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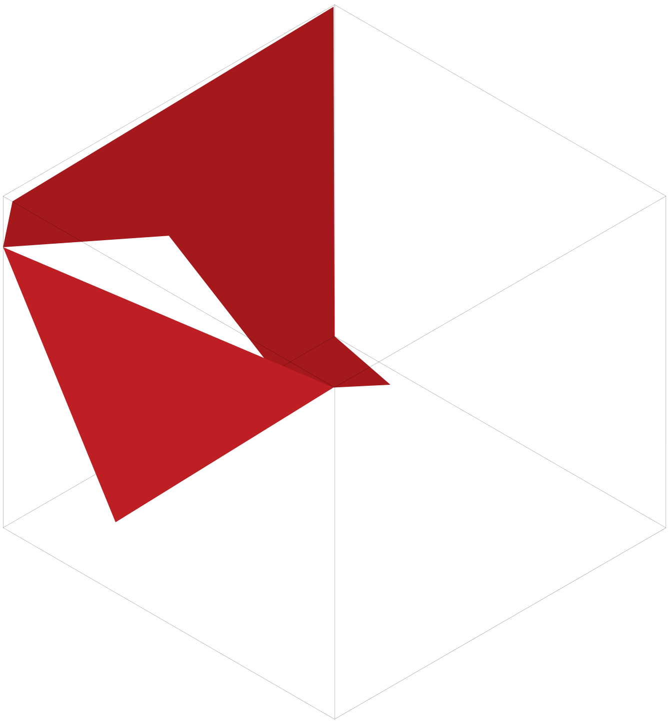

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The Return of the Wonderful: *Monanisms* and the undisciplined objects of media art

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between the contemporary transformation of bodies and boundaries of knowledge and the curatorial treatment of media art in museum collections and displays. It suggests that the "undisciplined" nature of media art objects challenges the predominantly mono-disciplinary epistemological structure of most mainstream art museums. The paper argues that the curatorial strategy of Monanisms*—the inaugural hang of the collection of the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, Tasmania creates a fertile and integrative context for media arts, by resisting the logic of the disciplinary object. The paper identifies MONA as part of a growing tendency in contemporary curating to draw upon the pre-disciplinary display tactics of the Wonderchamber. It argues that this "return of the wonderful" in museum and curatorial practice is entangled with the emergence of post-disciplinary knowledge formations.*

Keywords: media art, MONA, art museums, post-disciplinarity, disciplines, disciplinary objects, wonder, wonders, Wonderchambers, Cabinets of Curiosity, epistemologies, collections

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The Return of the Wonderful: *Monanisms* and the Undisciplined Objects of Media Art

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Introduction

Media art has always struggled to find a comfortable place within mainstream art museums. Numerous reasons have been proposed for this, including the instability, or immateriality of many media art “objects”, the challenge of complex, or rapidly changing technologies, and the problems of interactivity (Dietz, 2005). Art museums are prepared to face many similar challenges, however, for other categories of art (such as conceptual, kinetic or relational), which suggests a more deep-seated reason why media art remains underrepresented in museum collections. In this essay I argue that media art is resisted by many art museums because the “undisciplined” nature of its objects challenges their predominantly mono-disciplinary epistemological structure. This structure relies upon the notion of “disciplinary objects” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006, p.362), things that reinforce the knowledge boundaries and expertise of their associated discipline. The products of media art practice by contrast, are often hybrids that destabilise disciplinary boundaries; combining aesthetic experience with machine, tool, process, interaction and sometimes even living matter.

The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, Tasmania, is a private museum that displays the eclectic personal collection of David Walsh—a polymath, professional gambler and multimillionaire. His collection spans almost 6,000 years and, as the name of the museum suggests, its overarching logic collapses the distinction between artefact and artwork: combining ancient antiquities with modern and contemporary artworks of all forms. In this essay I argue that the conflation of old and new results in a curatorial approach that resists the logic of the disciplinary object, and in so doing creates a fertile and integrative context for the undisciplined objects of media arts. MONA is part of a growing tendency in curatorial practice to draw upon the pre-disicplinary display tactics of the Renaissance Wonderchamber[1]. I examine the relationship between this “return of the wonderful” and the aesthetics of digital culture, demonstrated in particular through the exhibition *Devices of Wonder* (2001), curated by Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak.

I argue that this curatorial enthusiasm for wonder is entangled with the emergence of a post-disciplinary sensibility—a desire to combine and integrate objects normally held apart in the structures of material culture—which responds to the transformations of the bodies and boundaries of knowledge caused in part by contemporary technologies. I will show how *Monanisms*—the inaugural and “evolving” hang of MONA’s collection —has been organised to maximise the experience of wonder, and how the configuration of the collection and the museum itself, asserts the legitimate role of wonder in a process of enquiry. The undisciplined objects of media art in this example are integrated fundamentally in the way in which the collection is displayed. Their ability to thrive in this heterogeneous context reveals the potential of this wonder-full approach to re-vivify museum collections as a site of knowledge production in a post-disciplinary era.

Undisciplined Objects

The emergence of our present day museums, including the distinction between art museums and other kinds, has its origins in the nineteenth-century formation of what we recognise as modern disciplines. As Tony Bennett (1995) argues, this formation includes both the coalescence of knowledge domains and the regulation of the methods and behaviours that accompany their performance and display. The disciplinary divisions inherited from the nineteenth century, and their associated ordering of objects, continue to hold throughout the twentieth century, despite radical changes in the way museums conceptualise history and represent sources and voices of authority (Knell et al., 2007). In fact the twentieth-century modern and contemporary art gallery has refined and exaggerated this disciplinary division. The purity of the white cube, which remains the dominant model of display in most contemporary art spaces, provides an extreme physical embodiment of the institutional division of art from everything else (O'Doherty, 1999). The persistence of this form in the face of the overwhelming movement in contemporary art towards relational and socially engaged practices reflects the enduring legacy of the rhetoric of aesthetic autonomy (Bürger, 1984).

