Behind the scenes of Post hoc in Venice

by Amber Baldock, Chris Sharp, Hope Wilson, Jude Chambers, Zara Stanhope

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Creative team: Dr Zara Stanhope (Lead Curator), Dane Mitchell (Artist), Chris Sharp (Project Curator). Photo courtesy of the artist.



Dane Mitchell, Dr Zara Stanhope and Chris Sharp present *Post hoc* at the press preview. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Post hoc Exhibition Attendant Hope Wilson, May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (installation view), 2019, Mixed media installation. (Offsite) Università Iuav di Venezia, New Zealand at Venice 58th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia. Image courtesy New Zealand at Venice.



HUM talks to Zara Stanhope on location at the New Zealand Pavilion in Venice, May 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (installation view), 2019. Mixed media installation, New Zealand Pavilion 58th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia. Photo courtesy: New Zealand at Venice.



Hope Wilson with Benny Chang, the first and second Attendants, respectively, for the New Zealand Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, 2019. Photo: Benny Chang.

Now nearly half-way into the Venice Biennale, and having published o ur interview with artist Dane Mitchell last month, we take a look behind-the-scenes of the New Zealand Pavilion: what goes into setting up a national exhibition at the Venice Biennale and attracting the public to it? How does a project get from start to finish? We asked five members of the team behind Post hoc *to give us their first-hand account and insights: Jude Chambers, Project Director; Zara Stanhope, Lead Curator; Chris Sharp, Project Curator; Amber Baldock, Project Coordinator; and Hope Wilson, Exhibition Attendant.*



Jude Chambers - Project Director

HUM What does the opening week of the Biennale represent, strategically, for participating national pavilions? What events did you host at the New Zealand Pavilion during the

vernissage and what do you hope to achieve during this busy period?

JC The opening week is a special moment for us to celebrate the achievement of the artist and team, to draw attention to the New Zealand pavilion, and manaaki (host) a large number of international colleagues. The spotlight is of course on the art and creative team, however we make the most of the opportunity to develop our relationships and profile more broadly. Following the blessing, we hosted a number of key events at the pavilion: a press preview, our official opening, a function hosted in partnership with *Mousse Magazine*, and a number of events for our patrons, partners and supporters. We also hosted a number of tours for patrons groups from the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and Museo Tamayo, to name a couple. Presenting at the Biennale provides an important international platform for our artists – the global attention develops their profiles and generates future opportunities. In a broader sense, it also supports New Zealand's reputation of being a country that produces relevant and innovative art.

HUM What are certain characteristics that you look for in an artist representing New Zealand at the Biennale? Are there particular qualities that they or their work should have?

JC Quoting a previous Venice curator "Exhibiting in Venice is like exhibiting on the Moon". It is an extraordinary opportunity, like no other, on many levels. I am sure our previous artists could speak directly to this, and in fact may be better placed to answer this question. From my experience, I think it is important that the time is right – the artist should have sufficient experience in both their creative and professional practice and have a strong support network in place. It should stretch and enhance their practice but also be a rewarding experience, and hopefully a little bit enjoyable! Above all else, the work needs to be of high quality and relevant for the Biennale context and environment. The specific criteria can be found on our website and

we are excited to have just closed the call out for the 2021 Biennale.

HUM As Project Director of the past six New Zealand Venice Biennale projects, what have been the particular challenges from one Biennale to the next and for this 2019 edition?

JC Each project has been so different and has presented its own suite of challenges. Managing the various venues and presenting work for over six months in environments that are not art-friendly is certainly a constant challenge across all. Venice always presents obstacles you just simply can't plan for – whether it's changes to Venetian regulations, or experiencing the coldest May on record, and the unprecedented weather causing havoc with solar-powered equipment – there is never a dull moment until the work is safely freighted back to the artist's studio.



Zara Stanhope - Lead Curator

HUM Can you speak about the context around this project, how *Post hoc* fits into the Venice Biennale and why it is relevant to present it now?

ZS It's very timely for Dane at this point in his career, as he has already held an international platform in various different ways. This is a great way to reinforce that and to bring a highly conceptual work that resonates in an international context, particularly a Western one, to the wider audience that we know come to Venice, of curators, gallerists, collectors.

We had talked about Venice previously and I don't think that he had the right project at the time so I'm really pleased it didn't happen earlier. I'm not sure whether he agrees but that's my perspective. This is the right project for the right time.

