



# An interview with Francis Upritchard

by Contemporary HUM

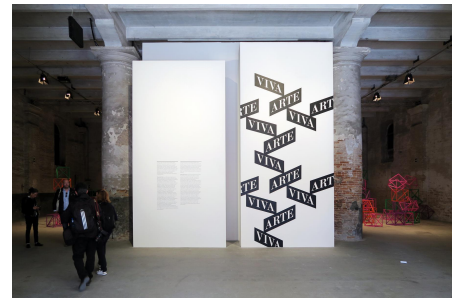
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Francis Upritchard, *Buey* (detail), 2016, steel and foil armature, paint, modelling material, fabric. 57th Venice Art Biennale, Arsenale, Venice. Image: HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *Buey* (detail), 2016, steel and foil armature, paint, modelling material, fabric. 57th Venice Art Biennale, Arsenale, Venice. Image: HUM.



*Viva Arte Viva*, the core exhibition of the 57th Venice Art Biennale, curated by Christine Macel, Arsenale, Venice, 2017. Image: HUM.

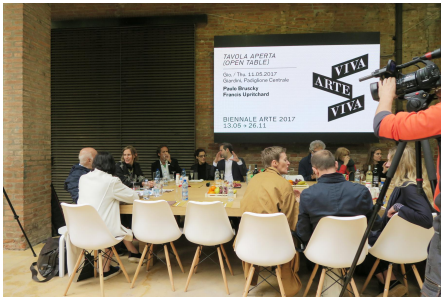


Tavola Aperta with Paulo Bruscky and Francis Upritchard, 11 May 2017, *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Art Biennale. Image: HUM.



Francis Upritchard, installation view at *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Art Biennale, curated by Christine Macel, Arsenale, Venice, 2017. Image: HUM.

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 Venexia 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: Urges of Imperialism Unravelling, Rhana Devenport's presentation of Emissaries: New Zealand's Pavilion 2017; What recognition for New Zealand visual arts on the world stage?, transcribed panel discussion with New Zealand Pavilion 2017 Commissioner Alastair Carruthers; Reporting from the Front Desk, Chris Winwood's take on New Zealand's Architecture Pavilion in 2016; Will Gresson on the history of the New Zealand's contribution to the Venice Art Biennale (upcoming 2017).*



Francis Upritchard, *Men with Octopus* (in the making), 2017. Courtesy of the artist



Francis Upritchard, *Men with Octopus*, 2017, bronze. 57th Venice Art Biennale, Arsenale, 2017, Venice. Image: HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *Octopus with Fish*, 2016, bronze. 57th Venice Art Biennale, Arsenale, 2017, Venice. Image: HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *Octopus with Fish* (in the making), 2016. Courtesy of the artist



57th Venice Art Biennale, Arsenale, 2017, Venice. Image: HUM.

**CONTEMPORARY HUM** Francis, this is your second time at the Venice Biennale, following on from your participation in New Zealand's national presentation in Venice in 2009, which also included artist Judy Millar. This time, your work is presented within the main curated section of the Biennale, this year curated by Christine Macel. Can you tell us how you became involved?

FRANCIS UPRITCHARD      I haven't asked her actually but I assume that Christine Macel saw my work here or when I had a show at Art Concept at the beginning of 2016, really close to the Pompidou Centre where Christine works, and I assume that she was either reminded or saw my work there. [Correction: Christine first saw my work at Anton Kern last year where I was doing a show with my husband Martino Gamper.] She got in touch with Anton and Kate MacGarry, who suggested a studio visit, but I was going to New Zealand, and then finally, finally, finally we managed to meet, I actually went to Paris to meet her. Yes, she pretty much said I love your work, and want to include it in the show, so that was quite simple.

HUM                      Was it an open invitation to make what you wanted?

FU                      Yes pretty much. She told me what works of mine she really liked, certain figures... And she described, the area [of the exhibition] she wanted to include me in—the *Traditions* section, but otherwise she was very free. I'm quite organised and work quite far in advance so I was pretty early sending them photos, but they never actually got back to me and said yes or no, I took it as an okay.

HUM                      Were all the works made for this show?

FU                      They're all new. I actually made another five or so. Yes, this is the very edited version because their space isn't so big.

HUM                      You've included seven figures and some are quite different, some are more minimal, and the figures in bronze have no colour or fabric elements. Is this a new direction?

FU                    They're not a new direction; just a new scale. I've been working with Balata since I went to Brazil in 2009. I'd always worked on a much smaller scale, but then suddenly I technically worked out how to make them bigger, and just ran with that. I'm really happy with those and that's probably where I'm going next, making more of these bigger figures. If I want to keep them they will have to be cast in bronze, because the rubber does degrade

HUM                  What are the properties of the rubber, what is it like to work with as a material?