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has argued that museum collections, as scholarly resources, gained legitimacy in the nineteenth century from the creation of "disciplinary objects". These objects, which clearly belong to, and constitute the basis of particular fields of study, in turn consolidate the boundaries and status of their associated fields (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006). The disciplinary object must be wholly explainable within the discourse of the discipline to which it is attached. Knowing and categorising the correct position of disciplinary objects has been a vital part of curatorship, and key to this process is the distinction between "art" and "artefact"—between objects created and understood wholly with the autonomous value structure of western art-history, and objects that might serve purposes (such as trade, ritual, magic, entertainment, therapy, communication etc.), or embody knowledge from other domains of human practice.

The idea of the undisciplined object is a provocative way to think about media art works, which resist the explanatory structures of individual disciplines. The definition of media art is a moving target—encompassing older, more specific and variously out-dated or debated terms such as digital, electronic or new media art. However it is largely agreed that media art practice as a broad category engages fundamentally with technology and frequently with science. Its processes and products often mobilise, represent or embody new techniques or understandings from these domains. Even when labelled as "art", such objects contain within them knowledge that cannot be wholly explained or valued by the critical structures of art history. As a result these objects and practices have been largely resisted by major art museums and remained largely invisible to the mainstream artworld. In a controversial *Artforum* article indicative of this invisibility, theorist and critic Claire Bishop claimed that contemporary art was failing to engage with digital technology (Bishop, 2012). To make this argument she explicitly decided to ignore the "entire sphere of 'new media' art", which she described as a "specialized field of its own" (Ibid.). Artists and curators working with media art responded indignantly that to ignore this "specialized field" perpetuated the exclusionary stance that was the very root of the problem Bishop was attempting to articulate[2]. Her self-limiting perspective revealed the impact and extent of the marginalisation of media art, the major collections and exhibitions of which have largely occurred through specialized festivals and institutions, such as Ars Electronica in Linz and ZKM in Karlsruhe.

Shifting Knowledge Formations

These specialized platforms that have grown up around digital culture have tended to connect integrally with research and innovation. The undisciplined practices of media art have thrived in the studio-laboratories of high-tech research facilities, which are emblematic of the morphing of modern academic disciplines and the emergence of new knowledge formations (Century, 1999). Disciplinary divisions are dissolving across all areas of research (Moran, 2002). Bodies of knowledge established to reflect specialisation in the fields of human understanding are being broken apart as that specialisation continues inexorably. Micro-specialisations and ever increasing complexity lead to inter-, cross- and trans-disciplinary research, in the face of which modern (or, by now, traditional) disciplinary separations seem increasingly irrelevant. This has given rise to the now well-rehearsed debates around inter- and trans-disciplinarity, which have become standard and even highly promoted modes of research within the academy (whilst continuing to prove problematic in funding, metrics and reporting).

The notions of inter- and trans-disciplinarity reinforce the foundations of existing disciplines at the same time as they promote the possibility of movement between them. Post-disciplinarity suggests something else—it suggests the inevitability of a way of being and of knowing beyond disciplinary organisation. The term indelibly reinscribes “disciplinarity” within itself, and as such remains the product of disciplinary thought, but it signals the finitude of this way of thinking. An interest in the notion of post-discipinarity has been in currency since the 1980s across existing disciplines, and particularly in new and emerging fields (MacCannell & MacCannell, 1982). Investigations of post-disciplinarity have arisen in economics (Jessop & Sum 2001), education (Menand, 2001) and sociology (Camic &Joas, 2004), where questions of the structure and organisation of knowledge, power and expertise are core concerns. It has arisen in the humanities and the myriad emerging fields of “studies” (feminist, cultural, technology, etc.), where the multitude of methodologies, schools and areas of study lead to an amorphous and contentious sense of disciplinary allegiance (Balsamo, 2000). Post-disciplinarity has arisen across and within the sciences, where the relationship between method and truth perhaps gives disciplinarity its highest stakes (Biagioli, 2009).

Pre- and Post-disciplinary Display

Whilst there are of course serious reflexive examinations of the role of museums in disciplinary change (Message, 2009), museological discourse has not yet moved to the level of post-disciplinarity. The museum is so essentially linked to disciplinarity that it is incredibly difficult to envisage what post-disciplinary museum might look like—in a post-disciplinary era, would museums exist at all? In 1995 John Handhardt and Thomas Keenan organised *The End(s) of the Museum*, an exhibition and conference that examined the epistemological basis of the museum, its purpose and the possibility of its disappearance. Their position was particularly informed by the debates dominating the 1990s about the impact of new technologies. In the book that emerged from this conference Friedrich Kittler argued that the “historical caesura” that separated the Renaissance Wonderchamber from the modern museum had irredeemably separated aesthetic from functional objects, and that despite the insistent challenge presented by technological art, most museums continued to resist any object that breached this boundary: “The rift between art and technology, as inflicted by the classical museum remains untouched by modern forms of presentation… the age of wonder chambers has not returned”. (Kittler, 1996, p.70)

For Kittler the art museum’s rejection of technological artefacts reveals a profound structural limitation. His invocation of the Wonderchamber serves as a reminder that the form of the modern museum is not eternal. Before its emergence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there existed a more heterogeneous practice of collecting and displaying treasures in the various configurations of the Wonderchambers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries[3]. Whilst each collection reflected the personal tastes and purposes of their creator, they were united by an exuberant eclecticism, and an emphasis on the wonderful. All tended to contain a mixture of natural and artificial items; monstrous and beautiful prodigies of nature, exotic objects from newly discovered lands and cultures, anatomical specimens, mechanical wonders and automata, feats of craftsmanship and technological instruments.[4]

In this pre-disciplinary mode of display Kittler envisaged a possible post-internet and post-disciplinary future for the museum through which it can continue to contribute to and create new knowledge in response to seismic shifts in disciplinary formations. Other critics and curators have similarly identified a resonance between pre-disciplinary and post-digital sensibilities. Anna Munster (2006) has explored the relationship between new media and baroque aesthetics in terms of embodiment and materialisation, Michelle Henning (2005) has described the use of multimedia in museums as a return to curiosity. Perhaps the most influential example is the exhibition *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen* (Getty Museum, 2001), curated by Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak. This major exhibition traced the history of human fascination with optical devices through an eclectic array of objects including contemporary and historical artworks alongside centuries’ worth of optical machines. The curatorial strategy emulated, in Stafford’s words “the curiosity cabinet’s epistemic organisation by juxtaposition and superimposition of heterogeneous elements" (Stafford and Terpak, 2001, p.2). Like MONA the exhibition used a combinatory approach, bringing together objects often separated by temporal as well as disciplinary boundaries, in order to discover or release the resonances between them.

