An interview with Dame Jenny Gibbs

Commissioner of the New Zealand Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale

by Pauline Autet

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With the world-famous Venice Biennale opening in one month, Conte mporary HUM's *Editor speaks to Dame Jenny Gibbs, one of New Zealand's most active patrons of the arts, about her long-standing support and relationship with Aotearoa's participation at the Biennale. Gibbs was involved with the very first New Zealand pavilion in 2001, and is the Commissioner again this year for New Zealand's 9th national presentation. We speak to Gibbs about the selected project,* Post Hoc *by artist Dane Mitchell, and what it's like to work behind the scenes.*

For further information about New Zealand artists at the Venice Biennale, follow our HUM in Venice *page, with our live news coming up during the vernissage week in May and further in-depth publications to be published throughout the duration of the Biennale.*

PAULINE AUTET What is your involvement in the history of New Zealand's participation at the Venice Biennale? You have played a significant role since 2001, when New Zealand first decided to take part. What was the arts landscape like before New Zealand had a pavilion at the world's most prestigious Biennale?

JENNY GIBBS Living in London in the ‘60s and being interested in art, I’d been to the Venice Biennale a couple of times in the late ‘80s, or early- to mid-90s, and what struck me at the time was that there were already over one hundred countries represented, but not New Zealand.

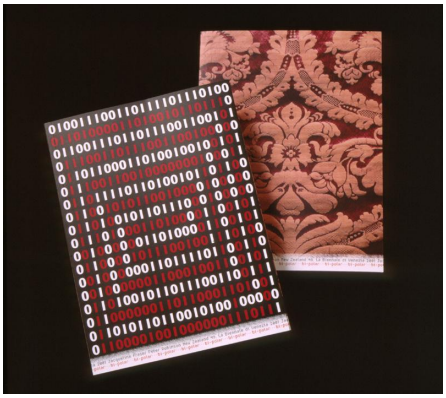
I’ve always believed very strongly that the best New Zealand artists are absolutely world-class, and so it seemed crazy to me that we didn’t have a presence in Venice. In the ‘80s and ‘90s Luit Bieringa, then Director of the National Gallery of New Zealand [now Te Papa], and I sent lots of letters to our national arts agency, Creative New Zealand. We were both very, very keen for New Zealand to take part in the Venice Biennale. Eventually, in 2001, they agreed to fund it for one, maybe two Biennales.

They appointed me Commissioner and someone who had a dance background as Project Manager. Then there were our two artists, Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson, and our Curator, Gregory Burke. None of them had ever been to a Venice Biennale so it was quite challenging, to say the least. Fortunately, I knew the people who were involved in the Australian Pavilion and I borrowed their venue Supervisor, Diego Carpentiero. He’s still our man on the ground in Venice today and has done a wonderful job for us. I couldn’t have done it without him, especially that first year.

PA What kind of challenges did you encounter in those early years?

JG Our first venue was the St Apollonia Cloister, and dealing with the Church in Venice is… tricky. And because both of the artists were Ngāi Tahu, we had a contingent of Ngāi Tahu arriving on gondolas – because we couldn’t get a waka – landing at St Mark’s Square and doing an impromptu haka. We didn’t actually have permission for this, but fortunately Diego was on the spot and managed to sweet talk people around because, it turns out, there’s a by-law in Venice that forbids walking around without a shirt.

Today we have a very good team in Creative New Zealand and we’ve developed a real in-depth knowledge and experience.



B1 Polar, exhibition catalogues, Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson, 2001. Design Neil Pardington and George Clarke, Eyework Design. Photo: Creative New Zealand.



New Zealand Pavilion exterior, St Apollonia in Venice, 2001.



Peter Robinson, *Divine Comedy*, installation view of New Zealand Pavilion, 2001. Photo: Bryan James.

PA What is it like, this year, to be the Commissioner again, 17 years after being the Commissioner of New Zealand's very first presentation?

JG It's been so much easier! Dane is a particularly well-organised, very professional and easy-to-deal-with artist. He doesn't appear to be too nervous either, even though it's always nerve-wracking for an artist to get major installations done there. And there are always logistical issues in Venice, but that's where Diego has proved his weight in gold.

The second time we were in Venice, in 2003, Michael Stevenson was our artist and he installed a Trekka, which is a funny, old-fashioned vehicle. He also had mountains of butter boxes. We were in La Maddalena, a round, 18th-century church, and we had to get abseilers who could get up into the dome of the church to build up Stevenson's piles of butter boxes.