FU                    I heat it in hot water— 80 or 90 degrees, so it's not boiling but it's quite hot—after soaking it overnight in cold water. When I bring it up to heat in cold water, it will take quite a few hours to become malleable if it's a big block.

Then I set up a bath, so I have these big pots with hot water and then I work in the bath making the sculpture, but it hardens in that cold bath. I can join bits by putting hot water on and sticking it together, it's a really weird process and it's very fast. Often I have some people helping me, because I can't handle it, it's all sticking together and overly malleable.

HUM                  And then you cast it in bronze?

FU                    Yes, but for example for the next show, because I'll be making quite a lot of them and it's expensive, I'll not cast them in bronze all at once, I'll do them one by one as they sell maybe. In Venice, I have two bronze sculptures. One is actually two figures, one guy is the backpack, he's on piggyback. Those are from a Japanese Netsuke, you know these little carved bone and tooth that Samurais would have, it's spelt Netsuke, but pronounced Netske. I saw some in LACMA in LA and I love these characters [Ashinaga and Tenaga] they are mythical characters that show up in drawings, calligraphy...



I loved this idea of these two men, they symbolise symbiosis and they work together to go fishing often, but sometimes they do other things like stretching their legs: one will be lying down and the other one will have his legs up, because one's got really long arms, one's got really long legs. And I've heard from one source that one's from the land of long arms and one's from the land of long legs, but another source I read that they are siblings, so I'm not sure. But they're pretty much always naked and I like the idea of these naked guys, sort of wrestling, touching each other and doing quite intimate things together.

HUM                    And there's a marine theme associated to them?

FU                    Yes that's why the marine creature came up, because they're usually catching crabs, flounders, other fish. But another representation I saw of them, they were trying to put a wine flask up on a shelf, so they do things that they can't do unless one of them has got long legs and one's got long arms. I've done a lot of drawings of them myself, I just find them so charming. And the other bronze work is an octopus on its own, I just felt like another small element might feel good. So in a way it's formal too, because I need another element kind of this size to go back here.



Francis Upritchard, *Buey* 2016, steel and foil armature, paint, modelling material, fabric; and Makiko, 2016, steel and foil armature, paint, modelling material, fabric, hair. *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Art Biennale, 2017. Image: HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *Black and White Fringe*, 2017, steel and foil armature, paint, modelling material, fabric, hair, bone. *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Art Biennale, 2017. Image: HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *Purple and Yellow Diamond*, 2016, steel and foil armature, paint, modelling material, fabric, hair. *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Art Biennale, 2017. Image: HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *Marianne*, 2016, steel and foil armature, paint, modelling material, papier-mâché. *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Art Biennale, 2017. Image: HUM.

HUM                      How do they relate to the other figures, the more colourful ones, the ones in costume—are they part of a single work or do you see them all separate?



FU                    The whole thing is one work, but there's no narrative between them, they're just one work because they happen to all look good together. It's not that one comes from this or that continent, it's not like that. Usually I make the heads first in polymer plastic on a foil base and then I'll make the bodies and I'll often do drawings at the same time or watercolours. So, if you saw my touring show in New Zealand, lots of the watercolours are, like trying to work out things like posture and colour.

I make work quite rapidly. I started making these in November last year, because I had a solo show booked with Kate MacGarry for *Frixe* 2016, so I had that first and then I just went straight into making this new work.

HUM                    So you've made these in the last six months or so. Does it contribute to you thinking of them as part of the same family?

FU                    These and another five I think. Once they're locked down, once they're on the plinth it sorts of sets them.

HUM                    Can you describe some of the other works presented in Venice?

So there's one that has a pink woven textile from Guatemala, that my husband collected there more than 20 years ago, and he's been carrying around, god knows why, he doesn't seem to be that interested in textile. And the face is actually based on my friend Maiko, who's Japanese and great looking, and she says it looks like her brother. It's got an old white glove as a hat, that's been a bit of re-sewn.

There's the one with gold earrings and clothing that's stolen, well no, my friends Peter Pilotto, the fashion designers, often give me off cuts, they say take whatever you want in there, and so the fabric comes from them. It's named *Buey* because I had stuck a weird

sticker that said 'Hola Buey!' on its back. That fell off, but it's still called *Buey*.

HUM                    There's the yellow figure sitting down?

FU                    Oh that one, the yellow and blue one is called *Marianne*. I often don't use models at all, but she's also from a model, because you get bored in the studio by yourself. And her name's Marianne. That one was simply because I wanted to do a figure that is all in polymer plastic, and lower and colourful...

And then there's the stocking figure I really wanted to do one with gray stocking figure and because I found that amazing black and white trim, I wanted to find a way to use that. Also that was a softer colour that could sit with the bronzes. So lots of the decisions are formal, just knowing that when I put it together it's going to look a certain way.

