



Gill Gatfield, *Zealandia (At Home)* 2018

## Gill Gatfield. The native tongue of the sculpture is interactive and democratic

Artist Interview by Bohdan Stupak

Published by Artscore

7 October 2022

<http://artscore.it/gill-gatfield-scultura-democratica-venezia/>

Gill Gatfield is a New Zealand artist with her heart in Venice. Her strong link with the city of water is expressed in her current exhibition *UNITY in Personal Structures 2022*, organized by the European Cultural Center, in the schedule of the Biennale Arte. The exhibition continues until November 27, spread between two centuries-old palaces Bembo and Mora, and the Giardini della Marinaressa. I had the pleasure of meeting the artist and gaining a deeper understanding of her world, the multidisciplinary path that led her to sculpture, and her dedication to fine materials and their origins.

***An interactive approach is essential to understanding and enjoying a major work in the exhibition, Native Tongue XR.***



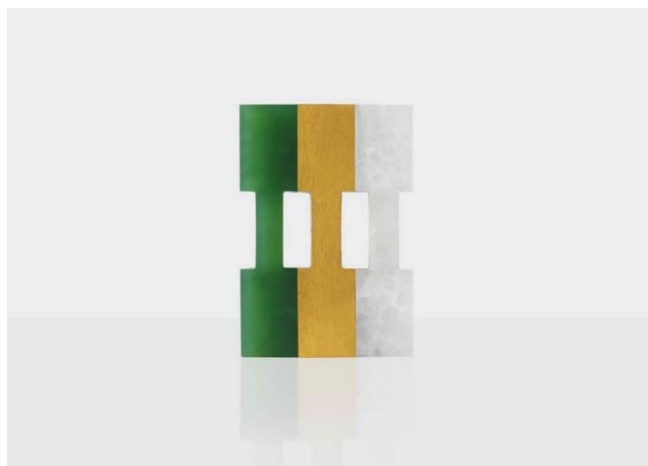


Gill Gatfield, *Native Tongue XR* 2018-2022

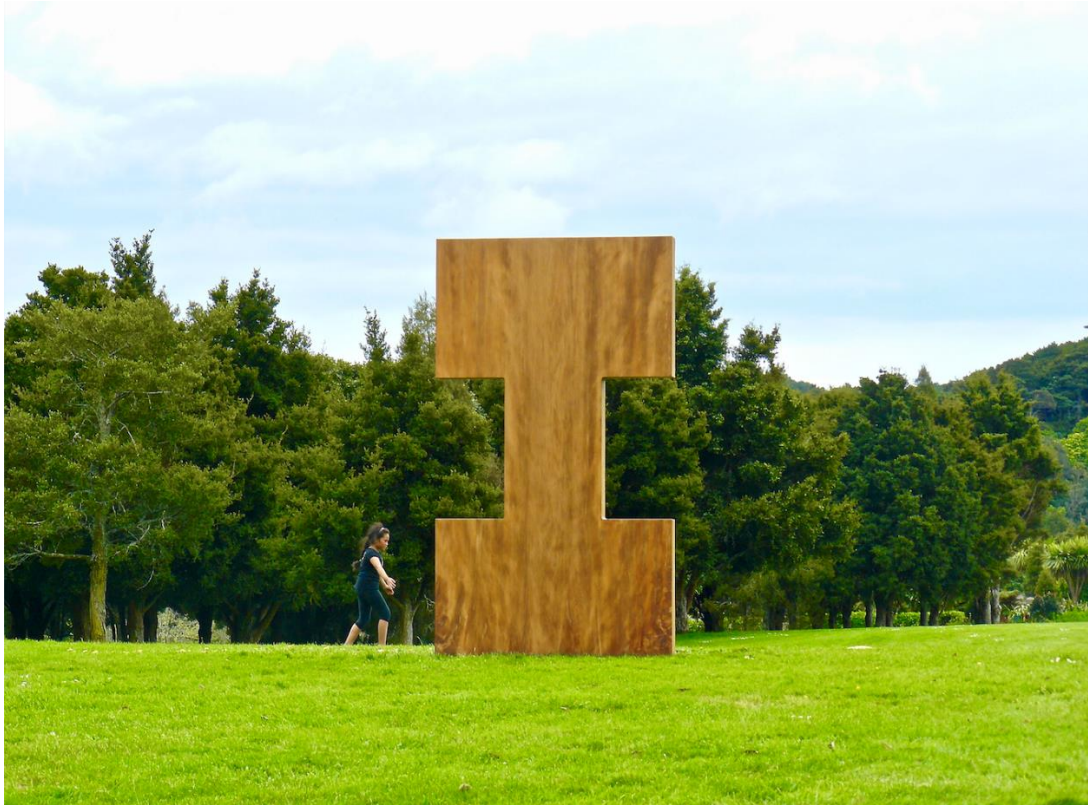
Through an application that can be controlled by various electronic devices, we can position the sculpture in any place we like: thus the minimal aesthetic of its form cultivates new meaning depending on its immersion in the natural or urban context. Its impact is enhanced against breath-taking views of the seas and oceans of our planet, developing another important thread in Gill Gatfield's oeuvre. The native tongue in the title is the most apt expression of a sculpture that is more democratic because it can be summoned to anyone's space, comes from the past and continues to live in the present.

