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PROFILE

THE GAMBLER

At home with David Walsh

BY RICHARD FLANAGAN

David Walsh. © Matthew Newton / Newspix

David Walsh first made global headlines in 2009, when he gambled on the life of Christian Boltanski, a French artist whose installations focus on death. Walsh was a mysterious figure even in his home, Tasmania, where, other than lurid rumours of a fortune made by gambling, little was known about him.

Walsh agreed to pay Boltanski for the right to film his studio, outside Paris, 24 hours a day, and to transmit the images live to Walsh, in Tasmania. But the payment was turned into a macabre bet: the agreed fee was to be paid as a monthly stipend, calculated as a proportion of an eight-year period, until his death. Should Boltanksi, who was then 65 years old, live longer than eight years, Walsh will end up paying more than the work is worth, and will have lost. But if Boltanski dies within eight years, the gambler will have purchased the work at less than its agreed-upon value, and won the bet.

"He has assured me that I will die before the eight years is up, because he never loses. He's probably right," Boltanski told Agence France-Presse. "I don't look after myself very well. But I'm going to try to survive." He added, "Anyone who never loses or thinks he never loses must be the Devil." In another interview, Boltanski described Walsh as being "fascinated by death". "Ultimately, he would really like to view my death, live. He says that he is constantly anticipating that moment. He would like to have my last image."

"It would be absolutely great if he died in his studio," Walsh said when asked by the New York *Times* about Boltanski. "But I don't think it's ethical to organise it."

Attempting to describe Boltanski's devil is like trying to pick up mercury with a pair of pliers. At 51, he has the manner of a boy pharaoh and the accent of a working-class Tasmanian who grew up in Glenorchy, one of the poorest suburbs in the poorest state in Australia. His silver hair is sometimes rocker-length long, sometimes short. Walsh talks in torrents or not at all. He jerks, he scratches, and his pigeon-toed gait is so pronounced that he bobs as he walks. He is alternately charming, bullying and silent. As he looks away, he laughs.

At the time he was betting on an artist's life, Walsh had embarked on an even more quixotic project: building a private art museum in Tasmania dedicated to sex and death. The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) opened in January 2011, and was immediately hailed by some as a new beginning for museums and derided by others as the end of art.

Walsh wanted his visitors to ascend to the museum from the water, as the ancient Greeks did to their temples. But at first sight from the Derwent River - from which most museum-goers approach by ferry from central Hobart - MONA looms above like a post-apocalyptic fortress, waffled concrete walls intersecting with great trapezoidal battlements clad in rusting steel. Set on a small peninsula, the four-storey complex is close to twice the size of New York's Guggenheim.

From the ferry terminal, a flight of steps upward ends in a bathetic tennis court (Walsh is a keen player), facing a mirrored steel entrance that reflects in twisted form the nearby working-class suburb of Walsh's childhood. Tasmanians are admitted to the museum free of charge and everyone else pays an entrance fee. Visitors descend by a large spiral staircase, or the cylindrical glass elevator at its centre, to cavernous deep passageways cut through Triassic sandstone, at the juncture of which there is a bar. Beyond the desultory drinkers is mysterious night. Elsewhere in the crepuscular light there hide a library, a cinema, various performance spaces, and three levels of galleries, all discrete and different. Some of the walls are gilded. One gallery is lined with blood-red velvet. Another room is flooded with water that's dyed black, where you cross on stepping stones to an island on which there are two large and identical cabinets, one containing an Egyptian sarcophagus, the other a digital animation of CAT scans that unveils layers of the sarcophagus until it reveals the bones of its mummy.

At this point, MONA begins to feel like a mashup of the lost city of Petra and a late night out in Berlin. Everything about it is disorienting and yet somehow familiar, from the high-tech tropes to the low-culture babble, the black humour about so much that is so serious, the attention to aesthetics in a museum unsure if beauty exists or, if it does, if it matters.

Designed like a Borgesian labyrinth, lit like a nightclub, arranged like a grand cabinet of wonders, MONA, since it opened on a remote island with a population of 500,000, has attracted more than 700,000 people. Visitors came first from Tasmania, then the rest of Australia, and now increasingly the world - a growing caravan of stars and celebrities, art lovers, aficionados, camp followers and the curious. In two years, MONA has become Tasmania's foremost tourist attraction and a significant driver of its languishing economy. Lonely Planet recently listed Hobart as one of the world's top ten cities to visit in 2013, largely because of MONA.

Walsh is explicit about what his museum is not: it's not a rich man gratefully giving back to his community. It's not an attempt at immortality, as he frankly admits his collection may be deemed worthless in another decade. It is a theatre of curious enchantments: from a wall of 151 sculptures of women's vulvas to racks of rotting cow carcasses; a waterfall, the droplets of which form words from the most-Googled headlines of the day; the remains of a suicide bomber cast in chocolate; a grossly fattened red Porsche; a lavatory in which, through a system of mirrors and binoculars, you can view your own anus; mummies; X-ray images

of rats carrying crucifixes; a library of blank books; cuneiform tablets; and stone blocks from the Hiroshima railway station destroyed by the atom bomb. Its most loathed exhibit is also one of its most popular: Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca Professional*, a large, reeking machine that replicates the human digestive system, turning food into faeces, which it excretes daily at 2 pm.

Last summer the museum offered naturist tours, where nude visitors took in ancient fertility symbols, Jenny Saville portraits, modern euthanasia machines, Damien Hirst sculptures, classical Greek coins, Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (a painting so controversial that, when it was displayed in New York in 1999, mayor Rudy Giuliani brought a court case against the Brooklyn Museum of Art), ancient Egyptian scarabs, major works of Australian modernism, tattooed pig skins and a rolling paradiddle of phalluses and skulls.