The exhibition and accompanying book established a compelling and influential connection between the kinds of knowledge and experiences deployed in the early modern Wonder-chamber and those being brought into being through contemporary digital technologies. Stafford argues that, if the modern museum reflects and reinforces a disciplinary and primarily ocular mode of investigation and representation, then the Wonderchamber offers, by contrast, an analogical and active mode. Rather than an authoritative classificatory system (that associates like with like, and differentiates between like and unlike), analogy, Stafford suggests, is a "tangible theory of order" (Ibid., p.4) that allows audiences to build their own connections between "far-fetched things" (Ibid., p.3). By offering a cornucopia of difference, she argues, the Wonderchamber invited its audience to create their own "associative assemblies" (Ibid., p.3). The experience of the early assemblers and viewers of the Wonderchambers was one of dynamic, active exploration, that "stimulated its users to become performers handling the props to better understand the world." (Ibid., p.6) Stafford sees a connection between the open-endedness of information in the early modern period and in the age of networks. She suggests the active and associative process of the curiosity cabinet can be seen as a "prototype for future connective systems" (Ibid., p.3) such as contemporary multimedia databases and, of course, the internet. The correspondence between these pre- and post-disciplinary modes of structuring and engaging with things and thoughts contributes to the contemporary resurgence of interest in wonder as an experience and as a spur to enquiry.

Wonders and Wonders

Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park (1998) have investigated the relationship between wonder and wonders – the subjective passion and the objects of that passion - from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. Whilst the interpretation of the state of wonder changes over time our contemporary understanding retains reverberations of its past meanings. In the medieval and early modern period "to register wonder was to register a breached boundary, a classification subverted" (p.14). The "visceral, immediate, vertiginous" experience of wonder, according to Daston and Park, sits between feeling and knowing (Ibid., p.11). Wonder is the combined physical and intellectual response to a destabilisation of order, a transporting and extreme kind of surprise in response to something extraordinary. To feel wonder is to recognise, then, as now, something beyond ones knowledge and understanding. This feeling may be linked to pleasure, rapture or fear, but it registers, in Daston and Park's words, "the line between the known and the unknown" (Ibid., p.13).

Some of the ways in which the understanding of wonder has changed over the centuries is the degree to which this visceral recognition of the border of the unknown is linked to enquiry, to power and to sensationalism. To wonder—as a process of contemplation, speculation or investigation—has had different levels of legitimacy at different times. In the sixteenth century, wonder was a proper emotional component of learned enquiry—the creation and organisation of collections, the contemplation and rearrangement of wonders, was a form of investigation and study linked to a powerful elite. Whilst some collections were open to the public, many more were private. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1992) has argued that the production and deployment of knowledge in Renaissance Wonderchambers was tightly bound to the display of wealth and power. Access was restricted to those privileged persons who could understand and appreciate the esoteric logic behind the arrangements. Stephen Greenblatt (1991) argues that the Renaissance "cult" of wonder, was often as much to do with what was not seen—the evocation of a "great man's superfluity of rare and precious things" (Greenblatt, 1991, p.50), conjured by the overwhelming impression of abundance of numerous drawers and cabinets in which innumerable objects may be found. Tempering Stafford's characterisation, active and tangible exploration did not necessarily mean an ability to touch and handle displays. Reports of the experiences of the earliest visitors to the Ashmolean Museum in the late seventeenth century suggest that whilst wondrous and enraptured touching took place, it was a practice that was disapproved of by some visitors who considered themselves connoisseurs (Martin, 1983).

Despite their earlier restriction to people of power and wealth, European Wonderchambers became sites of entertainment and attractions for travellers. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the passion of wonder increasingly became associated with sensationalism and the layperson. By the mid-eighteenth century, Daston and Park argue that wonder as a valued experience, and the wonders that provoked it, had disappeared from European elite culture and were viewed as simply vulgar. The emergence of the modern museum accompanied a new epistemological order that valued the demonstration of sequence, similarity and rationality over difference, analogy and wonder (Yanni, 1999). If the passion of wonder was at this point separated from the museum and consigned to the fair, Bennett has shown how the structures of these two public spaces were bound together in the nineteenth century institutional efforts to civilise the population and entrench class distinctions. Fluidity and exchange between the tactics of high and low culture is a feature of modern forms of display and presentation, but it is only recently that the passion of wonder have been rehabilitated as the legitimate basis for serious intellectual enquiry.

Daston and Park begin their book on wonder with a quote from Michel Foucault from *The Masked Philosopher,* which deals with the fate and treatment of curiosity:

> Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatised in turn by Christianity, by philosophy , and even by a certain conception of science….I dreams of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means for it; the desire is there; the things to be known are infinite; the people who can employ themselves at this task exist.
> (Foucault in Daston and Park, 1998, p. 9)

All that is standing in our way, Foucault suggests, is a “protectionist attitude” that insists on the separation between “good” and “bad” information”. This quote is also used as the standing preface for the influential magazine *Cabinet,* which emulates the Wonderchamber in its eclectic and combinatory editorial approach. It is also used by Brian Dillon (the UK editor of Cabinet) in his essay in the catalogue for his 2013 exhibition *Curiosity, Art and the Pleasure of Knowing*. For Dillon curiosity, like wonder, entails stupefaction, distraction and desire as part of “discovering the world” (Dillon, 2013, p.23). For Daston and Park “Wonder and wonders have risen to prominence on a wave of suspicion and self-doubt concerning the standards and sensibilities that had long excluded them (and much else) from respectable intellectual endeavours…”. (Daston & Park, 1998, p.10)The return of the wonderful in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries reflects, for them a “deep questioning of ideals of order, rationality, and good taste” (Ibid., p.10). This “deep questioning” is at the heart of MONA—a museum that embraces the sensational aspects of wonder as a fundamental part of its role in intellectual enquiry.

