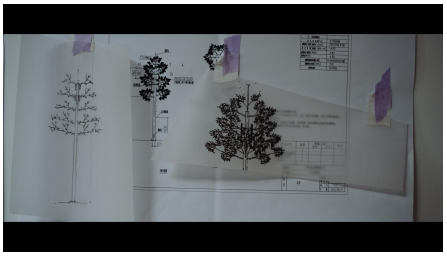
An abundance of loss

by Zara Stanhope

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Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc*, 2019. Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



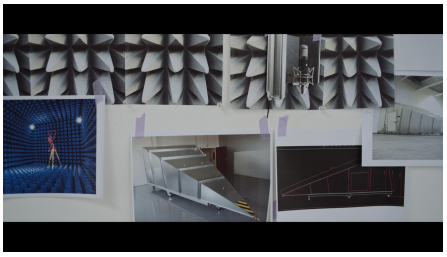
Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* production still, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



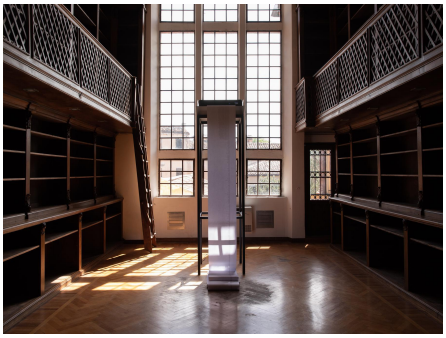
Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (detail), 2019. Mixed media installation. 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (detail), 2019. Mixed media installation. Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* production still, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (detail), 2019. Mixed media installation. Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.

With the 58th Venice Biennale opening this week, we asked Zara Stanhope, Lead Curator of Post hoc*, to give us an introduction to the New Zealand exhibition by this year's selected artist Dane Mitchell, and contextualise it within Mitchell's wider practice.*

How many futures might there conceivably be? We assume that gathering and sharing more knowledge and awareness offers a possible route to a better understanding of the world we live in and the future we hope for. However, increasing awareness of world affairs may alternatively be anxiety-inducing, as the issues of turmoils, extinctions and uncertainties pile up across the 20th century and into the present, as humankind has become increasingly self-conscious of its social and individual conditions.

That our worries are increasing is underlined by the number of thinkers who speculate that we are experiencing volatile moments and facing contradictory and dual crises. In his book *Four Futures* (2016), Peter Frase ventures the opinion that the fear of climate

change and accompanying reduction in natural resources, agriculture and habitable environments is a current phenomenon. This is alongside the apprehension of heading into a fully automated economy and consequent elimination of jobs. Drawing on these issues, he describes a crisis based on the combination of scarcity and abundance, too much and too little all at once.[01]

An alternative to confronting these concerns is to disempower the worry through avoidance, false news and disbelief.



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (detail), 2019. Mixed media installation. Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.
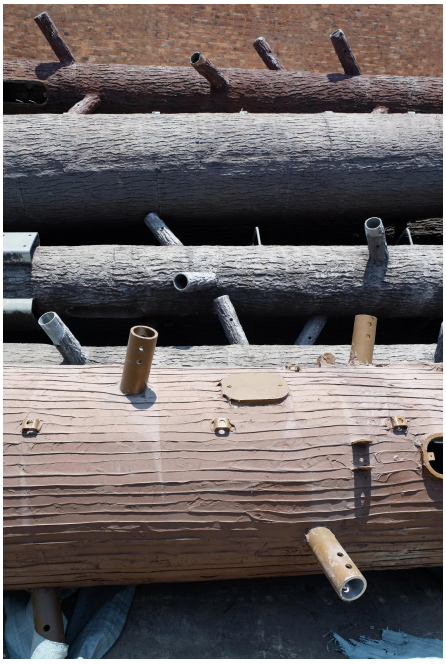


Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (installation view), 2019. Mixed media installation. Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (detail), 2019. Mixed media installation. Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (installation view), 2019. Mixed media installation (offsite), Arsenale di Venezia. New Zealand at the 58th Biennale di Venezia.