PA In terms of the New Zealand's art scene's participation in an international context, would you say you've noticed a different or rise of public interest or media coverage between that first time in Venice and now?

JG Yes, there's been a big difference, but it's been a slow and steady growth of New Zealand artists participating in the international art scene.

Venice has certainly contributed to the profile of New Zealand in the international art world. In the '70s, '80s and probably even '90s, we had very few artists who had done international residencies or who had international dealers. Both Jackie Fraser and Peter Robinson ended up having international exhibitions after their Venice project, and the same for Michael Stevenson in 2003. And there's been a very steady growth of New Zealand artists who have dealers in Berlin, London, or New York. For instance, Luke Willis Thompson who was a finalist in the 2018 Turner Prize.

New Zealand's increasing participation overseas has also been helped by the Walters Prize – which I and two friends funded and founded – because we've always invited a high-profile international judge. Our first judge in 2002, Harald Szeemann, curated the Venice Biennale in 1999 and 2001. Similarly, Robert Storr, Director of the 52nd Venice Biennale, was another of our judges in 2004.

We deliberately set it up to challenge people and make them think about contemporary art. And that's one thing that has changed noticeably. Early on, when we were in Venice, we used to get very severe criticism about the cost of sending people there. We had parliamentarians, even, ridiculing some of the art selections – et al. had a horrible time presenting in 2005.

PA Resulting in New Zealand not committing to the following Venice Biennale in 2007.

JG Yes, exactly, there's been none of that in recent times.



Installing Michael Stevenson's project *This is the Trekka* for the New Zealand Pavilion, 50th Venice Biennale, 2003.



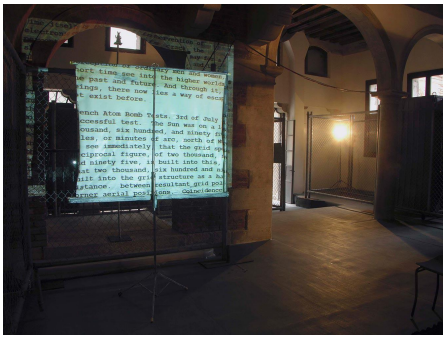
Transporting Michael Stevenson's art works by boat for the 2003 Biennale.



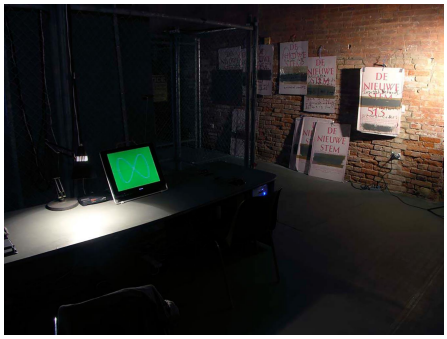
Transporting Michael Stevenson's art works by boat for the 2003 Biennale.



Abseilers installing the New Zealand sign for the 2003 Biennale.



et al., *the fundamental practice*, installation view, New Zealand Pavilion, 2005. Photo: Jennifer French.



et al., *the fundamental practice*, installation view, New Zealand Pavilion, 2005. Photo: Jennifer French.

PA From where I am now living, in Paris, I feel like part of the challenge in New Zealand is garnering public interest in the arts so that governing bodies and society as a whole place value on and prioritise the arts and culture. Do you feel that has evolved?

JG Yes, in France, artists have always been respected and they have a certain status in society, the general public supports them and respects the arts.

This hasn't always been the case in New Zealand at all, but it is improving. The very first time we were in Venice I created an organisation called the Patrons of the Venice Biennale, in order to increase the public buy-in, to spread support and create a constituency for Venice. They also contribute financially. We're quite different to most countries for this reason and it's become very successful. We'll have over one hundred patrons this year, and last time there were about 130 patrons travelling to Venice for the opening.

A number of people join because they like the idea of going to Venice with a group, but then they also become much more aware of contemporary art as a result. They often convert that interest into becoming supporters of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki or other institutions, so that wide-ranging support base and patronage grows and increases awareness, along with our presence in Venice.

PA New Zealand also has the challenge of having to travel halfway across the world, which would be quite difficult - because it's very expensive - without private support.

JG Absolutely. And we have the difficulty of not owning our own pavilion. Australia was the last country allowed to build a pavilion in the Giardini. We have the challenge and expense, every time, of going and finding suitable premises that become our base for the duration of the Biennale.