It's both personal and profane and, like all profanity, religious in temperament. Walsh, a self-described Catholic atheist and vegetarian, calls MONA a secular temple and a subversive adult Disneyland. If some of his early ideas – a crematorium and an abattoir, both fully viewable – remain unrealised, MONA still goes somewhere beyond the frontiers of taste into the badlands of emotion. It has been dismissed as a museum for the YouTube generation, a new Valley of the Kings, an underground inverted pyramid, an ego-seum, the future, the past, an un-museum, and – one feels, hurtfully for Walsh – conventional. Mostly, people have loved it. Gary Tinterow, a former New York Metropolitan Museum of Art curator and now the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, described MONA as "one of the most fascinating and satisfying experiences I have ever had in a museum". John Kaldor, a member of the International Committee of New York's Museum of Modern Art, said, "MONA has been a watershed in the way that art is understood by the general public."

At MONA's centre is the largest modernist work ever made in Australia, the near Olympic pool-sized *Snake*, painted by Sidney Nolan in the early 1970s. Influenced by the Aboriginal mythology of the Dreaming, its 1620 panels, each a unique image – a flower, a bird, a face – unite to form a mammoth writhing rainbow serpent. Above it, Walsh lives in an apartment with windows in the floor through which he can view this Australian masterpiece – which he rescued from decades of obscurity – every day. Whatever MONA is to others, it is for David Walsh home.

At a Sydney art opening, Walsh was approached by a man who asked, "Aren't you the guy who built the great art museum in Hobart?"

"No, mate," Walsh replied. "I sell drugs in children's playgrounds."

"Oh, well," the man said. "It's better than doing something bad like gambling."

Walsh is a leader of what Australian newspapers describe as the world's biggest gambling syndicate, a group of 17 known as the Bank Roll. The Bank Roll's other leader is Walsh's best friend, Zeljko Ranogajec, a fellow Tasmanian who's been described by the website Blackjack Insider as one of the "most innovative" blackjack players of all time. Frequently portrayed in the media as the world's biggest gambler, he is perhaps its most elusive. His formidable partnership with Walsh can be traced back over 30 years. "I'd spot the opportunities," Ranogajec, a gently spoken and amiable man, told me by phone from London, where he now lives, "and David would do the maths. He's intellectually gifted. Present him with any problem or puzzle and in a few hours he can solve it."

"Whenever he gets argumentative, I ask him how far Venus is from the sun," Kirsha Kaechele, Walsh's partner of the last two years and a self-described life artist, told me. "It always works. Numbers are very calming for David."

"Mathematics," Walsh has written, "is unsullied and friendships are dirty." At times, Walsh's belief in the wisdom of numbers approaches the mysticism of numerologists. In his unpublished memoir, a "fictional" chapter has a thinly disguised Walsh claiming to have had 18 significant relationships with women. Undertaking what he calls "the calculus of promiscuity", the narrator figures that there is less than a hundredth of a chance that it is not his fault his relationships have failed.

He happily parades his perversities, such as a fondness for group sex. For his lavish 50th birthday dinner, Kaechele had a dessert – a flesh-coloured marshmallow encasing a raspberry compote with almond jelly – made for guests using a mould struck from the vulva of one of Walsh's former girlfriends. His loyalty to his family and devotion to his two children, Jamie and Grace – by different mothers – and to his grandchild, Lockie, with whom he spends much time, are not things he boasts about. It is as if Walsh would accuse himself of anything except virtue.

Walsh's favourite novel is *Crime and Punishment*, and conversations with him can sometimes feel like talking to the deranged narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*: possessed, but rarely less than compelling. His obsessive desire to explain makes his thoughts sometimes seem to proceed algorithmically. Though the condition has never been diagnosed, Walsh and those around him believe he has Asperger's. If it seems to explain his extraordinary gift with numbers, it is hard to know where the condition ends and bad manners start. Walsh's rudeness is legendary. When he was young, a friend asked him if he was being "a total bastard to everyone I knew to elicit reaction to record

David Walsh and Kirsha Kaechele, January 2011. © Luke Bowden / Newspix

in my pending autobiography". "Let's face it," a close friend told me, "David can be a complete cunt. But he is also the kindest and most generous man you will meet." Walsh funds a major tennis tournament, the Moorilla Hobart International, as well as Hobart's MOFO music festival. There are also his many and ongoing private kindnesses: the various kids he sponsors at Hobart's Quaker school, Friends; his support of several families; and the friends he constantly helps out. Pointing out that Walsh has always spent more than he has earnt, Ranogajec said, "David was never motivated by money."

Walsh has given many seemingly contradictory explanations for why he created MONA. "I invent a gambling system. Make a money mine," Walsh wrote in 2011 in *Monanisms*, the first MONA catalogue. "Turns out it ain't so great getting rich ... What to do? Better build a museum; make myself famous. That will get the chicks." He has also said he "built MONA to absolve myself from feeling guilty about making money without making a mark". For Walsh, an immoral moralist, guilt and sex seem as plausible reasons as any. To these might be added the attraction of risk. Walsh frequently refers to a passage of Dostoevsky's that he says perfectly captures the gambling soul. "I wanted to astonish the spectators by taking senseless chances," Dostoevsky wrote in *The Gambler*, "and – a strange sensation! – I clearly remember that even without any promptings of vanity I really was suddenly overcome by a terrible craving for risk."

MONA was the ultimate senseless chance. Walsh wanted an anti-museum that challenged every shibboleth, anything, as he put it, "that pisses off the academics". And as the dream of MONA ballooned, as the stakes were raised ever higher, as the idea of pulling off a world-class, cutting-edge museum in a working-class Tasmanian suburb became apparent as the maddest gamble of all, the adrenaline-inducing, pulse-raising risk seems to have ever more appealed to him.