A Public Wonderland for Personal Enquiry

Since MONA opened in Hobart in 2011, it has been described repeatedly as a modern Wonderchamber.[5] The reasons for the comparison are clear: First, the museum is the private collection of an enormously rich individual whose idiosyncratic taste is everywhere in evidence. Second, the conflation of the very old with the very new leads to a vertiginous experience of eclecticism which is extremely unusual, if not unique, in the museum world. Third, the museum embraces and maximises the sensational with a combination of dramatic, ironic and luxurious elements to the museum, which identify it unashamedly as site of entertainment, enjoyment and provocation. In an almost entirely subterranean series of galleries the visitor is plunged, like Alice down the rabbit hole, into a wonderland of extremely diverse objects. If wonder has, since the enlightenment, fallen from its privileged position amongst the intellectual elite down into the depths of popular entertainment, MONA embraces that. Walsh himself has described the museum as a “subversive adult Disneyland”, a place where you might go to be entertained as well as provoked. All of these aspects of the museum have also attracted criticism, but the emphasis of many of MONA's fans and critics on its iconoclastic tone, and the personality cult of its owner, misdirects attention from the profound role which wonder is accorded in the museum as an epistemological stance.

In 2007 when the vision for MONA was being shaped by Walsh and his team, Mark Fraser, the museum's first director formulated a brief that identified the need for the museum to respond to the radical impact of digital technology on contemporary knowledge. We are entering, he argues, a "Neo-Enlightenment" or "Age of the Amateur", in which the "dissemination of knowledge via the internet had an effect comparable to the dissolution of monastic power in northern Europe in the sixteenth century" (Fraser in Franklin, 2014, p.222). In response to this he suggests "the new museum can be an effective combination of the Wunderkammer and the research laboratory" (Ibid., p.224). As this brief was refined—through back and forth discussion with other curators on the project as well as Walsh himself—other key experiential goals were articulated. The museum would be: "loud, aggressive, relentless, subversive"; it would "challenge the visitors' pre-conceived notions of art through the juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory elements" (Ibid., p. 229). Significantly the museum brief states that "David does not object to a 'fairground' experience. Strong emotions are welcome" (Ibid., p.229). MONA's mission was to combine fairground with museum, Wonderchamber with research laboratory—it was to embrace all the historical features of wonder in a quest to respond to new paradigms of knowledge.

As a private museum MONA is unfettered by public money or charter, which would require it to preserve commonwealth treasures, represent particular aspects of culture, or serve any particular public function. This freedom allows MONA to escape spectacularly the traditional disciplinary strictures of most public museums. The collection follows Walsh's exuberant taste and rapacious intellectual curiosity. His voice and his opinions are everywhere brought to you by the museum's location-aware interactive interpretive device the "O".[6] It is a distinctive voice—performatively honest and irreverent. Walsh is an autodidact, and a polymath—fascinated by science, technology and anthropology. In his own words his "superficial art-collecting represents a need to grasp a subject that forever seems out of reach" (Walsh in *Monanisms*, 2010, p. 357). Nicole Durling, MONA's senior curator, suggests that collecting art offers Walsh "ways of understanding the self, humanity, the world around us" (Durling, interview with the author, 2012). She argues that for Walsh the systems, patterns and statistics of maths and science are a natural way of understanding the world, collecting art is for him a way of trying to build a data set through which to investigate human experience. Walsh himself has described MONA as the antithesis to the way in which knowledge is treated as divine revelation in most public galleries and museums. According to Adrian Franklin (2014, p.145), Walsh claims he was trying to build a museum that would support the "gradualism" of the scientific method, in which one learns "by increments through guesswork and experiment, but with constant attempts to falsify".

According to Durling, Walsh sees micro- and macro-cosmic patterns everywhere between the objects and their physical arrangement. Collecting and arranging art, for Walsh, is a process of enquiry that resists firm or totalising conclusions. He is quoted as saying: "Every conclusion is tentative, and that's the key: that's what the museum says. Any time you ask someone something you get what sounds like a cohesive story but it's all bullshit, it could be different tomorrow." (Walsh in Lohrey, 2010)

This enquiry is deeply rooted in the physical processes of human experience, particularly sex and death. The first aim of the final brief for MONA was to "convey the view that sex and death predominate in art, both as subject matter and also provide a significant motive for its creation…" (Franklin, 2014, p.228). For Walsh, art's fundamental connection to sex and death is profoundly linked to its role in evolution. Bennett has shown how museums of the nineteenth century were arranged to compel audiences into an embodied performance of the "progress" of evolution (1995). "Organised walking" (Ibid., p.179) through brightly lit and clearly labelled exhibits led audiences through a spatialised narrative representing the development of the natural world, and its apotheosis in the civilised subject position of the white male viewer. In stark contrast MONA, with its dark, theatrical, labyrinthine setting, is organised to emphasize the visceral, complex, unlikely, violent and lustful reality of evolution, and a similarly complex subject position.

Reflection and Interaction

MONA's aim, like many other museums, is to engender reflection on the position and relationship of the self to the world, but this self-examination embraces the base physical and narcissistic aspects of self-hood as integral aspects of enquiry. The title of the exhibition —*Monanisms*—refers to both art-world wank and the self-absorption, or self-interest of aesthetic introspection. From the distorting mirror that surrounds the entrance to the museum (an artwork by Matt Harding), mirrors of one kind or another pervade the museum. One of MONA's signature interactive art commissions is *Locus Focus*, by artists' collective Gelitin—a mirror positioned in a toilet that allows a visitor to examine their own anus.

