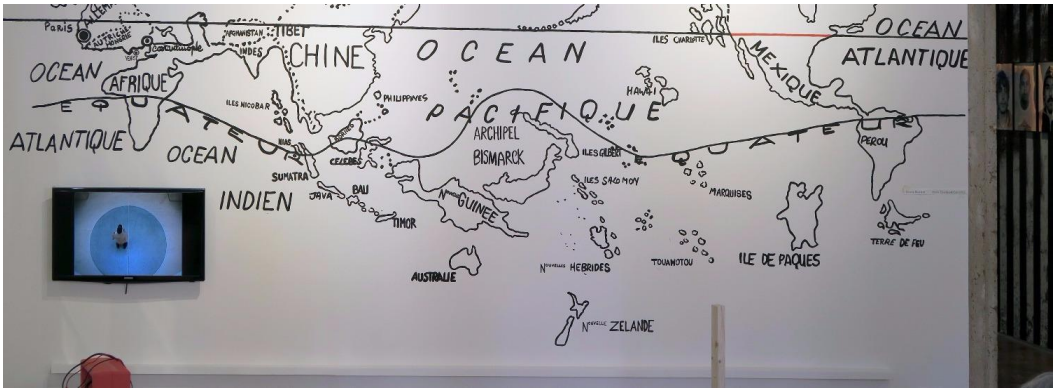
An interview with Bruce Barber

by Contemporary HUM

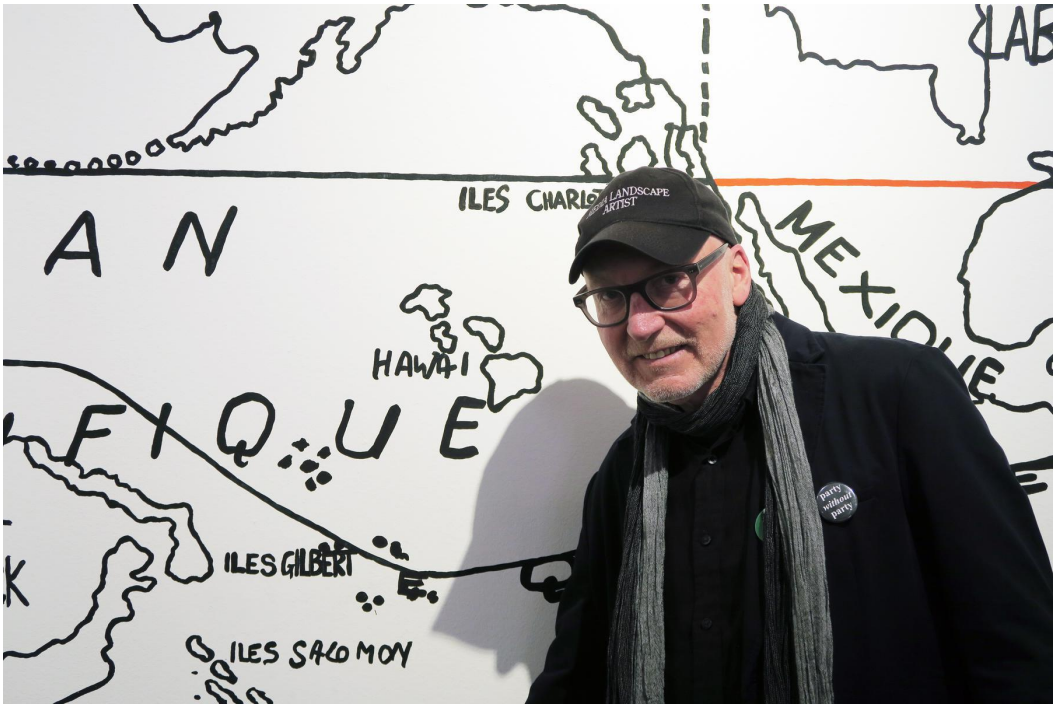
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New Zealand artists in Venice 2017 is a series of interviews conducted by the Contemporary HUM team during the vernissage of the 57th Biennale Arte di Venezia titled Viva Arte Viva, from 9-13th May 2017. While the multitude of official national pavilions and the extensive group exhibition put together by an invited curator make up the oldest and most notorious art biennale in the world, an equally vast number of collateral projects and parallel events take place throughout Venice every two years.

