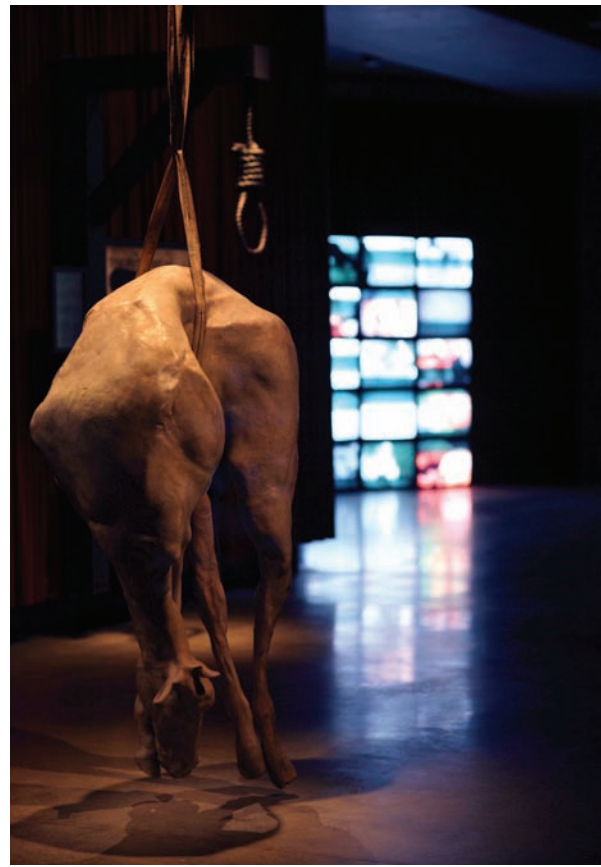




bus. Walsh's introduction to his catalogue invites you to try and steal a copy of the publication if you don't want to buy a copy or go to the library, a gesture acknowledging that not everyone can afford its \$80 price-tag. On the opening weekend, everything was free: from the buses out to MONA to the concerts featuring acts such as Tex Perkins and the Cruel Sea. People who would never otherwise have gone there came to see the museum, listen to the music and benefit from the very generous hospitality.

Local builders, architects, gallery assistants (largely drawn from the art school), and artists have also been involved with the Museum's creation and daily operation. Hence, Tasmanian-based designer Pippa Dickson's steel and wood benches, (*A Fleeting Encounter*), inspired by early aircraft design, have now found their rightful home in a cavernous space that does justice to their scale. Strong works by local artists including Patrick Hall and Brigita Ozolins are also represented.

Within the museum can be found Egyptian mummies, plunging rock edifices like the walls of a pharaoh's palace, labyrinthine staircases reminiscent of those found in Piranesi or Escher drawings that seem to appear and disappear, and magical underground waterfalls. There are also exhibition spaces that draw upon a storeroom aesthetic, complete with picture racks displaying an eclectic



P17: Museum of Old and New Art from Little Frying Pan Island, Derwent River, Hobart, Tasmania.

THIS PAGE: 1/ Looking from the Bar into The Void.  
2/ Installation view with (foreground) Berlinde de Bruyckere's *P XIII*, 2008.  
3/ Corten staircase connecting three levels in MONA.

All images this article courtesy the artists and the Museum of Old and New Art; all photographs by Leigh Carmichael.

range of artworks – and tombs in glass cases creating an environment in which it feels that the artifacts could potentially come to life. Dramatically, MONA fulfils the spectacular fantasy of the Indiana Jones-type 'old museum.' It also recalls the leisure, curiosity and spectacle elements of world fairs in which artifacts from distant lands were gathered together so that the visitor could 'travel the world' under one roof. Equally it bears parallels with cabinets of curiosities which, during the 16th century, featured princely collections of objects acquired from exotic locations. Cases featuring exquisitely crafted roman gold coins dramatically set against a black background, consciously recall this *wunderkammer* tradition, as do 'cabinets' placed in the museum's grounds that juxtapose artworks with fragments of film, photographs and documents.

These qualities of the 'old museum' are combined with some of the most interesting innovations from the rise of the 'new' and 'participatory' museum. Of particular note is the O iPod which allows you to navigate around the spaces label-free, to comment on the works that you see, to listen to the specially commissioned music accompanying some of the artworks, and to save an itinerary of works viewed so that they can be emailed to you.