As Nonda Katsalidis, MONA's architect, an elegant cicada of a man, told me one night at a Hobart rock 'n' roll pub, "MONA is David." David was at that moment standing awkwardly alone in the middle of the dance floor, amid several drunken dancers, devoutly mouthing the lyrics to the songs of Mick Thomas, a favourite of Walsh's, who was performing on stage. Walsh's entourage of women, architects and assorted flunkies were standing around drunk, lost, bored. Walsh had previously insulted

Thomas and would do so again later that night and will probably keep on adoring him and insulting him for the rest of their lives.

"I am David and I am an arseholic," Walsh writes at the beginning of *Monanisms*. If David is MONA, MONA is an enigma become a museum.

A few metres from the MONA bar is a theatrically lit cabinet, a cinerarium where for $75,000 you can have your ashes deposited and transformed into an exhibit. In the cabinet sits a Fabergé egg-like urn containing the ashes of Walsh's father.

Walsh's mother, Myra Heawood, was one of ten children born to a possum trapper. In 1941, Myra left Tasmania to visit her sister on the Australian mainland "for a week or two" and stayed 18 years. She married there, was abandoned by her husband, and met Thomas Walsh, a barman in a Melbourne pub. He, too, was married.

"Everyone called him Tim. Or Hairpin. He told a lot of stories. All his stories were untrue, but I believe this one," Walsh said. The story goes that Myra came back to Tasmania for a short visit during World War Two. "She wrote to him how hard it was to get things here, how she couldn't even get a hairpin. And he sent her a hundred hairpins. That's how he became Hairpin."

After the war, they divorced their respective spouses and married. Walsh's sister, Lindy-Lou, was born in 1955 and his brother, Tim, in 1958. In 1959, the Walshes moved back to Tasmania, where Thomas found work as an asylum orderly and, later, as a headwaiter. But the marriage was going bad.

"Mum got religion," recalled Walsh, "and Dad got violent." Lindy-Lou Walsh told me of her mother hiding roast dinners under her bed so that her father would not throw the food around the kitchen. Her mother sometimes slept in Lindy-Lou's bed. One of her earliest memories is of her father forcing the bedroom door open and Lindy-Lou, a little girl, standing between her father and her mother.

"And then?" I asked.

"Then I don't remember."

Myra, a Catholic, was told by her priest that as the Church did not recognise her second marriage, she and Thomas could live together, but no longer as man and wife. There could be no physical relationship, an injunction Myra obeyed. Walsh, born more than a year later, believes he is the result of the rape of his mother by his father.

In 1963, when Walsh was two, his parents separated. "He spent his last 45 years training greyhounds," Walsh said of his father, "and waiting for Mum to come back to him."

Beyond the ashes of Walsh's father lies close to a quarter of a billion dollars' worth of building and art dedicated to carnal acts and charnel ends. It is a prematurely haunted subterranean world. Who lingers in the uneasy juxtaposition of ancient skulls and phalluses with a video of an artist conducting an auction in the language of his childhood church? Who torturously entwines with Giacometti-like Christs in razor-wire rolls of DNA helices?

One winter's day Walsh drove me to where he grew up with his mother, Tim and Lindy-Lou, in a small weatherboard cottage, typical of Tasmanian post-war public housing, in the northern suburbs of Hobart. He would see his father every week or two, sometimes helping him walk his racing greyhounds in the thickly wooded mountain range that lay beyond his home. Walsh recalled going to the dog races with him and praying for his father's dog to win. "I still believed in God then." God: David Walsh's first gambling system. The dog won.

"Why are you interested in this?" Walsh asked me, as he pointed out the telegraph pole in the cottage's front garden, with its electricity transformer that hummed and leaked oil throughout his childhood; as he showed me the exterior chimney that he spent days hitting a tennis ball against, leading to a lifelong proficiency at table tennis and tennis. "It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't explain me. It's all just coincidence."

