An interview with Dane Mitchell

by Contemporary HUM

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Contemporary HUM in conversation with Dane Mitchell in the New Zealand Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell's list of vanished things printing out inside the historic library of the Palazzina Canonica, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell in conversation with HUM, at the 58th Venice Biennale. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell's *Post hoc* tree tower, installed in the Parco delle Rimembranze at Sant'Elena, Venice. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



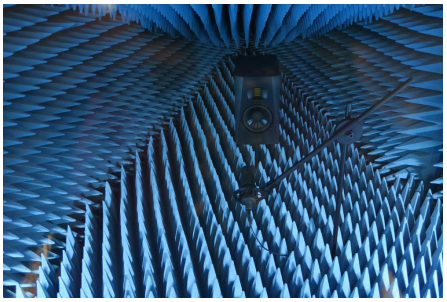
Parco delle Rimembranze at Sant'Elena in Venice with one of Dane Mitchell's pine trees installed on-site. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

The HUM team attended the vernissage of the 58th Biennale di Venezia in May 2019, covered on our daily Venice blog here. On Day One, we headed straight to the New Zealand Pavilion to hear from artist Dane Mitchell about Post hoc *– the project he has developed for this prestigious occasion.*

This year's venue for the national pavilion of Aotearoa New Zealand is Palazzina Canonica, a historic Venetian building on the main waterfront, between the boat stops for the Arsenale and the Giardini, where the majority of the Biennale events take place.

As we enter the premises and gardens of the New Zealand Pavilion, there is a small, stand-alone building on our right, across from the main building. Inside, we find a triangular industrial-looking object in

stainless steel. Walking around it, we peer into the viewing window to the spiky blue foam covering the internal walls of the anechoic chamber, where over three million lost or disappeared things are spoken aloud by a machine over the course of the Biennale. There, we start our conversation with Dane Mitchell…



Interior view of the anechoic chamber. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell's anechoic chamber, Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell and HUM viewing the anechoic chamber on the ground floor of the New Zealand Pavilion, May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

DANE MITCHELL This specific type of chamber, called a tapered anechoic chamber, is used by engineers and military to test things that transmit electromagnetic waves. Things like antenna and cell phones that emit a frequency.

This object is off-the-shelf, in the same way that the trees I used for Post hoc are too. All the forms in this project are pre-existing in the world.

I love this notion of testing things that transmit because transmissions travel much further than sound. They travel vast distances.

What happens inside this tapered anechoic chamber box is beautiful, poetic and actual rather than metaphorical, because a transmission inside this box travels over an infinite horizon. Whatever's transmitted in an anechoic chamber of this kind never hits anything that would reflect it back so it just continues in infinite space.

This is the heart and brain of the project in many respects. Here, there is speaking and listening happening. There is a speaker

speaking the list of words I've compiled and a microphone listening.

CONTEMPORARY HUM Does the glass window we're looking through impact the anechoic quality of this object?

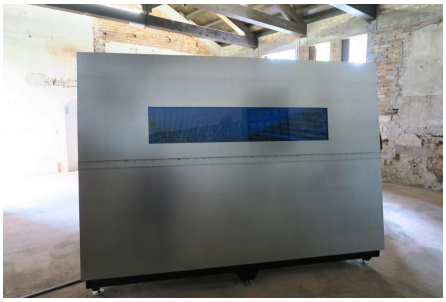
DM Yes, it does complicate it.

HUM Does a common anechoic chamber have such a viewing window?

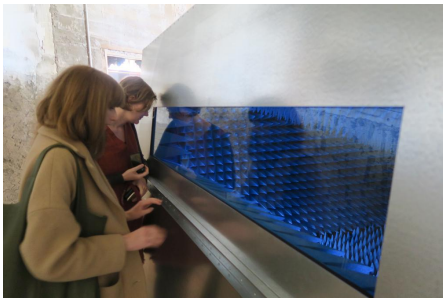
DM No, usually it's closed. In *Post hoc* I've adapted existing forms. The trees come from a factory in China that produce cell phone towers. This chamber is, by chance, produced by a company nearby in Verona.

So, there are certain adaptations to both: the trees are shorter than actual towers, they hold and support different technology. The adaption of the anechoic chamber is two-fold: one is the window to allow this view into a grotto or a kind of silent internal space in which the speech-act occurs. In the same way that no one can ever experience the whole project — there's something ungraspable about the content of the lists, which represent six months of reading — the utterance inside the chamber cannot be heard.

