An interview with Paul Handley

by Contemporary HUM

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Paul Handley, *Untitled # 7*, 2016. Pigment Print on archival paper, 84 x 110 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Paul Handley, *Déplacement (Smuggling Pod)*, 2017. Installation at Giardini Marinaressa, Venice. Image: HUM.



Paul Handley, *Portable Protest Pod* 2016, We demand the Greek Government find a Solution for Syrians in Greece (Quote from the streets of Athens, June 2016.) Plywood, Metal rod, Castor Wheels, Vinyl Banner. 240 cm diameter x 110 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



From Lesvos looking towards Turkey. Courtesy of the artist.

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 Em issaries*: 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 Paul, you come from New Zealand but you live in Melbourne and spend a lot of time in Europe for exhibitions and research now. What has been your journey from New Zealand to here?

PAUL HANDLEY I was born in Christchurch. Literally when I was 18 I looked at my prospects, art school-wise, and it was either Dunedin or Auckland. I decided I'm going to Sydney. So I went to Sydney for a couple of years and applied for art school there. Quite surprisingly I got in, but it was good, I did an undergraduate and then a postgraduate, so I was there for about six years studying. I suppose I've been making work for 20-odd years. I took about ten years off, between about 2000-2010 I just decided I had enough. I suppose my profile is not that high because there's a significant period where I decided: no more art. There was a lot of monetary terms and the art world was just getting to me and I decided and I can do without this...

HUM So you worked in a different field?

PH No, I did odd jobs teaching, worked at galleries, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, installing art, going between Christchurch and Sydney. And then I moved to Melbourne, started up a little gallery for a couple of years. Not for me, just to show other work, graduate's work among others. That was a great eye-opener into running a space. So it was roughly about 2010 I decided I'll go to Europe. I travelled a bit, lived in Athens for a while and just absorbed and realised, it's time to make art again.

I suppose I just had to leave, I had to get out. I'd been to Europe before so it wasn't the first time. I decided to look at making art again and I've always been interested in the socio-political, political art, activism and so on, as opposed to, as I mentioned yesterday, I'm not into identity or where I'm from, I don't believe that for me personally.

HUM When you say you don't believe in it, do you mean it's not relevant to your practice?

PH Yes, it's not relevant to my practice. I've got a love-hate relationship with New Zealand, so I did sort of escape!



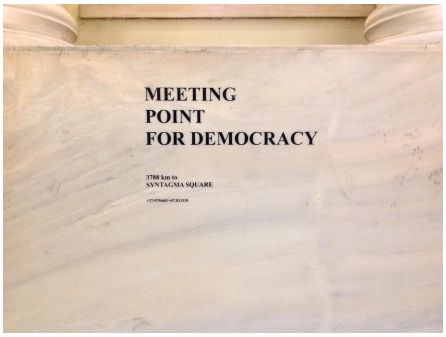
Paul Handley, *Meeting Point for Democracy* (Place de la Bastille), 2016. Pigment print, 110 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Paul Handley, *Meeting Point for Democracy* (Taksim Square), 2016. Pigment print, 110 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Paul Handley, *Portable Protest Pod* 2016, We demand the Greek Government find a Solution for Syrians in Greece (Quote from the streets of Athens, June 2016.) Plywood, Metal rod, Castor Wheels, Vinyl Banner. 240 cm diameter x 110 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Paul Handley, *1972 km to Syntagma Square*, 2013. Vinyl, dimensions variable, Athens Biennale. Courtesy of the artist.



Paul Handley, *Liberte*, 2016. Pigment Print, 84 x 110 cm. Courtesy the artist.

HUM As it's not your first time in Venice, can you tell us how your journey brought you back here?

PH I came to Venice for the 2011 Biennale and there was one work in the main exhibition by a group called Norma Jeane. It was a big piece of clay in the colours of the Egyptian flag, a big cube, and you could come take some and put it on the wall. Over the duration of the exhibition it just deteriorated into the wall and I think that really kicked me into action. There's a lot of art I don't like.

