

Review of MONA Installation, Kryptos

The raison d'être of MONA is to curate and display art both old and new. The exhibits are either one or the other, except for *Kryptos* (Greek adjective for *hidden, secret*), a dark and brooding integration of both the old and the new in a single installation, organised as a stylised maze. The work, by Hobart artist and academic Brigita Ozolins, was commissioned directly by David Walsh.

While I was immersing myself in the work, noting points and features for this account, two youngish women came in. We were the only ones there. After a minute or two one of them said "Jesus this place is giving me the creeps." She asked me what was called, so that the guide-app could be consulted. I told her, and asked that she not tell me anything about it because I was doing a cold analysis. She looked at the guide for a bit, and then said "Not a chance, we're outa here".

It's not common to see two *compos mentis* adults fleeing an art installation, if not in terror, then at least with manifest disquiet, so what is it about *Kryptos* that got to them so? Let us take the journey, to seek an answer.

Entry is from a large portal to a corridor lined with a single row of many 8 digit binary strings (01001000 01101001...) affixed to the wall in raised relief. A low-pitched drone note is lightly modulated. The lighting is subdued and from the floor. The binary strings, in a single length dimension, lead either left or right (it makes no difference, denying the efficacy of choice) to three artefacts – a cuneiform paving stone with two smaller cuneiform artefacts on either side. The strings, equidistant from floor and ceiling, direct like Ariadne's thread (there is no escape otherwise) to an intersection of the oldest written language with the newest. The row of binary digits is interrupted by a sudden recessed retreat to the far past. We are forced to stop, and consider, and bring our minds to traverse the great gulf between our modern world, and this remnant of ancient civilisation – of old technology and of new. But there is continuity by a congruence of form: as cuneiform is pictographic, so also, and these only of our ten digits, are 1 and 0 – one as a tally stroke, a finger held forth, and zero as an empty enclosure, the null set; and one is the shape of the cuneiform wedge mark. The utensil on the left is in the shape of 11, and on the right, 0, and so we are led out of and then back into the binary stream.

The interesting thing about binary is that it is so - binary. Using only a vertical stroke and a circle, a system of absolute minimal complexity, we nonetheless have a way of encoding all human knowledge, of calculating all possible results, of enumerating all sub-atomic particles in the universe, and beyond. A hundred ordered binary digits is enough to count every item we could collectively possibly ever know. But beyond mere utility, the essential mythic structures (as Levi Strauss showed) by which we sustain ourselves are all dichotomous. From mere on/off, we have being and nothingness, unity and emptiness, and then following the entire vista of human experience by the great parade of oppositions: male/female (the vertical stroke now as phallus, the empty circle as receptor), heaven/hell, black/white, good/evil, god/devil, knowledge/ignorance, body/soul, singularity/infinity, sanity/madness, and, most importantly for this discussion, old/new, ancient/modern and past/present.

The binary strings have a few English words scattered like tokens of the meanings within, hinted darkly: *DEEP, FOUNDATION, HIDDEN, SECRET*. These give a sense of foreboding. Do they, and if so how, relate to the binary strings? What do the strings encode? What is hidden?

Opposite the cuneiform tablet is the next portal, to another corridor or pathway nested within. We must turn our backs on the world of the past to continue the journey. The portal is smaller than the outer entrance. Our space is being constricted, our attention focussed. The drone note raises an

octave, and the modulation increases. The walls now have the binary strings in two dimensions, closer to and further from the floor/ceiling, as if they are trying to join heaven and earth by providing points of traversal – little platforms we can use to jump from one to the other, as we either descend or ascend. The scattered words of English become more insistent: on the outer wall, LIGHT, EYES, DARKNESS, and on the inner wall, SUN (placed near the floor), RAYS (by the next inner portal), DEAD – again, tokens of a hidden meaning one step further removed. Light/darkness are the archetypal moral symbols for good/evil, but here, the light comes from below, from the floor, not from above. The eyes see darkness, the rays point towards the next level, the keyhole door, smallest of the three, forcing a stoop to get through. We must reduce and humble ourselves to take the next step.