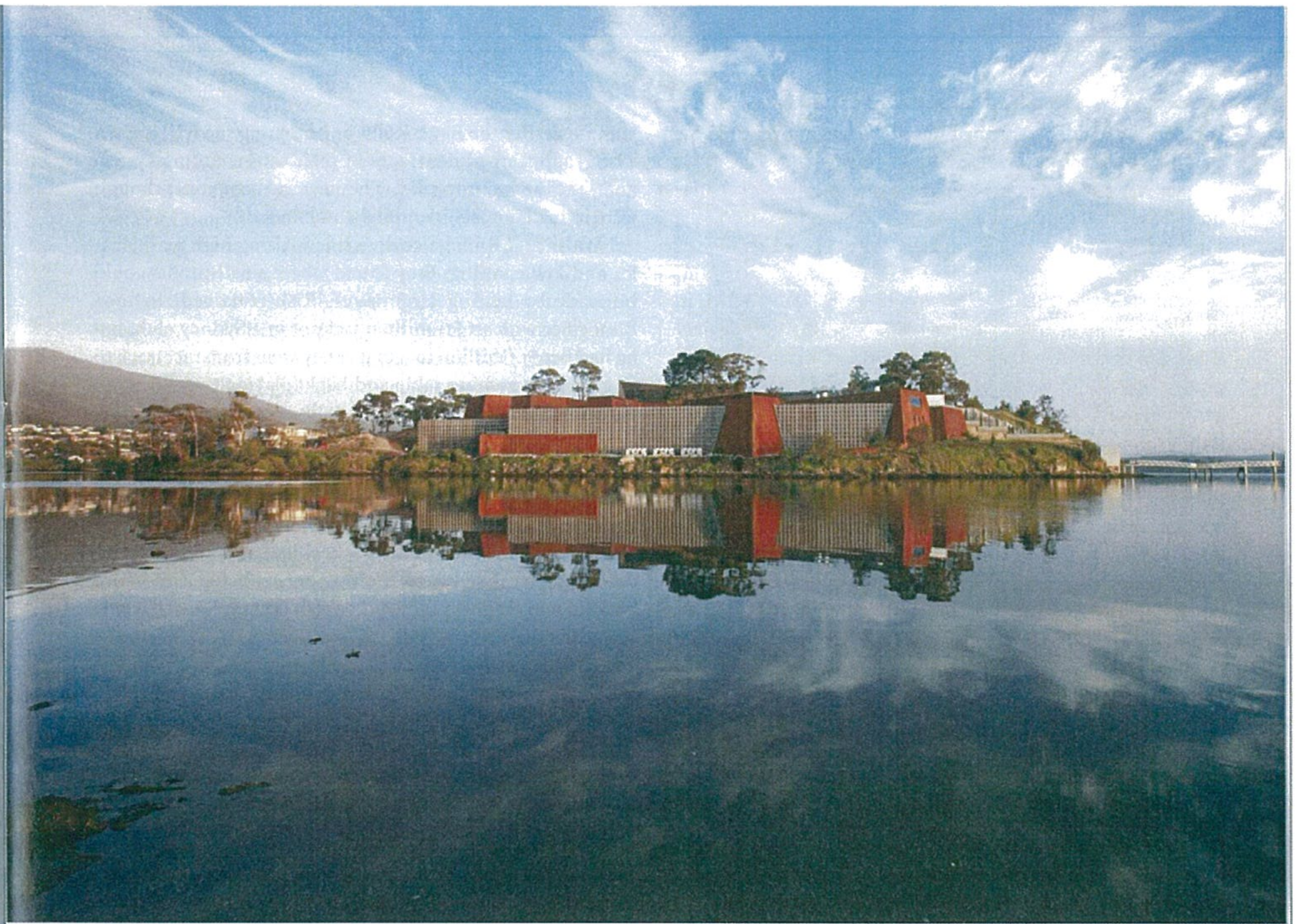
"Everyone seems to believe I'm a product of my environment," Walsh writes to me later, "mostly, I think, because I don't."

Walsh is almost as affronted by the suggestion that he grew up in poverty. A sickly, asthmatic child, he was an avid reader and seems to have lived in the endlessly rich world of his own mind. When Walsh was ten, two gifts entranced him: a book of astronomy given to him by his sister, Lindy-Lou, and a collection of Isaac Asimov stories, from his mother. Of a night, he took to sitting on the roof of their backyard shed studying the stars, his first great passion. He told me the ending of his favourite Asimov story, 'The Last Question', a tale about entropy in which at the universe's end, a man-computer – an image, in its way, of autism – reinvents creation. When later I read the story, I discover he had recited the ending almost word-perfect.

He learnt "to enjoy being hated" when he went to Dominic, a working-class Catholic school renowned for its harshness. He was cripplingly shy and his academic success meant nothing in a school where intellect was little valued. His Year 9 religious studies teacher became so infuriated with Walsh, who had read the Bible in its entirety and began pointing out inconsistencies, that he would make him stand outside, even during the wretched Tasmanian winter. Finally, the teacher relented and let Walsh spend the lesson time where he was most happy: in the library, reading.

Walsh's mother gave him a telescope and he joined an

MONA from the Derwent River. © Tourism Tasmania



astronomy club. A teacher from the Friends School showed him how to grind his own telescope lenses and taught him basic astronomy. "It was," he said, "the first time anyone treated me as if I had a brain." Even now he seems surprised.

After Lindy-Lou and Tim left home in 1976, he and his mother moved to a flat in an inner-city public-housing complex that became so notorious as a slum that it was later demolished. Walsh recalls their apartment as "lovely. Ground floor, lots of sun; my mother decorated it beautifully. I had a nice stereo, our first colour TV and lots of books." It was only a short walk to the State Library of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, where he continued his self-education – the latter an institution that in the 1970s was little changed from what it had been when founded over a century before. Walsh would spend hours in its dusty, empty galleries among the stuffed remains of extinct Tasmanian tigers and dioramas of whaling and Aboriginal life, the crude, strangely vibrant convict paintings, and Polynesian artefacts, discovering in himself a growing capacity for curiosity and wonder, before returning to lie to his mother that he had been to Mass at St Joseph's.

He remembers his mother as loving and dutiful, but not affectionate. She had, Walsh said, "high hopes for me. She prayed that I might amount to something, perhaps a public servant or teacher."

And so Walsh ended up in his first, and, as it happened, his last year at the University of Tasmania, getting about in zip-up wool cardigans his mother knitted for him, studying mathematics and computing. One day in the Physics Club he overheard a conversation about card-counting.

Six years earlier, Tasmania had opened Australia's first legal casino, the Wrest Point Hotel, a five-minute walk from the University of Tasmania's mathematics department. The students in the Physics Club had read a book on card-counting, and started using what is known as 'basic strategy' – principles based on mathematical calculations – to play blackjack at the casino. They were betting four dollars a hand and winning six dollars an hour.

"Why not scale up?" Walsh asked.

"Who'd take that sort of risk?" one of them replied.

Walsh taught himself card-counting, walked down to the casino, and began winning. One afternoon at the university

bar, playing a video game by himself, he was approached by a student he knew only vaguely.

"Apparently you're the bloke to get gambling calculations done," Zeljko Ranogajec said.