HUM                    Do you think at all about who those figures are or the cultural and historical narratives you reference?

FU                    No, what I try and do is mix it up as much as possible.

HUM                    Aesthetically speaking or even historically and culturally?

FU                    Historically and aesthetically. With the figures of course it is only aesthetic because all you can read from the sculpture is what is there. So you might read that it's a Japanese face, but with maybe an Inca painting and then, if you know much about textiles you'll know that was a Guatemalan fabric. But the other fabrics, the orange is from a Palazzo in France and so is the green, the trim is from the Portobello Market in London.

So I really know all the histories, but as a viewer, it's not particularly useful. And for the tall one with the blue and black dress- I'd never made such a large figure, not used paper mache before with the Super sculpy plastic, so it was interesting trying to join together those two materials. Speaking of materials, I often go to the African places to buy my hair to make the wigs, and I wanted to make a curly black wig for that sculpture but I could never find what you'd use to do that. I took my girlfriend who makes wigs for films to advise me and it turns out you brush the ringlety hair pieces. So that was really nice to finally finish that work.

HUM                    What is the experience like to this time be in the curated group exhibition, and how it differs from being in a national pavilion?

FU                    Well it's much easier this time, because there are lots of expectations in a national pavilion presentation which are, for me, irrelevant. Because you've got people with particular needs—the New Zealand Arts Council etc, etc, whoever's providing money and things like that—their outcomes are really different. I need to make a good show, that's what I need to do, and I really know the art world, I know exactly how it will help me—if I do a good show I'll meet interesting curators that will ask me to do more good shows, and that's what happens.

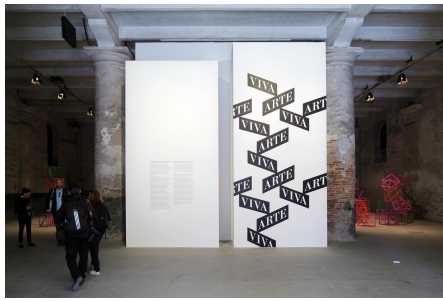
But, of course, for bureaucratic bodies that's very waffly, they want to tick boxes and things like that, which for me, the artist, what a waste of time... Yes, that is frustrating, because I don't work in an office, I'm not used to office politics, I just do what I feel like and I'm very economical, I don't waste time writing excess pages of words that are not useful. So, with this presentation, I can just do exactly what I need to do.

HUM                    You have more freedom.

FU                      Not more freedom, I'm just more efficient, the Biennale too. They've got 130 artists, they don't want everyone to waste their time by adding extra bureaucracy; they get what they need very quickly. And also, they really leave me alone, I mean, I had to find my own airbnb to come and install, I brought my own team to install. I like working like that, it works for me, it doesn't work for lots of people, but for me it's really good. But I've also got really nice galleries who support me, Anton Kern and Kate MacGarry have been amazing.

HUM                      You also received funding from Creative New Zealand for this project.

FU                      Yes I did, to actually produce the work, which was invaluable....



*Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Art Biennale, curated by Christine Macel, Arsenale, Venice, 2017. Image: HUM.

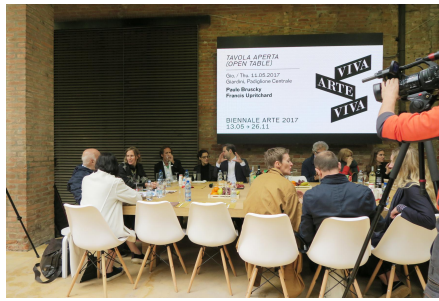
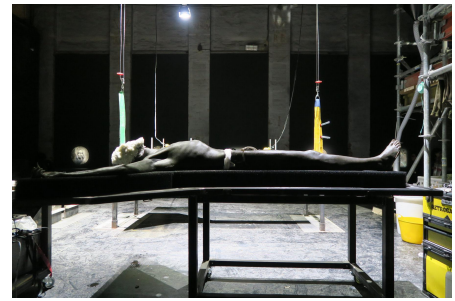


Tavola Aperta with Paulo Bruscky and Francis Upritchard, 11 May 2017, *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Art Biennale. Image: HUM.



Roberto Cuoghi, *The Imitation of Christ*, one of the Christ casts going through manufacturing process, Italian Pavilion at 57th Venice Art Biennale, 2017. Image: HUM.



Roberto Cuoghi, *The Imitation of Christ*, plastic tunnel with casts going through deterioration process inside, Italian Pavilion at 57th Venice Art Biennale, 2017. Image: HUM.



Roberto Cuoghi, *The Imitation of Christ*, plastic tunnel with casts going through deterioration process inside, Italian Pavilion at 57th Venice Art Biennale, 2017. Image: HUM.



