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*Christoph Büchel, Land of David (Poynduk), installation view, Port Davey, Tasmania, 2014; image courtesy the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Hobart; photo: MONA/Rémi Chauvin*

# 'The Land of David': Christoph Büchel's Tasmanian odyssey

MICHAEL FITZGERALD



‘We’ve become part of the artwork,’ said a cheerful front-of-house officer on *Art Monthly Australia’s* September visit to the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart. Around her was a tourist centre, with a children’s toy boat ride and a poster of pristine Port Davey wilderness proclaiming ‘DEVELOPING TASMANIA: WHERE VISION GETS BUILT’; beyond was a table for book signings of what appeared to be a memoir from the museum’s eccentric owner David Walsh, entitled *Land of David*; and beyond that a ‘Starbucks Coffee’ cafe. A lift ride down into the cavernous depths of the museum was the community centre, C’MONA. On this sunny Saturday morning, the fluoro-lit rooms echoed with the sound of ping-pong, while a sole guitarist strummed in the knitting room.

For those who might have realised that this was, in fact, an elaborate artwork, the task of then guessing the artist was all part of the intriguing game being played out. A dark humour and provocative political sensibility was evident. But not until a week after the museum’s winter season opened on June 17 were MONA’s front-of-house staff able to utter the name of the artist responsible: Christoph Büchel. The Iceland-based Swiss artist is perhaps best-known for his highly conceived immersive environments and interventions (he will represent Iceland at next year’s Venice Biennale).

‘The Land of David’ was MONA’s secret winter project, the successor to last year’s ‘The Red Queen’ and 2012’s ‘Theatre of the World’. It was every bit as ambitious as these mega-projects, perhaps even more audacious, and included an expo, ‘Australian Fair for Freedom of Belief and Religion’, which drew 28 religious groups to the museum over a July weekend. And if Büchel (who prefers to work below-the-radar and does not grant interviews) had his way, the public would never have known that he was the author of the work; ‘The Land of David’ would have simply disappeared.

Events following the show’s opening, however, conspired to strip Büchel of his sought-after anonymity: on June 21, *The Australian* newspaper publicly outed the artist after finding Büchel’s name linked to the project on the website of his London gallery Hauser & Wirth.<sup>1</sup> Then on June 24, David Walsh (who has not been in the business of apologising for his so-called museum of ‘sex and death’ since it opened in early 2011), blogged an apology, both naming Büchel as the artist and apologising for appearing to endorse ‘a presentation that we are uncomfortable with’.<sup>2</sup>

Only once the work’s authorship became known was it possible to begin to comprehend the vast complexity that Büchel had created with ‘The Land of David’. Indeed, the multilayered project – as much to do with the subversive circulation of ideas and images as physical objects – spilled uncomfortably beyond the boundaries of the museum, from the public billboards for a mysterious ‘Southdale’ development (‘an exciting new shopping experience is coming soon’) to a caravilla (or Jewish caravan) that colonised a World Heritage site within the remote southwest wilderness of Port Davey. Even Walsh’s ‘memoir’ transpired to be a transgressive creation of Büchel himself, outlining chapter by chapter the historical underpinnings of the show, from the fervent attempts by Critchley Parker to create a Jewish homeland, or ‘new Jerusalem’, at Port Davey before the end of the Second World War, diary accounts of early colonial contact with Tasmania’s Indigenous peoples to the convict story behind the establishment of the Hobart Synagogue. There is a memoir of Helena Rubinstein’s early cosmetic career in Australia interspersed with Adolf Eichmann’s reflections on the German Reich, and even Tasmania’s 1993 *Gaming Control Act* (the closest, perhaps, we get to Walsh himself, whose gambling fortune has famously helped bankroll MONA). For Büchel, everything is connected – commerce and genocide, Tasmanian and world history – not unlike the hyperlinked cyberspace that is today’s virtual world. But while everything is connected, not everything is illuminated.

In its planning, installation and exhibition, ‘The Land of David’ stretched, challenged and, at times, frustrated MONA’s directors, curators and staff like no other, and even in its afterlife it has the power to generate conversation and debate. In its final few weeks, MONA’s Senior Curator and Co-Director of Collections and Exhibitions, Nicole Durling, and Curator Jarrod Rawlins walked through the exhibition with *Art Monthly Australia*, teasing out this curatorial conundrum and helping piece together a provocative picture puzzle.<sup>3</sup>

**Michael Fitzgerald:** The exhibition began, cloaked in anonymity, with the understanding that it wouldn’t immediately be recognised as art. And yet MONA’s entry, with its ‘Southdale’ sign, does announce something.

