

Zealandia: Self-defined Sculpture by Gill Gatfield

At the Venice Biennale 2018, New Zealand artist Gill Gatfield presents Zealandia, an x-shaped sculpture in stone which combines ancient materials, technical innovation and minimalist form in a mise en scene of intersecting narratives. Exhibition: Time, Space, Existence. Curated by Global Art Foundation & European Cultural Centre. Venice Architecture Biennale. 26 May – 25 November 2018.



Located in the shade of the maritime pines of the Giardini della Marinaressa, in the Venetian sestiere of Castello, *Zealandia* is the first sculpture that welcomes visitors, effectively introducing them to the theme of the exhibition *Time, Space, Existence* 2018, curated by the Global Art Foundation. This massive x-shaped sculpture, placed at the corner of the gardens on the long Venetian waterfront, faces San Giorgio Maggiore Island and the open water of the lagoon. Many people, both art lovers and sightseers, linger with their hands over the stone, caressing its veins. *Zealandia's* stone intrigues and attracts. It has not been seen before in Venice.

The sculpture, extremely simple at first sight, is in fact stratified and woven into a series of narratives that reflect a twofold purpose: an aesthetic discourse and a logical reflection. It presents

as a consideration of the interconnection between logic and intuition. According to the artist Gill Gatfield, artistic practice is a non-linear method where logic and intuition are symbiotic and belong to the one creative process. In terms of producing meaning, there is no end game in mind. Her aim is to bind the parts – material, form, method, situation and title – together to create art that self-defines. This methodology can be traced in *Zealandia* through the application of semiotics.

As Umberto Eco noted in *Opera aperta*, even if the openness of a work of art is potentially infinite – that is that it allows multiple interpretations – some works naturally lend themselves to the signifying process through the participation of the receiver, asking for participation, while others present a certain degree of predermination that nullifies this role. *Zealandia* belongs to the first category. It is – or perhaps more accurately, as we will later see, “she” is – a sculpture which remains open to interpretation.