Post Hoc has been a great opportunity for Dane to take another direction with his work, shifting away from the more familiar, conceptual works that we're used to, which often are largely invisible, whereas here we have a work that has that sense of invisibility in its context and its subject matter, and is really deeply rooted in thinking about our histories as well, but which also has a physical presence. I think this is important in getting people to really stop and engage with and think about the work. When an artwork is largely invisible, in the context of Venice, it's a difficult ask.

People might also see the work at different times, in different places across the city. So it's reinforcing itself across that time period. In a pragmatic sense, this is a really great project for both this site and context. Venice, to us and to visitors, can feel a bit like a stage set, and so there's this double layer with the fact that the trees are artifice. It's a strange place in the world, and in some ways it has a strange suitability for the project. And then of course when you think about histories and loss and invisibility, and of Venice itself, as we know, presently sinking away, the site is also perfect in that sense.

HUM Was there any kind of curatorial input or guidance from you and Chris Sharp for Dane's selection of the lists?

ZS It was largely Dane's thinking around the list. He put forward a list at the start and we all contributed some other

ideas that came to mind, and it quickly grew. And then he inserted several things that were particular to his thinking and interest as well, and then a couple of his researchers selected some that were interesting and relevant.

A couple of subjects got dismissed, that we thought didn't quite fit. But largely, we wanted it to be Dane's project and true to his thinking and way of envisioning this project.

HUM What is the significance of using language to bring these items back to the present day? Can you talk more about the importance of language in the project?

ZS Dane talks a lot about speaking, about enunciation, which is what he's thought about for some time in his practice. But we all agreed that language is a form of communication, whether it is spoken or written, and list-making is one of these forms. So there's a sort of poetic sense to that as well.

For me, once you start to really look at what the lists are framing, you see that language is shrouded in Western epistemology. And not only because it's English, but also in the way that it shows how the West has structured our thinking around things like time and classification, around Latin as a language that was all about genealogies and classification of the world and people. It is very much about how Western culture has seen and understood the world. Language is the framing, structuring system that is really what we're talking about, and our behaviour comes out of that.

HUM What is expected of the audience when they come across these artificial trees in the city? Is there an emotional, or is it more a subconscious reaction? As curators and also with the artist, how did you expect people would experience the work?

ZS Initially, the trees were going to speak, but for pragmatic reasons this wasn't possible – and conceptually, we

decided it didn't really matter. Our next thoughts were that people would see a tree and then use their device to access the lists.

The audience engagement is the full spectrum: some people ignore the trees, and some are very curious about what they are and immediately come up to them and start to investigate. Others have an emotional response to the lists, thinking about things that they've lost, and some have a curiosity regarding why some items and not others. I think it's great that people have this almost anxious response to this tree.

Meanwhile, a lot of Venetians were worried about the aesthetics of their island, because this artificial, ugly thing, is sitting in a beautiful Venetian garden or in a hospital. But once you start to talk about it as art, people understand it as such.



Chris Sharp - Project Curator

HUM When or how did you first encounter Dane's work, and what is it in particular that you find compelling in his practice?

CS I encountered Dane's work on the back of a short visit to New Zealand around 2010. I was living in Europe at the time. The two of us met, did a studio visit, and then he invited me to write for his catalogue at the time.

What drew me to Dane's work at the time was his elegance of thought. The clarity and the economy of the presentation, how well everything was considered. And also some of his themes, like immateriality, different forms of materiality, immaterial structures of sculpture...

I feel like where my practice as a curator or some of my thinking really links up with this is in this interest in withdrawal. It's something I've been working on for a little while.

At one point I was working on a kind of anthology of artists who withdrew and stopped making work and considering the implications of that. Obviously this is much vaster, but these kind of willful absences are a force of production and a way to really think about the parameters of art. These immaterial structures are parameters of sculpture which are really hard to define or map out.

HUM And what is it about *Post hoc* that resonates with you?

CS When you initially hear us speaking about it, it might sound like it's just tragic and traumatic. And that's certainly a component, but I like to think of the lists almost like a Shakespeare play; something that will make you cry and something that will make you laugh and kind of enchant you at the same time. So it's very multidimensional, it's not just one thing.

And I really like this idea that the work is somehow bigger than us in the sense that it's incomprehensible as an experience. The chamber speaks but we don't hear it, it projects outwards, we can tune in to it, but actually the lists are so vast and the speech so long that actually no one can grasp the entirety of those lists. They read for seven months. So it's this constant sense of a language, and that kind of non-grasping nature of the work.