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* production view, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Creative team of *Post hoc*: Dr Zara Stanhope (Lead Curator), Dane Mitchell (Artist), Chris Sharp (Project Curator). Courtesy of the artist.

For two decades, Aotearoa New Zealand artist Dane Mitchell has been challenging audiences' consciousness of their relations with the world. Through artworks that often navigate sensual and logical experience, his practice questions rational knowledge and the idea that understanding is reliant on evidence. His projects

often encompass ideas and practices from lesser recognised technical fields, implying that alternative forms of wisdom or experience are garnered in the grey zones.

Paradoxically, these projects often require the use of methods from the hard sciences to give form to his expressions. Substances such as perfumes or vapour technologies or specific glass, stone or other customised materials have been employed in different projects to elusive ends that problematise the expected operation of these elements and thereby newly highlight the subjective nature of things. The fleeting qualities of fragrances and their chemical register in the body as well as the potential to influence the senses, memory and health was implied in Mitchell's *Let us take the air* (2015), an installation which comprised essences with the power to generate both remembering and forgetting.[02] Another 'molecular sculpture' presented at RaebervonStenglin, Zurich in 2015 vaporised homoeopathically-treated water from what was once the Büyük Maeander River in Turkey. Mitchell's *All Whatness is Wetness* (2015) generated the proposition that diluted water could hold potent memory.[03] His use of homeopathic remedies and airborne essences, or collections of dust and celestial particles, ensure poetic and reflective experiences.[04] Matter, tangible and intangible, is deployed in aesthetic designs to affect the viewer's haptic and unconscious realms by means that can't be wholly proven or known, thereby creating uncertainty.

Mitchell is also interested in positioning his work as sculpture, encouraging it to be part of a dialogue that interrogates materialist thought about the properties of matter and physical forces. Ideas such as New Materialism and philosophies analysing the dynamic nature of, and interconnected relations between, all things are attempts to describe a certain understanding of the world. Parallel discussions on related concerns are found in the arts, philosophy and the sciences; Mitchell's work aligns with these critical discussions that rework assumptions about the nature of the universe, which include questioning the place of humans within it and where agency might lie in the spaces between objects, things and bodies.



Dane Mitchell, *All Whatness is Wetness*, exhibition view at RaebervonStenglin, Zurich, 2015. Courtesy of Raebervonstenglin, Zurich.



Dane Mitchell, *Potency Venn* (detail), 2015. Brass, 106 x 190 x 25 cm. Courtesy of Raebervonstenglin, Zurich.



Dane Mitchell, *Homeopathic Meander Remedy (30C)*, 2015. Homeopathic remedy, plastic cans, acrylic label, each bottle: 28 cm x 24 cm x 19 cm. Courtesy of Raebervonstenglin, Zurich.



Dane Mitchell, *Potency Venn* (detail), 2015. Brass, 106 x 190 x 25 cm. Courtesy of Raebervonstenglin, Zurich.

Post hoc

Mitchell's latest project, *Post hoc* (2019) has been conceived for a site with its own share of abundance and loss: Venice, Italy.[05] At the heart of the project are 260 lists of things that no longer exist or are not visible, compiled by the artist with the assistance of several researchers. This content intersects with Mitchell's

ongoing interest in intangible experiences, but it is more factual and focused on data mined from histories of social, cultural, technical and natural events and objects. Mitchell is allowing attendees of this year's Biennale to read and hear the titles as well as the full contents of each list, which are being broadcast across several venues in the city for the entire duration of the Venice Biennale.

Extinct languages, regions of last darkness, former trade routes, silent radio stations, extinct reptiles, discontinued fragrances, closed and destroyed museums, obsolete meteorological terminology…

These are just a few of the many lists. Together they form a uniquely subjective archive of histories that have gone before and material that is no longer visible. In this way *Post hoc* functions as an archive and repository of information, albeit temporal in its public accessibility. A compilation of lost, former, obsolete, closed, retired, collapsed, destroyed and discontinued items.