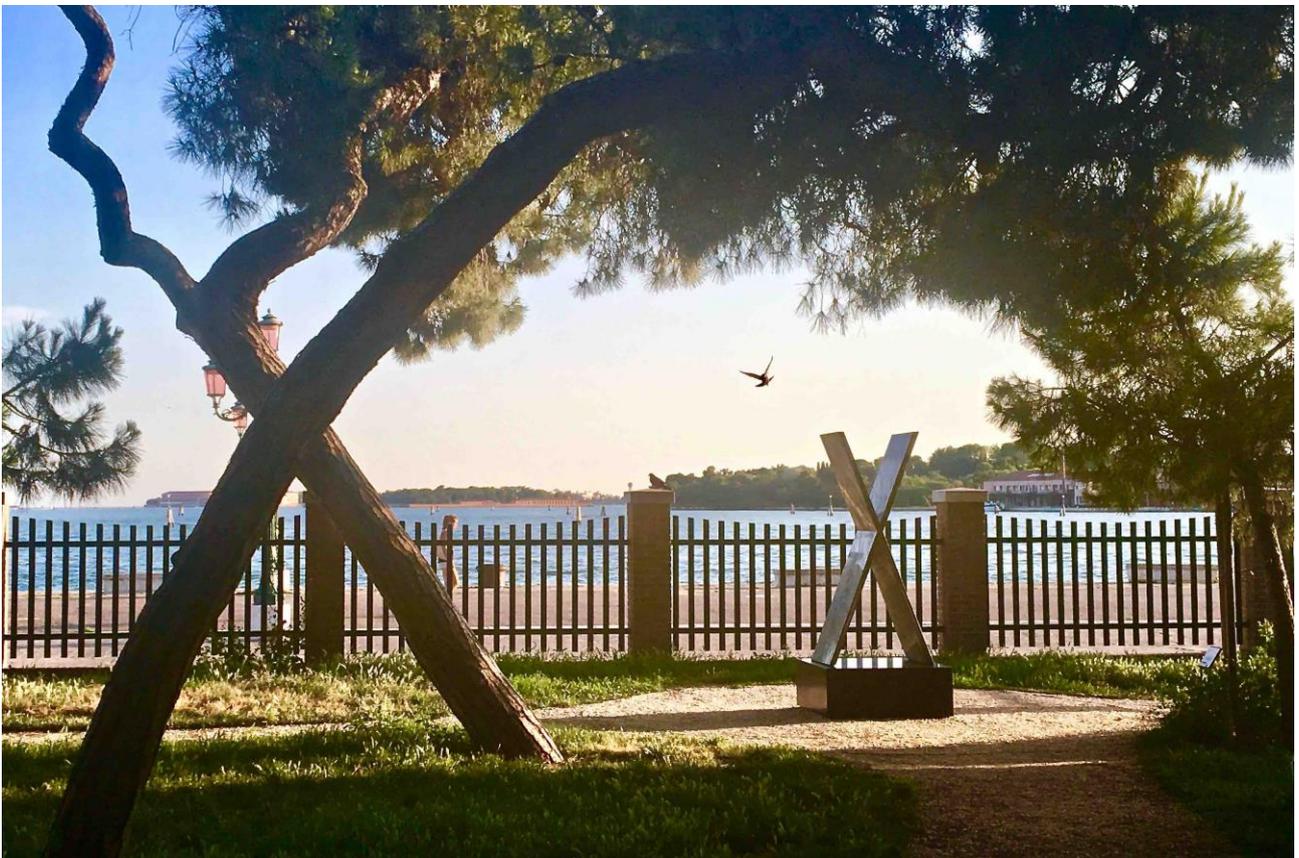
The “body” of Zealandia

Positioned over a square of black Italian granite and crossed by a metal skeleton, *Zealandia* conjures a Grand Square. Comprising two intersecting plates, the stone X is cut from one unique block found in New Zealand’s South Island. This prehistoric material, striated by golden and silver threads, undertook two significant sea journeys to reach its destination. Extracted from below the mountains of New Zealand, the rare stone travelled first to Xiamen in China for block cutting using equipment not available in New Zealand. Returning to its country of origin for the intricate process of shaping and polishing, *Zealandia* was then shipped by sea via the Indian Ocean and the Suez

Canal to Venice, travelling in total 42,000km. The Italian granite used for the base made a similar journey in the opposite direction, a complete round trip.

Zealandia delivers the experience of transition. The colours of this stone are extremely variable, changing according to the light and to the observer's position, since there are no privileged points of observation. Direct sunlight and a 'side' view reveal the warmth and complicated texture of this stone. With a slight movement, it turns into a mirror or a dark presence, a black silhouette, reflecting the x-shape in the shiny granite or, depending on the sun's position, projecting on the ground a second x variable in size and shape that revolves around the X-figure like a sister. At 230cm high, *Zealandia* is taller than the average man, placing the observer in a condition of mild inferiority, but without being excessively oppressed. However, the real sense of expanded height is found in the body, the figure-x. This anthropomorphic component of *Zealandia*, whose branches form arms and legs traversed by a metal skeleton, is of primary importance in order to understand the sculpture as an embodiment of female essence.

This is an artwork that immediately suggests an interlock of concepts. Resolutely minimal at first glance, *Zealandia* hides behind this genuine simplicity of form a far more variegated and complex substance. To demonstrate this, it is necessary to consider both the semiotic values found within the sculpture and the relationships with the external contexts for which it has been conceived – the country of origin, the Venetian landscape, and the cultural history of mankind.



Mathematics and symbology

The concept of *dominant*, as defined by Roman Jakobson, provides a starting point for discovering *Zealandia*. The dominant is “the focusing component of a work of art” which provides rules to “determine and transform the remaining components”. The first dominant in *Zealandia* is the mathematical concept of the variable.