Heading over to Venice this May, we knew that five New Zealand artists would be exhibiting in both official and parallel venues in 2017, and it seemed important for HUM to offer a space for artists to talk about their own work and the international context of its presentation, but also the challenges and particularities of working across the world. Interviewed artists are: Lisa Reihana, whose project Emissaries was New Zealand's official presentation at the Biennale; Francis Upritchard, included in Christine Macel's central curated section for the Biennale; Bruce Barber, Paul Handley and Kāryn Taylor, exhibiting in Personal Structures' recurrent exhibition running parallel to the Biennale, titled Open Borders in 2017.

Alongside these interviews, HUM's coverage of New Zealand's participation in Venice includes the following commissioned essays: Ur ges of Imperialism Unravelled, Rhana Devenport's presentation of Emissaries: New Zealand's Pavilion 2017; What recognition for New Zealand visual arts on the world stage?, transcribed panel discussion with New Zealand Pavilion 2017 Commissioner Alastair Carruthers; Reporting from the Front Desk, Chris Winwood's take on New Zealand's Architecture Pavilion in 2016; Will Gresson on the history of the New Zealand's contribution to the Venice Art Biennale (upcoming 2017).



CONTEMPORARY HUM Bruce, you've lived in Canada for a long time now but you continue to exhibit in New Zealand regularly, and this is your second time participating in a Personal Structures exhibition in Venice. Can you introduce the work you are presenting this year Party without Party, which is an ongoing project and consists here of a world map on the wall and a video work on a small monitor?

BRUCE BARBER Yes I'm bi-national, I carry a New Zealand and Canadian passport, and our children are too. In 2013, I was invited by Rene Rietmeyer to submit a project for the 2015 Personal Structures exhibition. My project was called Spectres of Marx, based on Jacques Derrida's famous book, and it had a ten-minute video in it. And it was on that wall adjacent to where my work is installed now. I asked to be in the same space this year...but I'm a little concerned about how much work there is in here. But I won't make complaints, that's what happens when you get into group shows.

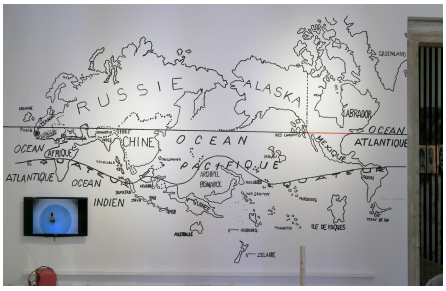
This work [Party without Party (2017)] has a ten-minute video also. It's a 'Button action' performance filmed in New Zealand, at the Britomart subway station in downtown Auckland.

I like this video, because my nephew Andrew Barber, also an artist, and some other New Zealanders were involved. I gave them all caps. They were different caps to this one [points to the cap he is wearing].

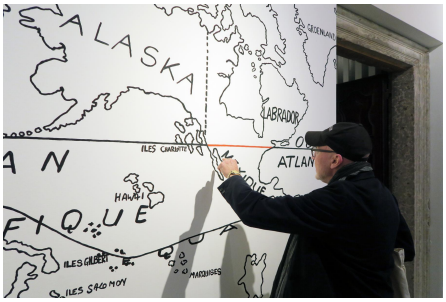
HUM What did you ask them to do? What's going on in the video?

BB To ask people whether they would like to wear a button, but they changed it to, 'would you like to wear a badge?' And people would say, 'what's it about?' So then you get into a conversation. What if politics at left, right, and centre disappeared? What if there weren't two federal parties, or two or three New Zealand parties. In Italy there are nearly 400, many of them defunct, but there's different parties, six to eight on the top.

Look at Macron in France. He was just elected without a party as such, and that's a form of republicanism. Slavoj Žižek had a group meeting recently in Venice, discussing the notion of states without states at the 'Pavilion of a State which does not exist' and that perhaps we were too strident in controlling our political borders. Here, in an exhibition called 'Open Borders', I think it is prudent to have this surrealist map of the world, which was based less on geopolitical boundaries. Because we know that many of these countries were all colonies of three or four European imperial states. And the emancipation of these countries has been long standing, and is still continuing through various struggles around the world. Iraq, Afghanistan; these are all post-colonial struggles that can be identified essentially from this map.



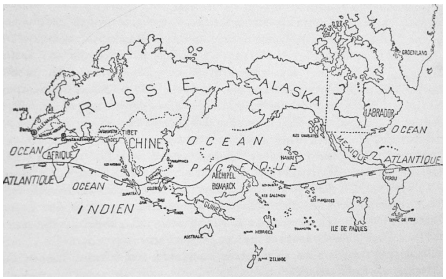
Bruce Barber, *Partito senza Partito*, 2017. *Personal Structures: Open Borders*, Palazzo Mora, Venice. Image: HUM.