**You come from a very distant country, New Zealand. How did your homeland inspire your artistic production?**

I spent my formative years in a small town located on a volcanic plateau in the Bay of Plenty. Here, indigenous customs, tikanga Māori, were valued and shared. I swam in rivers that bring life, walked in primeval forests and slept under ancestral mountains. Also here, I discovered how the stories and spirit of the people and the land are indissoluble, and how they permeate living and non-living beings. These foundations are the cornerstones of my practice and influence my choices of material, methodology, forms and ideas.



Gill Gatfield, *Harmony* 2022



Gill Gatfield, *Native Tongue* 2011. Auckland Botanic Gardens

My production also reflects an openness of a different nature, a willingness in Aotearoa to grapple with difficult questions and look for creative solutions. Profound issues concerning decolonization, racism, gender discrimination and the environment are debated in New Zealand, upfront. Women and Māori hold prominent roles locally and internationally break new ground. As a young nation, isolated from traditional centres of commerce and power, there is a desire for self-determination and invention. I am deeply curious about how sociocultural movements translate into aesthetics and philosophy. My sculptures can be perceived as suspended objects activated in the honing process of structural change.



With Gill Gatfield in Venice



**When did you start coming to Venice? What binds you to this unique city?**

Venice is seductive! In my early twenties, I was in awe of this city. Constantly lost and found, it was a love / hate relationship, an enigma to be overcome or solved. On subsequent visits, I abandoned this ambition and immersed myself in the ebb and flow of the velvet waters and dramatic skies. When I am in Venice I feel at home: the islands, a mirror of water, a liquid mass. This city exudes charm yet beneath the surface lurks a complex current of conquest, trade and ritual.

Venice mirrors the mind. Full of mystery and intrigue, the city physically plunges the body into its hidden streets and canals: narrow and winding, enveloped by the darkness and the elements of the centuries. Secret passages force people to come closer: anonymous whispering bodies passing by. The paths lead to dead ends or suddenly widen and give a glimpse of the sky, framing splinters of milky light. In a minute you can go from a cacophony of sounds in a pulsating square to a powerful silence under a marble arch.