Common expressions of death, former country names, lost and destroyed fossil specimens and sites, discontinued film cameras, hurricanes, ghost stations, closed cinemas, abandoned train routes and lines, vanished borders, inundated villages, cities and towns…

The lists are read by an automated voice inside an anechoic chamber installed by Mitchell inside the Palazzina Canonica, the venue of this year's New Zealand Pavilion, giving this content the appeal of a collection that is post-human or virtual. Anechoic chambers are engineered to deliver pure sound, to produce noise and transmit waves under conditions of uninterrupted travel into infinite space. The sense of otherworldliness or post-nature in *Post hoc* is reinforced by the delivery devices used by the artist to communicate the lists more broadly: stealth cell towers. These are standard industry products constructed in Guangzhou, China to mimic pine trees (but the steel and plastic objects fall short of being convincing). The lists can be accessed at each tree by joining the project's offline wifi network and opening posthoc.co in a phone browser.

Unidentified flying object sightings, obsolete radio formats, lost continents, dam failures, sunken lands, former constellations, extinct plants, crashed markets, shipwrecks…

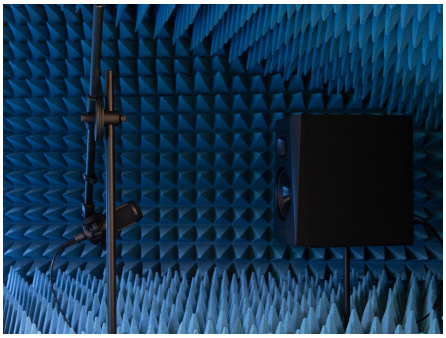
The lists describe a current situation, a history that is growing moment by moment. This history is necessarily incomplete, only as extensive as the artist's research and, as the losses described continue to expand, many of them are made immediately out of date. Compiled predominantly through internet sources, the lists are also as subjective as the directive nature of algorithmically-determined search engines. Moreover, many of the lists have clear associations with the practice of their author, as evident in Mitchell's past works using molecular substances and effects that are on the edge of bodily and conscious recognition:

Chimerical, fugitive, fictional, forbidden and impossible colours, prohibited molecules, planetary occultations, hypothetical chemical compounds, failed utopias, chimerical objects…

A type of unconventional anthropology of the times, a way to understand the world the artist lives in, *Post hoc* makes me think of the writings of several provocative authors of interest to Mitchell, such as Michael Taussig. The nature of loss is boundless, piling up and made visible in many different ways and perspectives if we pay heed to *Post hoc*. How should we respond to such an abundance and absence, complete with its rich tales of human activity and outing of natural vulnerability?[06]



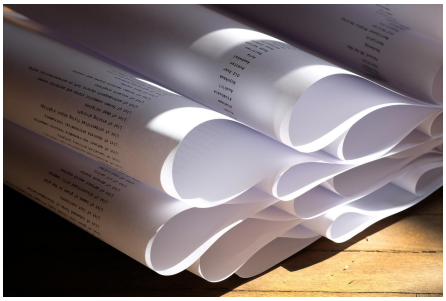
Dane Mitchell, 2019. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.



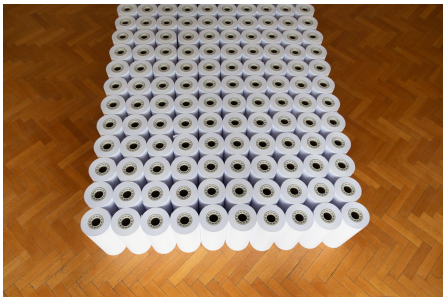
Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (anechoic chamber detail), 2019. Mixed media installation. Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.



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Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (installation view), 2019. Mixed media installation (offsite), Parco Rimembranze - Sant'Elena. New Zealand at the 58th Biennale di Venezia.



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (installation view), 2019. Mixed media installation (offsite), Università Iuav di Venezia. New Zealand at the 58th Biennale di Venezia.



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (installation view), 2019. Mixed media installation (offsite), Arsenale di Venezia. New Zealand at the 58th Biennale di Venezia



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (installation view), 2019. Mixed media installation (offsite), Ospedale Civile di Venezia. New Zealand at the 58th Biennale di Venezia.

