



# Artists angered by DNA stand

By JILLIAN MUNDY



A STAND purporting to offer free DNA tests to determine Aboriginality has been removed from a major installation at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA)

in Tasmania, due to the offence it has caused local Aborigines.

Complete with DNA swabs, application forms and pamphlets, it formed part of a *hoax shopping centre installation* by Swiss artist Christoph Büchel.

Against the wishes of a visibly irate Büchel, the offending display was removed soon after it was seen by a group of Tasmanian Aboriginal artists who were preparing for fibre and kelp craft workshops in a 'community centre'.

Unknown to them at the time, the 'community centre' was another component of Büchel's installation.

The Aboriginal artists told MONA they would not work while the display remained.

Wendal Pitchford, the senior of the Aboriginal artists, said she felt like a tree had risen from the ground and smacked her in the face when she came across the stand.

"Even though it was a hoax, it was taking the mickey out of Tasmanian Aboriginal people," she said. "I think he wanted to stir the hornet's nest."

Denial and examination of Aboriginal identity has been a divisive issue in Tasmania for nearly 150 years.

Another of the artists, Lillian Wheatley, further explained why the display was so offensive. "We'd be laughed at again. Our people have been researched and analysed since the early 1800s, probably before then," she said.

"For example, Lady Franklin was gifted and honoured to take an Aboriginal head from Wybellanna, and have it looked at. She considered she had a rare specimen of the world.

"We've been traced for hundreds of years against our wishes. Everyone is interested in our genes. Putting that DNA installation up was the biggest insult to a community that has suffered this humiliation for years. It's rehashing this again.

"I get (Büchel's) concept. If he had

consulted with the Aboriginal community he would have had a little more understanding of our culture and why that would be so offensive."

Ms Wheatley said it was extremely disappointing. "It was an opportunity for our Aboriginal artists and community to have exposure to the international art world and

to share our knowledge," she said.

The women said one curator offered them money to go ahead with their workshops and just endure the offence.

"It offended us further," Ms Pitchford said. "I said, 'My community and culture are not for sale.' I hope it can be repaired. I hope we mend the rift."

MONA owner, millionaire professional gambler David Walsh, somewhat of a cult figure in the art world, who has not shied away from controversial art, apologised online for having "pissed some people off".

"We will find a way to resolve reasonable unaddressed issues," he wrote.

Mr Walsh said he believes much of Büchel's exhibition is relevant, clever and funny, but while pursuing his goals the artist doesn't care what the consequences are for others, unlike MONA.

He referred to Büchel as the most uncooperative artist he has encountered, who demanded if any element of the installation was removed that the entire exhibit was taken down.

"If Christoph fails to approve our action he will have the right to legal process, of course," Mr Walsh wrote.

It would not be the first time Büchel has taken legal action against a museum. In 2007 he took on the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art with the help of New York lawyer Sergio Sarmiento.

In his blog last week, Mr Sarmiento referred to the removal of the DNA stand as a cowardly act, saying it was "symbolic of the lamentable rebirth of identity politics and political correctness in the art world".

Mr Sarmiento blogged he was certainly ready for another moral rights battle.

Other material in the faux shopping centre installation include Starbucks Coffee, Estee Lauder and Hugo Boss signage, teller machines with no money, a display of cheap foreign-made souvenirs bearing Aboriginal art designs appearing as



if they were for sale, and a poster advertising the 'Midden Bar'.

MONA is built on Aboriginal middens.

Mr Walsh said Büchel's installation explored, among other things, the unintended consequences of created utopias. "The colonisation/invasion of Tasmania by Europeans, and the debilities that resulted for its inhabitants, are among the areas explored," he explained.



**Standing strong: Tasmanian Aboriginal artists Lillian Wheatley, Fiona Hamilton (who produced the MONA ninger canoe project), Wendy Pitchford and Janice Ross, pictured at MONA where tensions arose over a hoax DNA collection stand.**



**The offending part of the MONA installation that has since been removed.**