PA But could having a different venue each time be seen as an opportunity too, because it allows each project to have a building and a site which is best suited to the project? If we shift towards Dane's project for this year, I understand that the Palazzina Canonica, where our pavilion will be based, is the Italian Institute of Marine Science. Arguably, this has provided an opportunity for a collaboration which may not have occured in a permanent building?

JG Yes, you're absolutely right. There are pros and cons. In a permanent pavilion, of course, you don't have the time-consuming and expensive task of hiring a venue for nine months. In 2017 we were inside the Arsenale for the first time, and if you're in the Arsenale or the Giardini, you're confined to their timetable, their hours. So you can't use your own pavilion for opening parties and functions. And you also can't totally adapt it for whichever artist you've selected for that year.

At the same time we're very flexible and always involve the artist in selecting the site. So it works out with great advantages in many instances. This year, with Dane's project, we're particularly fortunate because the Marine Research Institute had recently vacated their headquarters on the Grand Canal, and Dane's project particularly intrigued them. They've never had their site used for the Biennale. It's a beautiful Renaissance building with a wood-lined library and a garden, and it's down on the waterfront, halfway between the Giardini and the Arsenale, just along from where the Giardini vaporetto stops so it's a wonderful location. However, this time we have an additional challenge – Dane wanted to feature his work in additional sites.



Dane Mitchell, 2019.



Palazzina Canonica, this year's site for the NZ Pavilion and Dane Mitchell's *Post hoc* project. Photo: Creative New Zealand.



Production still at SJ Cell Tower & Artificial Plant Company Limited, Guangzhou, China for Dane Mitchell's project *Post hoc*, 2019.

PA I understand the 2019 installation by Dane Mitchell comprises six steel transmitting antennas, camouflaged as trees, inside the pavilion and elsewhere in the city, which will be broadcasting a list of things which have, in one way or another, disappeared.

JG Yes, they're called stealth transmitters. The transmission will come from our main venue and the trees, scattered around Venice (locations tbc) will be receiving these lists transmitted digitally from a big box which is totally soundproof. As you walk past the trees, you'll suddenly hear a sort of whispering of lists.

Dane's got over two million words already, but he's aiming for four million, representing things that have disappeared, become extinct or are not being used anymore. For example, medical procedures that are no longer used, galaxies that are no longer visible.

It will be quite an intriguing project but, like Simon Denny's in 2015, it requires background information for visitors whereas Lisa Reihana's one last time is very easy to grasp instantly.

PA Why was Dane Mitchell's project chosen for Venice this year and how will visitors access the project created by the artist, whose work is often invisible or intangible, and not immediately obvious?

JG Dane's work was chosen because it's a very intriguing, very technically sophisticated project. Dane also has a track record of delivering but we also knew it would challenge the Venice authorities. They've not had anybody using multiple sites like this and needing the bandwidth for transmitting. There'll be an app for people to access the transmission. And there'll be a small post at each site with a sign on it, which will tell you what's happening.



Post hoc visualization, by Dane Mitchell for the New Zealand Pavilion in 2019.



2019 Venice Creative team L-R Lead Curator, Zara Stanhope, Commissioner Dame Jenny Gibbs, Artist Dane Mitchell, Project Curator Chris Sharp.



Post hoc visualization, by Dane Mitchell for the New Zealand Pavilion in 2019.

PA For those who may not know - and because every country has its own process for choosing the artist and team assigned to the Venice Biennale - can you briefly outline the selection process that took place this year, and whether or not it's different to 2001 and 2003?

JG Right from the beginning, Creative New Zealand has been the commissioning body and prime funder. I believe it’s the same for other countries, like Scotland and England, where their Arts Council is the commissioning body.

On day one they select the panel who will choose the artist, which usually includes the commissioner for that year or previous years, two or three senior curators or gallery directors from around the country, and usually one from overseas as well. They call for submissions, there’s a short-listing, and then the final selection. As far as selecting the Commissioner is concerned, that has always been done by Creative New Zealand and they’ve had a wide-ranging number of people: Jenny Harper, when she was Director of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, and last time Alastair Carruthers.

But last year, the Biennale authorities changed the rules and now insist that every participating country choose someone from the Commissioning Authority as their Commissioner. By pure chance, we comply because I happen to be on the board of Creative New Zealand. This change was partly introduced because they are unhappy with commercial practices that have crept in, like dealer-galleries taking over the country's representation.

PA Let's take a step back. How have you come to be involved with New Zealand arts, and within the international arts sector? You're a member of MoMA's International Council?