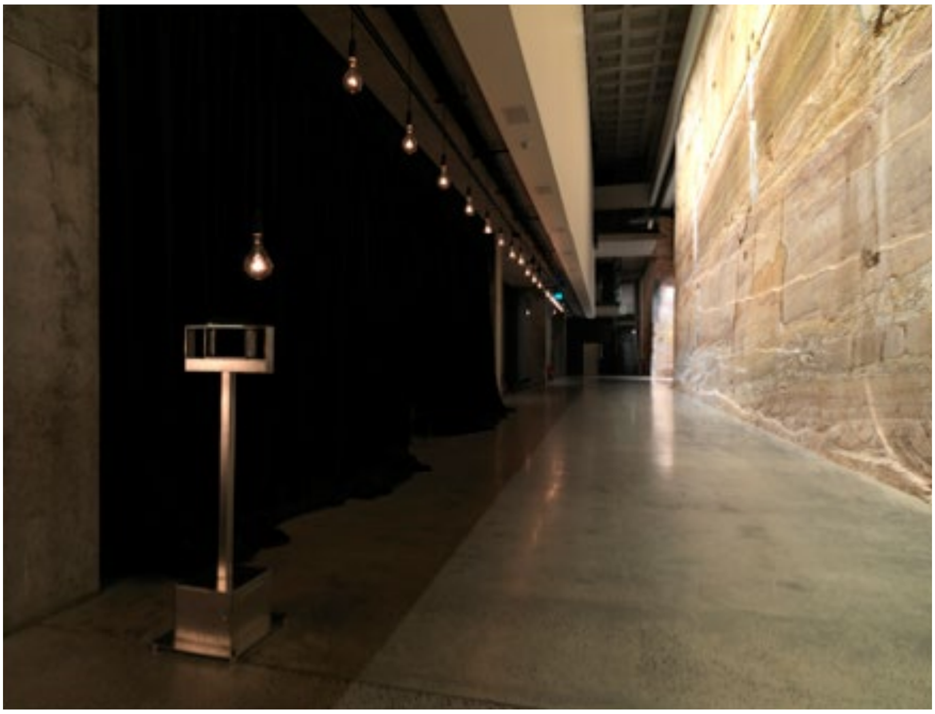

Figure 1. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (born 1967, Mexico City, Mexico; lives and works in Montreal, QC, Canada). *Pulse Room*, 2006. Installation of 108 light bulbs, electronic sensors, edn 2/3. Photo Credit: MONA/Rémi Chauvin. Image Courtesy MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.

Artist David Rokeby has described the way in which interactive media artworks function as "transforming mirrors" (Rokeby, 1995, passim); systems that refract the audience's image, creating space for enquiry and interrogation, that exceed the closed system of narcissistic self-regard. Transforming mirrors of many kinds were also popular, as Stafford points out, in early modern Wonderchambers—and in fact across cultures and periods—as "instruments of both science and divination" (Stafford, p. 23), connecting physics with metaphysics. The first work you encounter, having been transported down through the sandstone rock to the heart of the museum is Raphael Lozano Hemmer's *Pulse Room* (2006) (Figure 1). When visitors grasp a set of hand-held sensors the rhythm of their heartbeat is recorded and the data joins that of the ninety-nine previous visitors, to be translated into pulses of light emanating from a huge array of incandescent bulbs. Its central positioning is a rhetorical move that immediately casts the visitor as the "heart" of the museum. It embraces the egotism of interactivity and implicates the viewer within this ambivalent combination of self-absorption and self-examination. Lozano Hemmer's interactive media works are notable for their comparative success within the mainstream art-world, where they are widely collected and displayed. Despite this success, Lozano Hemmer himself claims that he only recently began to consider museums as acceptable contexts for his works because he believes that his installations are "alive", they are "listening to us and they're sensing us and they're looking at us and they're hoping that we will do something that will inspire them" (Lozano Hemmer in *Monanisms,* 2010, p.311). Traditional museums, he claims, have a "vampiric" and "necrophilic" desire to keep works artificially alive through conservational stasis. By contrast, Lozano Hemmer is interested in museums that are, like MONA "…mixing different pieces, different media, different eras, different styles, different politics to create a performative platform for the piece to be able to continue making its performance" (Ibid., p. 311-312).

Juxtaposed with *Pulse Room* is Julia deVille's *Cinerarium* (2009) (Figure 2)—an urn housed in a vitrine that contains the ashes of Walsh's father. Whilst not a media art work, *Cinerarium* is, like *Pulse Room* an interactive work that offers to integrate the audiences fundamentally into the museum—albeit over a much longer timescale. For $AUD 75,000 any visitor can, according to the 'O' "enjoy all the benefits of Eternity Membership" to the museum, which include, upon death, cremation and permanent exhibition. The juxtaposition of these two works is a self-conscious, dark joke about the limitations of interactivity and the rhetoric of audience inclusion in museums. But as Adrian Franklin points out "laughter is no joking matter" at MONA, where humour is deployed as a serious strategy to subvert and interrogate the power structures at work in the display and consumption of art (Franklin, 2014, p. 294). Like many media artworks, and numerous works in the MONA collection *Cinerarium* is categorically confusing—it is an artwork, but it is also *functional*. As an actual site of interment it is both art and artefact.

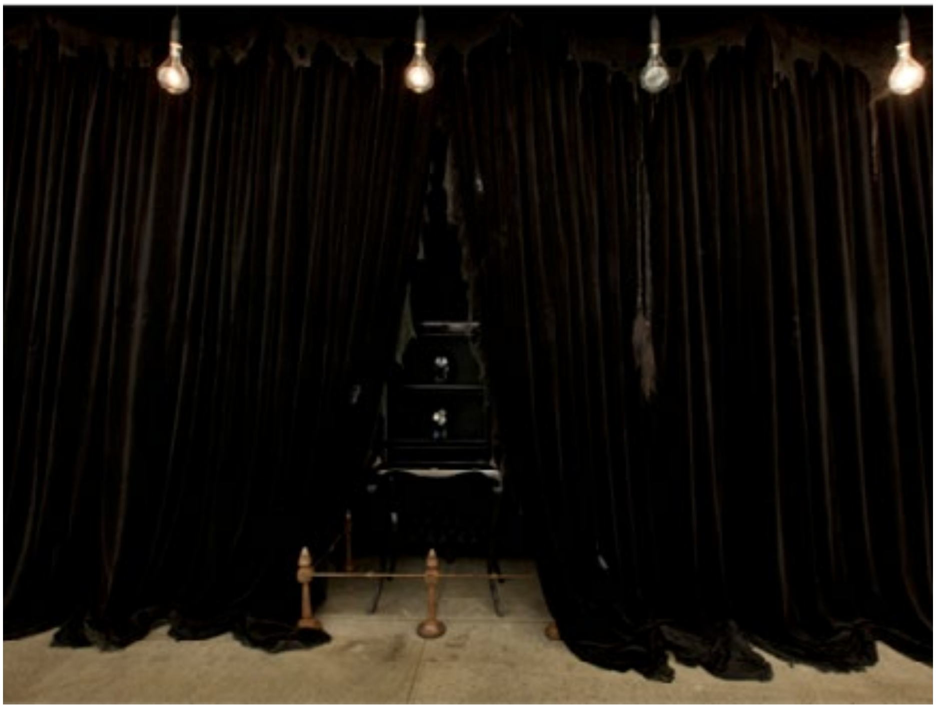

Figure 2. Julia deVille (born 1982, Wellington, New Zealand; arrived 2001 in Australia; lives and works in Melbourne). *Cinerarium* 2009, Australian Forest Raven, silver, marcasite, black diamonds, jarrah, human ash, wood, glass, velvet, human hair, tulle, muslin, Part of the MONA permanent collection. Photo Credit: MONA/Rémi Chauvin Image Courtesy MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.