In 1637 Descartes first introduced the concept of the variable in *La Géométrie*, selecting the alphabetic letter x to represent an unknown value. Since then, in mathematics and physics the letter x identifies an independent variable. Depending on the context, the value of the variable can be of three kinds: arbitrary, unspecified or unknown. The x of *Zealandia* is a variable that needs a logic operation in order to be deciphered and, therefore, to convey a traceable meaning. It relies on ambiguity in order to let the layers of meaning flourish. In this sense, *Zealandia* is a work that acquires a pattern of ambiguity, where several interpretations are plausible, in contrast to the concept of vagueness, a situation in which it is difficult to form a specific interpretation. If Minimalism often arises as mere aesthetic simplicity – in concepts and in structure – *Zealandia* has her power in her mysterious ambiguous and unknown value. Ambiguity is an added value which brings this artwork toward a direction without denoting a single and direct meaning.

In symbology, there are numerous possible associations with the letter x which apply equally to *Zealandia*, adding depth to the layers of ambiguity. Besides the mathematical variable, the x has other values: the horizontal axis in the Cartesian coordinate system or, still in mathematics, the multiplication sign. In roman numerals, x represents the number 10. In cartography, x is used to mark a specific location, the destination of a journey, or the secret location of a place to find. As a mapping device, *Zealandia*'s x asserts territory *and* remains hidden, inviting Umberto Eco's receiver, the viewer, to 'find' her.

With an upright human-like stance, the sculpture's form is also a capitalised X, adding biological content to the variable – one that generates a gender discourse: the universal form of genetic heritage, a component shared by both sexes. Human kind recognizes in this X symbol the foundations of the transmission of the universal chromosome, the continuity of the species. Yet, the double of *Zealandia*, that is, the shadow tendered on the ground creates her specific gender identity: XX, the symbol of female heritage and of the act of generating life, a characteristic that links *Zealandia* to the origin of the species.



Image: Gill Gatfield, *Zealandia (At Home)* 2018. Limited edition archival print

The eighth continent

The title of the work is a reference to the discovery of Zealandia, the 8th continent of the planet, an almost entirely submerged landmass that sank after being separated from Antarctica between 85 and 130 million years ago and from Australia between 60 and 85 million years ago. The stone and the form of *Zealandia* suggests a rekindling of that submerged land form, of which only a few isolated peaks and Islands emerge - among them New Zealand, known to the indigenous Maori people as Aotearoa, land of the long white cloud.

In Anglo-Saxon iconography, the symbol or personification of this land is Zealandia, a European-like woman similar in posture and manners to Britannia, her “mother”. The image of this woman appears on postage stamps, posters, cartoons, war memorials, and New Zealand government publications most commonly during the first half of the 20th century. She personified the “good colony”, one of those territories that the British “motherland” used as a flagship to show the rest of the world. Needless to say, this ideology reflects a colonialist way of thinking, particularly European in nature, characterized by an expansionist desire and depicted, according to orientalist norms, with a typically manly frontier mythology.

During European colonization, this territory was populated as a new and unexplored world, abandoning and repressing de facto its native cultural heritage that has only recently been

reassessed as fundamental to its identity. Gatfield's sculpture *Zealandia* emphasises a new approach, in antithesis with the colonial past. By revisiting the iconography of Zealandia and recasting her as an independent variable, the sculpture takes the idea of representation back to its origins and synthesizes the form according to new schemes. *Zealandia's* stone is 100 million years old, a geological era in which humanity, and consequently its social norms, had not yet appeared. This embracing of the past is more a will to rethink the origin and evolution of life on a natural and non-national basis, rather than a negation of history. Here, the Earth (mother) is the source of life.

Still, *Zealandia's* projection of Zealandia is not idealised, as it continues to emphasise a deeper unknown. Its ancient stone was formed by a process of clashing earth plates. Brought to the surface, it is uplifted again into two angled planes which cross, mirroring the shifting of tectonic plates, an eternal submerged movement that animates and changes the planet.



Sea Merchants

The artist's chosen site for *Zealandia* – within a circle in Giardini della Marinaressa – stands in stark contrast to its vast subterranean origins. The Marinaressa gardens are a small exception in the Venetian panorama, a land that in its origin required the use of every available square meter. They are a green oasis in which the dominant, continuous architecture of the city takes a break. This area originally hosted the first Venetian communities that faced the commercial activities that crossed the lagoon to set course for the Mediterranean. Here *Zealandia* stands, making an analogy with the commercial past – an exchange not only of goods but also of ideas – between two places on the opposite ends of the world. A meaningful parallel is also found in the close proximity of the two materials, Italian granite and New Zealand stone, a combination that creates another symbiotic

relationship. *Zealandia* fuses the ancient submerged Italian stone brought to the surface through volcanic action with the New Zealand stone resulting from an upheaval of the earth's plates.