For the other student card-counters, Walsh said, gambling at the casino was "a social thing. For Zeljko, it was serious." Walsh burnt his money, but Ranogajec, a law and commerce student and the son of Croatian immigrants, hung onto his winnings, using them to bet ever bigger. Ranogajec understood the need for a mathematical edge if they were to win, while Walsh could appreciate the virtues of Ranogajec's approach. They joined forces. By the end of the year, Walsh was at the casino every day from when it opened, at one o'clock in the afternoon, to four in the morning when it closed. The croupiers laughed at the students for thinking they could win, but Ranogajec's pool was growing rapidly: from a $200 stake to $14,000 in 12 months, and then to $150,000 a year later.

In 1986, Ranogajec took Walsh with him to Las Vegas. They lost almost everything they had. Ranogajec spent the next five months at the tables painstakingly winning back their stake while Walsh, who had always loathed casinos, escaped what he called "the scream of the bland" for a new discovery that was to prove their big break: the world's largest collection of gambling literature, housed at the library of the University of Nevada. He read widely and deeply on gambling history and gambling systems, the psychology of gambling, its management, its workings as a business, why people win and lose.

When they returned to Australia, Walsh, who had never liked playing blackjack, and who had been obsessed with computer programming since his teens, began applying his new knowledge by writing a computer program to bet on horseracing. He had written two before. "The big difference," Walsh said, "was this one interested Zeljko."

Walsh, Ranogajec and Ranogajec's girlfriend took the overnight ferry to mainland Australia and drove on to Sydney, Ranogajec singing 'If I Were a Rich Man' over and over. On Australia Day 1987, the two young Tasmanians placed their first bet on a horserace using Walsh's program. They won.

Ultimately, thoroughbred racing would become the main focus of their gambling, but for a time they struggled. Their ideas, systems and programs were good, but not good enough. They were making only a little money, spending a lot, and on occasion they came close to losing it all. They kept going by playing blackjack. They were by now formidable players, and their ongoing wins led to them being banned from all the Australian casinos, and so they took to playing in Korea, Sri Lanka, Macau and South Africa to stay afloat. But the Bank Roll was becoming too well known. The group trained new faces in their card-counting system and sent them out to play. The new card-counters, though, were in turn quickly identified and banned.

Walsh and Ranogajec diversified. Using high mathematics and low cunning, they found where small profits could be made by betting large sums. Risk remained. In 1993, Ranogajec won an $11 million jackpot in a Sydney club, but he had bet $14 million to win it. They went from racetrack to dog track to gaming table and back, playing everything in between, from chocolate wheels to baccarat.

There was also what Ranogajec calls "the low-lying fruit". Once, they employed hundreds of people to fill out entry forms with every possible permutation of a lotto game, and won $1.6 million. Another time, Walsh discovered that a particular model of roulette wheel had an inbuilt and undetected bias that led to the number 27 being 20% more likely to win, and win they did. Walsh bought himself a new Mercedes and plated it RED-27.

They rented four rooms at the Waggon & Horses, an old working-class pub in North Hobart, installed a large safe, and took Keno, a mum and dad's game, to an industrial level using mathematical modelling, computing power and a hard-won knowledge that the house always wins. An investigation by the *Australian Financial Review* (*AFR*) discovered that between September 1999 and June 2001, the Waggon & Horses won the 8-Spot jackpot three times, the odds of which have been calculated by Stephen Sugden, associate professor of mathematics at Bond University, as 11 million to one. No data has been found for jackpots at the Waggon & Horses between 1994 and 1999, but the *AFR* concluded that the Bank Roll's main game was the 7 Spot. "They never lost a jackpot," it reported a source as saying. Ranogajec said they lost plenty. In any case, it wasn't the heart of their success. They cut a deal with the publican. According to the *AFR*, the publican gave the Bank Roll 80% of his 9.6% commission on the many millions they were gambling through his franchised Keno business. According to Walsh, the publican gave his full 3% commission in return for the room rental. Whatever the rebate was, it served to minimise the Bank Roll's losses and maximise their wins, in a manner that was later to characterise much of their gambling around the world.

From the warehouses of the Hobart wharf district of Salamanca and the rooms of Hobart pubs – where banks of computers and attendant programmers, mathematicians and statisticians crunched information, enhanced mathematical systems and placed bets – the Bank Roll's gaming went global. The Bank Roll gambled increasingly large amounts in a number of countries on mutual-betting pools – known in Australia, where the totalisator machine was

invented to calculate betting-pool odds, as totes – the operators of which take anywhere between 18 and 30% of the total pool as their cut. To increase their own profits, betting-pool operators simply need to increase turnover, which they do by offering the largest gamblers rebates of up to 10%. All the gambler has to do to make money is not lose – still risky and very far from easy, but not as difficult as having to consistently win. A win becomes icing on the cake. It was recently reported in the *Australian* that the Bank Roll gambles "as much as $3 billion" globally on betting-pool systems.

The Bank Roll continues developing new mathematical models and computer systems to gamble on horseracing, basketball, football, rugby and dog racing in Europe, Asia and the US. One of the world's largest publicly listed gambling companies, Tabcorp, is an example of the scale of Walsh and Ranogajec's operation, with their gambling reported to account for 6 to 8% of Tabcorp's annual turnover of $10 billion.

