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# cultural solutions



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## ESSAY

# Inside the tent

The opposite of shovelling muck

Natasha Cica

**‘IN** Australia, culture is what does not qualify for arts funding.’ So quipped a young Sydneysider in *THINKtent*, a project whose prototype I delivered across Tasmania last year. *THINKtent* invites members of the public into a small, travelling canvas tent that provides an intimate, beautiful and ‘safe’ space for people to come together for conversation and reflection: the Tasmanian tent is internally adorned with commissioned design furniture and decor, inspired by the lost Tasmanian wilderness of Lake Pedder. *THINKtent* holds up to ten participants at a time in sessions each lasting around an hour, each including a personality or specialist speaking on a topic of their choice. I host *THINKtent* as one long, meandering performance across the day, recording it by taking handwritten notes and still photographs. Smartphones and their relentless distraction are unwelcome.

*THINKtent* must be culture, because it hasn’t received arts funding as such. *THINKtent* debuted in Tasmania’s Ten Days on the Island arts festival in 2013, however, which currently receives \$1.5 million in public funding – Tasmania’s Opposition promised to halve that in government – and benefited from marketing support and cross-island schlepping by the Ten Days’ team between site placements in Burnie, Launceston and the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA). Business boosting came from Hobart-based Peta Heffernan of Liminal Spaces, providing design curation *pro bono*. Extra private-pocket support came from the participating designer/makers Simon Ancher, Angela Griffiths, Penny Malone and Rachael Rose, who effectively worked free of fee. My assistant Sally Laing volunteered unpaid overtime to

keep the backend running, smoothing compliance issues across a matrix of three local government regimes. I burnt buckets of midnight oil and worked through weekends and public holidays to ensure the frontend fronted.

I'm not complaining, but I am recalling a decade-old statement by a safely superannuated bureaucrat regarding his decision to allocate zero budgetary dollars to commissioning content for a cultural initiative that made him, his political masters and the State of Tasmania look pretty damned good on bigger stages – 'the creative mind always overinvests.' Indeed it does, which adds extra value to the freedoms I was afforded across 2012–13 by being one of twelve Australians who received an inaugural Sidney Myer Creative Fellowship from Melbourne's Sidney Myer Fund, rewarding talent and courage. This fiscal buffer – bless you, Sidney Myer, one hundred and sixty thousand times I bless you – enabled my investment in developing *THINKtent* beyond its Ten Days' testbed. At the time of writing, the Tasmanian *THINKtent* is tracking to appear in the Sydney Opera House as part of Advance's 2014 global awards forum, and iterations featuring curators and designers outside Australia are planned for Belgrade and Helsinki later in the year.

*THINKtent* RECENTLY FEATURED in the 2014 season of the outdoor food, art, craft, design, music-and-more market on the lawns at MONA, now in its third summer. Branded MoMa, its craft curator Natalie Holtsbaum says the no-trash and mostly child-friendly (with occasional nudity) market 'honours ideas, whether they are in infancy or fully developed', is 'a space for risk taking', and is characterised by 'a deep respect for environment and tradition...whether this relates to how an apple cider is prepared, to master craftsmen breaking rules or to celebrating traditional cultures.'

MoMa's the brainchild of Kirsha Kaechele, founder of the Life is Art Foundation, who relocated to Hobart a few years ago as the partner of MONA owner David Walsh. Kaechele was born in California – where she still holds land that she has farmed with marijuana as a statement about how hard it became to fund arts projects after the 2008 global financial crisis – and largely raised in Guam. Since then her trajectory has taken her all over, including southern Lebanon (where she accidentally rubbed up with Hezbollah, some assumed she was Jewish), Europe (where Walsh crashed a Basel

Art Fair black tie event to get closer to Kaechele back when she was a bigger name than him) and Manhattan (where she used to live, and where Walsh proposed marriage in the middle of a heatwave last August – partying on at a celebration featuring a handcut ice dining table, while a lithe performance artist collected falling drips). Kaechele also spent many years in New Orleans, where she set up an art space in a disused bakery in the seriously no-go ghetto of the Eighth Ward, shovelled muck in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, grew life-as-art gardens with local children – aged from three to sixteen, ‘and one eighteen-year-old, who is the one I loved so much because he didn’t want to participate in the gangster scene but got shot anyway’ – who had never seen or eaten a carrot and set up a social enterprise for them to sell their vegetables to the fanciest restaurants in town.

Currently she’s adapting the food garden idea for schools in underprivileged communities in Tasmania, as the *24 Carrot Garden* project that’s rolling out as a lower budget version of Stephanie Alexander’s kitchen gardens. On Tasmania, a place many consider to be a cotcase of socio-economic dysfunction, Kaechele is refreshingly positive: ‘It’s one of the more functional places I’ve lived. There are hyperfunctional places like Manhattan, but there you’re in an artificial bubble because all the riffraff has been pushed out to the edges. Here the riffraff is kind of all around, but it’s really not that bad...it’s nothing like the ghettos of America.’

