

# 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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