The other adaptation I've made is that in an anechoic chamber of this kind, a tapered one, there would be no acoustic wedges on the floor or on the roof. They're not needed because it's actually the larger end-wall close to us that is the absorber and the infinite space that the transmission travels into and over.



Viewing window installed in Dane Mitchell's anechoic chamber. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



HUM viewing the anechoic chamber, Palazzina Canonica, Venice, May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell's anechoic chamber, Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, *58th* International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell's anechoic chamber, Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM So would you say these are aesthetic adaptations?

DM I guess they're just a way to be more communicative. They're aesthetic and they're a way to intensify the project. It's like a distilling or allowing a sort of clarity of form. Without this window, there would be even more toughness to the proposition that this was happening without us having access to it. I also like that people view it from where that transmission travels into, you're implicated in that transmission by being in front of it. What's being transmitted is simultaneously exiting the box, because it's communicating with the trees installed around Venice.

A tapered anechoic chamber, in real research terms, would be completely isolated, but the sound I'm generating in here, the utterance, travels outwards.

HUM You've produced 260 lists of lost or disappeared things for this project. Could you name a couple and tell us why you chose them and where you went to find the words that are contained in the lists?

DM The attempt to name, list and contain or grasp the magnitude of gone, vanished, absent things in the world is just an impossible task, and so the lists are a deeply subjective and poetic undertaking.

They reflect my proclivities and my interests, but they also push pretty hard up against this assumption or belief in Western epistemological thinking that we can contain the world or hold it and name it. They are also an expression of the bubble in which I live, hemmed in by my language and by the kinds of search tools available to me, or to us collectively. In the same way that the trees, the chamber, and the printer are all existing things in the world, all of the data collected is existing knowledge.

The list of lists, as I've been calling them, is a kind of poem. They contain references to other works of mine, things like discontinued fragrances, prohibited aroma molecules, closed glass factories or fabricators I think they allow the audience to think about what it might mean for something to be gone.

One of the things I've said before is that nothing ever really vanishes. Things metabolise and change but the planetary mass does not change. Even with all of this birth and death, and things being mined, built and destroyed, there's a kind of impervious constant to it: the planetary mass. So not only are the lists contradictory, it's also a fool's errand to try and contain all of the world's lost things.



Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



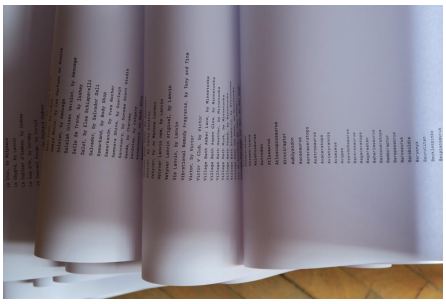
Entrance to *Post hoc,* Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Entrance to *Post hoc*, Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Post hoc's list of lists, Palazzina Canonica, Venice, May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Post hoc's list of vanished things, Palazzina Canonica, Venice, May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM How did you start to research these words two years ago?

DM It was a very organic and handmade undertaking and I revisited the lists continually. A lot of my work deals with the way things transform or transmit, but also the presence of the material forces and the unseen. I started this project thinking about this gone stuff that we are surrounded by, I had a small list of maybe twenty things, like dead languages, extinct plants, abandoned airports…

HUM For some of the lists, you worked with various organisations to source data?

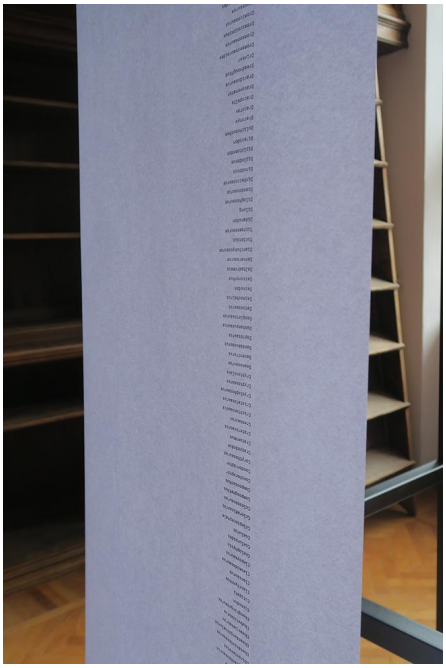
DM Yes, but I probably produced 70% of them personally. You can see the size of my finger, it's all swollen from physically typing in the data.

HUM Data that was sourced from the Internet?

