

ENTERTAINMENT ART & DESIGN ARTS

Thought Melbourne already had enough rain? Think again

By [Stephanie Bunbury](#)

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Consider the toaster, sitting inanimate on your kitchen bench. “It becomes very crucial for survival in the near future to know how we tick,” says Florian Ortkrass, one of the two artists who head up art-and-technology group Random International, “because we make machines that know or will know us better than we do. I will have a toaster that knows that when the air pressure is 50 millibars higher or lower, I am in a worse mood and I am more likely to buy this stock or that stock or watch this channel or that, to write an email or not, be late to work or not be late to work. They will find that out.”

The toaster looks a lot less scary than the Terminator. “But it is much more powerful than a big silver thing with machine guns,” Ortkrass continues, “because we can quickly convince everyone we should shoot that guy, but a toaster is just a toaster. And while we have a limited capacity for facts, obviously, computers are very good at detail. Very good. So us being utterly unaware of how we function is not a good position to be in. It’s like being in a negotiation where the opposite person knows more. Not a good position at all.”

Ortkrass and his fellow artist Hannes Koch set up Random International in 2005 to make work that slithers around in the space where the digital and analogue – or technology and art, the inorganic and the organic, the rational and emotional – collide or overlap. The company employs 24 people, including design engineers, product designers, software engineers, electrical engineers, mechanical engineers, a fashion designer and an art historian; projects have included clusters of mirrors that turn to follow the viewer (*Audience*), points of light that gather and move collectively like birds or bees (*Swarm Studies*) or conjure the human body’s movement with just a few key spotlights, showing how the brain fills



in the gaps (*Fifteen Points*).

It is engineering as much as art, says Koch; call it fabrication, says Ortkrass. Ideas come from their discussions, but their execution involves and tests

everybody in the group. It is no longer possible, says Koch, to send out a design with instructions and wait for it to come back.

“You can’t be a not-knowing artist who says ‘oh, technology doesn’t interest me,’” he goes on. “You can’t separate the cutting of the granite, the schlepping it in, from the chiselling away. If you really want to maintain the artistic control, the impetus and stay true to what you saw or what we shared, then you have to see it through. The materials of our time require that.”

Most successful of all has been the *Rain Room*, a 100-metre square pavilion in which it is possible to move through torrential rain without getting wet, thanks to sensors that cut off the water wherever movement is detected. The first *Rain Room* was commissioned by the Barbican in London and exhibited in 2012; replicas have been seen by half a million people in Los Angeles, New York, Shanghai and the Sharjah Art Foundation in Dubai. This month, a new *Rain Room* bought as a permanent part of the Jackalope Art Collection will open in a purpose-built pavilion in St Kilda. The fact of falling water or the experience of being wet or dry are beguiling, but what interests the artists is how we respond.



Hannes Koch (left), and Florian Ortkrass of Random International. MARK DAVIS



From left: Bianca Collie, Rebecca Jacobsen and Dirk Strachan manage to stay dry inside Melbourne’s newest art installation. JUSTIN MCMANUS

Reactions have varied according to location. At the Sharjah foundation, the hidden technology chimed in a telling fashion with the building where it was installed – “the most automated architecture of the 20th century” says Ortkrass – where the lifts read where you are and accordingly rise to meet you.

In Los Angeles, people thought it was a commentary on the drought raging outside and worried about how much water it was using. “When we proposed this to the Barbican, they said ‘oh, so this is a work about the environment?’” Ortkrass says. “And we were like ‘no, it’s more about environments plural: something you know well, like rain, but an industrialised version. It’s something you know, mixed with something you don’t.’”

They actually wondered, when the first *Rain Room* opened in the middle of a particularly grey London winter, whether anybody would come at all, but it turned out that people loved rain more than they had imagined.

“Everybody has an idea of an experience or a memory of an experience of rain, that is a very shared thing, but everybody’s emotional response to it is very intimate and personal and memory-based,” Koch says. Because this is just reticulated water, it doesn’t smell of anything; the image of a rainstorm becomes a blank canvas. “But I think if it were only this triggering of fantasy or whatever, it would only get you so far. I think for us, the fundamental thing we felt was worth considering is this: what is it if a mechanised environment suddenly exerts control?”

It is a curious, confused feeling, to be cocooned within falling water. “Once you are in there it’s a hefty experience, multi-sensual and very fundamental, very physical, you smell, you hear, you see,” Koch says. “And your brain is constantly trying to work out why you’re not getting wet; the dissonance is permanently present and that heightens your senses.”

Children in particular try to outwit the mechanism, speeding up so that they will catch the drops released before they moved; gravity affords them a two-second window of opportunity. So it is possible to get wet, but Koch says it is fascinating to see adults making “all these absolutely ludicrous guesses” about how it works to beat the machine.

“I think it really developed a whole world of topics that are interesting, about the impact of digital and the clash with the physical,” Ortkrass says.

“The world is messy; in the Rain Room you really can get wet. Whatever the screen, the digital, the app, you know, tries to make you believe, the actual world is something you always have to negotiate with.”

Ortkrass and Koch were both born in Germany, but met at the Royal College of Art in London, where they were studying product design. “We never designed a single product. I think that was a successful degree,” Koch says. “The highest thing pitched to you was to design a vacuum. That literally was the hardest thing, to make a bloody Hoover. You have to code and program and stuff and then, when you put your blood, sweat and tears into drawing something, making something and modelling something, you pretty quickly go ‘what is the point?’

“I think one of our aims was [to think about] what to do with your life in a world full of mindless, crappy products, you know. Our work now requires everything that is used in the development of high-tech products. It’s just that we make sculpture.”

Ortkrass chips in. “I think the point of product design was to make things that



From left: Josh Green, Bianca Collie and Dirk Strachan inside Melbourne’s Rain Room. JUSTIN MCMANUS

make life easier.” Working out that a cup is easier to use if it has a handle: that kind of thing. “We make things that little bit more difficult, hopefully, by making you think about why we do the things we do. Well, maybe not more difficult but...”

“Definitely more difficult for us!” says Koch. “But also it goes back to the physical. Maybe I’m not right about this but I think if you have something physical – as in a physical piece of art – you learn more about yourself than by looking at a screen. I think so.”

Perhaps, through total immersion, we will gain some insight into why we click on the things we do, why we get irresistible shots of dopamine from those Facebook quizzes even as we push away the knowledge that this is data going straight to companies such as Cambridge Analytica.

“Everything that supports us thinking we are very rational beings when we’re not. Completely not. I think we completely overestimate ourselves,” Ortkrass says.

“We love to engage with shit that we don’t understand,” Koch says. “And that is something really worth exploring, maybe without a pre-determined outcome but it is definitely worth exploring, because it affects us in our decision making, this belief in our rationality and control.”

Ortkrass laughs. “And it’s used heavily by advertising, right? They probably look at our work and go ‘oh yeah I’ve used that too, to sell someone more Coke’. We used this; we used that. They know exactly what works.”

***Rain Room* is at Jackalope Pavilion, corner Acland and Jackson streets, St Kilda, August 9 to September 29. jackalopehotels.com/art/rainroom**



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