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Technomania at MONA: just because you can doesn’t mean you should

It is a common trope for museums to exhibit the influence of the ancient world on modernity. Our legal systems, road networks and mathematical principles are all indebted to the discoveries of the ancients. Even modern art, described as a reflection of its own age, is often inspired by ancient forebears. However, what is often not expressed is the influence of modern museum technology and ideology on our own experience and understanding of antiquity. The River of Fundament exhibition, which ended on 13 April 2015, exposes this reciprocal relationship, showing both its ability to encourage or encumber our relationship with materials of the past.

Described as ‘art’s subterranean Disneyland’, the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Tasmania, MONA for short, has been an institution at the forefront of the reconceptualisation of what it means to visit and curate a museum collection.¹ Since its opening in 2011, the curators of MONA have worked with the expansive private collection of David Walsh to create a museum that can remain innovative and diverse while still functioning as

Figure 1: Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Hobart, Australia. Barrylb, March 19, 2011, Wikimedia Commons. http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/70/MONA_1.jpg

¹ Ruiz 2011, January–February.
a whole. The exhibits are conceptually based, often critical of the art world in which they participate, breaking the boundaries of aestheticism and materiality. This, combined with a beautiful geographical setting and the work of critically acclaimed Melbourne-based architect Nonda Katsalidis, makes MONA an absolute must see for any art lover, regular museum goer or casual visitor to the Apple Isle.

A visit to MONA is theatrical. The visitor is presented with a diverse yet unified expression of art, one that is not only viewed, but also experienced, even constructed by those in its presence. Whichever way you approach it, the museum, cut deep into the cliff, still takes you unawares. Maybe more accurately put, it seems to sneak up on you. It blends into the environment until it is suddenly so strikingly obvious that you feel like hitting yourself over the head for missing it. Such an experience is also described by artists about the process of creating art. Painter Balint Zsako once said ‘if you know what it’s going to be, what’s the point of making it?’ Much contemporary art is meant to be emergent, as is the collection of MONA itself, each piece as startling as the last, each with a different aesthetic, a different meaning and a different way of occupying the multi-purpose open gallery spaces.

The River of Fundament was a case in point. Though the exhibit premiered at the Haus der Kunst in Munich (curator Okwui Enwezor), it was very much designed for MONA. It was curated in part by Matthew Barney, the artist himself, with David Walsh, Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne. The exhibition is based around Barney’s five-and-a-half-hour long film of the same name released earlier in 2014. The film itself, and thus the exhibit surrounding it, was a response to Norman Mailer’s great opus Ancient Evenings, criticised as a self-glorifying overly sexualised reworking of Egyptian mythology.

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2 Neustein 2011, 28 July.
3 Mona 2011.
4 Varenne 2014, 29 August.
5 MONA 2014.
Far from being a mere adaptation of the book into artistic forms, Matthew Barney’s work seemed to be an inquiry into the book’s narrative, its author, his creativity, his sources of inspiration and the various underlying themes and controversies that made up both the book and the author’s own life. Various set pieces, props, conceptual designs, metal plate drawings and photographs were set throughout the vast spaces of the museum’s B3 level. It gave attention to both the work’s inspiration and its product, the former through the integration of ancient Egyptian pieces, copies of the original books upon which it was based, as well as a storyboard style collage of the movie’s various elements, the latter through inclusions of pieces used within the movie whether as props or set elements.

As an archaeologist and historian rather than an art critic, it is not my place to comment on the aesthetic and conceptual quality of Matthew Barney’s


film or his artworks – if that is what you are interested in, there are numerous other reviews that focus on Barney’s art. My intention is to focus on the way in which the exhibit functions: its organisation by the curators and navigation by the public, and specifically its use of technology.