The work addressed the Occupy movement in the Arab Spring 2011, it's a subject matter that I identify with. I started to pursue it and I ended up doing this project about democracy: *Meeting Point for Democracy.* It was a submission for the Istanbul Biennale because they had an open call. The work was based around Taksim Square, the main square in Istanbul. I conceived this imaginary circle of latitude around the world based on the latitude of Taksim Square and pinpointed places around the globe that were similar squares, similar meeting points. Then I made all these posters, and organised to find artist groups in these towns and these countries and sent them the posters. So eventually they were plastered around particular squares that I nominated around the world, around this circle of latitude.

The project didn't go [ahead] in Istanbul, but it was something I followed up and took to Athens for the Biennale there. They were interested in the project and in a sense commissioned me to make the work around the same sort of concept. So it was based on their parliament which is central to democracy as Athens was the first democracy.

HUM The circle is a recurrent element in your work, including in the work you are showing here, *Déplacement (Smuggling Pod)*, 2017.

PH I don't think I was thinking about that at the time, but there's something in that circle. Jumping to this work here, the circle is based on the chandeliers in mosques around Istanbul, big chandeliers with candles. So that's why I identify with the circle and it's probably not a great conceptual leap but the lifejackets are about people fleeing Syria and mainly Muslim countries.



Norma Jeane, *#Jan25 (#Sidibouxid, #Feb12, #Feb14, #Feb17…)*, 2011, 54th Venice Biennial. Colored plasticine, 150 x 150 X 100 cm. Photo: Alberto Zanetti. Courtesy of the artist and Di Gropello Collection, Rome.



Norma Jeane, *#Jan25 (#Sidibouxid, #Feb12, #Feb14, #Feb17…)*, 2011, 54th Venice Biennial. Colored plasticine, 150 x 150 X 100 cm. Photo: Tommaso Zamarchi. Courtesy of the artist and Di Gropello Collection, Rome.



After the Venice Biennial some remaining plasticine was brought to Cairo's Tahrir Sq. where local kids had Norma Jeane's project's ultimate playtime. Photo: Wessam Abdrabo.

HUM In the accompanying publication, you also included an image of big piles of lifejackets on the beach. Is that a photo you took?

PH Yes. After a few years of working with Democracy, I think early 2016, I saw press images of this pile and it drew me, I thought, I've got to go find out about this. I knew about the boats coming between Turkey and Lesbos and other Greek Islands and so I did a pilgrimage of sorts in June 2016. I flew to Athens, caught a boat up to the island of Lesbos which is more Turkey than Athens, you know.

There's always a backstory to everything. I hired a car and I had a rough idea of where the jackets were on the island but I wasn't exactly sure. I committed myself to a couple of days to find them. All I had were these press images of the jackets showing different points in the hills, so I was driving around looking. The morning I was heading up I did a quick search online and got a reference to a particular town. I ended up right in the north of the island, which makes sense because it's the closest point to Turkey, only about ten km, you can actually see Turkey from there. So I drove to the highest point of this island, looked out and saw the distinguishing peaks, and that's where I went. I gradually made my way through and came across this little dirt track, literally just enough for the car and went up half a kilometer up the hill. So I got there, it's essentially a big council tip, were the lifejackets are dumped. And they say there's about ten acres, or roughly 500 000 jackets.

HUM Like a giant dump?

PH Yes, even when I was there, there was a council truck dumping more jackets. So I spent the next few hours documenting it. I didn't know what I was trying to do with it at the time. I just wanted to document, I wanted to be there because literally every jacket is a journey, somebody's been in it and they'd been sold as well. The smugglers on the Turkey side were selling the jackets on the beach and charging €100 for the worst of the worst jackets. I found a child's inflatable, it was more like an inflatable swimming vest... there was hundreds of them just everywhere. And they're fine for a swimming pool, but not on a leaky boat as they say. So that inspired me, when I got back I started to print the work and the quickest way to get it out there was to submit to Art Awards competitions.