**Jarrod Rawlins:** Christoph needs to convincingly occupy a space, so for him to do a work at MONA he needs to occupy the entrance, otherwise what you walk into is a museum and then you find art. So it needs to be the other



*Christoph Büchel, Land of David (Poynduk), installation view, MONA, Hobart, 2014; image courtesy MONA, Hobart; photo: MONA/Rémi Chauvin*

*Christoph Büchel, Land of David (Southdale Shopping Centre), installation view, MONA, Hobart, 2014; image courtesy MONA, Hobart; photo: MONA/Rémi Chauvin*

way around for Christoph for it to work – you need to walk into the art, and not recognise it, and then go into the museum, and then when you’ve left wonder: ‘Maybe that entrance was the art? Because that was all a little bit out of place and I didn’t quite understand why there was a Starbucks ...’ So it really needs to actually occupy the entrance to the building, and it works.

**MF:** The historical figure of Melbourne-born Critchley Parker Junior (1911–1942), who worked closely with the Freeland League and Tasmanian Government in seeking to establish a Jewish homeland in the southwest, and who died there (of starvation) while surveying a prospective site, looms large in this show, and is heavily referenced by Büchel, most immediately with the caravillas that occupy both the MONA tennis court and the show’s additional commemorative site at Port Davey. How early on did Parker help inspire the show?

**ND:** Christoph’s initial proposal was more a pot shot at David, even more directly than this current one. That required a level of detail to satisfy Christoph that was basically impossible for us to do. Plan B wasn’t as direct a go at David, but again the scale of it was beyond possibility ... Critchley Parker was always on his radar. He didn’t really come up until around Plan C.

**JR:** Christoph had been doing research on Tasmania last year in his spare time, because he came prepared with a fair bit of knowledge of what was going on.

**ND:** The bones or the structure of the project Christoph pitched was certainly very detailed and resolved, but the process of making it here [formed the work] ... I mean, this work couldn’t exist anywhere else.

**JR:** Yes, this is the most Tasmanian artwork I’ve ever seen.

**MF:** As well as Parker, Büchel references other fragments of Tasmanian history, including the wreckage of novelist Joseph Conrad’s iron barque at Hobart’s Otago Bay, and mass murderer Martin Bryant (a car associated with his Port Arthur massacre adorns a poster in the cafe). Do you think that was part of Büchel’s strategy – to play with people’s perceptions of place, and some of its inherent cultural sensitivities?

**ND:** It’s certainly an investigation of a place. Of course everyone knows that this was a former penal colony. There’s a bunch of information about that, but there are so many subtleties, and that kind of layering brings us to where we are now ... This project couldn’t happen anywhere else,

and I think Christoph is one of the few artists who really works like that. You see that in ‘Deutsche Grammatik’, the piece he did in Kassel [2008]. It was so much about Kassel; the layering of that area of Germany and then the layering of Germany on top of that. It’s the same here.

**MF:** The other layer we see running through this work is one of reality – most notably with the tourist and community centres, which actually function as such – and which merge with all the other layers of fiction and history present in the project.

**ND:** Yes, that’s certainly where the shift for Christoph’s work has been – from making what he would call sets or props or stages into reality, with these ‘real’ environments. Like the tourist centre in there; he wants it functioning; it has to have every element of it that is real.

**MF:** Büchel’s vision is almost forensic in its attention to detail: from the ‘Critchley’s List’ postcards in the tourist centre (listing the spartan supplies Parker took with him on his fatal trek) to the red sale dots that mysteriously appear under some of the framed photocopies of racist cartoons in the ‘Starbucks’ cafe. There’s even a machine that pipes the aroma of freshly baked croissants into the museum. Southdale’s banner motto is ‘WHERE IT ALL COMES TOGETHER’, and the visual merchandising materials created for the project are all seamlessly melded with the real and the found.

**ND:** We had a graphic designer sitting with Christoph for three months straight, making all of this material.

**MF:** The advertisements that line the entry walls often link to either Jewish families that fled the Holocaust or to contemporary companies that have historical ties with the German Reich (which in turn help contextualise Parker’s quest). There’s even a fictional poster for the Liberal Party of Australia, ‘Improving security’, illustrating three white sheep kicking a black sheep off the Australian flag. Büchel seems to be deliberately playing with racial tensions, both local and global, in these posters.

**ND:** All the time, Christoph would use the term ‘acid’. He’d make the project but then continue to add and add and add, and he’d say, ‘it’s got to have the acid’, ‘it doesn’t have enough acid yet’, ‘there’s no acid’, and he’d get really anxious about it if he felt his work was just, you know, a bunch of nice pictures that were just seamless. It wouldn’t be enough just to do an Estée Lauder. It would have to have another layer behind it that added to what he considered ‘the acid’.



Christoph Büchel, Land of David (Southdale Shopping Centre), installation views, MONA, Hobart, 2014; images courtesy MONA, Hobart; photos: MONA/Rémi Chauvin

**JR:** Yes, this is the art, because there's the tension.

**MF:** Relationships between yourselves and Büchel also seem to have become tense during the making of the project.

**ND:** Christoph's resolve and the integrity behind what he does is remarkable. It also makes it incredibly frustrating, and very difficult to work with.