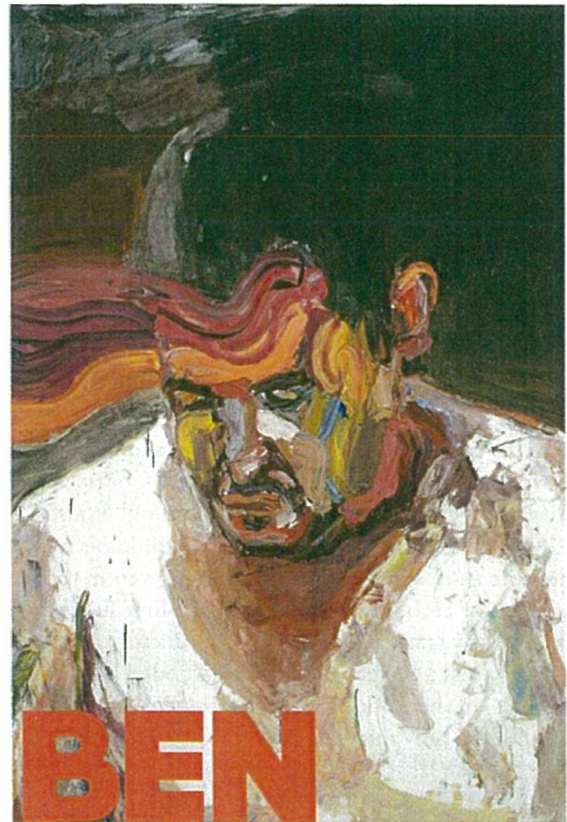
These days, according to Walsh, the Bank Roll contracts people who are much better than he is at mathematics and computing. At a MONA party, you are as likely to meet an Ivy League econometrics professor recruited to do statistical analysis of Hong Kong thoroughbred racing as you are a Tasmanian abalone diver or a naked dancer, just let out of a cage suspended from the ceiling, expressing her gratitude for "the honour of dancing for David".

Gambling, with its allure, its lore, its cosmology of numbers and chance, the immense skill it demands, the wild hope and dizzying despair it summons, remains powerfully attractive – and lucrative – to Walsh. For all the mathematical systems and computing power, Walsh remains a gambler. He bet on the last Pope, studying the form of vying cardinals, putting his money down when Joseph Ratzinger was running six to one. But at the heart of his passion he found emptiness. "Gambling, like future-markets trading, doesn't produce anything," Walsh has written. "It just causes money to change hands … Winning gamblers end up with money but have achieved nothing else."

And Walsh wanted to do something.

In 1991, Walsh's beloved elder brother, Tim, died of cancer. Tim was many things his younger brother was not: charming, a dresser, something of a leader. Walsh took to wearing Tim's jackets, as though he were starting to take on the mantle of his brother – as if a metamorphosis was beginning.

Not long afterward, Walsh was in South Africa playing blackjack. Unable to bring his winnings out of the country in cash, he bought a Yoruba palace door for $18,000. He began buying antiquities from around the globe. Though many of his early buys later turned out to be fakes, Walsh's algorithmic mind had become focused on collecting.



QUILTY
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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

NAS GALLERY

Troy Park, after Afghanistan, 2012, oil on linen, 190 x 140 cm, OL00628.009

Walsh bought a small peninsula of land, known as Moorilla, in Hobart's northern suburbs in 1995, after family troubles forced its previous owner, Claudio Alcorso, a Jewish refugee from Mussolini's Italy who had made his fortune in textiles and his name as a patron of the arts, into bankruptcy. Alcorso had built a high-modernist house there.

Designed by the celebrated Roy Grounds, the same architect who designed Hobart's Wrest Point Hotel Casino, the house didn't appeal to Walsh as a home. He turned it into a museum for antiquities in which he housed his mummified cats, Roman denarii, Etruscan mosaics and fake Costa Rican metates. No one came. It was, in his words, generic. "It looked like every other museum." He began to question everything he had been told about museums, from the white walls to the notion of neutrality of presentation. By then his collecting had begun to extend into contemporary art, and the idea of a more ambitious museum took hold. Walsh's first decision was radical. He didn't choose to build his museum on the elite shores of Sydney Harbour, or even in the more select parts of Hobart. Instead he chose Moorilla, less than five kilometres from where he grew up. Picturesque to visitors, set against a wide waterway and wooded hills, MONA is, to locals, in the working-class heartland of Hobart.

It's not the only misperception to which MONA has given rise. Not the least is that it stands in sharp contrast to a Tasmania frequently misrepresented in mainland Australia as conservative. But Tasmania is better understood as a place of extremes, radicalism and unreality, and MONA merely its latest manifestation.

There is no golden age in the telling of Tasmania. For a quarter of its modern history, Van Diemen's Land served as the British Empire's gulag. A ferocious war was waged and lost by indigenous Tasmanians against the British colonists, an apocalypse that later inspired HG Wells to write *The War of the Worlds*. Fearing their subversive powers, fiddling and dancing were banned by the British governors who ran the island. In the ruins of the totalitarian state that was left when convict transportation ended in 1853, nothing much changed, because neither the prosperity nor the waves of emigration that transformed mainland Australia ever arrived in Tasmania.

The island became not so much a democracy as a mediocracy, in which the worst kept their power by destroying the best. Corruption scandals that were never properly investigated or punished came and went; a savage, self-deceiving complacency became the ruling creed; a culture of cronyism became the norm, and backwardness became self-perpetuating. Governments of astonishing incompetence had for many years no policy other than the blanket support of a rapacious forestry industry run on scandalous subsidies. If Australia was the lucky country, Tasmania became its unlucky island. Its people are on all social indicators the poorest in the country.

Such a society breeds extremes and revolt, the radical issue of which are everything from the invention of the quintessential Australian outlaw hero – the bushranger – to the world's first Green political party. It is perhaps no surprise that Walsh frequently mentions *Wunderkammern* – 'wonder chambers'. Before science vanquished awe and fantasy, *Wunderkammern* were the fashionable way for European royalty to display their great, eclectic collections. Objects as diverse as virgins' milk, automatons and paintings were displayed in often playful ways next to the relics of saints and the remains of animals; the fabulous, the fantastic and the fake all thrown and shown together in a spirit of enchanted wonder. Tasmania is an island *Wunderkammer*, crammed full of the exotic and the strange, the beautiful and the cruel, conducive not to notions of progress but to a sense of unreality – an unreality without which there would be no MONA.