Bruce Barber pointing to the 'Trump Line' he added in his appropriation of *The Surrealist Map of the World,* 1929. *Personal Structures: Open Borders*, Palazzo Mora, Venice. Image: HUM.



Bruce Barber, *Partito senza Partito* (detail), 2017. *Personal Structures: Open Borders*, Palazzo Mora, Venice. Courtesy of the artist.



The Surrealist Map of the World, 1929, was published in a special issue of *Variétés*, a Brussels-based magazine. Courtesy of the artist.

HUM Why is this map, which you've painted onto the wall, in French?

BB It was in French originally when it was published in a Belgian Journal. I've appropriated it, and detourned it in a Situationist fashion by adding in Venice, which wasn't in the original map, and adding in a Trump Wall line between the US and Mexico. Many American friends have said this is demeaning to the United States worldwide, it's diminishing the respect that people have for the U.S. And it's created a new North, South divide. The equator—the black line—is on the original map but this isn't [points to horizontal red line].

It was written in French, and it's anonymous but it is argued that Paul Éluard, who was a Surrealist poet and one of the first Surrealists, was the author of this counter map that reveals how malleable geographical space can, or should be. And it gives attention to island nations, where the importance of ethnic identities, allegorical meanings are recognised, you know the

Surrealists were interested in Africa, South America, Asia and Polynesia. Observe the reworking of Easter Island in the map.

HUM And you've kept the Surrealist scale of the different land masses, as they are on the original map?

BB Yes, what I did was to project the map and trace the geographical outline on the wall, with paint. And the text is also from the original. Most people who have studied art history will know of this map, others don't know about it. But those who know my work in New Zealand, will see it is as a kind of honorific piece. New Zealand is large on this map. It's even larger than Australia.

HUM Can you tell us more about the motivations behind *Partito senza Partito / Party without Party*? Is it a call to action?

BB The reference is about potentialities, and agency with respect to political subjects. And it's a call to communication, a call to engage in some deep thinking. I don't want to set up another political party, that's not the effort. But the most important aspect of it is negotiating potentiality about which one of my teachers, Giorgio Agamben, Italian philosopher has written.

So this is site specific in that sense. Giorgio Agamben wrote several books on potentialities. You'll see in my pages, in the catalogue, references to two of his books. And to Bartleby, The Scrivener. Herman Melville wrote this book called *Bartleby, the Scrivener: The Story of Wall Street* (1853). It's about him resisting the power of the law and the lawyer by saying 'I prefer not.'

So, the reference to Bartleby, the Scrivener, is writ large through the association with, or reconsidering, reconceptualising, questioning the tradition of political divisions. Such as in Italy which has multiple variations of centre right, centre left, centre... You have these variegated gradients. And very few people actually

participate in the political process, but hundreds of parties are evidence of political struggles.

HUM How do you feel a world without parties would behave, would it resolve issues?

BB Well that's not up for me to decide. But right now, with neoliberal ideology on the rise, people are putting up walls everywhere. Has Donald Trump not read Robert Frost's *Mending Wall*? That poem was a staple reading in New Zealand schools when I was young. It's about building walls. Who would want to put up a wall? There's been 6000 refugees who already have arrived on the Italian shore. And through New Right populism, people are saying 'put up more walls, put up more borders.' It's to reinforce the party project to get more people to vote in favour of nationalistic agendas. And we know that extreme nationalism is very close to fascism. And the type of nationalism, represented by the likes of Marie Le Pen, it's very scary. So this is a challenge to that kind of thinking, whether you come from Frankfurt school, or whether you're like me, post-modernist, post-conceptualised, that's what I'm interested in—not in setting up an agenda of my own. That's not the project here.

HUM It sounds like you are very knowledgeable, and well researched about politics in different countries. Do you engage in a particularly focused or site-specific research process to respond to the country you exhibit in? Is your knowledge of Italian politics based on your show here?

BB Well yes, I spoke to my research in Italian politics. And I've been clipping things in a blog, engaging in a dialogue with myself about some of these thoughts. But it's still just the beginning of my Italian iteration for this work. *A Party without Party* catalogue was produced in New Zealand by curator Emma Bugden and is available on my website.



Bruce Barber, *Partito senza Partito* (detail), 2017. *Personal Structures: Open Borders*, Palazzo Mora, Venice. Courtesy of the artist.



