

# You say dyspeptic, I say inspiring: MONA provokes fierce debate

By GABRIELLA COSLOVICH

IN ITS brief but brash first six months of life, Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art has rewritten the rules about what an art gallery can be — and given academics and critics plenty to think about.

The brainchild of David Walsh — professional gambler, canny mathematician, lapsed Catholic, and devotee of atheism and evolutionary science — MONA is a subterranean, secular temple to some of the most in-your-face art you're likely to see in Australia, and some of the most sublime.

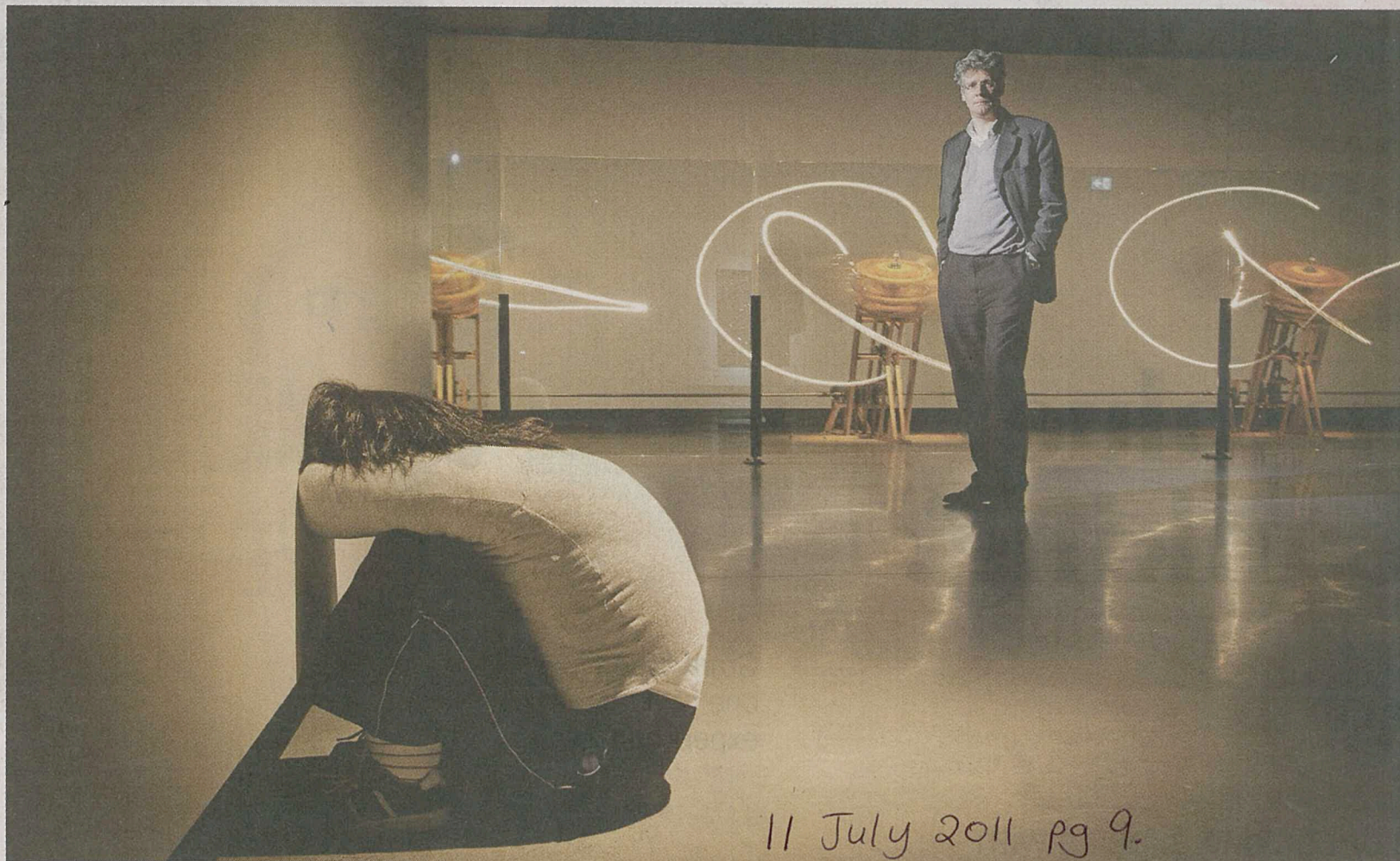
It's easy to focus on the visceral and provocative, at the expense of the transcendental and beautiful: the image of bestiality, the faeces-making machine (literally), the sculpture made from huge chunks of rotting meat.

But it is none of these works that sums up all that is amiss about MONA for University of Melbourne philosopher John Armstrong. The work that he finds the most moving, and symptomatic, is a lifelike sculpture of a child, curled up in despair against a wall.

Armstrong describes the sculpture, by Taiyo Kimura, as an "image of powerlessness in the face of broken hopes, fears, confusion". In Armstrong's opinion, this dyspeptic view of life is where MONA is stuck, and why, ultimately, the museum fails to rise beyond provocation into meaningfulness.

In the latest edition of Tasmania's *Island* magazine, Armstrong writes that MONA "repudiates responsibility for what comes next . . . it does not seek to instil in us, the beholders, the qualities of mind and character, and the relevant insights and convictions, that would help make our lives, and the lives of others, good".

If that sounds like a rather evangelical view about art, it's meant to be.



Philosopher John Armstrong, with Taiyo Kimura's *Untitled (stool for guard)*, will share his views on MONA and art at the Wheeler Centre this week.

PICTURE: PETER MATHEW

"I think it's good to be evangelical about art," Armstrong said. "It's an issue for our times . . . we should have higher expectations about what art can do for us, just as we should have higher expectations about what politicians can do for us, or economists can do for us, or oil producers should be doing for us."

On Thursday, Armstrong will

present his views (which proved highly unpopular at a forum in Hobart recently) at a debate about MONA and art, at Melbourne's Wheeler Centre. Organised by *Island* editor Sarah Kanowski, the debate will be hosted by Radio National's Amanda Smith and speakers will include artist Peter Hill, and artistic director of the Australian Centre for

Contemporary Art Juliana Engberg.

Walsh has yet to read Armstrong's essay, but was not impressed when the philosopher's argument was relayed to him.

"Almost all of the responses I get, except from academics, who, I guess, have to justify their existence, is that [MONA] is life-affirming," Walsh said. His fears that his private museum

might become a "heroic failure" have not eventuated.

Rather, visitor numbers have exceeded his expectation — since its lavish January opening, MONA has had 218,000 visitors, more than half from interstate.

The debate at the Wheeler Centre on Thursday at 6pm will be free to the public.