Liminal space

To experience *Post hoc* at the New Zealand Pavilion at Palazzina Canonica and at other sites across Venice is to become aware of being in a space between *what was* and *what's next*. The tree towers, fabricated for international use in a large-scale factory, have a shiny, synthetic appearance. As trees they are evidently exceptional, especially when seen amongst the other living species in the grounds of the Palazzina or elsewhere. As objects, the tree towers contrast with the real in a way that makes both artificial and real nature look uncanny. The additional four venues where the lookalike pine communication towers are sited introduce other specific contexts: Iuav University of Venice is a place of theoretical and disciplinary argument; the hospital at the Scuola Grande di San Marco is a location where life is given and mortality is aided; the North Arsenale is a site linked to maritime history and therefore integral to Venice; and the well-utilised social space of Parco Rimembranze in Sant'Elena Gardens was established as a

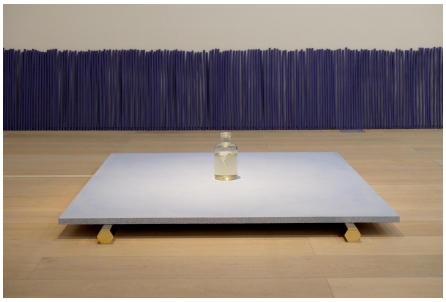
memorial to those fallen in WWI. These locations act like nodes in a network, creating the sense that *Post hoc* acts as a virtual field of dispersed information. The tree towers themselves also signal a post-nature era, where the synthetic has already become the norm.

Post hoc's incongruity and exceptionality only recedes upon its installation in the library of the Palazzina Canonica, the former headquarters of the Instituto di Scienze Marine. The room's books have been removed to reveal the historic wooden shelves. This previous home to a collection of geological, maritime and oceanic histories now stands empty, evoking a memorial to the practice of compiling and holding knowledge in published form. In the library, *Post hoc*'s lists are printed on rolls of paper as they are read in the chamber. The paper is going to unfurl around this room and become increasingly difficult to access as it accumulates across the floor over the duration of the Biennale. Once each item has been spoken, it will recede into silence, remaining present only as a printed record. At some time in the near future, the tree towers themselves will also be subject to obsolescence and redundancy.

Time, immateriality and subjectivity or belief play essential parts in the meaning of *Post hoc*, as they have in Mitchell's other works. However, the tension between the material and immaterial aspects of this project – the combination of minimal aesthetics in the chamber and library and the poor facsimiles of the synthetic-looking trees – create a fresh sense of incongruity. This conjunction was first evident in a work that precedes *Post hoc: Hiding in Plain Sight* (2017) is a tree cell tower sited at Connells Bay Sculpture Park, Waiheke Island, New Zealand. Several of Mitchell's subsequent projects also comprised specially-made radio towers that trespassed airwaves and broadcast extinct sounds.[07] They demonstrate Mitchell's interest in shifting beyond previous sculptural works that generated potential physical effects – such as unimaginable essences that might penetrate the body – and they portray the artist's exploration of spaces within theories of the material world and ontology of objects.

Sound is not new in Mitchell's oeuvre: in our first project together, which supported artists from Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia to work in Santiago, Chile, he included a recording of his attempts to learn Spanish on the flight over.[08] As a final example of

Mitchell's distinctive exploration of ways of understanding the world, a recent installation presented at both Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, Japan and Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand, *Iris, Iris, Iris* (2018) was potent with molecular, sensual and spiritual forms of transformation, featuring materials that include incense, the perfume of an Iris flower, and a camera lens.[09] The installation drew on the artist's research into materials and histories in Japan. The combination of elements, including stone, brass, vaporous molecular and liquid elements, suggested a state of change or alchemy within the work. The significance of the body and its organ was also expressed in the printed image of both of the artist's own irises on textile.



Dane Mitchell, *Iris, Iris, Iris*, curated by Zara Stanhope and Mami Kataoka. Installation view, 2017, *MAM Project 024: Dane Mitchell*, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2017. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Dane Mitchell, *Iris, Iris, Iris,* 2017 (installation view), Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Toi o Tāmaki, 2018. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Dane Mitchell, *Iris, Iris, Iris*, 2017 (installation view), Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Toi o Tāmaki, 2018. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Dane Mitchell, *Iris, Iris, Iris* (detail), 2017. Digital print on habotai silk, 130 ×140 cm. Courtesy: Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland & Christopher Grimes, Los Angeles.