The exhibition was very much an integration of different eras, with ninety modern pieces and fifty pristine ancient artefacts taken from MONA’s storage rooms. Each room was set up to a different level of overlap, combining ancient sarcophagi with mangled crowbars mimicking Egyptian royal sceptres or perhaps the bones of the mummies they accompanied. The spatial integration ultimately reflects the conceptual assimilation that the artist had attempted to achieve within his work. It is not uncommon in the world of modern art for artists to draw their inspiration from ancient predecessors, such as Picasso, Moore and Rodin, who are known for the ground-breaking nature of their art, an art still firmly rooted in ancient sculpture. However, in exhibitions the inspirations for these ‘artistic geniuses’ are often confined to a mention in an information panel or two. Perhaps, if you are lucky there will be a single example of such a piece in the exhibit. Fortunately for the curators of the River of Fundament exhibit, this was not a problem, with access to MONA’s collection of ancient artefacts that could be co-opted into such displays. The exhibition is an attempt to simultaneously show the transformation of the ‘artistic legacy of antiquity’ by the modern artist and juxtapose modern art with pieces from which they draw inspiration. The self-absorption of the River of Fundament exhibit is both the strength and weakness of the project. The single focus allows for a more straightforward structure that the viewer can navigate, and this in turn allows for a more intimate integration between ancient and modern, both entwined into a single artistic narrative.

6 Needham 2014, 7 March.
7 McDonald 2014, 28 November.
Another way in which the MONA exhibit brings the modern and the traditional together is their manner of guiding you through the exhibit. When entering the museum, rather than the usual map and audio-guide, you are given a smartphone and a set of headphones, the intention being that you can enjoy a text free exhibit, with information available through the smartphone. This method not only circumvents the clutter of labels, but also allows the viewer more autonomy to move through the museum. The information provided is extensive and well-researched, providing commentary from experts in both modern art and ancient history. Beyond the general description of the piece and its supposed creation date, materials, find-spot and iconography, the description includes an analysis of the object in light of its history and its place within Barney’s own work. Layers of information are provided through various media to give the viewer a more rounded understanding. Though a great method in its ability to provide a breadth of sources, the overload of information read from this tiny screen can become cumbersome, taking attention away from the actual pieces themselves, creating a barrier between the viewer and the artefact or artwork.

In his article about exhibitions and inclusions, Dr. Mammad Aidani emphasises the importance of objects being presented so as to ‘affect the visitor’s sense of self in the space and their relation to other’.\(^8\) This focuses on a conception of the museum as a public space and a social space where people can engage in encounters with one another and with the objects at hand. For the museum to simultaneously perform its educational function this encounter needs to be mediated in some way, through display elements such as textual labels, audio fragments or virtual reconstruction. These can provide context for the object, with the potential to give further material for the dialogue between viewers and objects. However, it could be argued that these exhibition methods dilute this public function as it isolates the viewers from one another and from the objects at hand. This is a difficult balancing act that is often

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\(^8\) Aidani 2013, 33.
dependent to a large extent on the type of gallery, the resources available and the curatorial aims. This begs the question: to what extent can we sacrifice the social aspect of museums for the sake of progress, efficiency and individualism? It is a difficult conundrum, especially with modern conceptual art, which often speaks to the individual viewer and requires a great deal of explanation to understand its full meaning.

In the case of the MONA, the incorporation of modern techniques for collection curation, though enforcing the museum’s educational function, threatens the social aspect of visitation. While the integration of modern and ancient in their material is one that is stimulating and challenging, their technological guidance methods fall short of their status as a radical museum. Though technologically advanced, the system provides an overload of data, removing the need for interpretation and analysis, and hampering any social discussion that could follow from such a thought-provoking exhibit. Especially for a museum so focused on its theatrics, the device disconnects the viewer entirely from object and surroundings. The developers describe their app as a solution to the didacticism and limitations of wall labels, stating that their product will enhance visitor experience, enabling imagination, free thinking and private appreciation.\(^9\) I would argue that the app is a treatise to a very specific view, that of the museum collector and his private band of interpreters and critics. Though the information is impressive in its extent, it does not allow for the interpretive freedom suggested. The potential is there, the ability for interaction, commenting, immersion and education, are all evident but more thought needs to be put into the museum experience as one that is social and discursive. In the case of MONA, it becomes too easy to get lost in the mobile device, removing the impetus to interact with other visitors and the object.

\(^9\) Chan 2011, 27 October.
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