

*Possible applause from the Australians in the audience.*

As your things made you you, Mr President. Indefinable, intangible things; elusive things – but things just the same.

Mr President, a mate sticks by you when you find yourself in trouble, be it your own fault or someone else's. You can be a ratbag or a blithering idiot, and a mate'll stick. You can make a complete animal of yourself, and he'll stick all the stronger.

Of course I don't mean to imply that the United States is in any sense a fount of humbug, or moronic, as your own HL Mencken insisted it was, or root and branch corrupt as Mark Twain and many others have said, or, beyond a few notorious examples, animal-like in any way.

*Somewhat forlorn pause.*

Mr President, mateship demands that one mate tell the other when someone's dogging him – that is, unless the one doing the dogging is also a mate. In such cases the normal thing is to hang out with a different set of mates till the business blows over. This is not one of those cases; and, even if it were, we don't have any other mates – what you would call *real* mates – in this part of the world to hang out with.

Mr President, there are people dogging you. There are people saying America's hollowed out like a walnut with weevils: the communitarian ethos by which it flourished in the great years has been replaced by outrageous greed and self-indulgence, the good society by the security state, the civilian economy by the military-industrial complex. That's what they say, Mr President: not us – them. A kleptocracy sustained by unreasoning fear and ignorance, fantasies, brainless cults of materialism and celebrity. A hollow empire; rampant bully and quaking adolescent both; an eight-dollar-an-hour neo-feudal slum. Your republic is rotting, Mr President. That's what they say.

Just the other day, in *Newsweek*, there was an investment banker with Lehman Brothers for 30 years – “kissing ass and lying through his teeth” the whole time, by his account. He says the story of modern America is opposite what Roosevelt and Kennedy inspired him to believe: corruption, he says, “has settled like some all-enveloping excremental mist on the landscape of our hopes ... permeated every nook of any institution or being that has real influence on the way we live now.”

Mr President, feel free to have your military detain this 75 year old indefinitely under the powers granted by the legislation you recently signed. We will understand. Render him to Darwin if you like. Let him learn that the rights of man derive from the generosity of the state, and not, as some idealists have previously averred, from the hand of God.

*Likely applause.*

Mr President, according to the most recent statistics, on the battlefields of Iraq, 4487 American servicemen and women were killed and 32,226 were wounded. This does not include suicides, accidental deaths and Americans whose

last full measure of devotion was made per medium of private contractors. The Pentagon also reports 229,106 cases of mild to severe traumatic brain injury among US soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. The RAND Corporation found 14% of veterans suffered post-traumatic stress disorder and the same proportion suffered major depression. Fourteen percent of 1.5 million is 210,000. Veterans of America estimates that one in three – 500,000 – suffered PTSD, depression or brain trauma. For every soldier wounded in action more than four more were evacuated for other medical reasons. Chronic fatigue syndrome, migraine, memory loss, sleep disorders, malaria, hepatitis and tuberculosis were among many diseases suffered by returning soldiers. The Department of Veterans Affairs warns combat veterans that they may suffer debilitation from exposure to depleted uranium, toxic shrapnel, open-air burn pits and hazardous chemicals. Yet war is war, and as my mother used to say, it's no good getting upset at things you can't do anything about.

There have been at least 130,000 civilian deaths in Iraq, an unknown number maimed, one and a half million refugees, at least as many internally displaced. Too terrible to think about, Mr President, and I'm sure that's why you never mention them.

*The president is due to depart around now. Should he do so, wave gaily.*

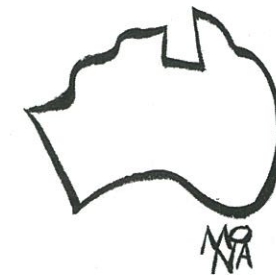
Mr President, if the United States fails then the whole cause of freedom fails, John F Kennedy said half a century ago, He meant it must lead by example.