Sometimes I found the selection of works by artists such as Damien Hirst, Chris Offili and the Chapman Brothers, recalled a catalogue of 'blockbuster' art. Walsh's desire to shock the public could also pall at times. I was also disappointed that Tasmanian Indigenous artists Julie Gough and Ricky Maynard were not represented – but then this is a purely personal collection. Overall though, the artworks presented inspired wonder and curiosity. *Bit fall*

(2006-7) by Julius Popp magically renders words in water as it cascades down adjacent to the sheer rock face of the museum's wall. *Artifact* (2010) by Gregory Barsamian provides glimpses of a fantastical mind within an enormous bronze head. Anselm Kiefer's *Sternenfall* (2007), with its combination of the galaxy and maps of the railway lines leading to the concentration camps, points to the Holocaust as an event of mythic proportions, the enduring impact of which lies beyond human comprehension. Other works such as Berlinde De Bruyckere's *P XIII*, a marble rendition of a dead horse, and Tessa Farmer's *The Fairy Horde and the Hedgehog* invite consideration of the relationships between museum displays, statuary, taxidermy and death.

The 'old' art is equally outstanding including The *Coffin of Ankhpefyhery* (730-600 BCE), the *Stater of Athens* (407 BCE), and the *Falcon* (300 BCE-CE 100) from Egypt. These bear testament to the art of civilisations that still holds resonance and power thousands of years later.

Some aspects to MONA are problematic. The lack of labels was liberating but I also observed that it transformed museum visitors into the 'living dead' as they became more focused on their iPod devices than on the art itself. This is also a high-maintenance museum requiring attendants for *Mummy*, *Bearded face-covering and Coffin of Ta-Sheret-Min* (664-332 BCE), the Anselm Kieffer pavilion and the *Cloaca Professional* ('poo machine') (2010). People are also needed to changeover the meat carcasses in Jannis Kounellis's *Untitled* (1998), aid visitors to create rubbings for *Hiroshima In Tasmania - The Archive of the Future* (2010) by Masao Okabe and Chihiro Minato, and hand out O iPods. How will this be sustained? There is no clear collection policy apart from David Walsh's own tastes, and there are questions about how his vision will be carried out beyond his lifetime. But then Walsh is expecting that climate change will cause the place to flood within the next century anyway!

It is MONA's freedom from considerations concerning the representation of various demographics within the museum, from accountability to government boards and adherence to conservation regulations relating to the preservation of items for future generations, that allows the Museum to stimulate the imagination in the way that it does. It waves the gauntlet challenging assumptions about the role of museums thereby offering an intriguing counterpoint to Australia's national and state cultural institutions.

MONA is not going to solve the economic woes faced by Tasmania's young people but it has the capacity to invigorate people's lives. It connects the state with a global



artworld so that future Tasmanian-based artists do not have to feel that (beautiful as the island is) the 'artworld' is happening elsewhere. Many of us feel profound relief to finally see Walsh's Museum. Here is an enterprise designed to put Tasmania 'on the international map' that does not follow the misguided path of former attempts with the Wrest Point Casino, the Franklin Dam and the pulp mill. Both the story behind MONA's creation, made possible by Walsh's gambling fortune, and the museum itself are just the sort of quirky, extraordinary tale that is bizarrely and yet quintessentially 'Tasmanian'. 'David Walsh, I take my hat off to you.'<sup>1</sup>

1. Comment from my brother Daniel Boddy, father of two teenagers and employee of Global Water Tanks in Sorell, Tasmania.

**Dr Sarah Scott** grew up in Tasmania and remains strongly connected with the island. She currently works at the Australian National University where she is the Convenor of the Liberal Arts: Museums and Collections Graduate program.

Brigita Ozolins installing her work *Kryptos* at the Museum of Old and New Art, 2010. The work was commissioned by David Walsh in 2005, to respond to works in the MONA collection from Babylon and Assyria (present-day Iraq) which depict cuneiform, one of the earliest known forms of writing. The walls of the three chambers comprising *Kryptos* are embossed with binary code and words. Ozolins describes the work as 'about the present and the past, old technology and new technology, death, light, darkness, secrecy and transformation'.  
<http://brigitaozolins.com/work/bureaucracy/kryptos-2011/>

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Echidna Quill Necklace (detail),  
2007, Jeanette James  
Represented by Bett Gallery  
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