***Being inside Venice is like being inside a sensory cave. Creativity runs through the veins of the city.***



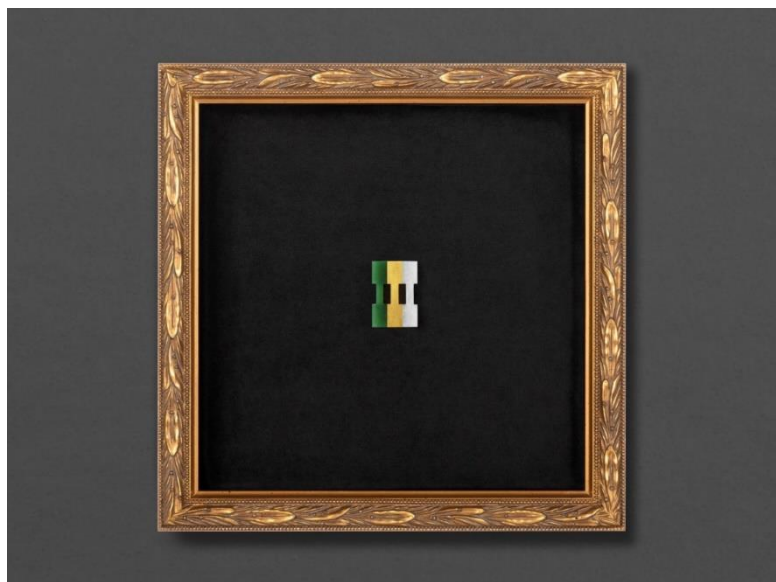
Gill Gatfield, *Mirrors of Venice* 2022

The city has inspired my site-sensitive projects, and more to come. I made the *Zealandia* sculpture in a rare New Zealand stone for the Time Space Existence exhibition at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale, curated by the Global Art Affairs Foundation and the European Cultural Center. The exhibition combined the work of 30 international sculptors with ideations by architects such as Odile Decq, Peter Eisenman, Kengo Kuma and Daniel Libeskind. The geometry of *Zealandia* rewrote the "perfect proportions" of the Vitruvian Man to project the feminine, inventing new ratios based on the proportions of women from all continents. This X figure proposes a new ideal, a messenger for a new era.



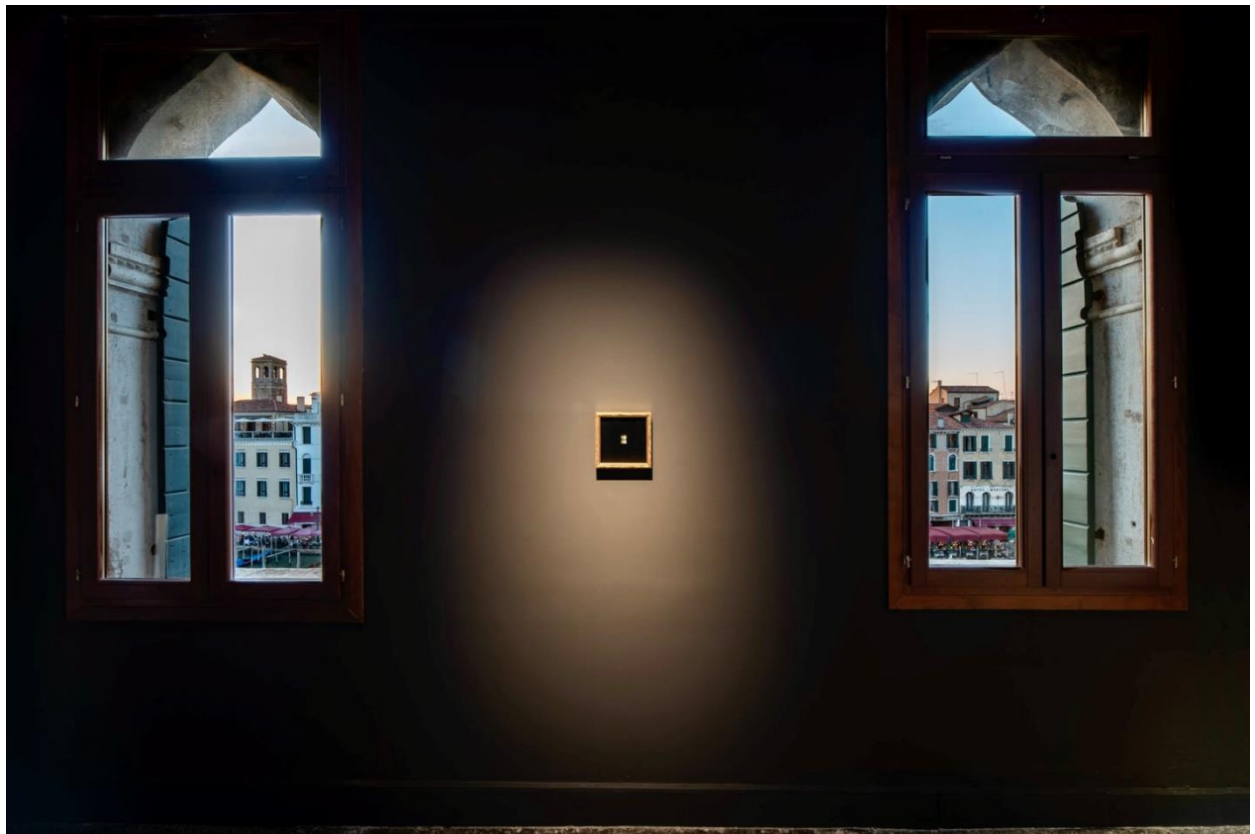
*Zealandia* 2018 by Gill Gatfield in Venice