Yet we could not help noticing that at the very same time as one bunch of Americans were paying any price and bearing any burden and meeting any hardship to assure the success of liberty, another bunch were behaving as if it were their equally solemn duty to make themselves obscenely rich. And I must say, as a mate, we did wonder why you rewarded them with bailouts and positions in your Cabinet, especially when to no one's surprise they put the great bulk of the money not to new lending, restructuring mortgages, stalling foreclosures or doing a single thing to help their country or their struggling fellow citizens, but to satisfying the same old scabrous greed.

“Man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life,” Kennedy said. Your military budget now totals 43% of the whole world's. Are you mad? We don't care, but since Kennedy inspired you with a call to civic duty, you've increased the power to abolish life a thousand-fold; made war, to quote your own Andrew J Bacevich, your “normal condition”; and condemned 46 million of your people to poverty. And they're getting poorer. Of course, we speak only of material impoverishment, Mr President. No doubt you are strong in spirit.

But, Mr President, we're like two men on opposite ends

of a cross-saw that stretches across the Pacific. Mates. It's not for us to ask why you saved the banks instead of the economy. And if you've got it upside-down and arse-about, that's when we stick strongest. Going back, we've always been here, and we'll always be here going forward. Together we are one, Mr President.



## The art of ideas

AMANDA LOHREY

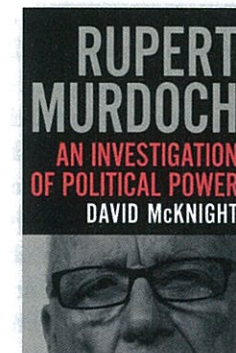
The phenomenon that is Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) is a Plato's cave of multi-layered subterranean space where shadows of the real in the form of artworks are installed within vaults of Triassic

sandstone. Since the museum's opening in January 2011 it has lured a staggering 400,000 visitors, of whom it is estimated 5% are of international origin, 57% local and 38% from interstate.

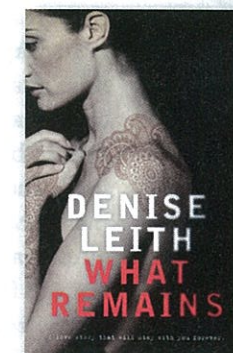
Anecdotally, the word in Hobart is that MONA alone propped up the faltering Tasmanian tourist industry over a difficult winter, and the locals are grateful. Its owner, professional gambler and art patron David Walsh, tells me he is surprised at the degree to which the public in Tasmania has taken ownership of the museum, that people give him a thumbs up in the street or stop to thank him. The goodwill towards MONA reminds me of the Sydney public's enthusiastic embrace of Jørn Utzon's opera house, and it seems peculiarly and demotically Australian that both opera house and art museum should have been funded by proceeds from gambling.

One of Walsh's favourite artists is Belgian Wim Delvoye, who is the focus of the museum's first solo exhibition. In MONA, Walsh wanted to construct a temple to atheism based on the scientific worldview and Delvoye is nothing if not irreverent and quirkily experimental. Among the 100-plus works on display are items of mock folk art in the form of Delftware patterns painted onto gas cylinders and shovels, anal kisses in lipstick on hotel stationery, ornately carved tyres, a concrete mixer carved from teak, a full-size cement truck of laser-cut corten steel, and pigskins tattooed

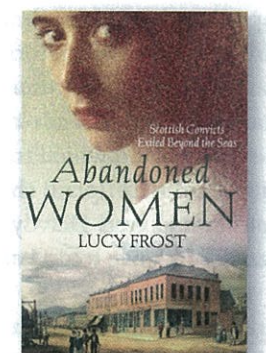
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Delvoye now lives in China where he keeps a pig farm and tattoos live pigs (sedated) but his prize tattoo exhibit is human, a young London-based Swiss known as Tattoo Tim who can be observed at MONA sitting on a plinth (he also gives tours of the museum). In 2006 Delvoye tattooed Tim's back and sold the work to a German art collector for 150,000 euros (\$205,000). Tim is obligated to exhibit his back up to four times per year and the tattoo will be the collector's to keep after Tim's death.