Like Venice, New Zealand is a land of many Islands where the sea is intrinsic to its identity. The first inhabitants, the Maori people, reached the islands approximately seven centuries ago. Later, in the 1800s, European commercial needs brought the first colonial settlements, and the market initially flourished. As in Venice, the Pacific figure of the merchant is connected with the idea of exploration, with making contact and trading with new cultures. In *Zealandia*, granite and stone merge in a single form to create a hybrid entity that celebrates the journey, both commercial and human. Her voyage to Venice reverses the colonial passage of cultural knowledge and the current supply lines of precious stones. In idea, form and material, *Zealandia* delivers something new in Italy and, at the same time, challenges the ways of old.

The shape of woman

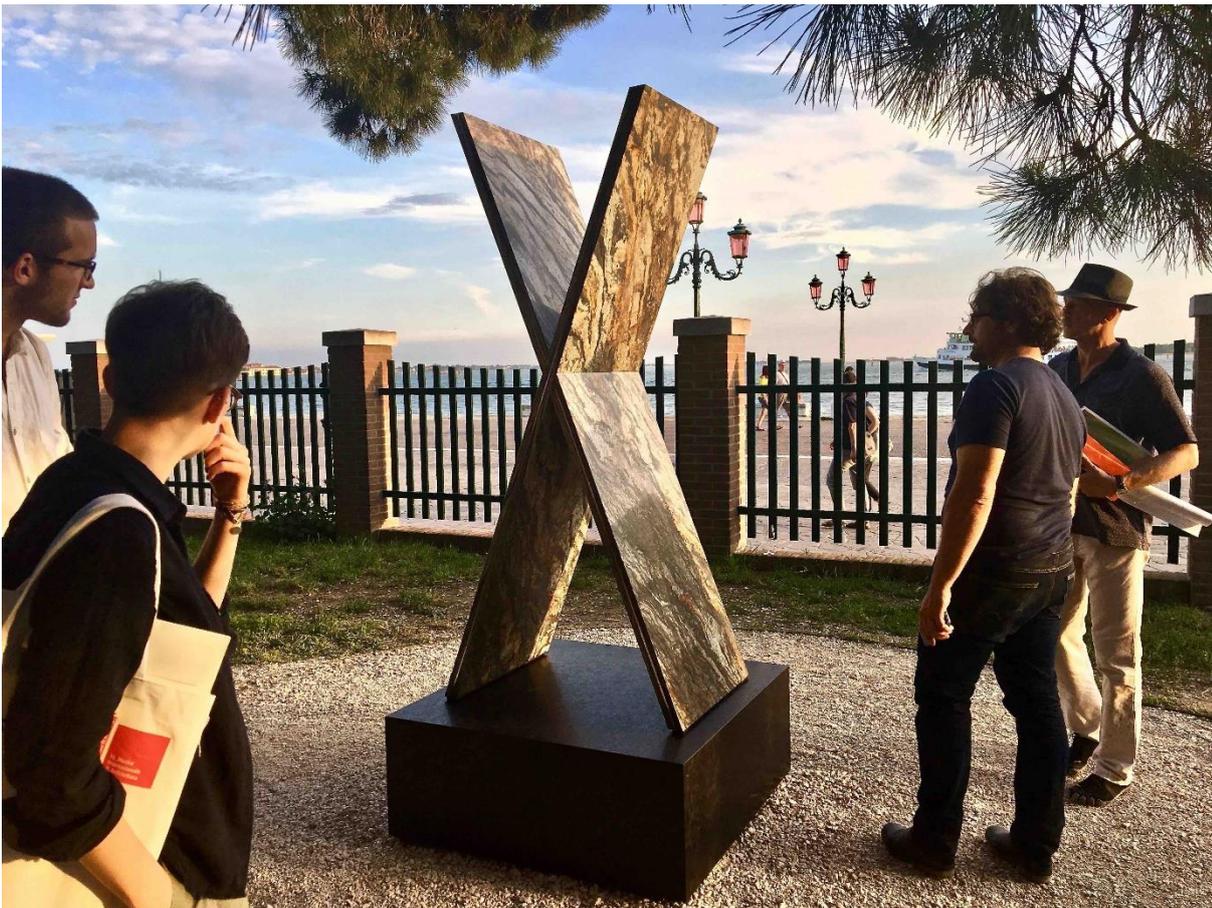
Within the anthropomorphic figure X, *Zealandia* articulates a set of defined geometric principles. The X-figure, precisely positioned on a square, within a circle, reflects on the human body, rethinking the harmonic form and the proportions proposed by Leonardo da Vinci in the *Vitruvian Man* (circa 1490). In the third book of the *De architectura* (circa 15 B.C.), Marco Vitruvio Pollione argued that there cannot be a temple that is not regulated by the principles of harmony, order and proportion among its different parts, and the same is true for the human body. *Homo bene figuratus*, the "well-proportioned man", is to be considered as such only if the measures of his body correspond to precise canons. In his iconic drawing, which became a symbol of the Renaissance, Da Vinci established these canons and proportions, fixing them into the collective imagination. Framed within a circle and a square, the head represents one-eighth of the body, the foot one-sixth, the forearm one-quarter, the chest one-quarter, and the centre of the body in the umbilicus. However, if this proportion seems correct for discerning the perfect *man*, the form and the proportion of the perfect *woman* is either ignored or is subsumed within the perfect man.