Francis Upritchard, installation view at *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Art Biennale, curated by Christine Macel, Arsenale, Venice, 2017. Image: HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *Buey* (detail), 2016, steel and foil armature, paint, modelling material, fabric. 57th Venice Art Biennale, Arsenale, Venice. Image: HUM.



Francis Upritchard, installation view at *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Art Biennale, curated by Christine Macel, Arsenale, Venice, 2017. Image: HUM.

HUM Supporting and documenting international presentation is an ongoing drive for us with Contemporary HUM, because we're interested in expanding those notions of who is a New Zealand artist, or has a link to New Zealand. We try to also get international writers to write about the wider context of presentation in relation to New Zealand artists' work...



FU                    That's actually much more useful, I think, because New Zealand looking at itself from every angle is of no use to anybody.

Because if you want a real career that's international, it's extremely difficult to do that from New Zealand. I'm so proud of people like Nathan [Pohio] in documenta, well done doing that from New Zealand, he's made an amazing work and it's very effective. It will be really great to see Hotere in the other location of documenta too. Yes, but that's tough. So I'm super lucky that I've both got a New Zealand identity and a British identity and I've got an Italian husband, you know, I'm really lucky, I can be very fluid and leave very quickly.

HUM                    This brings up the ongoing discussion of national representation within the Venice Biennale, whether it's still relevant to make that distinction, when so many work internationally or carry a mix of different origins and backgrounds. But this year, the curated sections are actually structured around this idea of trans-national pavilions?

FU                    Which to me is super meaningful and also for Paulo [Bruscky] obviously too [at the Tavola Aperta earlier in the day], he was quite passionate and he was saying that he would not agree to be in the Biennale representing Brazil, his own country for very valid political reasons. But he was extremely happy to be here and that's obviously not a factor for me, although I'm increasingly disappointed with Britain at the moment. But even Phyllida Barlow, her opening speech yesterday was very political. Artists usually are. I love it that Christine's not trying to say that anything's more important than anything else.

HUM                    In some ways you do still represent New Zealand—when you look at the Biennale list of artists, the statistics of how many artists are included and from how many countries, continue to be emphasised.

FU                    Yes, so I was very happy that CNZ would fund that, because I think some people might ask, am I still a New Zealander? I've lived away for 20 years...but I think I am because I come back for three months every year and that's actually a lot.

And I also have a lot of relationships with New Zealand artists and really, where I can, I help them with my international connections.

So I actually went over to Athens because I really wanted to introduce Nathan to people I knew and I made sure that Lisa's invited to my party tonight so I can introduce her to people there as well, so she can meet Christine if she hasn't already.

HUM                    Did you have other thoughts about the Biennale this year, highlights or moments you particularly liked?

FU                    I think you know my highlights... [we bumped into Francis the previous day in the Italian Pavilion, which she was visiting for the third time.]

HUM                    The three parts of the Italian Pavilion were very strong together [Roberto Cuoghi, Adelita Husni-Bey, and Giorgio Andreotta Calò.]

FU                    The Cuoghi work is especially interesting to me, because I thought about representations of Jesus for many years, in a very unreligious way. I think for an Italian artist it means something different too, but it is the most fascinating thing. It's kind of, funny, upsetting, both irreverent and totally spiritual. It's really weird, with the E.T. lab... I think it's wonderful.

It's maybe once a year that I have an art experience like that, something I feel, I've learnt so much from that and I've seen something so incredible.

HUM                    What's coming up next for you?

FU                      Next I'm doing a show at the Barbican, in September next year. In the Curve of the Barbican, which I really love because it's free. I actually think experiencing art should be free. That's a big show, and at the end of this year I'm meant to be going for six months to the Americas, maybe starting in Canada, I've got a residency near San Francisco. I'll probably go to Oaxaca, Peru, Guatemala.

*This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.*

### *Biographies*



Francis Upritchard was born in 1976 in New Plymouth, New Zealand and lives and works in London. After studying Fine Art at Ilam School of Art, Christchurch, she moved to London in 1998 where she co-founded the Bart Wells Institute, an artist run gallery, with artist Luke Gottelier. In 2006 Upritchard won New Zealand's prestigious Walters Prize, and has had major solo exhibitions at Vienna Secession in 2009, Nottingham Contemporary in 2012, Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center in 2012, Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art in 2013, and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles in 2014. In 2009, she represented New Zealand at the Venice Biennale. Her work is in international collections including Tate, London; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Paisley Museum, Scotland; Saatchi Gallery, London; Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tāmaki; Christchurch Art Gallery, Te Puna o Waiwhetu; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; and Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. She is represented by Kate MacGarry, London; Anton Kern Gallery, New York; and Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland.



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.