HUM How do you see the project in the bigger picture? If you take a step back and look at it in its entirety, what does it mean to you?

CS All this data about things that once were and no longer are, researched and accumulated by Dane, are momentarily conjured up through the speech act and then symbolically materialised in fact in the library by these reams of paper.

The entire project can be inscribed in the history of Western epistemology. It's easy to think of different instances in Western conceptualism where it's all about the writing and inscription and archives, like Robert Barry's set of artist's books, *One Billion Colored Dots*. Enlightenment thinking, modernity, ideas of progress, the encyclopaedia. It's this notion or hope or ambition that everything can be classified, accounted for, named and described, so that the unknown world can become this completely scientific and known thing.

Dane comes along in that tradition. Because it's really touching, this impossible task, and I don't think any single human can actually experience this work in its entirety. And the fact that this work exists describes something that is completely impossible. The work speaks to a completely unfulfillable ambition of describing all these different forms.



Project Coordinator Amber Baldock with artist Dane Mitchell on the steps of Palazzina Canonica, Venice, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

Amber Baldock - Exhibition Co-ordinator

HUM Is *Post hoc* a particularly challenging exhibition to coordinate – with elements installed in public spaces and a significant audio/transmitting system to develop?

AB When I first joined the project, I could tell *Post hoc* was going to be an exceptional exhibition; with its expansive sites across Venice and its combination of sculptural and technical elements, the installation cut an impressive footprint on the island.

Despite Venice being a Biennale town, the city, with its canals, historic architecture, pressured infrastructure and constant stream of tourists, offers peculiarly unique challenges for putting on an exhibition, irrespective of scale and complexity. One area I thought might prove most challenging was how to safely install and secure five-metre tall, 500kg sculptures, in what is, in essence, one large World Heritage Site. The trees, in actuality, went up very smoothly.

HUM What do the weeks leading up to the Vernissage look like?

AB Our small but dedicated exhibition team covered a lot of ground during this time, and the installation solutions we came up with were varied and often novel. It's an intense part of the project when you finally arrive in Venice, signalling the shift from development to delivery. The first step is to get all the artworks safely into Venice. As you can imagine, the waterways become very congested in the build up to the Biennale, as each country prepares their own exhibition. Even more common than the tourist boats are transport barges packed with crated artworks. This can also be one of the most worrying times as the transfer from vessel to hard ground takes place – it's not a time to rush, but rather a time to have a few useful Italian phrases up your sleeve.

It's not wrong to say that Dane and I were figuratively, and literally, inside the 'work' for those weeks on the ground in Venice. And that 'work' was often quite taxing to install – the industrially-manufactured nature of the art objects meant we were working with hard and heavy materials – galvanised steel, awkwardly-shaped branches, oversized bolts and their corresponding tools. Reflecting back on this period, you couldn't script what each day would bring, and that is what makes exhibiting the Venice Biennale so rewarding.

HUM Due to the nature of the exhibition and some of the *Post hoc* lists raising environmental issues, has there been any consideration of organising the exhibition in a sustainable way?

AB The Biennale as an organisation requires exhibitors to be environmentally aware. When it comes to recycling, you also take your lead from Venice – the city authority has a strong focus on recycling, and it is very expensive to dispose of rubbish there. This is further encouragement to make sure you only bring to Venice what you absolutely need, and you make sure you take it back with you. We certainly found ourselves in some

hilarious situations of trying to recycle more than our daily allowance, with timed runs to various pick up and drop off locations in the city.

As an exhibition-maker, I always look to utilise sustainable or 'green' work practices wherever possible. Reusing, borrowing, recycling and avoiding excess were some of the sustainable strategies employed during the preparations for *Post hoc*.

That said, I'm also cognisant of the fact that we are making *things*, and *Post hoc* is a project that holds complex positions in relation to environmental issues. On the one hand it might contain messages from the past about our ecological present, yet it's delivered by way of artificial trees that displace and replace nature.



Hope Wilson - Exhibition Attendant

HUM *Post hoc* is quite a complex and conceptual project that doesn't immediately reveal what it is about, not unlike other works by Dane Mitchell that operate in the realm of invisible or

intangible ideas. As an attendant of the New Zealand Pavilion in Venice, how do you guide visitors through the project?

