



Why The Free Market Produces The Best Art

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Art is for consumption, and when it is designed with the audience in mind it provides a feast. And a cultural feast has been provided by Tasmania's privately run and owned gallery—the Museum of Old and New Art, or MONA.

MONA's collection is one of the best and broadest in the world, especially for a private gallery.

The subterranean gallery that opened in 2011 cost \$80 million to build and houses over 500 works estimated to be worth \$100 million.

And its focus on the consumption of art appears to be at the heart of its success. It currently attracts 350,000 visitors a year which, considering its geographic isolation makes it one of the most popular galleries in the nation.

MONA is the brainchild of professional gambler, David Walsh, who established the private gallery to house and display his impressive collection of artwork.

In the galleries publication, *Monanisms*, Walsh says he 'got the money mainly by gambling with the odds in my favour and by borrowing off an extremely loyal rich mate. The former sounds lucky, the latter was'.

But despite the free entry for Tasmanians (non-Tasmanians have to pay an entrance fee), MONA is a symbol of the enterprise that is sorely lacking in the art world.

Walsh's artistic gift to Tasmanians may appear to be purely philanthropic, but it is not.

The gallery that costs \$7 million annually to run is commercial and is designed to cover its own costs.

In a recent interview, when it was suggested to Walsh that his atheism could result in the gallery being used as a site for secular funerals, he expressed enthusiasm for the prospect and said that market forces would dictate the price.



The best way to make the gallery economically sustainable is to deliver what art has lacked in recent years—a focus on consumers.

Walsh clearly embraced this concept in a practical fashion with an Apple iPod touch used as the museum visual and audio guide for each visitor. Using the iPod touch, visitors can even rate their love or hate for each work.

In a recent interview, Walsh said his challenge was to make MONA accessible so 'visitors are not to feel intimidated by art'.

It's an utter rejection of the cultural norm that has now enveloped the art world, which is becoming less and less democratic.

The evolution of challenging and subversive art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was

influenced by a desire to democratise art from the exclusive enjoyment of the wealthy.

Art can be many things. But the great democratisation of art came from marking it about form and function. Few people can afford their own art gallery. But most of us enjoy the inspiration of art in our daily lives through design.

In practice this democratisation was achieved by infusing design into everyday consumer objects including plates, bowls and furniture.



Snake by Sidney Nolan

But in more recent times as art has been influenced by centralised authority, driven by government grants, and less by the marketplace, it has become more distant and staid, and less connected to its consumer.

In a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*, academic Camille Puglia lamented the ‘wasteland’ of contemporary art.

According to Puglia ‘no major figure of profound influence has emerged in painting or sculpture since the waning of Pop Art and the birth of Minimalism in the early 1970s’.

She argues it is largely because an anti-capitalist ‘group think’ now pervades the art world.

Yet Puglia argues it’s those sections of the art world that embrace the commercial world that are thriving with ‘works of bold originality and stunning beauty continuing to be done in architecture, a frankly commercial field’.

Walsh acknowledges the selfish motivation of artists writing in *Monanisms* that ‘artists make art for all sorts of reasons, but the metamotives are the same, showing off to get sex or power, trying to avoid death through prayer, avoiding or engaging the wrath of authority, resolving an obsession’.

And that ‘all these things, collectively or individually, could be (are) selected for Darwinian processes’.

Walsh describes his gallery as a ‘subversive Disneyland’.

But it’s not subversive. It’s an engaging collection of artistic works that prompt thought and reflection and place the consumer at the heart of the gallery.

It's a perspective largely ignored as art has been increasingly represented in modern society as a form of 'public good' that should not be driven by self-interest or the consuming public. The attitude is very much to the arts' disadvantage.

If you have visited the site, MONA is one of the most challenging art galleries in the world.

'Challenging' is a word regularly thrown around in the art world with 'provocative', but rarely does the viewing experience live up to the hype. MONA does.

In addition to its collection of pre-Christ coins and statues, Egyptian sculptures and contemporary installations, the gallery houses a mechanised digestive system that excretes manufactured faeces at regular intervals, and an interactive euthanasia machine used by Dr Philip Nitschke to assist people in dying.

The last two may be revolting but the gallery and the works it contains are designed with the consumer in mind.

In particular, the euthanasia machine invites the viewer to participate in clicking the necessary buttons on a computer to prompt a needle injection that, if it was connected, would deliver a lethal dose of chemicals.

This visitor simply couldn't press the final confirmation button.

Even some art cannot be consumed. But even that realisation is a demonstration of how successful Walsh has been in delivering a gallery that engages its consumers.