DM Predominantly from the Internet, yes. I had three researchers working with me, two of them for about a year, the other for about eight months, working for around a day a week. As you mentioned, there were third parties, like the Marine Research Institute, who made lists to do with the marine environment, but because of the lists' subjectivity, I needed to be doing most of it. I also had an incredibly generous offer from the Art Loss Register, which is a company in England that tracks stolen artworks and antiquities. They gave me a list of 40,000 stolen artworks – which reads for eight days.



Post hoc's printed list in the library of the former headquarters of the Istituto di Scienze Marine (CNR-ISMAR), Venice. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Detail of Dane Mitchell's list of bygone things, in the historic library of Palazzina Canonica, Venice. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



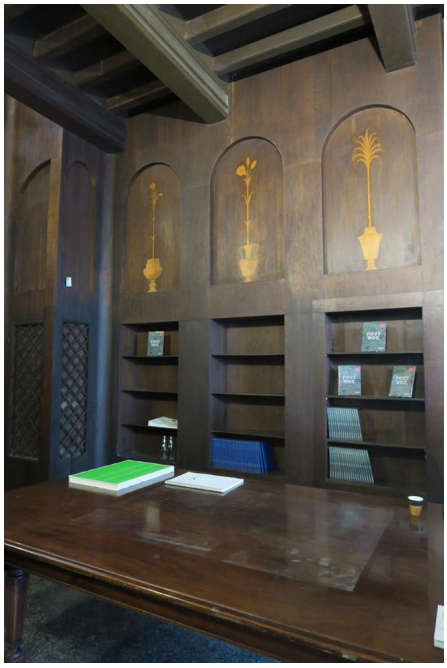
Rolls of paper ready to be printed with the lists of bygone things, upstairs at the New Zealand Pavilion, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



View into the historic library of the Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Post hoc installed in the emptied, historic library of the former headquarters of the Istituto di Scienze Marine (CNR-ISMAR), Venice. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Ground floor of Palazzina Canonica with *Post hoc* exhibition catalogues and reading material. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM In that list, did you edit anything out?

DM No, that needed hours of work! There were some details I wasn't interested in, like descriptions or material lists. I just tried to clean up that data.

When I was trying to find all the abandoned oil platforms sitting out in the ocean, I received a fantastically depressing list from this organisation called End Coal... there are over 40,000 oil platforms waiting to rust and fall back into the ocean.

Sometimes I was quite anxious, thinking, "How am I going to get enough lists?" But when you start, one thing leads to another, and then something poetic happens.

There are some lists that I love: subduction zones, where one tectonic plate falls under another; planetary occultations, when one planet passes in front of another, this idea that something is momentarily gone, and then comes back again; things that move from solid to gas without going through a liquid state [solids that sublime]; voids in outer space.

One of my other favourites is lost lunar samples. When the Apollo space missions went to the moon, they brought back rocks which Nixon gifted to organisations and nations, and some went missing.

HUM They're lost for someone, but they're still somewhere as you said. Did you have to stop at some point to take a step back and check what's missing? What does the list still need to include? Did you attempt to access more difficult sources, perhaps from non-English-speaking countries?

DM In an ideal world, with a larger budget, it would have been great to have several other researchers in other parts of the world to do that. However, I don't think the project is slackened by its specificity in terms of its singular viewpoint. In fact, maybe there's something tougher in the proposition that it comes from a singular place, from one location, to seek ways to transmit knowledge out, but also to pull knowledge towards a single source.

Maybe there's a kind of a dilution, and not because one set of knowledge is more valuable than another, but because there's a

firm honesty in the fact that this is full of holes. The list of absences is full of absences.

Also, any one list is two lists at once. It's a list of the things it says it is, but it's also a list of who has the most visibility in terms of a knowledge economy. The United States is well over-represented in many of these lists because there's an amplification of knowledge from certain parts of the world, as in this instance.



Opening night of *Post hoc* in the library, upstairs at the New Zealand Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, 8 May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Opening night of *Post hoc*, in the New Zealand Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, 8 May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dame Jenny Gibbs, Commissioner for New Zealand at the 58th Venice Biennale with artist Dane Mitchell, on opening night of *Post hoc*, 8 May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM What made you stop at 260 lists?

DM My swollen finger! No, I was thinking about the language in that list as a kind of material, and it had reached a certain size, weight and form that I felt was right for the project and big enough for the undertaking. We got to three million words.

HUM What process did you use once you had collected all the words? How is the automated voice generating the spoken words from that written list?

DM All 260 lists were collated using Excel. From each column, you then enter the coding that allows for speech inflection and reading dates correctly by the voice.

Her name is Amy, and like all of the other parts of this project, she is off-the-shelf. A horrible thing to say but let's be frank, she's not a person. She is an Amazon product, a machine learning text-to-speech software.