Opening night of *Personal Structures: Open Borders,* Palazzo Mora, Venice, May 2017. Image: HUM.



Opening night of *Personal Structures: Open Borders*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, May 2017. Image: HUM.



Bruce Barber, *Partito senza Partito* (detail), 2017. *Personal Structures: Open Borders*, Palazzo Mora, Venice. Courtesy of the artist.

HUM What is your relationship with New Zealand now after living in Canada for...many years?

BB Yes longer than I've lived in New Zealand. But do I have a Canadian accent? No. I have two Canadian kids though. With my wife Pauline we travel to New Zealand as often as we can.

I've had some wonderful exhibitions in New Zealand. Including the exhibition I Swear at Te Tuhi this year and I still have many family members and friends in New Zealand.

I'm Facebook friend with my high school art teacher Dugald Page, and Jim Allen is a wonderful friend, who just turned 94. He and Pam are downsizing so the other day he sent me one of my 1970's posters, 1973. And one of Kieran Lyons'. Do you know Kieran? He was an English visiting prof. And also Adrian Hall.

Colin McCahon was one of my teachers a long time ago. We spent a lot of time at the pub, It was part of an art education back then! And I just had a visit the other day by Ernest Smith, an Australian who used to be director of the Dalhousie University Art Gallery then moved to Auckland and became the Senior Curator of the Auckland City Art Gallery which is when I got to know him, through exhibiting with Jim Allen and Phil Dadson, Kieran Lyons (Four Men in a Boat) and a few others.

But I've had two survey exhibitions. One in Sydney, Australia at Artspace, at Te Tuhi gallery in South Auckland, and I have exhibited at the Auckland City Art Gallery, and National Gallery, in group exhibitions. Te Tuhi has been great, they have an early sculptural piece of mine from 1971 on extended loan. I love the Pakuranga context. I've been there as a visiting academic too, wearing my other hat, touring New Zealand Universities.

HUM You said earlier you'll be inviting refugees in the context of this exhibition?

BB Yes, to speak at Te Tuhi. Filipino refugees hopefully. I'm in contact with Amy Weng there who is helping to set it up. They have been collecting headlines and articles from the New Zealand Herald for me on the topics of refugees and immigration. And there's three billboards with citizenship oaths of three commonwealth countries New Zealand, Australia and Canada.

HUM Do you see parallels between Canada and New Zealand, since you have lived in both?

BB Yes and no. Places change. We've had very progressive health policies in Canada when the NDP was in power and then that was eroded over the years. And in New Zealand, education used to be free, my first two degrees were free, it's not the case anymore! And the same goes with health care. Try to get an ambulance to come get you now…

I've always felt that the art world in New Zealand was up to speed with things, it was in the 70's, and it still is. It's become more commercial I think. We're hoping in 2018, 2019, when I'm on sabbatical, that we'll settle in New Zealand for a while.

Postscriptum September 2017

HUM With the Biennale season drawing to an end in November, what do you take away from exhibiting in Venice this year?

BB This is always a very rich context for viewing and experiencing art and I have been fortunate to be able to visit Venice during the Biennale several times during the past twenty years. Participating in parallel exhibitions such as this provides ample opportunities to meet with fellow artists, curators and reviewers such as yourself!

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.



Bruce Barber is an interdisciplinary media artist, cultural historian and curator whose research and writing explores the representation of art, artists and art history in film and television and literature, performance art, public and littoral art. He is best known for his performance work, neo-conceptual reading and writing rooms, Squat projects and his theoretical writing and practice with littoral art, cultural intervention and other relational art practices.

Born in New Zealand, Barber is based in Canada where he teaches courses in media arts and film history at NSCAD University. He holds a BFA (1973), and MFA in Sculpture and Art History from Auckland University (1975); an MFA (Intermedia), NSCAD (1978), and PhD (2005), Media and Communications, European Graduate School Leuk Stadt, Switzerland.

Barber's interdisciplinary artwork has been exhibited internationally at the Paris Biennale, Sydney Biennale, 49th Parallel Gallery, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Whatcom Museum, Walter Phillips Gallery, London Regional Gallery, Auckland City Art Gallery, National Gallery of N.Z., Casula Powerhouse, Te Tuhi Gallery, Artspace, Sydney and Auckland and is represented in various private and public collections. Barber's interdisciplinary art practice is documented in the publications Reading Rooms and Bruce Barber Work 1970-2008.

HUM

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