Provocative Resonance

My Beautiful Chair by Greg Taylor and Dr Philip Nitschke (2010) (Figure 3) continues both the category confusion and the interactive black humour. The installation consists of a leather sofa, rug and coffee table, upon which sits a model of Nitschke's euthanasia machine. A computer hooked up to an automatic mechanism for delivering a lethal injection offers the user a series of questions to determine their informed desire to die. If you click "yes" to all the questions the machine will deliver the fatal dose (in the artwork a cartoonish version of the machine contains an oversized syringe of toxic looking green liquid). The computer counts down, describing the order in which your vital functions cease, finally reporting: "you are dead". For the seconds that the countdown runs, the work produces a feeling of slightly hysterical anticipation, similar to the experience of a ghost train or a horror movie. Audiences queue for their turn to go through the motions of death and experience that momentary thrill. They rapidly run through the question sequence—"yes", "yes", "yes". Companions dissolve in giggles as the syringe empties—it is the nervous laughter of a broken taboo. Taylor claims that the work is intended to start a public conversation about euthanasia. He expected the installation to incite anger, to be smashed up[7]. Instead it seems to open some kind of release valve, to allow audiences to play safely with a confronting issue. *My Beautiful Chair* is provocative not only because it deals with the topic of euthanasia, but also because of its undisciplined defiance of categorisation: it is a working model of a modern technological solution to an ethical dilemma. The machine itself harnesses the questionable neutrality of technology to defer agency for an illegal act. It is part artwork, part model, part pathological side-show, part ethical discussion.

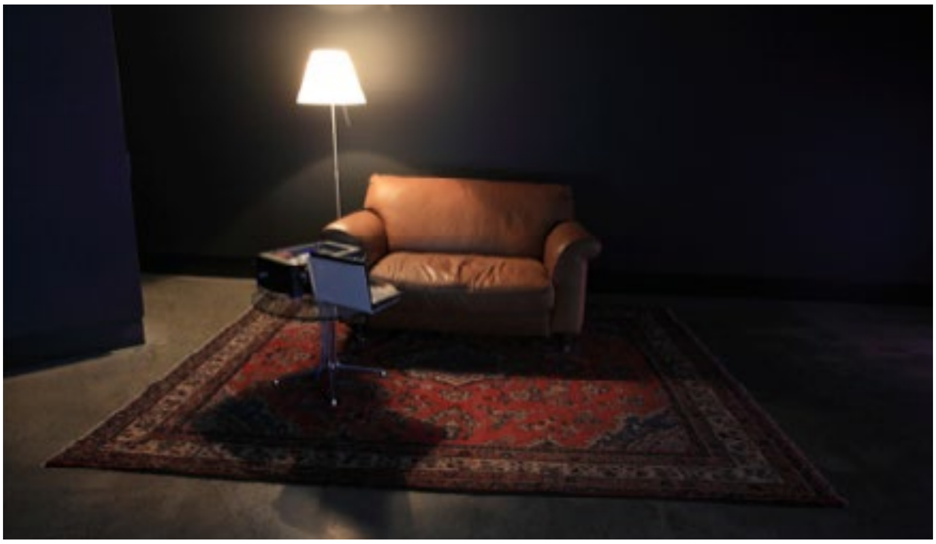

Figure 3. Greg Taylor (born 1959, Bega, NSW, Australia; lives and works in Melbourne, Australia) & Dr. Philip Nitschke (born 1947, South Australia, Australia). *My Beautiful Chair* 2010. Interactive installation: leather armchair, Nitschke Euthanasia Machine, Persian floor rug, glass coffee table, standing lamp. Photo credit: MONA/Leigh Carmichael. Image Courtesy of MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

A crucial aspect of the experience of *My Beautiful Chair* is its resonance with the surrounding Greek, Roman and Egyptian artefacts: death masks, funerary objects, fertility symbols. Without labels to fix their meanings all these objects become somehow undisciplined and provocative. Cut loose from fixed interpretive structures the assemblage of objects mingles magic, technology, representation, belief and utility in a play of relationships that magnifies their connection to potent human experiences of life and death. This curatorial system of juxtaposition, like the tightly encased eclecticism of the Curiosity Cabinet "offers a parallel to the interlocking dynamics of the contemporary universe… it flattens hierarchies and allows new attachments to spring up" (Stafford and

Terpak, 2001, p.5). Adrian Franklin argues that this curatorial approach accurately and vividly conjures the “unruly” nature of objects in the real world, which “resonate with one another through chance juxtapositions, in aesthetic, functional and symbolic terms” (Franklin, 2014, p. 102).

Throughout MONA the resonances between different kinds of objects create a nexus of different systems for knowing and understanding the world. This is particularly vivid in *Kryptos* (2008-2010) by Brigita Ozolins, a multimedia work commissioned for the museum. A series of three interlocking chambers creates a concrete labyrinth in which the walls are covered with binary code, a translation of the ancient text of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Set into the walls are clay tablets of cuneiform script—an extinct form of written communication. These ancient messages are now opaque—encrypted—as is the contemporary digital code that lines the walls. Once again the generative, yoking power of analogy, described by Stafford, is conjured to create correspondences across and between forms of inscription. The experience of walking through the labyrinth becomes a meditation on the “deep technology” of language that has formed human beings over millennia (Ihde, 1998). Mystery, surprise, concealment and partial revelation heighten the experience of wonder. The disoriented visitor reaches the heart of the labyrinth and looks up to find—once again—a mirror reflecting her own image. The key at the heart of this conundrum is the viewer herself, whose fundamental nature is to create and crack codes, to shape and be shaped by words.