JG I've been an art collector for a very long time, but I never set out to be a collector. I don't think anybody does. It creeps up on you and becomes a label. My father and my grandfather were both artists of their era, watercolours and landscapes. My husband and I started collecting art when we were at university, just works on paper, and the collection just built and built into a very significant one.

MoMA invited me to join their International Council in 1991. I've also been on the International Council of the Asia Society of New York, so I've travelled a lot and have always had an interest in art. I consequently became involved here, such as helping the Auckland Art Gallery to develop the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery in the early '80s. I've been very intrigued at watching the growth of internationalism in New Zealand art, which was originally very influenced by international reproductions.

PA Can you elaborate more on that?

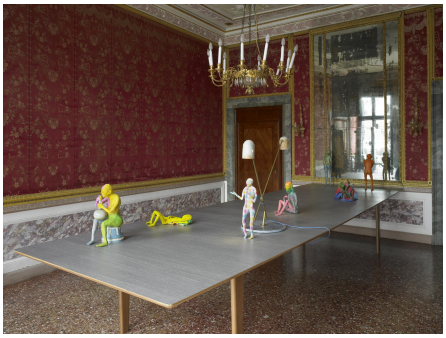
JG I think a lot of New Zealand artists grew up really only knowing international art by reproduction, particularly in the '50s, '60s and '70s, like McCahon. And then around about '80s and '90s, Creative New Zealand and others set up international residencies, and art schools like Elam started taking tours

overseas, and our artists became increasingly exposed to seeing art in person internationally.

That led to artists acquiring dealers overseas and international careers, like Judy Millar, who was one of our artists at Venice in 2009, or Francis Upritchard. That's relatively new, and it really coincides with the time we've been going to Venice.



Francis Upritchard, *Save Yourself*, installation view of New Zealand Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 2009. Photo: Andy Stagg.



Francis Upritchard, *Save Yourself*, installation view of New Zealand Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 2009. Photo: Andy Stagg.



Judy Millar, *Giraffe – Bottle – Gun*, installation view of New Zealand Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 2009. Photo: Judy Millar.



Judy Millar, *Giraffe – Bottle – Gun*, installation view of New Zealand Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 2009. Photo: Judy Millar.

PA Going back to Venice, what's your view on whether it's possible for an artist to solely represent him - or herself at the Biennale, independently from representing their country? The work of an artist illustrates their own world view, yet they participate in a national project which represents a whole country. How does the commissioning team negotiate that?

JG You're right in one sense that they are representing their country, and Venice is different to other biennales because you can't present an exhibition unless your country has been officially invited, but I don't think that our country expects our artists to be specifically 'New Zealand' or to have to say something about New Zealand.

Dane Mitchell's project has nothing to do with New Zealand. Lisa Reihana's one happened to be as did Michael Parekowhai's. Bill Culbert's didn't. We've always chosen the artists on their merit, and not just their artistic merit, but their experience and their ability to cope with the pressures of the Venice Biennale. Artists may feel this pressure, that they're representing their country, but we've always tried to leave them with absolute open-hand support for whatever it is they want to come up with.

PA Living in Europe allows you to travel and see shows more easily, and I agree with what you said about New Zealand artists producing work of very high quality just as other international and acclaimed artists do.

My experience being involved with the Venice Biennale in 2015 made me think that even more, and that's what pushed me to start Contemporary HUM. It felt necessary and relevant to create a platform that could document and also centralise information about artists who have come from New Zealand or who have at some point had a link with New Zealand. We're trying to keep that focus quite broad because it's more about creating international exchange than about closing in on our borders.



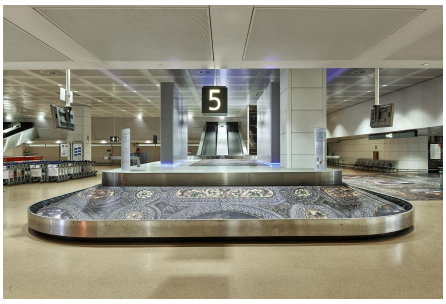
Bill Culbert, *Daylight Flotsam Venice*, Venice Biennale 2013. Photo: Jennifer French.



Bill Culbert, *HUT, Made in Christchurch*, Venice Biennale 2013. Photo: Jennifer French.