For the current exhibition in the lagoon-city I created a new project, UNITY, which explores the sovereignty of "I" as human and spirit in the Anthropocene. Engaging the metaverse and the physical realm, two interconnected installations were born: the precious miniature, *Harmony*, at Palazzo Bembo and the digital sculpture, *Native Tongue XR*, at the Giardini della Marinaressa. Both manifest as totems and monuments to humanity and the biosphere. UNITY fits like a glove in the Serenissima, a legendary title conferred on the city of Venice for its foundations of diplomacy, prosperity, justice and peace.



*Harmony* 2022





Gill Gatfield, *Harmony* 2022 Palazzo Bembo ECC. Ph. Matteo Losurdo

**You describe the virtual sculpture *Native Tongue XR* as a democratic monument ... can you elaborate on this?**

The democracy of *Native Tongue XR* arises from its form and presence as a free spirit that defies borders and transcends materiality. It is both serious and playful, as you say. It can activate ideas and actions on a personal and political level. When released by the viewer via their mobile device, it appears as if by magic and is met with joy and surprise. The viewer is thus transported to a surreal place where reality is both engaged and suspended, on a scale that requires a step back and a step forward in time and space.

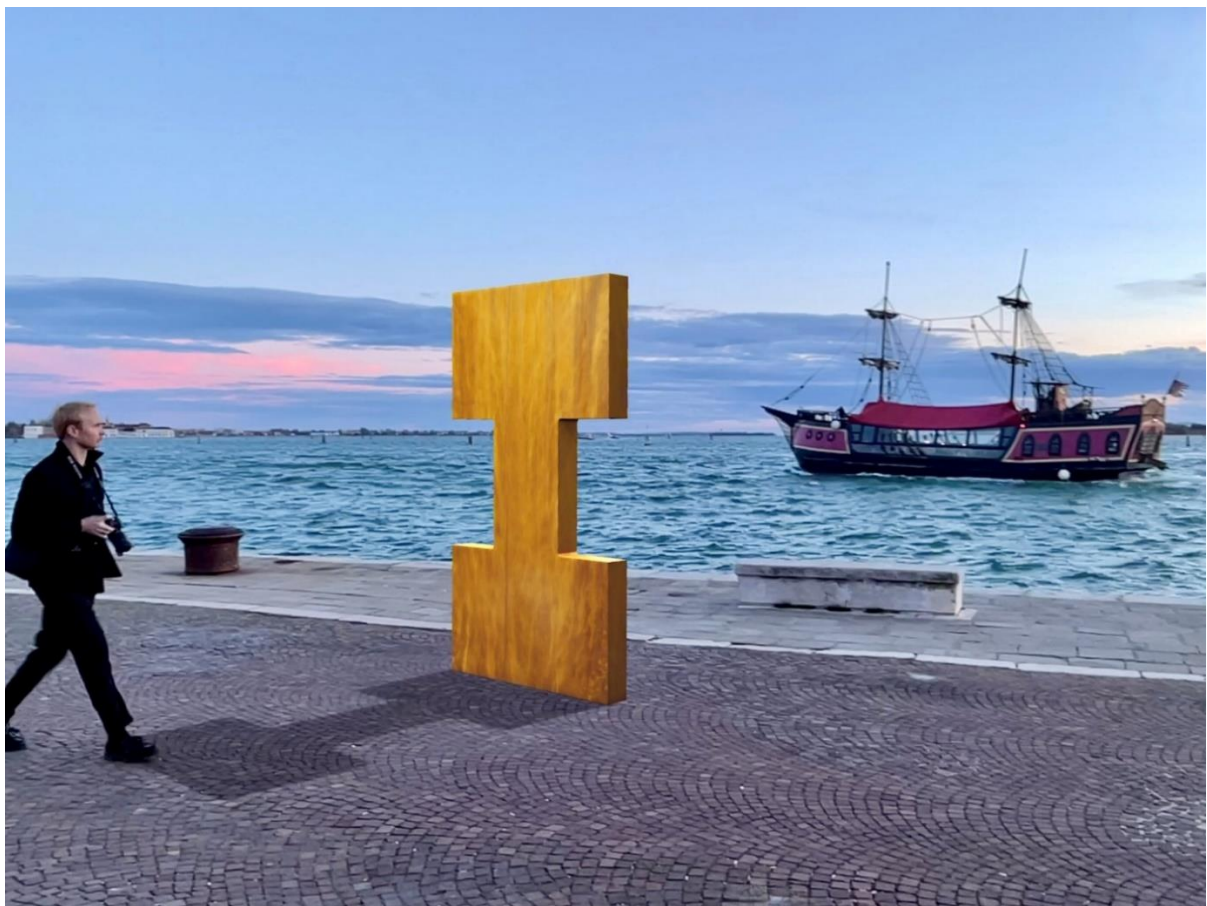


Gill Gatfield. The interactive work *Native Tongue XR* 2018-2022

With its I/One shape, *Native Tongue XR* draws attention to a fundamental element of democracy. As a first-person pronoun, "I" conveys the status of a person, a legal precursor to the right to vote, a human right still denied in some countries to women, migrants, prisoners and people outside the veils of power.