In an informal talk given at his opening Delvoye described his work as democratic and socialist. Tattooing is a democratic art because "only a certain class of people wants it" and it shows that "everyone is an artist". Art is about "class struggle" he says. "I can only see rich people showing off their wealth" and "discrimination [against the poor] is never far off when it comes to art". In 2003 Delvoye consulted lawyers about the possibility of selling convertible shit bonds, allowing people to invest in the turds made by his *Cloaca* machine, an enormous clinical apparatus that mimics the human digestive system so that food is fed in at one end and excrement produced at the other. This, said Delvoye, was his comment on the euro.

A version of *Cloaca* was installed for MONA's opening last year. Since then *Cloaca* has registered with visitors as the most disliked work exhibited at the museum, although according to the information device visitors can listen to as they stroll through the gallery, and which tracks their movements, it is also the one where they spend the most time. "It's a universal approach to art," says Delvoye, "the idea that everyone shits, and you don't have to do it well or poorly - it just gets done."

In 2005 Delvoye installed another version of *Cloaca* in China and he describes it as a "truly cosmopolitan socialist piece". The Chinese are not shocked, he says: "They don't have a western art education, don't care about prestige or being in the in-crowd". At MONA several of these so-called shit machines, in various sizes, are exhibited in a large room of mirrored walls with the aim of immersing the viewer in a "scatological nightmare". The effect, however, is clinical and mundane. With its bright lighting and glossy surfaces, the installation looks like a science lab; as an assemblage of machines *Cloaca* is less interesting or provoking than a motor show.

Delvoye's work is sometimes described as 'ideas art' but since ideas are inherent in all art, his work might be more aptly described as 'statement art'. The risk with this kind of enterprise is that the idea will be more interesting than its visual execution, or that the idea itself is banal and reductive (the human body is a shit machine). The viewer 'gets' the idea in the first few seconds of viewing the exhibit ... and then what?

Of more interest are Delvoye's ironic takes on Catholic iconography, though these too tend to suffer from obviousness. There is the *Viae Crucis* (*Stations of the Cross*), 14 X-ray images of ghostly crucifixes in which mice are substituted for the human form. There is a 6-metre Gothic-style, laser-cut tower hanging from the ceiling and a series of silver double-helices made up of intertwined figures of the crucified Christ. There are also some traditional stained-glass windows depicting excrement, copulating couples and X-ray images of rats. Walsh has commissioned Delvoye to design and build a 12-metre-high chapel that will feature similar windows beneath which couples can be married. This will complement MONA's already existing small cemetery where for a price you can have your ashes interred in ornately designed urns.

The last thing Walsh wants is for MONA to become "just some picture gallery"; he wants it to be a platform "whether a launching pad or a Tower of Babel". While he is surprised and pleased

at the public response - and the embrace of MONA by the Australian arts community - he is disappointed at the level of critical attention. Most critics have reviewed the museum favourably, but "very few have attempted to distil MONA's goals and assess whether they have been met," he says.

The Delvoye 'introspective' will be at MONA until 2 April after which some of it is due to be exhibited at the Louvre. Then the artist is off to Mumbai where his new exhibition will be accessible on YouTube and where he will inaugurate "the world's first design-based religion", a religion with no dogmas and better, he says, than Scientology, "which, after all, was invented by a comic-book artist".

After my tour I walk upstairs to where guests of the opening are eating slices of spit-roasted pig on hamburger buns (both Walsh and Delvoye are vegetarians). I go to the museum shop to buy the Delvoye catalogue but am soon distracted by other items. There's a 6-inch doll of the Queen with a small solar panel that, when fired up, induces her to give the royal wave. I buy it for a friend who is an environmental activist. I think it will make him laugh. **M**



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