I got quite a good response, people were quite shocked by what they saw. I thought a lot of people had seen this in the media but actually not.

HUM A lot of close-up jackets have been circulated but not so much images that document the vast expanse of it like that.

PH I decided to do something with the jackets. In the hundreds of photographs I took I identified this particular jacket that kept popping up and identified that it came from China. I purchased a whole stack of them on eBay and got them sent to Melbourne. I got them for $5 each. These are children's lifejackets and they're just appalling quality. I thought about how I can present them, I was thinking about making my own piles, but realised I wanted a sculptural piece that would maybe open people's eyes.

I wanted to show this in Europe because I wanted to say, come on Europe, what's going on here, because it's a European problem. Well, it's global, but at the moment it's a European problem. And Rene the curator just jumped on board and invited me to show the work.

HUM Not to digress too much, but it’s a problem in Australia too for example.

PH Yes, they [Australian Government] have an appalling record. Obviously they're a big island, they're close to Indonesia. Years ago boats were coming all the time, but they weren't making it to the mainland, they were making it to international waters which is 2000 kilometres away from Australia. So once they made it [to Australian waters] they were put on boats and carted off to Christmas Island, a layout post. Australia deals with it by pushing them off onto islands, Papua New Guinea, Manus Island, out of sight. Even while the New Zealand government, the last prime minister, was offering to take a number of these Syrians and other refugees, Australia said no because they didn’t want them to get residency, allowing them to come and go as we have free movement between the two countries.



Coming across the life jacket dump in Lesbos. Courtesy of the artist.



From Lesvos looking towards Turkey. Courtesy of the artist.



Paul Handley, *Untitled # 4*, 2016. Pigment Print on archival paper, 84 x 110 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Paul Handley, *Déplacement (Smuggling Pod)*, 2017. Life-jackets, Steel, 200cm diameter x 100 cm. Installation at Giardini Marinaressa, Venice. Image: HUM.

HUM How did you become involved with the *Personal Structures: Open Borders* exhibition?

PH I've always had this tendency to go looking for opportunities as opposed to waiting for them to come and I've always been interested in Personal Structures, I followed the organisation for a number of years, and knew that I would love to be involved. So after I made the work, it was December last year, I just emailed them and within hours I got a reply from Rene [Rietmeyer] and he was interested. Rene is the Dutch artist who started Personal Structures in 2002. He wasn't part of the curating group this year, but he brought me on as a personal project. We Skyped and had a pretty vocal conversation about the whole Italian response to refugees.

HUM It seems you know a bit more than us about this mysterious Personal Structures. From their website, we get a sense of the artist collective who organise these enormous shows, every year, during the Biennale. Entrance is always free and huge catalogues are printed and given out like cookies – because artists pay to be included and there seems to be a flurry of sponsors.

PH Yes, I think they've got a reputation now because the European Culture Centre [in Venice] is part of their base, they took that on a number of years ago and host shows there. They're more interested in philosophical ideas and art making, that's their conceptual framework. Maybe they used to be associated with the Biennale, but from what I understand, this show has so much clout that it doesn't need the Biennale anymore. It draws its own numbers and responses. This was a derelict park and Rene negotiated with the Venice council [to host part of the exhibition]. Then Rene had to submit all these works to the council to get approval. My one was a bit problematic.

HUM Politically?

PH Yes, pretty much. Getting back to the jackets, we had a discussion about how I would get them to Venice and I decided I'd buy a new batch on eBay. I got the jackets sent from China to Venice and they got rejected at the border.

The Chinese supplier said everything was fine tax-wise, but for some reason it was rejected by customs. The mystery is why but anyway, I had to get them sent to Melbourne again, and I ended up taking them as luggage with me. So I had two big bags and I rocked up here. They questioned me at the airport, but it went through.

HUM You said yesterday that don't have a gallery, and you represent yourself. How did you go about organising this exhibition? Did you seek support to make it happen?