HW Although *Post hoc* does have a lot of working parts, there's a poetic simplicity to the core of the project – the lists. I always start by describing the lists as a subjective and partial catalogue of phenomena that have vanished, been lost, become extinct or obsolete, and then give a few examples to illustrate the breadth of things they'll encounter on the lists. For example, there are lists of dinosaurs, lost languages, and discontinued perfumes, but there are also lists of haunted locations, failed utopias, and cured diseases. Giving visitors a sense of the idiosyncratic nature of the lists, as well as their scope, is key to understanding and engaging with the three physical/sculptural components of Dane's work, the stealth cell tree towers, the tapered anechoic chamber, the printer, and of course the work as a totality.

HUM You are spending a lot of time with the project and getting to know it in great detail. What element do you personally find the most compelling in *Post hoc*?

HW I know I've already spoken about the lists but they really have captured my imagination. I've become very familiar with the 'list of lists', but seeing the printer materialise the entries on each of these lists in the library of the Palazzina Canonica is something entirely different. It's amazing how each individual entry has its own web of histories and associated understandings. I also enjoy the way Post hoc uses existing or 'found' technology – the stealth tree cell towers, the tapered anechoic chamber and the printer – to communicate the lists, and how the associations and languages those objects bring to the work can open up avenues of understanding for the viewer.

HUM As the artist has said, the list of disappeared things he selected for the project is a subjective and incomplete list

that could be compiled without end. Are people challenging the selection? Has anyone picked up on something that, in their eyes, is not lost or gone (someone we spoke to expressed her surprise to hear Brunei Island listed as she had recently been there)?

HW There have been a few people who have challenged individual entries, but on the whole I've found people to be very inquisitive and open to thinking about the lists as a poetic document – where research activity is integral to the making of the work, but the work isn't defined by it. This is one of the contradictions *Post hoc* deals with – the lists challenge the limitations of knowledge collection, and at the same time asks people to think about whether something is truly ever gone – I find this really fascinating.

Biographies



Amber Baldock is Exhibition Coordinator for the New Zealand Pavilion at this year's Biennale. In addition to being the Exhibitions Manager at City Gallery Wellington since 2010, where she lead the installation of New Zealand-born sculptor Francis Upritchard's first survey show *Jealous Saboteurs*, Amber also oversaw the installation of Simon Denny's *Secret Power* project at the 2015 Venice Biennale. She was also one of ten exhibition attendants at the 2013 Venice Biennale.



Chris Sharp is a writer and independent curator based in Mexico City, where he and the Mexican artist Martin Soto Climent run the project space Lulu. Chris has curated a multitude of international exhibitions including Against Nature, co-curated with Edith Jerabkova at the National Gallery of Prague (2016); *As if in a foreign country*, at Galerie nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder, Vienna (2016); A Change of Heart, at Hannah Hoffman Gallery, LA (2016); *The Secret and Abiding Politics of Stones* (2016) at Casa del Lago, Mexico City; and The *Lulennial: A Slight Gestuary* at Lulu, Mexico City, co-curated with Fabiola Iza (2015). Chris is formerly news editor at Flash Art International and editor-at-large of Kaleidoscope and is currently a contributing editor of Art Review and of Art-Agenda.



Hope Wilson was the first attendant at the 58th Venice Biennale, and is currently the Assistant Curator for The Physics Room in Christchurch, a role she has held since 2016. She also volunteers as a Committee Member for the Friends of Christchurch Art Gallery. Hope completed her Bachelor of Arts with Combined Honours in Art History and English (1st class) from the University of Otago in 2013 and in 2017, completed her Postgraduate Diploma in Museum Studies from Massey University.



Jude Chambers is the Manager International Services and Initiatives at Creative New Zealand. She manages the team responsible for connecting New Zealand artists and arts organisations with global markets, international networks and cultural and artistic exchange. She is also responsible for delivering a number of international projects and initiatives for Creative New Zealand, including New Zealand's participation at the Venice Art Biennale and the Edinburgh festivals, the international visitor programme Te Manu Ka Tau: Flying Friends and a suite of partnerships and programmes that support international cultural and artform exchange including the Focus on Asia initiative. Jude was the Project Director for *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries* at the Biennale Arte 2017, worked on New Zealand's 2009 and 2011 Biennale Arte projects and was the project manager for Bill Culbert's *Front Door Out Back* in 2013, and Simon Denny's *Secret Power* in 2015.



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

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

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