

BON A TIRER AND EMBOSS: "PANAMA PAPERS," 2016-18

Neil Emmerson

All human beings have three lives: public, private and secret. (Gabriel García Márquez)

This project was initiated in 2016 when the media exposed what became named the Panama Papers.

The Panama Papers are 11.5 million leaked documents that detail financial and attorney–client information for more than 214,488 offshore entities. The documents, some dating back to the 1970s, were created by, and taken from, Panamanian law firm and corporate service provider Mossack Fonseca, and were leaked in 2015 by an anonymous source. The documents contained private, personal financial information about wealthy individuals and public officials. While offshore business entities themselves are not illegal, reporters found evidence of money-laundering, fraud, tax evasion and the evading of international sanctions. New Zealand also became implicated in the resulting scandal, that continues to resonate today.

In the spirit of hiding secrets, this public exposure of dodgy financial dealings became both a title and a vehicle for expressions of other hidden, illegal practices. The clues to other secrets appear in graphic references to the works of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. The appropriation of Johns' *0 through 9* work is laid over a contemporary imitation of Rauschenberg's 1950s newspaper cut-and-paste print, including clippings of Panama Papers newspaper reports. Johns and Rauschenberg were young men in love during a period of rampant, institutionalised homophobia in mainstream American culture. Their relationship remained a public secret for many years due to the criminalisation of homosexuality at the time. Their historically illicit, homosexual relationship meant a close proximity to that secret place called the closet. This repressive 1950s culture is not entirely dissimilar to the current situation in Russia. It must be remembered that for many LGBTQI people globally, this is still a pressing and, in many instances, life-threatening issue.

Concurrently with the Panama Papers exposure in newspapers and other daily news media, the cannabis issue had surfaced and was being debated, yet again. Should its medicinal and/or recreational use be legalised or remain a criminal offence? The connection between the cannabis issue and the laundering of illegal drug money through illicit Panama accounts might also be one worth thinking about. Cannabis or hemp, along with all its many and varied applications and uses, has been demonised in the modern world of national politics and multinationals. This demonisation is what it has in common with homosexuality. Actually, similar discussions have been a part of homosexual law reform debates, arguments against legalisation being issued by a similar mixture of conservative religious and political individuals, groups and institutions. This does not, however, mean that these two issues are necessarily similar beyond this point. However, if a practice is illegal then there is an equivalence and, it could be argued, an associative relationship. For example, Jean Genet artfully fused the idea of the homosexual and the thief in his writing.

Johns and Rauschenberg were involved in an illegal relationship during a relatively recent period in American history when homosexual activities were a criminal offence. In some more liberal environments, cannabis is now a legal means of recreation and medicinal treatment – but mostly it is still globally illegal, regardless of how widely it is used by a cross-section of society for both purposes. The titles of the three mock Rauschenberg/Johns screen prints, *tinny*, *fiddy* and *hundy*, are a tongue-in-cheek play on colloquial terms for the various, common quantities of cannabis generally sold illegally (\$25, \$50 and \$100). Money to be laundered.



Figure 1. *Panama Papers, Tinny Bag*, Installation View. c3 Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne. Photograph: Screaming Pixel.

Accompanying the three prints are two other sets of three objects in relative, escalating scale to the prints. Three transparent plastic bags filled with various quantities of shredded, green- and pink-coloured paper and fake New Zealand banknotes imitate, or are a spoof of, the clear plastic bags commonly used for the packaging of smaller quantities of cannabis. These oversized bags stuffed with shredded coloured paper become expressive, abstract compositions in shiny, clear pillows, resonating with ideas about the relationship of abstract expressionism to Pop and enabling associations with Rauschenberg and Johns once again.

Three reconstructions of cigarette rolling-paper packets, using the altered label of Panama Vice (instead of Zig Zag), reinforce both the Panama Papers and the cannabis puns and are furnished with pink papers for 'rolling up a number.' Once more, both repetition and the exaggerated and escalating scale of these objects nod in the direction of Pop. Art history can construct various narratives that, as noted in the case of Rauschenberg and Johns, can be used to cover up and conceal secrets. If we talk about this work in regard to its relationship to abstract expressionism and pop art, can we create an art-legitimate diversion and sweep the cannabis debate under the rug? Metaphors collide in this *Panama Papers* project. All three sets of signs refer to the other in a triangular system of shifting associations. Antithesis, hyperbole, metonymy and simile are all swirled together in an arty joke, a cryptic smokescreen.

This project was exhibited recently (April-May 2018) in concurrent group exhibition projects at c3 Contemporary Art Space in Melbourne and the Forrester Gallery in Oamaru. The News Network is a trans-Tasman group of print practitioners whose work references the news media and develops projects based on issues and images lifted from a wide variety of media sources and developed into productions for fine art contexts. These two recent events were the third and fourth group exhibition projects organised by the News Network.

Bon a Tirer (BAT) and Emboss use pseudonyms when working together on their collaborative P lab projects. In this case, the playful use of these nom de plumes also reinforces the idea of secrets and concealment at work in *Panama Papers*.

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The News Network: Marian Crawford, Melbourne. Richard Harding, Melbourne. Trent Walter, Melbourne. Alison Alder, Canberra. Steve Lovett, Auckland. Neil Emmerson, Dunedin. Marion Wassenaar, Dunedin. BAT & Emboss, Dunedin

Neil Emmerson is a Senior Lecturer and coordinates the Print Studio at the Dunedin School of Art, in New Zealand. Neil has a Master in Visual Arts from the Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney. His research expertise spans a broad range of Print-related technologies, Identity Politics, Queer Theory, and Gay and Lesbian History. His work is held in the collections of major public institutions in New Zealand and Australia.



Figure 2. BAT & Emboss, Installation View. c3 Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne. Photograph: Screaming Pixel.



Figure 3. Neil Emmerson, BAT & Emboss, Installation View. c3 Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne. Photograph: Screaming Pixel.



Figure 4. BAT & Emboss, Installation View – Forrester Gallery, Oamaru. Photograph: Neil Emmerson.



Figure 5. BAT & Emboss, Installation View – Forrester Gallery, Oamaru. Photograph: Neil Emmerson.