For Walsh, traditional art museums were "designed to inculcate a sense of inferiority, to prepare you for the instilling of faith". Beholden to nobody, he wanted to "subvert the very notion of what an art museum is" by democratising the viewing of art in a way that had "no viewpoint privileged". But subversion didn't come cheap.

In 2008 he ran out of money and borrowed $80 million from Ranogajec. The combined cost of the museum and its art is rumoured to be in excess of $200 million, twice the cost of constructing the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. By 2009, with MONA half built, Walsh was again short of cash and faced bills of $10 million needing immediate payment. On Ranogajec's advice, he went out big at the Melbourne Cup, won $16 million, and kept going. Not without reason, Walsh regards his life as shaped not only by his own acts but also by "a series of successful but unlikely coin tosses".

In keeping with a life of serendipity and his determination to put his experience at the centre of his museum, there is no sense of an ordered progression in MONA. As with some ancient cave system, you explore it in your own way. There are no signs or wall text, and the visitor's only guide is a modified iPod Touch, known as the O.

Another Walsh idea, the O connects to an internal geolocation system, and tells the visitor what she is looking at while delivering vastly more information of much greater richness than conventional signage. With titles like "Art Wank" and "Gonzo", it allows a visitor standing in front of a particular work to read a curatorial description of the piece, hear an audio interview with the artist or delve into their biography, ponder Walsh's own, often highly idiosyncratic comments, or listen to music matched

to the exhibit. It also delivers to the museum valuable information about its visitors – where they go, what they look at, and what they don't. The O liberated Walsh from white walls and meant that the museum could be dimly lit and moody. Walsh's architect, Nonda Katsalidis, was able to design in far more radical ways – creating a deliberately disorienting layout and dramatic, vaulting spaces crisscrossed by Escher-like stairs within a building that recently won Australia's top architectural prize, the Sir Zelman Cowen Award – while his curators could embrace a liberating theatricality.

MONA is, then, both a return to older ideas of enchantment and a vanguard of something new. Just as two centuries ago the bourgeois art museums, with their revolutionary ideas of a universe divinable and communicable as classifiable systems, overran the regal *Wunderkammern*, so, too, does an art labyrinth like MONA now challenge art museums. But exactly what it is challenging them with is harder to say. MONA's ideas, like its owner, rarely spend the night with consistency. What, for example, is the meaning of juxtaposing an Aboriginal bark painting of a shark with a photograph of a naked man on all fours being mounted by a large dog? Of showing together a Roman bronze of Leda and the swan, a Damien Hirst canvas made of dead flies, a collection of ancient Chinese coins and a skull blinged with blue beetles? In its free-flowing associations, MONA owes as much to the Web as it does to the past, and a visitor doesn't so much visit MONA as surf it. It is as if the museum in its entirety is the artwork.

"I'm not sure that art is so important for me," Walsh has said. "It is the relentless dissecting of myself to bring me closer to an understanding of why I do what I do that seems to be important to me."

Walsh happily says he's not even sure if much of his collection is good or bad, or whether it will have any enduring value. To him, that's beside the point. Much contemporary discussion of art treats the feelings aroused by art as unimportant, the embarrassing kitsch of the uninitiated. With MONA, Walsh returned the experience of individual feeling to the centre. Every paean of praise, every furious condemnation of MONA proceeds from where you stand with regard to this achievement.

After four years of construction, MONA finally opened in 2011 with Walsh talking up its controversial exhibits, perhaps hoping to be once more hated as he had been as a child. MONA was, Walsh said, about "People fucking, people dying, the sorts of things that are the most fun to talk about." In response to the question about why a defecating machine was art, he asked, "Aren't we just machines for manufacturing shit?"

SYDNEY
DANCE
COMPANY
DE NOVO
Choreography by
RAFAEL BONACHELA
ALEXANDER EKMAN
LARISSA MCGOWAN
Featuring music by
NICK WALES
& SARAH BLASKO
With costumes by DION LEE
1-23 March, Sydney Theatre
Photo by Ellis Parrinder
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Australian Government
NSW Trade & Investment Arts NSW

But after strenuous attempts at provocation, he was underwhelmed by the contempt visited on him. There was something of a weary sneer at the arriviste from some of the Sydney arts establishment, with the *Sydney Morning Herald* comparing MONA to "rich kid Dick Grayson's [sic] Batcave stashed, unexpectedly, with Egyptian mummies, video extravaganzas and the front of a Mack truck." A pro-forma attack, denouncing MONA as "the art of the exhausted, of a decaying civilisation", came from Australia's leading right-wing journal, *Quadrant*. Its left-wing rival, *Overland*, wondered if MONA wasn't really "a monument to reaction". But other than the shock of these very few, that was that. MONA had made contingency plans for protests, picketing, bomb threats and police raids. But there was nothing.

Could it all have meant so little?

For a time it troubled Walsh that none of the hate and loathing he had expected had eventuated. As the praise began to mount, as Tasmanians took to calling it "our MONA", as visitors - both eminent and humble - sought him out to thank him, Walsh began to see that respect and gratitude are also emotions not without virtue. There was the growing awareness he may just have made something that matters. "MONA could have been crap," Walsh wrote. "I think it isn't." On occasion, he seemed almost rueful about his earlier language in describing the museum. In a recent email, he wrote how he hoped that people would see "the space between the flash", pointing out MONA's "humour and beauty". If there was truth in this, it also seemed David Walsh was in strange danger of respectability.