PH I tried. I applied for a quick response grant from New Zealand. I approached the Australian council because I've got the luxury of crossing both borders. Australia's quite flexible in allowing New Zealand-born residents to apply for funding. But no, essentially it was a big financial commitment and I alo did crowdfunding between friends by selling some work, that's the only way I could fund it. And yes, I've never had representation, I had a gallery many years ago, but they started to dictate what I should make so I told them to go. But it's a bit frustrating because by having a gallery therein have a spokesperson who champions you. I had to do my own publicity for this show, firing off PR statements to try and get something, but I got nothing, which is quite frustrating. I did some research and found that New Zealand had supported artists to present at Personal Structures in the past. But anyway, I've always been an independent artist, pursuing my own thing.

HUM The funding question has often come back in conversation whilst working on HUM. Who's a New Zealand artist? Here in Venice is a good place to have those discussions about nationality and national representation. You said quite clearly that you are not representing the place you come from, your work is not

about identity. Nonetheless, do you find that your background or your experience from the antipodes has influenced your practice?

PH Yes, I'm a lover of Colin McCahon. I lived in Christchurch, I saw the landscape around me and was always inspired by the landscape. You're always going to be a product of where you grew up. I lived there until I was 18 and was quite absorbed by it. In the last few years I've had a few shows in New Zealand too.

HUM Yes it’s a problem for antipodeans, the distance is a real obstacle. The modest public resources allocated to arts and culture have to be spread out even thinner when you have to travel that far.

PH I suppose that's why a lot of artists have moved to a place like Germany. I'm drawn to Europe because of the opportunities. Projects I've done overseas in the past have always been a stepping stone to something else. New interests, new discussions with new people to talk about new projects.



Paul Handley, *Déplacement (Smuggling Pod)*, 2017. Life-jackets, Steel, 200cm diameter x 100 cm. Installation at Giardini Marinaressa, Venice. Courtesy of the artist.



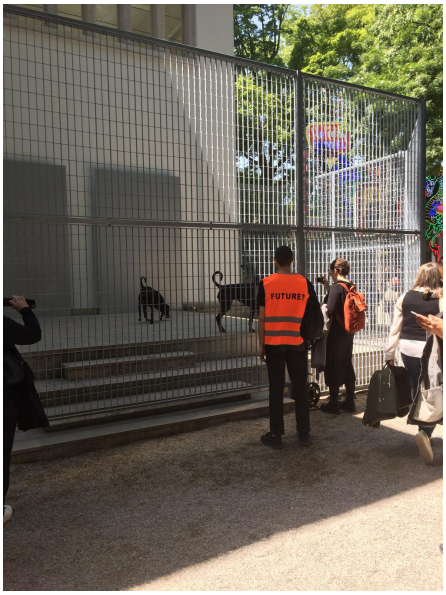
Paul Handley, *Déplacement (Smuggling Pod)*, 2017. Life-jackets, Steel, 200cm diameter x 100 cm. Installation at Giardini Marinaressa, Venice. Image: HUM.



Anonymous graffiti, Venice, 2017. Image: HUM.



Sighting in Venice, 2017. Image: HUM.



Sighting in Venice, 2017. Image: HUM.

HUM The political is very important in your work. Do you have any thoughts on whether that's a responsibility of artists, reflecting our time is important within this context? You're presenting a very humanist response in the face of what's happening, but it can also be problematic.

PH I suppose I see myself as reflecting our time. This sounds cliché, but I just feel it's my right to respond or to extend the dialogue, maybe open some eyes, because a lot of people have them closed. I see problematics with the Biennale—and it will probably be criticised because of its 'humanitarian' agenda or undercurrents. It's always problematic because some can see others are just jumping on the band-wagon. During the first Iraq war, second Iraq war, I was obsessed with the propaganda from Al Qaeda, who have now moved into Isis, it's a product of the long history of occupying Russia and the US occupying land in Afghanistan and so on. I've always had an interest in this... I was interested in the propaganda from Al Qaeda because they use YouTube in the early days of 2000s and they were uploading videos of suicide bombings and I was fascinated by that. Probably a bit too much actually. But it would be good for me to explore the Biennale a bit more in the next few days.