The Spectacular and the Grotesque

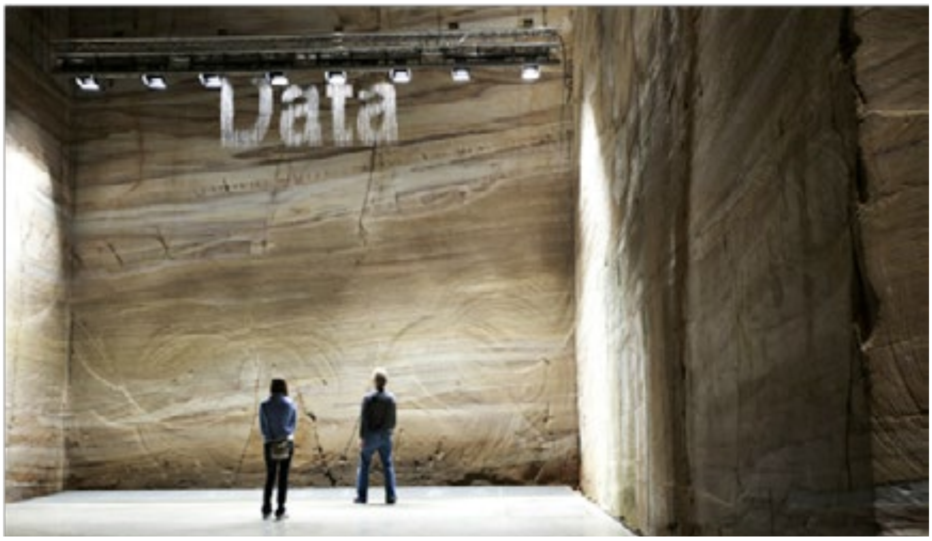

Figure 4. Julius Popp (born 1973, Nuremberg, West Germany; lives and works in Leipzig, Germany and New York, NY, USA). *Bit.Fall* 2001-2006. Computer, electronic devices, pump, 320 magnetic valves, stainless steel basin and water, edn 2/4 Part of the MONA permanent collection. Photo Credit: MONA/Rémi Chauvin. Image Courtesy MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

This same obsession with language, transmission, perception and infrastructure is spectacularly deployed in *Bit.Fall*, by Julius Popp (Figure 4). Towering through the museum the droplets of this artificial waterfall are the pixels in a low-res display. Momentarily the water forms words gleaned from Google searches, which rapidly dissipate into mist. *Bit.Fall* is, according to Popp, about the overflow of information. It is intended as a critique of the way that contemporary technologies push human consciousness to the limit. Like the butterfly pinned in a case, it briefly isolates one instant of coherence from the deluge, freeze-framing time to briefly reveal the signal in the noise. Set against the crumbling exposed sandstone wall of the museum the work seems to be part natural and part mechanical wonder. The "O" will tell you that it is the most "loved" exhibit in the museum – the delighted throng of visitors add to the information overload critiqued by the work by snapping and uploading images of the words as they materialise. Popp worries that his critical intentions are somewhat thwarted by the transporting delight the work inspires in its audiences[8], but MONA's atmosphere of serious frivolity and profound spectacle scaffolds *Bit.Fall's* captivating critical doubleness.

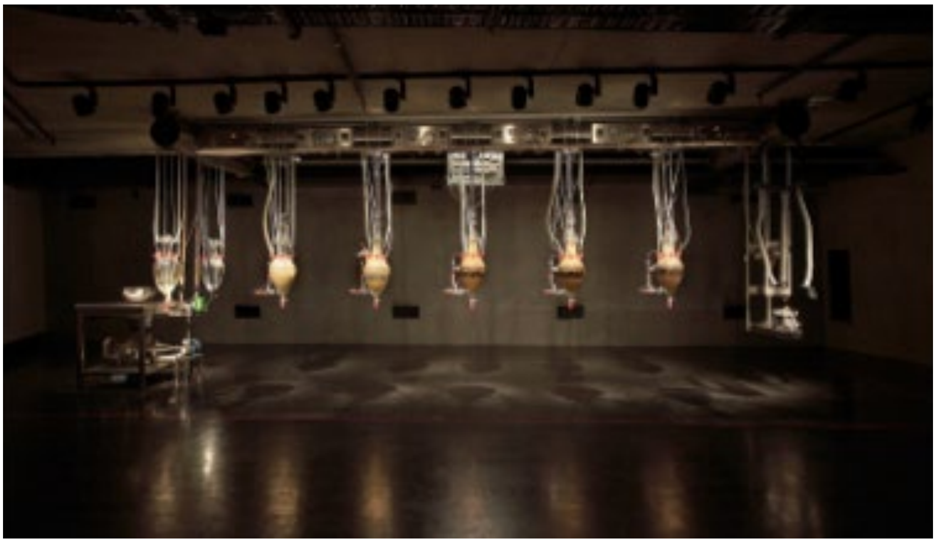

Figure 5. Wim Delvoye (born 1965, Wervik, Belgium; lives and works in Ghent, Belgium), *Cloaca Professional,* Mixed media, 275 x 710 x 175 cm. Collection MONA, Hobart. Photo credit: MONA/Leigh Carmichael. Image courtesy of MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.

If MONA unashamedly deploys the mechanically spectacular it just as readily deploys the mechanically grotesque. Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca Professional* (2010) (Figure 5) is a machine replicating the human digestive system, which is fed meals from the museum's cafeteria at one end, and excretes reproductions of human faeces at the other. This impressive technological assemblage is a demonstration of precise and complex engineering, gleaming in a clinically white space. Its unpleasant, slightly familiar smell contrasts with the cleanliness of its surroundings and makes its audience uneasy, and slightly nauseous. Like *Bit.Fall*, *Cloaca* represents a complex technological achievement that is a crucial aspect of its appreciation. Like *My Beautiful Chair*, it excites fascination, hilarity and disgust at the overstepping of a taboo. It raises the suspicion that the viewer herself is somehow the butt of this dirty joke, but at the same time provokes a fascinated amazement that this much technology is required to reproduce something that can occur mostly unnoticed within the comparatively diminutive human body.