**MF:** Büchel's unfinished project for the Massachusetts Museum of Modern Art in 2006–07, 'Training Ground for Democracy', ended in a long legal wrangle over moral rights. Did this weigh in the back of your mind while working on 'The Land of David'?

**ND:** I was ready to walk away from the project from day one. And I think that's the only way you can work with an artist who works like Christoph. Okay, so we opened the project at 'MONA Till Midnight' at 6pm, and that was Christoph's deadline. I was ready to walk away from the whole thing right up until 5:59, 59 seconds. And even when it opened I was still ready just to pull the whole thing down.

**JR:** Once you're ready to walk away from the exhibition, or once you're comfortable with the fact that this is all going to go a bit strange, you get on with it and we did it; we got a show. I think a lot of the projects that don't get up are because the people potentially working with Christoph perceive themselves as having too much to lose or risk so they're too anxious and they don't allow themselves to just let him be who he is ... This is not about patting ourselves on the back; it's about thinking about how complex this process is and getting through it.

**MF:** So the show went on. But it was your removal of Büchel's 'Are you of Aboriginal descent?' faux-DNA testing centre that appeared to upset the artist most, along with David Walsh's subsequent blog, 'A letter of apology to Tasmanian Aboriginal people (and whoever else we have offended)'. How difficult was this situation for you to resolve?

**JR:** We were a bit slow to respond to this stuff in a public way – we didn't want to be apologetic on behalf of Christoph; he was doing his thing.

**ND:** We're certainly incredibly sorry for offending people that we have a lot of respect for ... There were a couple of people who are our peers, our colleagues, who were really upset. I mean, what do you do?

**JR:** You have to respond to that. You just have to. So we did.

**MF:** And Büchel?

**ND:** He's not happy.

**MF:** We're now going downstairs to the community centre, which has operated more or less autonomously since mid-June. Büchel was keen to involve local Indigenous and refugee groups, and inmates from the Risdon Prison, but apart from that it's a seemingly unscripted space, which differentiates it from the artist's London project 'Piccadilly Community Centre' in 2011.<sup>4</sup>

**ND:** It's certainly constructed – it's a community centre inside an art museum – but the functionality of it is as it would be if it was in Glenorchy on the main road. Now, does it change the way a visitor to an art museum would read what a community centre is? And how is that art? It folds back into these conversations. A lot of people talk about relational aesthetics, but it's got nothing to do with this form of art.

**JR:** What I've noticed is people are oblivious to the fact they're part of the project. It doesn't mean anything to them. This is the thing – this is their community centre. Christoph would like that, and I think that's really good. They're not participating in something consciously; they're not acting out something; they might leave and think, 'Oh yeah, it kind of is actually an art project'. But at the time they're just doing their own thing. And that's the difference between this and relational aesthetics.

**MF:** I wonder if Büchel might be secretly happy with what has transpired here.

**ND:** We've spoken internally about this quite a lot.

**JR:** I said to David [Walsh], 'I've spent a fair bit of my time sitting with Christoph and listening to him, intently, like you cannot stop listening. And if Christoph is the artist that he's been telling me he is for the last three months, then this is really good. This worked – not in a premeditated way, but if we're locating art in this, it worked.'

**MF:** It's interesting that so many months into the project, you're still asking these questions.

**ND:** I don't think any of the projects that I will work on again will bring up all these questions, these moralities around me as a curator, the way that I interact and work with artists, how we develop projects. I guess that's what happens when you are commissioning an artist, and particularly an artist who works like Christoph.

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1. Matthew Westwood, 'David Walsh at MONA: The god of mall things', *The Australian*, 21 June 2014.

2. David Walsh, 'A letter of apology to Tasmanian Aboriginal people (and anyone else we have offended)', 24 June 2014; see [monablog.net/2014/06/24/a-letter-of-apology-to-tasmanian-aboriginal-people/](http://monablog.net/2014/06/24/a-letter-of-apology-to-tasmanian-aboriginal-people/), accessed 8 October 2014.

3. This conversation took place at MONA, Hobart, on 13 September 2014, and also draws on an earlier conversation with the curators in Sydney on 29 August 2014.

4. See Adrian Searle, 'Piccadilly Community Centre: Broken Britain invades Westminster', *The Guardian*, 30 May 2011; [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/may/30/piccadilly-community-centre-christoph-buchel](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/may/30/piccadilly-community-centre-christoph-buchel), accessed 8 October 2014.

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*Christoph Büchel's 'The Land of David' was at the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, from 17 June until 6 October 2014.*





Christoph Büchel, Land of David (C'MONA – Community Centre), installation views, MONA, Hobart, 2014; images courtesy MONA, Hobart; photos: MONA/Rémi Chauvin