The coding from the Excel sheets is transferred into an HTML program, called Sublime, which gets copied into an online program to generate MP3s and is bundled into blocks of 100,000 characters at a time. Amazon Polly spits out MP3s, which I use to build day files or folders for the exhibition. Those lists get read out each day for eight hours, 10 am to 6 pm. The first list that's read out every morning is the list of lists which is 18 minutes and 52 seconds, then a list of seven hours and 42 minutes is read and if it goes longer than that it continues the next day.



Entrance to the Ospedale Civile di Venezia, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Interior of the Ospedale Civile di Venezia, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell's communication tower installed in the garden of the Ospedale Civile di Venezia, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Detail of one of Dane Mitchell's 'stealth towers', for *Post hoc* at the 58th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM Is the sound recording transmitted live from the anechoic chamber to the trees and simultaneously being printed out on these long rolls of paper in the old library room of the Palazzina?

DM Yes, these day files are being transmitted from the chamber to the three trees here at the Pavilion at the same rate that it's being read in the chamber. Each tree also holds the entire inventory of the lists so you can go to any one of them and connect to it by way of a closed network. Once you join the Wi-Fi network, you're no longer online, you're in a one-to-one contact with the tree, and when you load Posthoc.co you can select any one of the lists to listen to.

HUM Why do the four trees located outside the pavilion not 'speak out loud' like the three in the Pavilion? Was that a decision you made, or does it reflect the limitations of exhibiting in public space here?

DM Let's be honest, Venice is difficult. Trying to make these five locations happen was just epic!

I started off ambitiously, but it's like anything, you start to calibrate it and you whittle it down. Venice is a frenetic environment but we've managed to extend across the island, west, out to the architectural school, and up to the Arsenale in the north, so I feel like there's this great cross-field cover, a contagious network.

The one at the hospital sits right outside the psychiatric ward, and there was a sensitivity to the context, with trying to have this tree reading endlessly in a very quiet place. And to be honest, I'm more interested that the trees can be thought about as emitters, or transmitters, than as speakers. So, for me, the speech act is not diluted by them not speaking, it's just a speech act that happens more intimately, with you and your device.

HUM Can you tell us about the artificial trees and why you picked the pine specifically? You have said that pine trees evoke something different for New Zealanders than it does here in Europe, especially being made in China.

DM The first time a cell tower appeared on the landscape was in the 1980s in the United States. There was a lot of concern around these objects appearing high on our landscape and emitting electromagnetic activity and what that meant for the human body, so a company devised this technique of disguising that technology as nature, as a pine.

I think it was affectionately known at the time as a Franken-Pine. What I really like is that it was the genus, the first species of these strange objects that now populate landscapes across the world. There's also something interesting about our relationship to pine, specifically in New Zealand where it is no longer nature, it is capital, a resource that is technological.

We grow pine apparently seven times faster than most other places. It's a huge force within our environment and economy, and in the way it offsets carbon credits but then technologically it's this kind of contained disaster that's not treated as nature. The moment it leaves those confines of its field of allowed growth, it's called a wilding and is an invasive species that must be killed.

I think in New Zealand we should be honest about our relationship with nature, and with the pine. It's dynamic, beautiful and complicated. We seek identity through our natural environment, when in actual fact most of our experiences with nature are technological. They are through parklands which are monitored and aggressively policed for invasive species.

There's also something about the way pines grow, in this very clone-like, regimented, linear way in a plantation. There's a seriality to the way we grow them as capital, so I wanted all the trees to be the same, scattered across Venice in this way.

They've been installed for a few weeks now because we wanted to photograph them for the publication. The feedback's been, "What is that?" People here read it as infrastructure, not art.

They recognise it for what it is: a kind of surrogate for nature that is supporting some kind of transmitting technology. There's been conversations with us, like, "What's it emitting? Or is it watching me?" We actually had to put a sign up during install, explaining it is not a transmitter but part of the Biennale.