Zealandia contests the universality of these values, this ecumenical aesthetic canon of beauty and harmony that does not consider woman's shape as part of it. Conveying qualities of fragility and resilience, and shaped as an ideal 10, the sculpture presents the idea of the female body, perfected. With a reduction in complexity and therefore of connotations of any kind, this abstraction is the unwavering skeleton of woman, her inner substance. The stone becomes a sheath of skin, bonded to the bones of steel. This woman has nothing to share with the Zealandia of the postcards, the symbol of a submissive colony. Instead, she assumes the value of an archetype.

The anthropomorphic X recalls the intention during the Renaissance to rework existing relationships and give man a place in the world, a new status, released from the encompassing religious framework. At the socio-political level, *Zealandia* also reworks these concepts, changing the discourse to grant woman a central place in a world that for too long has silenced women's

voice. Diversity of form and figure are cornerstones of this 'place' marked X, evidenced in the open range of depth and breadth in *Zealandia's* shadow, the encircling genetic blueprint XX.

Through aesthetic qualities and textual narratives, *Zealandia* is an artwork that 'self-defines', and, as such, presents a metaphor for the independent woman. This feminist icon is shaped by an alternative non-male model, an inclusive universal archetype which honours female form and spirit, and the Earth's life-force. Her resolute X crosses out and overrides the constraints created by the colonisation of lands and the colonisation of women's bodies and psyche. *Zealandia* breaks the mould and builds anew.



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Arts writer Alessandro Guaita graduated in Humanities at the University of Padua, Italy. His Master's degree in Film Studies at the University of Rome La Sapienza focused on the study of structures in visual forms of communication. In 2017 he graduated from the Erasmus Mundus Masters programme in Cultural Narratives, an international Master's degree in Comparative Literature and European Studies from the universities of Lisbon, Portugal; Perpignan, France; and Guelph, Canada. His Master's dissertation addressed semiotics and the concept of fragmented narratives. Alessandro has worked in international arts and culture institutions including the Italian Institute of Culture of Marseille, France; the Ducci Foundation in Fez, Morocco; and the European Cultural Centre in Venice, Italy.
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All Images: Courtesy of the Artist.

All images are titled, Gill Gatfield, *Zealandia* 2018

Except one Image titled: Gill Gatfield, *Zealandia (At Home)* 2018. Limited edition archival print.

