The Sydney Morning Herald

Hobart's Dark Mofo winter arts festival sets pulses racing

June 15, 2015

The Fire Organ in Dark Park at Dark Mofo, Hobart. *Photo: Christopher Pearce*

DARK MOFO
Hobart, until June 22

There was a moment during David Walsh's talk with performance artist Marina Abramovic on Sunday that gave some insight into the gambling multimillionaire and arts patron's thinking.

He quoted a Woody Allen gag from *Annie Hall* to illustrate his views on some of the spiritual aspects of Abramovic's oeuvre. ("A guy walks into a psychiatrist's office and says, 'hey doc, my brother's crazy! He thinks he's a chicken. Then the doc says, why don't you turn him in? Then the guy says, I would but I need the eggs'.")

People feeling the force of the sound in Bass Bath at Dark Mofo festival, Hobart. *Photo: Christopher Pearce*

He may not be a believer in crystals and shamanism, but he appreciates their appeal, as well as the numbers that Abramovic can attract to his home town (as witnessed by the queue that ran down the block for her sole public appearance in Hobart).

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For many Hobartians, Walsh - founder of the Tasmanian city's Museum of Old and New Art, the Mona Foma summer festival and winter drawcard Dark Mofo - is the goose that laid the golden egg.

Talking to locals two years ago, when Dark Mofo began, there was a widespread scepticism about Walsh's mid-year event, and how his activities overshadowed everything else in the island state.

The Blacklist Event after hours at Dark Mofo, Hobart. *Photo: Christopher Pearce*

Their attitudes now seem markedly different, and devoid of cynicism, having seen the proof in the pudding: an expected 150,000 visitors and hotels at full capacity instead of only 10-20 per cent full in what would have been the quietest time of year for an economy increasingly reliant on tourism.

The impact of the MONA effect is clear in the number of new restaurants, cafes and boutique hotels that have since proliferated in the city, and in the number of mainlanders (those from the "north island", as locals joke) who have moved there.

On Saturday, MONA's creative director Leigh Carmichael unveiled plans for a permanent structure, a towering piece of public art by Mexico's Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Called *Art Tower*, the 117-metre tall tower will have two double-helix staircases for people to ascend and descend, featuring LED lights pulsing in synch with the recorded heartbeats of those who reach the top.

Gareth Liddiard sings at the Odeon Theatre at Dark Mofo, Hobart. *Photo: Christopher Pearce*

A representation of that piece sits on the site now - a sphere of spotlights pointing from the proposed site for the tower, the former *Mercury* newspaper building, into the sky. While it appears simplistic from a distance, like a poor man's *Spectre* (Ryoji Ikeda's stunning light installation from the first Dark Mofo in 2013), it comes alive up close, responding to the hearts of people queueing to power its pulsing lights and throbbing soundtrack.

Another work at Dark Park on Macquarie Point (which is home to a program of public art on the city's wharf), has an enormous pulse. *Bass Bath*, by Byron J. Scullin and Supple Fox, floods the senses with the sound of eight monolithic 2100 horsepower subwoofers (the drone of which could be felt a block away).

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The remainder of the public art is more spectacle, less interactive - *Fire Organ* by Bastiaan Maris is a Matthew Barney-esque construction of pipes that sends bursts of flames into the sky; *Night Ship* by Anthony McCall is a fishing vessel sailing down the Derwent with a strident beam of light and ear-piercing fog horn.

While the music program on the opening weekend was patchy (Preatures were a bit hit and miss, while Gareth Liddiard's solo show was perhaps more lo-fi than many expected), the Blacklist dance party, with its faux art kidnappings, kissing booth and enormous sheet draped over the audience, was a huge word-of-mouth hit and worth a visit to Tasmania alone.

But it's Abramovic's retrospective at MONA, *Private Archaeology,* that most people are here to see, charting the Serbian superstar artist's groundbreaking career from pioneering video works with her former partner Ulay (including *Rest Energy*, 1980, in which he has a taut bow and arrow poised at her heart) to more recent pieces (the stunning 2003 work *At the Waterfall*, with Tibetan monks chanting) and interactive installations.

If the huge crowd that jammed into the museum on Saturday night is any indication, that's an awful lot more eggs to fill Hobart's brimming basket.

Marina Abramovic's *Private Archaeology* is at MONA until October 5.

The writer travelled to Tasmania with the assistance of Dark Mofo.

Performance artist Benjamin Hancock at the Blacklist Event at Dark Mofo, Hobart. *Photo: Christopher Pearce*

The Pulse Column at Dark Mofo, Hobart. *Photo: Chritopher Pearce*

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