Of her time in New Orleans, Kaechele says, ‘I felt like it was the best human work I had done in the world’. Unfortunately a centrepiece of that portfolio triggered the disfavour of the influential Warhol Foundation. They’d asked her to throw one of her spectacular dinners, art pieces attracting the likes of Uma Thurman (which she recently replicated in Hobart as the *Curiouser & Curiouser* feast at the first Dark MoFo festival last winter). ‘I ran the table down the worst block in New Orleans, and they couldn’t handle their privilege in contrast with the lack of privilege of my neighbours. Even though the neighbours were all invited, and the Warhol Foundation wouldn’t pay for the seats for my neighbours, so I sold extra seats to rich New Orleanians to subsidise forty places [for them],’ she recalls. ‘And my best friend from that neighbourhood, Loach, my first protector, had died a few days before. I was at the hospital when he died. So I got my friends Peter

Nadin and Anne Kennedy to pay for his funeral, because the family had no money, nor did I...and the family scheduled their second line, which is the big marching band that celebrates a person's life, for the night of the dinner. So they bust into the dinner, the street, hundreds of people, and the band, with horns, and they circled around me and they start chanting – *You lost one, but you won a hundred; You lost one, but you won a hundred.* I mean, I'm weeping,' Kaechele explains. 'As far as I'm concerned, it's the best night I've ever had,' she continues, but the Warhol representatives 'just couldn't take it.' Kaechele and her projects lost foundation support. 'I felt, you're okay as long as your dinner's in the Mandarin Oriental, whatever safe rich bubble it's in, you don't feel guilty about your privilege then. But somehow I took the blame... The neighbours weren't upset, they were happy, because all their family members were working the dinner, making money. Or invited. They had a choice – do you want to sit down and have the dinner, or do you want to work? The Warhol Foundation were really pansy asses, and I'm not afraid to say it.'

LOCATED ABOUT AS geographically far from that scene as you can hurl yourself, MoMa's clearly become the vehicle for Kaechele to get fully back into her professional stride. It doesn't hurt to have Walsh as a lover, backer and producer, as she frankly acknowledges. 'I would be doing the same thing I was doing before I lived here if I didn't have [access to those] resources,' Kaechele reflects over a five-course degustation lunch at MONA's Source restaurant. 'But these resources have been so relaxing and empowering, I am so grateful. It takes the pressure off.' Despite her Southern Belle-style charm, Kaechele is no pansy ass by any stretch of the imagination. According to Holtsbaum, it's Kaechele who delivers 'the big wow' in the MoMa production – through 'her curation of big minds and big ideas, expressed through art, performance and structures.'

The conceptual fulcrum of this year's market was the *Derwent River Heavy Metal* project, an art-science collaboration drilling down into the problem of heavy metal pollution in the river that embraces the MONA peninsula on three sides, whose project partners include the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS), CSIRO, Monash Art Design and Architecture (MADA), the University of Texas and the Massachusetts

Institute of Technology. 'I just thought the river was perfect when I arrived here,' says Kaechele, 'and then I discovered there's this horrible dark side in the form of toxicity resting in the sediment...there's no known solution, even after two scientific symposia with experts in heavy metal and a bunch of artists and creative people.' Hypothetically, oysters could be one answer. 'Each oyster can filter fifty litres of water per day, they're really efficient at bio-accumulating metals...unfortunately, David did the math and you would need 1.1 trillion oysters to clean the Derwent,' says Kaechele, but they've commissioned a piece as a kind of poetic homage to that possibility. Fine art specialist Kit Wise from MADA has collaborated with IMAS on the *Chapel Oyster Massage Hatchery*, incorporating an aquarium sitting in a wooden tepee with live oysters feeding on fluorescent-looking algae and a videolink to oysters working in the river, with human massage available nearby. As each oyster dies, it will be embalmed in slumped glass made from old Moorilla wine bottles and used to plug a hole in the concrete waffle section of another market project, the rammed earth *Heavy Metal Retaining Wall* designed by Ross Brewin, Alysia Bennett and architecture students from MADA, with windows featuring artworks themed around concentrated heavy metals like cadmium and mercury.