Then national news bulletins reported that MONA, less than two years after it opened, might have to close. Sitting in his restaurant at Moorilla, overlooking the Derwent River, last August, David Walsh talked about his tax problems over lunch. The Australian Tax Office (ATO) had ramped up an aggressive campaign against Walsh and Ranogajec. With 250 staff working on the case, they were now seeking payment from the group of, according to the *AFR*, an estimated $541 million in back taxes.

Cheerily, Walsh pointed out that not the least irony of his life is that the only job he ever held as an adult was with the tax office. At the age of 18 and at the end of his first year at university he had, in addition to his card-counting, begun taking public service examinations, at which he excelled, for other university students. Those who went on to prominent careers in the bureaucracy paid him handsomely for his results. He finally took the exam under his own name and immediately got a job as a clerk with the tax office.

"It turned out to be tough taking a job seriously that paid $99 a week when at night we were betting, on occasion, $100 of Zeljko's money a hand," Walsh said. He signed his forms "Jesus Christ". No one noticed. "They thought me a public service devotee because I always wore a suit," Walsh recalled. "I wore a suit because they were mandatory at the casino." When confronted by a woman with several kids who had claimed a rebate she wasn't entitled to and who pointed out she had no capacity to pay it back, Walsh tore up her file. No one noticed. "I realised," he went on, "I had to get out of the public service or I might end up in serious trouble." He stopped going to work, stayed at the casino, and no one noticed for three weeks.

Three decades later the tax office did notice. In Australia gambling winnings are tax-free. The tax office nonetheless made a claim for back taxes based in complex legalities. According to Walsh, the ATO in rulings and meetings prior to 2010 led him and Ranogajec to believe their gambling wasn't taxable. With characteristic paradox, Walsh declared himself "an oxymoronically rich commie" who supports high-taxing regimes, because "the rich should carry the burden of social services disproportionately", but fought the tax office's claim. While declaring himself happy to pay tax from 2010, the date of the ATO's claim, he publicly attacked what he saw as the injustice of their retrospective claim for the years before 2010, and argued that if the ATO were successful in their original claim, he would have to close MONA.

This was no hollow threat. At various times, Walsh has publicly declared that he has spent all his fortune on MONA. In addition to the $80 million he owes Ranogajec, he owes an undisclosed sum to his bankers. MONA costs approximately $12 million a year to run but makes only $4 million, with Walsh putting up the difference. In essence, Walsh has some minor assets, very large debts, an enormous tax bill and a loss-making avant-garde museum at the end of the world.

The tax case was finally resolved in a confidential agreement last October, but it demonstrated the fundamental fragility of MONA - its dependence on Walsh in all things. In his memoir, Walsh writes of Shelley's 'Ozymandias', and there is more than a little of the vainglorious "king of kings" in Walsh. In the restaurant, he told me he had plans drawn up to make sure MONA continues after his death, but his conviction echoes his belief that he could pay for MONA in the first place. A senseless risk yesterday, it remains a wild gamble tomorrow. "If I cared about longevity, I wouldn't have built a museum a couple of metres above the sea level," Walsh told a newspaper in 2010. "The Derwent is a tidal river. In 50 years, there's going to be a lot of money spent on MONA, or it's going to be underwater."

Later in our lunch, Walsh - with the autodidact's vast appetite for books - talked of writers. I gesture across the Derwent, to the rusting hulk of the barque *Otago*, the last boat on which Joseph Conrad sailed before heading up the Congo River. "And the only ship of which he ever had

ocean-going command," Walsh said. He said he struggled with *The Shadow-Line*, Conrad's elusive novel inspired by his time on the *Otago*. As with so much else, Walsh is certain in his thinking about books.

A few days after the lunch, my sister received a diagnosis of advanced cervical cancer. We sat in her living room, like filaments in a light bulb that had been switched off. She talked quietly. Cancerland talk. Measurements, treatments, statistics. Numbers. Numbers. I told her about what Walsh had said about numbers and admitted I understood none of it. She told me that she had gone to MONA after her diagnosis and sat in front of Sidney Nolan's *Snake*. She had been there three times before but she had never understood what it was about.

"And I was just sitting there," she said. "And I felt it moving. That huge snake was moving through that room and rolling through me. And I got it. I got the snake."

And now the filament was glowing. She leant toward me. "It's creation. That's what the snake is. Creation."

Later I told David Walsh.

"She's right," he said. And, being David Walsh, he then explained to me why.

Maybe that's where you end up, staring down sex and death and blowing hundreds of millions of dollars searching for something forever out of reach. You wake up in an apartment pondering what it's all about and look out over an Olympic pool-length painting. And you finally understand: it's about creation.

MONA is a museum not of conviction and progress, but of doubt and questioning, of despair and wonder; made not by committee, neither celebrating nation nor seeking to preach orthodoxy, freed from the desire to educate. Certain only of its own uncertainty, it touches something of now. To an outsider, it looks like Tim and Hairpin, and a mother who couldn't show affection and a sister who burnt in a different way, while to Walsh it's just where the dice roll led. Chance, history, a lost island that dealt in dreams and nightmares – whatever explanation is forthcoming is futile. All that can be said is that David Walsh made something genuinely new.

"It is an amazing story," Zeljko Ranogajec said, reflecting on their lives. "But the most amazing thing is the museum."

It may be that when the devil dies MONA closes. That "colossal wreck", wrote Shelley, "boundless and bare". It may be that as the oceans rise, it will, in a few decades, disappear under water, one more mad Tasmanian myth, a shadow line, another rusting skeleton mirroring the *Otago*'s ribs on the far side of the river, after its skipper abandoned it to head into his own age's heart of darkness. **M**

A shorter version of this article appeared in the New Yorker.

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