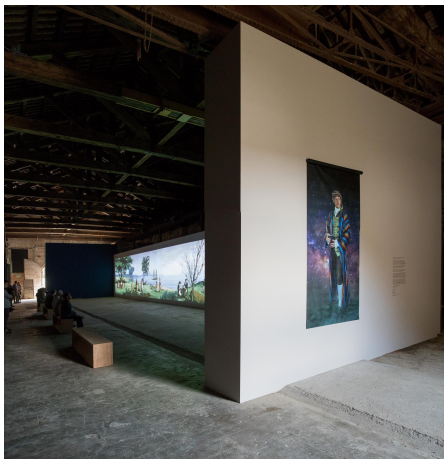
Simon Denny, *Secret Power*, installation view at the Marciana Library, Venice Biennale 2015. Photo: Jens Ziehe.



Simon Denny, *Secret Power*, installation view at Marco Polo airport, Venice Biennale 2015. Photo: Paolo Monello.



Lisa Reihana: Emissaries, New Zealand Pavilion inside the Arsenale complex for the first time, Biennale Arte 2017.



Lisa Reihana: Emissaries, New Zealand Pavilion exhibition view, Biennale Arte 2017.



Michael Parekowhai, *Chapman's Homer*, Venice Biennale 2011. Photo: Michael Hall.

JG That's exactly the rules that we set up when we founded the Walters Prize. The artists only have to have a

connection to New Zealand, so we've tried to open the borders up for that too. One of the things that always strikes me when I look at Australian compared to New Zealand art is that Australia's a much bigger and more confident country and their artists very often work on a very Australian platform.

New Zealand is much smaller and has always been less confident and felt the need to look outside. We've developed a lot of conceptual, minimalist and abstract artists because we've always looked outside and seen international trends. Our artists compare themselves to the international art world rather than looking inward, and that's what's developed their quality. I really do genuinely believe that our best artists are absolutely world-class.

PA And what of the future? How do we ensure this movement continues to grow outwards, across borders and across cities from our island nation?

JG We just have to keep chipping away. South America had its big moment when the US suddenly discovered Latin American artists and they're now a big thing. Similarly, Aboriginal artists have been 'discovered' and picked up by the international art world. With every showing, like the Venice Biennale, where we present work that is of real quality, the international art audience and the media become increasingly familiar with our artists' practices. For example, Lisa Reihana's work went from Venice to being included in *Oceania* at the Royal Academy in London, and is now showing at Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. It's slowly happening, our artists are getting more recognised overseas.



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.



Lisa Reihana (b. 1964) is a multi-disciplinary artist from Aotearoa New Zealand (of Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine and Ngāi Tū tribal descent) whose practice explores how identity and history are represented, and how these intersect with concepts of place and community. The subjects of Reihana's portraiture inhabit a world in which the boundaries of past, present, and future are mutable; their identities are likewise unfixed and transgress everyday expectations of cultural and social norms.

She graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland University, with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1987, and recently completed her Master of Design through the Unitec Institute of Technology. Reihana has an extensive exhibition history in New Zealand and abroad and in 2014 she was awarded an Arts Laureate Award by the Arts Foundation of New Zealand. Her works are held in private and public collections including Te Papa Tongarewa; Auckland Art Gallery; Australia National Gallery; Staatliche Museum, Berlin; Susan O'Connor Foundation, Texas and Brooklyn Museum, New York.



Michael Stevenson is a New Zealand artist born in 1964, who has been living and working in Berlin since 2000. In 2002 he was awarded the New Zealand residency programme at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin and in 2006 he was the Capp St. resident artist at the Wattis Institute CCA in San Francisco. In 2003 he was selected to represent New Zealand at the Venice Biennale. In 2005 he was awarded a work grant by the Senatsverwaltung für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kultur, Berlin. Since 2011 he has undertaken a full-time teaching professorship at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Nürnberg.



Pauline Autet is an independent editor, curator and project manager. Based in Paris since 2016, Pauline founded Contemporary HUM in collaboration with other art professionals from Aotearoa New Zealand based in Europe and beyond. She previously worked at City Gallery Wellington, 30upstairs Gallery and co-founded the nomadic gallery Elbowroom. Following her experience as attendant of the New Zealand pavilion at the Venice Biennale for Simon Denny's *Secret Power* exhibition in 2015, she thought something could be done to bridge the gap between Aotearoa and the wider art world and developed HUM. Since 2016 she has worked with the Aotearoa and French art scenes concurrently. She is in charge of the editorial platform *TextWork*, initiated by the Fondation Pernod Ricard and in collaboration with the French Ministry of Culture. She is also Executive Director of Trampoline, a non-profit initiative created by a group of private organisations in France to support and raise the international profile of artists from the French art scene.

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