HUM Coming back to your work presented here, and its formal composition, is there a significance to the number of jackets you used or the fact that you have installed a double layer around this circle?

PH There's 30 lifejackets but there's no great significance in the number. I made a work last year called *Portable Protest Pod* constructed on a similar circle, similar legs, but on it was a banner with text taken from the streets of Athens. I was photographing and documenting what I experienced first-hand, like the economic crisis in 2013. I've been to Athens a number of times and when I went back last year it was quite shocking, the deterioration of Athens. It's just terrible. So I was documenting the graffiti everywhere and one of the phrases I saw was "We demand the Greek government find a solution for Syrians in Greece." From that, I got a vinyl banner made up and it hung around this structure. I suppose the reference of the circle to chandeliers in mosques, it's a motif that comes back in my work. In the process of working out how to display the jackets, the pod came back back to mind. But I never envisioned this piece to be outside. It was Rene who suggested we install it in this park on the Venice waterfront.

HUM While the bright orange jackets instantaneously bring to mind refugees, the circle of them floating mid-air alludes to the bodies within, and it makes you think of a people gathering together in a circle.

PH Yes, that's exactly right. Like images you see of families grouping on the boats, on the dinghies. Richard Ines, the Melbourne curator who wrote the text accompanying my work in the catalogue, responded to it better than I could.

HUM I'm curious to know if you've seen the orange lifejackets spray-painted on walls around Venice? They are fluorescent orange and say *Future*? on them. There's one just outside the main entrance to the Arsenale.

PH I know nothing but I will go looking for them! But I know Ai Weiwei is in Venice this week. He's actually set up a studio in Lesbos and he's making work under similar concerns but Ai Weiwei has a big budget… There's a lot of artists working with these ideas and using lifejackets as a material.

HUM To conclude, what projects are coming up for you?

PH In 4 weeks I'm doing a project in Melbourne, similar to this one but a four storey pod, so I need to get back for that. Then a few projects coming up in Europe, but I can't say much more yet. There is a collaborative project in Athens called 'Breaking News' where I'm contributing a piece and a project in Ireland next year.

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?

PH Through the tyranny of distance, it's always difficult to gauge the response to one's work in the short term... or until reviews or references pop up online. I have enjoyed following the various Instagram # feeds around the Biennale and have been surprised by the somewhat positive feedback I've received... both in the number of posted photographs of *Déplacement* (*Smuggling Pod*) and by the number of positive critiques and personal commentary. The work has definitely touched a nerve! Exhibiting in Venice and Europe has once again opened up new opportunities and projects for 2018...and beyond. I'm currently in negotiations to exhibit *Déplacement* (*Smuggling Pod*) in Athens thanks to a overnight email invitation... from a Greek based institution.

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Biographies



Paul Handley is a New Zealand born Melbourne-based multidisciplinary artist who exhibits nationally & internationally. Recent projects and exhibitions include *Vests*, Bundoora Homestead Arts Centre, Melbourne; *Breaking News*, Diplarios School, Athens; *Site Specific*, Lesvos, Greece; *Liberte*, Kings Artist-Run, Melbourne; Fisher's Ghost Art Award, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney; The Incinerator Art Award: Art for Social Change, Incinerator Gallery, Melbourne; *Der Wald*, Group Global Project Space, Berlin; 2013-16 National Contemporary Art Award, Waikato Museum, New Zealand; 2013 & 2016 Substation Contemporary Art Prize, The Substation, Melbourne; Proposal Base, Buitenplaats Koningsweg, Armham Netherlands; *The Open West* 2014, The Wilson, Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum, United Kingdom and *AGORA*, 4th Athens Biennale 2013, Greece. www.paulhandley.com

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