The mechanical grotesquery of *Cloaca Professional,* the spectacular apparition of *Bit.Fall,* the provocations of *My Beautiful Chair,* the conundrum of *Kryptos* and the refracting mirror of *Pulse Room* reveal, in their extreme variety, the breadth and variety of media art as a category. There are numerous other media works in the collection, including several commissioned specifically for the museum. Gregory Barsamian's *Artifact*, for example, uses the old-school technology of the zoetrope to evoke the flickering coherence of consciousness and the emergence of ideas; Patrick Hall's *When My Heart Stops Beating*, also a MONA commission, offers a luminous interactive chest of drawers embedded with vinyl records – each of which releases a disembodied "I love you" when opened. All of these works can be described as "undisciplined" in their various minglings of science, technology, design, archaeology and ethics, and all of them seem at home in the emancipating eclecticism of MONA's curatorial approach. The emphasis on wonder allows the collection and the visitor to wander between disciplines, media, concerns, cultures and timescales.

Many of these media artworks are also undisciplined in the sense that they breach museum etiquette by *doing* things. Having "behaviour" of any kind is bad behaviour for a museum object. Curatorially this bad-behaviour is intentionally emphasized. The theatricality of the museum reinforces the exuberant entanglement of these undisciplined objects with the aesthetics of the side-show, the fair and the carnival. Like a hall of mirrors these works exploit the capacity of interactivity to turn attention back to the audience, they embrace the pleasures of narcissism, self-regard and childish curiosity into the most base aspects of humanity as part of a process of enquiry into the nature of experience.

This enquiry need not be focused, restrained, or quiet. The curatorial team aimed, Nicole Durling claims, to "create a cacophony of sound and objects" which would provoke thought:

> We didn't want to tell people what to think about the mysterious world of art but to be curious and to question. We wanted them to be self aware, aware of what they are experiencing, to come out confused, repulsed, exhilarated. (Durling, 2012)

Durling further claims that MONA is curated "viscerally" and "instinctively". Walsh, she says, is very happy to admit that they "retrofit" explanations for why curatorial decisions are made. For him "understanding emerges, collaboratively and through layering", the process of curating—of arranging and staging objects—is itself the process of discovery. (Ibid.)

The Undisciplined Object in the Post-disciplinary Museum

David Walsh does not claim to have a particular interest in media art. In fact Durling claims the contrary—that media art has no special place in the MONA collection and is not identified in any way as different to any other work. In her words: "We've got a group of objects… some of them need watering, some of them need tuning, some of them need to be turned off at the mains and rebooted" (Durling, 2012). Within a list of strange and un-similar objects media artworks are just another kind of peculiar thing. Selecting the digital and technological art within the collection for special critical consideration, as I have done in this essay, is in fact anathema to MONA's integrative mode. And yet, I believe, it is an illuminating exercise. The undisciplined objects of media art, which too often remain awkward and isolated within museum collections, loose their specialness in the environment of MONA and gain, instead, a depth of reverberant meanings. What does their loss of special status tell us about the epistemic organisation of MONA? And, more broadly, what does MONA's epistemic organisation tell us about the way knowledge may come to be mobilised and represented in museums?

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has argued that many museums have become "museological" to a second degree—that is they have become "custodians of the materialization (and display) of outmoded knowledge formations" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006, p.369). As she points out, many museums are, and will continue to be, valued for exactly that. But if museums are to play a role as "epistemic organisations" —sites for the production as well as the representation of knowledge (Miettinen and Virkkunen, 2005)—then they will need to respond dramatically to the profound epistemological changes of a post-disciplinary era. Whilst there is a good understanding of the way in which museums have represented, reinforced and deployed knowledge formations of the past, there is less understanding of how contemporary curatorial practices produce *new* knowledge. In this essay I have equated the resurgence of wonder as a pleasure and a spur to enquiry with a shift towards a post-disciplinary sensibility. In this respect MONA offers a valuable site of study. It clearly identifies itself as a museum of *art,* but in integrating old and new it has collapsed a boundary between art and artefact which reverberates along the fault lines between other classificatory divisions: useful and useless, tasteful and tasteless, technological and aesthetic. These are the kind of distinctions which have kept media art out of art collections, and housed instead within specialist media art, science and technology institutions. Like the canary in the mine, the thriving of media art's undisciplined objects in MONA's subterranean mixture suggests a shift in traditional museum structures that can be seen as a prototype for the way museums may have to reorganise, or even disorganise, themselves to engage with post-disciplinary knowledge.

Endnotes

[1] Prominent recent examples (all from 2013) include the 55th Venice Biennale of art *The Encyclopedic Palace* curated by Massimiliano Gioni, *Theatre of the World*, curated by Jean Hubert Martin at MONA and two Hayward Touring Exhibitions: *Curiosity, Art and the Pleasure of Knowing*, curated by Brian Dillon and *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things*, curated by Mark Leckey.

[2] See, for example, the twenty-two comments following Bishop's article on the *Artforum* website: http://artforum.com/inprint/id=31944

[3] I use the term "Wonderchamber" to cover a variety of different permutations of chambers and cabinets associated with this phenomenon, including Wunderkammer, Kunstkammer, Wunderschrank, Cabinet of Curiosities etc.

[4] Works of art played only a minor part in these collections, usually classified amongst other "artificial rarities", and only in the latter part of the seventeenth century were they separated out to form their own specialized collections. See MacGregor 1983, p.71.

[5] See, for example, Timms (2012).

[6] The "O" will, if you choose, offer you a range of different kinds of information on any nearby artwork, including "ideas"—short pithy thoughts on the work, '"artwank'"—a traditional, though still notably informal art historical explanation, "gonzo"—usually Walsh's own observations on what the work means to him, and often how or why he acquired it, and "audio"—informal interviews with the artists. The "O" itself is the subject of several blog posts and short articles, see for example, Love, Hate or Punt? Opinions and prevarications about MONA and its O by Nancy Proctor on the blog for Curator: *The Museum Journal,* posted on December 23, 2011 at http://www.curatorjournal.org/archives/1023. Retrieved on 22 June 2012.

[7] According to his interview on the "O".

[8] According to Popp's interview about the work accessible through the "O".

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