The inner sanctum is a cube, not a corridor. There are no more portals in the second dimension – left/right or front/back. We instead look upwards, and the third dimension opens as infinite height – the ceiling is a mirror which shows us to ourselves. The illusion is of escape, but the escape is to return. The ceiling shows an image of the floor, and thus ceiling and floor become each the other. Heaven and earth are reversed. The intention of the chiaroscuro lighting from the floor is revealed. Light comes from below, and when we look up, we see the depths, not the heights. When we look down, we see reality illuminated – we see the floor, we see our feet, we see practicality and the everyday world. When we look up, we see illusion, a reflection of the rays which directed us into this keyhole of perception. Heracleitos: ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὡσιτή - *the way up and the way down are one and the same*. The journey transforms to a quest for mystic unity.

The token words intrude: SEES (placed high), VOICE (placed middle), FACE, HEAR, DEATH. With our faces, we can see, hear and speak of death. The drone raises another octave, with resonant harmonic overlays.

From the doubled ceiling, space now has three dimensions. The maze becomes a pyramid, the sanctum a crypt. Thus binary is not the end. The next step is tertiary: the three regions enumerate the three dimensions. Not just sound, but three octaves. Not just heaven and earth, but the self as mediator too - the floor, the ceiling, and our lateral traversal between. Three portals, three artefacts, three languages and three scripts (cuneiform, English, digital), three timeframes (past, transition, and present), three modes of communication (we see, hear, speak), three senses (we see, hear, and are invited by the binary in relief to touch), three states of being (actual, as perceived, as imagined).

Architecturally, we have the inner sanctum enclosed by a middle pathway, itself then enclosed by the outer pathway, itself then enclosed by the museum and the greater world beyond. All of it is many metres underground (MONA is housed in a deep excavation). Are we trapped in the Minotaur's den? Is escape an illusion? But we can trace Ariadne's thread to find our way back out of the maze. Our dimensions reduce as we go, the octaves descend, until following the lines of digits, each portal now expanding rather than reducing, we return in safety to the populated world of the museum, with other exhibits, other sounds, other people, other visions, other art.

One purpose of this architecture is to extend to the fourth dimension. The inner sanctum as cube contained within nested rectangles geometrically describes a tesseract or hyper-cube – in the same way as you can create the illusion of a cube on a two-dimensional surface by linking two squares, you can model a hyper-cube in a three-dimensional space by enclosing a cube. In relativity terms, the fourth dimension is time – precisely the mediator we need to link our old and new worlds. Within *Kryptos*, we can be anywhere in space and time. *Kryptos* itself is a portal of portals.

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With the first journey complete, we can now follow the implicit invitation to decode that which is hidden. This might seem a forbidding task, but our modern world makes mighty feats of scholarship by mere ordinary persons quite the everyday occurrence. *Kryptos* is autotelic – all one needs to apprehend and understand is the work itself and a lexicon. It creates and sustains its own meaning. But to fully elucidate that meaning, we must consult the lexicon.

The binary digit strings are, one might presume, an encoding of English characters, and so it transpires after a few minutes with a calculator and an ASCII table, that, reading from left to right, we have

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01001000 01100101 00100000 01110111 01101000 01101111 00100000 01110011 01100001 01110111  ...
72      101      32      119      104      111      32      115      97      119
H      e      (space)  w      h      o      (space)  s      a      w
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And continuing, the line with original English word tokens capitalised goes

“He who saw the DEEP the FOUNDATION of the country...”.

The tertiary theme appears again, as binary to base 10 ASCII code to English characters. The very-well-versed among us may recognise this line as the opening of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The rest of us can google the text, to find in a few seconds:

*He who saw the Deep, the country's foundation
who knew..., was wise in all manners! Gilgamesh...*

The connection of the two binary digits and cuneiform both being pictographic is reified by each being the translation of the other. As the mirror showed one as two, so do the languages show two as one.

This fact of common meaning renders *Kryptos* a grand narrative. As well as a portal of portals, it is a narrative of narratives – a meta-portal, a meta-narrative, even a meta-journey. Gilgamesh is the story of one man's journey through power and arrogance, to despair and fear of death, then eventually to reconciliation and acceptance. *Kryptos*, by embracing Gilgamesh's journey as Epic, translates, transforms and transports, to make it our journey too – a partner text which parallels our movement from the outer entrance to inner sanctum. As grand narrative, the story of Gilgamesh is used to tell the story of the survival of the past into the present – that we have the script, the language, can translate, and if, however faintly, can reach back into that far past and retrieve a sense of it - that is how we come to understand ourselves.

Dale Chant, 15 April 2016