Another market anchor was *Total Body Burden*, a work curated by Kaechele and supported by Hobart Pathology and the Menzies Research Institute. Members of the public peed into jars with the label of their choice: Hobart, Artist, or Rest of the World. The urine was pooled and tested once a day for heavy metal concentration – artists scored most highly. Participants were then interviewed by medical practitioner Molly Shorthouse, prepared by visual artist Cat Glennon to be 'softed' on clean white sheets (don't ask), and entered a decommissioned dental van for a psychodramatic experience with Tora Lopez and Rya Kleinpeter of New York-based *INNER COURSE*, wearing peekaboo costumes in their trademark shade of Caucasian Nude. Astrology readings emphasising the planet Mercury became part of the package when a Tasmanian called Joanne just turned up in a nurse's uniform and started offering the service. Nearby, another New Yorker Daphane Park hung out with healers in her *Exquisite Corpse Café Superconductor*, a domelike sculpture made of ripped blue denim dipped in beeswax, inspired by the work

of Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich and his notions of capturing the universal cosmic energy of ‘orgone’. Periodically, Rome-based artist Emiliano Maggi swathed himself in a slinky black forehead-to-foot bodysuit to deliver a performance and sound interpretation of a river nymph transforming herself into a dead tree, featuring an electric guitar embedded in a massive eucalypt dragged from Walsh’s remote beach property at Marion Bay. Surrounded by all that – especially on MoMa opening day, with around four thousand punters swirling around outside, downing luscious edibles curated by foodie Jo Cook and quaffing cocktails laced with squid ink – my sweet round *THINKtent* looked a bit, well, square. Who really cared to sit on buttoingrass cushions to engage with worthy, nerdy topics like *Beauty in the public domain*, *Is culture entertainment?* and *Who’s got the power? Influencing change in curious times*, speakers interrogating literacy and social equity and democracy, and scientists demystifying naked fish and dirty mud? Enter a brief crisis of confidence. It was getting insanely hot as the sun beat down on that canvas – did *THINKtent* need the help of occasional nudity?

I flashed back to the very first *THINKtent* performance on Burnie’s seafront. The billed talent was perfectly poised – Theatre North director Greg Leong, resplendent in a butter coloured satin suit. But the boardwalk was deserted, except for a lone grey nomad reading his newspaper on a park bench nearby. ‘What now?’ wondered Leong (all set to riff on *Too many festivals?*), ‘How will it work?’ Great question. The bloke on the bench turned out to be chasing arts festivals all around Australia in his campervan. A retired photojournalist, he’d long moonlighted as a member of a Melbourne choral group specialising in traditional Balkan music. Pretty soon the tent was full – not just of people, but of songs sung in Bulgarian, Cantonese and French, a curtain raiser to an excursion from permaculture to pig-rearing to political secrets, an ocean storm that didn’t blow us over, and some skateboarding (code for ‘delinquent’) youths I persuaded to try out *THINKtent* instead of ripping it down.

Unfolding at MoMa, *THINKtent* attracted an assorted, all-age collection of visitors from Canada to Northcote, Stockholm to Moonah. It threw up a new project idea about taking celebrity chefs to Risdon Prison to teach food preparation skills. It challenged tensions between ‘elite’ and ‘popular’

conversation, and underlying anxieties about what culture really is, and for whom. It made me ponder why we seem to need permissions from gatekeepers and bankrollers before we start the work that truly transforms us and touches others. Like the worried well, too many of us get knotted up about distinctions without differences, about predetermined outcomes and prescribed outputs. Culture is not compliance. It is woodchopping competitions is opera is V8 supercars is needlepoint is ornamental cabbage arrangements in the street is whisky tours is kindy kids growing broccoli is poems is dancing in the dark to David Bowie in unsensible shoes is fresh watermelon juice is dressing like Vivienne Westwood or Cate Blanchett or Serge Gainsbourg or yourself is cooking for Chinese New Year wherever your family comes from is new and old stuff on small and large screens is surfing is breaking cruel rules is the heartbeat of an oyster is football in any code is manga is homemade preserves is pop-up jazz is playing roulette preferably not Russian is shell collecting is demonstrations in the streets is design is story is dreams is voice is meaning is scent is life is art is let it go and things will come is brave and creative solutions to the problems of the human condition. Or as Kaechele put it around course three of that standout lunch, as we soaked up the view of the corrupted/cleansed Derwent and stared in reverence at the privilege of a perfectly poached egg yolk in a skin of truffle oil sitting on a bed of parmesan-scented custard: ‘All these things come in life, this beautiful dance where you feel like you’re part of the formation of a snowflake. Honestly, that’s how I feel about a project. The seed idea comes, and it’s strong enough to let you know that that’s the seed: and then, suddenly all the little things start locking in and connecting. I’m just watching the snowflake form, and that’s it. That’s my version of curating. And granted, a few phone calls and this and that, but they’re out of inspiration. So here we are. It’s the opposite of shovelling muck.’

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Natasha Cica is director of the consulting practice Liminal Strategy, and was the founding director of the Inglis Clark Centre for Civil Society at the University of Tasmania until 2014. In 2012 she was awarded an inaugural Sidney Myer Creative Fellowship, and in 2013 was celebrated by the *Australian Financial Review* and Westpac as one of Australia’s 100 Women of Influence. She is the author of *Pedder Dreaming: Olegas Truchanas and A Lost Tasmanian Wilderness* (UGP, 2011) and co-edited *Griffith REVIEW 39: Tasmania – The Tipping Point?*