An abundance of loss

Post hoc continues the artist's subjective exploration of qualities of the exceptional. It operates at the more speculative and philosophical (rather than experiential) end of an art practice that looks to generate effects that are often too vast for the body or mind to register; yet are generated from very little, from a minimal aesthetic. Mitchell's latest project brings forth what is natural – expressing the independent operation of matter in the natural dissembling of things or autonomous change – as well as that which humanity has brought about. The work suggests that the present rests on a multitude of lost pasts or invisible things. *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, the Latin phrase from which the title is derived, warns us against assuming that an event was caused by another event it succeeded. *Post hoc* addresses and adds to the subjective ways history is produced and consumed. Whether or not Mitchell's foregrounding of histories and their potential continuance is anxiety-inducing entirely depends on your sense of accounting or responsibility for the world to come.

Footnotes

01. Peter Frase, *Four Futures, Life After Capitalism*, Verso: London and New York, 2016.

02. *Let us take the air*, 2015, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, New Zealand.

03. *All Whatness is Wetness*, 2015, RaebervonStenglin, Zurich, Switzerland.

04. Interplanetary dust particles were collected in Cosmic Dust Collection (*Extraterrestrial Smithereens*), 2010, Busan Biennale, South Korea.

05. Mitchell's Post hoc 2019 is the New Zealand project at the 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.

06. For an example of abundance concealing vulnerability in the natural world see: www.huffpost.com/entry/an-abundance-of-loss-with_b_5791144

07. *Tuning*, 2018, Hopkinson Mossman, Wellington, New Zealand and *Lost Bandwidth (Canopy)*, 2018, Krabi Biennale, Thailand

08. *TRANS VERSA, artists from Australia and New Zealand*, co-curator Danae Mossman, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Santiago, Chile, 2006.

09. *Iris, Iris, Iris*, Mori Art Museum and Auckland Art Gallery, 2018, co-curators Mami Kataoka and Zara Stanhope.



Dane Mitchell's practice is concerned with the physical properties of the intangible and visible manifestations of other dimensions. His work teases out the potential for objects and ideas to appear and disappear. His practice evokes a connection between the sensual and the conscious. It speculates on what is material and explores systems of knowledge or belief and people's experiences of them.

Dane's exhibition history dates back to 1999; since 2008 alone he has held 30 solo exhibitions and in the same period participated in more than 50 group exhibitions. He has presented solo exhibitions both nationally and internationally in Germany, France, Brazil, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Australia, United States and New Zealand. He has also participated in a number of biennales, including Biennale of Sydney 2016, Australia; Gwangju Biennale 2012, South Korea; Liverpool Biennial 2012, United Kingdom; Singapore Biennale 2011; Ljubljana Biennale 2011, Slovenia; Busan Biennale 2010, South Korea and the Tarrawara Biennial 2008, Australia.



Dr Zara Stanhope is Lead Curator of Dane Mitchell as the New Zealand artist at the 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. Zara is the Curatorial Manager, Asian and Pacific Art at Australia's Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), and was Principal Curator and Head of Programmes, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki from 2013 to 2017. Previous roles include Deputy Director of Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, inaugural Director of the Adam Art Gallery at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and Assistant Director of Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne.

Her curatorial practice spans more than 70 curated and co-curated exhibitions of Australian, New Zealand and international art and she is widely published. Exhibitions of note include *Ann Shelton: Dark Matter, Space to Dream: Recent Art from South America* (with Beatriz Bustos Oyanedel); *Yang Fudong: Filmscapes* (co-curated with Ulanda Blair); *The World in Painting* (touring Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam and Australia); *Three Colours*, Gordon Bennett and Peter Robinson (touring Australia and New Zealand), *Slow Release: Recent Photography in New Zealand* and she was co-curator of the ninth Asia Pacific Triennial at QAGOMA in 2018.

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