Dane Mitchell's 'stealth tower' located in the courtyard of the New Zealand Pavilion, at the Palazzina Canonica, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



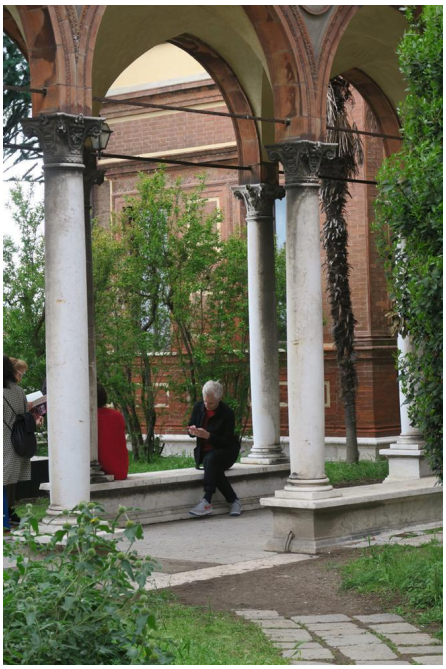
Detail of one of Mitchell's six-metre tall artificial pine trees installed at the New Zealand Pavilion, La Biennale di Venezia, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Mitchell's 'stealth tower' in the gardens of the Parco di Rimembranze at Sant'Elena, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



One of three 'stealth towers' installed at the New Zealand Pavilion, for La Biennale di Venezia, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell at the entrance to the New Zealand Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



HUM interacting with Mitchell's pine trees, at the Ospedale Civile di Venezia, Venice, May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM What about the company that made the trees?

DM It's the SJ Cell Tower & Artificial Plant Company Ltd in Guangzhou, China, which is the factory of the world. If we're

not sitting on a chair that was made in Guangzhou, we're certainly close to an object that was. When I was at the factory, they were working on a contract for an Indian telecommunications company, producing 4,000 Phoenix palms to line a new freeway, each of which would have some kind of sensing technology in it, be it for weather, traffic or Internet technology.

They do domestic plants too, small, little fake topiary. It's totally crazy that we do this as humans, mimicking nature is something we've always done, but this is something else. They are surrogates for trees but they're also incredibly damaging to nature, they replace and displace it.

HUM And you had modifications made to the trees there?

DM Yes, the size reduction is the main thing. Because the standard towers produce an invisible network, to which we're all tethered by way of our phones, it's heavily reliant on cumbersome infrastructure so they're 40 metres high. In New Mexico, there's a giant cactus who's top lifts off, which contains communications technology.

One *Post hoc* tree weighs 450kg, and the bases each weigh 390kg, plus there's another tonne on there for load-bearing.

HUM It's a heavy load to bring from Guangzhou to Venice.

DM Yes, it's huge. The oddity of the New Zealand pavilion producing these kinds of fake trees made in China…



Post hoc installed at the entrance to the New Zealand Pavilion for the 58th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



View of *Post hoc* installed on the grounds of the Palazzina Canonica, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Entrance to *Post hoc* at Palazzina Canonica, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



The list of lists being printed out for *Post hoc*, at the 58th Venice Biennale, May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell's 'stealth tower' installed in the gardens of the Parco delle Rimembranze at Sant'Elena, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM On the one hand, you've said that the project is not about casting a moral judgement, and the trees themselves seem to try to camouflage themselves in the city. Yet at the same time, when listening or reading the list of disappeared things, it's possible to perceive a level of criticality, especially around ecological concerns, in the project. Was it one of your intentions to show what has disappeared because of us humans?

DM Thinking about all of this unseen, immaterial, vanished stuff that once was, I knew the work would start to impinge on environmental and ecological concerns, mass extinction, climate change, political frameworks. I was up for the work having to grapple with that stuff.

The title for me, *Post hoc*, is a way to somehow try to disentangle the work from being a moral lesson. It's important to me that it's not that. In fact, there are some things on the list that we should be glad are gone, such as cured diseases. We do live in a moment where there's potential to imagine an epoch change, to think about

living after climate change, or after mass extinction, and the continued threat of the human species on all kinds of things.

I think we also have to be honest about our own dirty footprint. Yes, the work came in a barge from China. The work is polluted in the first place and then pollutes the Venetian landscape with its contagious network.

HUM What will happen with the different elements of *Post hoc* after the Biennale closes in November?

DM I don't know. It's all new work so it's up for grabs. There will be 800kg of paper when each roll of 152 metres is printed out. In terms of what that might do, I don't know, but it's all recyclable, of course. I've been so inside this project, I've been here seven weeks, and I've needed every minute of it. And I'm totally exhausted, but I'm really excited to be with the audience, with the work.

HUM What's coming up next for you?

DM This has been so intense. Just the lists, which are the heart of this project, were so epic. I haven't had a moment to even look up at what else is on. I'm looking forward to having a little break and getting home, seeing my dog, I've missed her. I need some down time, to be honest. No one needs to hear more from me for a while, surely.



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.

Contemporary HUM is the first centralised platform dedicated to documenting New Zealand projects abroad. HUM publishes conversations, reviews and essays on the international projects of New Zealand creative practitioners.

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