***Through form and function, Native Tongue XR reflects the precarity of the democratic ideal of individual autonomy. The I-shape is meta-dimensioned but ephemeral, it dissolves in the air and can only be materialized by those who have the necessary resources, opportunities and free will.***

Appearing as an independent object, the figure silhouettes in a long shadow on the ground. Abstract and anthropomorphic, it imitates a monument, apparently fixed to the ground. It resists the theatricality and enclosure of virtual stimulation found in much digital art, it remains static, forcing the viewer to place the I-figure at the centre and walk around it. Its monumental form suggests a mega-mirror of the self that draws the viewer into a dialogue, one-to-one, rotating between subject, object and self. Every viewer becomes the keeper and curator of *Native Tongue XR*, a monument at hand (or pocket) in every country in the world.



*Native Tongue XR on the Venetian waterfront*

**The title *Native Tongue XR* is a clear reference to languages as well as their origins. Even today, several countries are deprived of their native language. Does your work also consider this situation?**

This year in Venice, at a conference of linguists, writers, researchers, jurists and musicians at Palazzo Grassi, *Lingua Madre* (the Mother Tongue) was described as a vector of democracy. Depriving someone of their mother tongue is a strategy of oppression to breakdown morale and culture in occupied states, as happened with the Russian language in Ukraine, and in the colonization of indigenous peoples and lands.



In Aotearoa, just a generation ago, Te Reo Māori was discouraged and Māori children were beaten if they spoke te reo at school. Our process of decolonization requires revitalising the language and redress for the intergenerational harm. *Native Tongue XR* stands like a pouwhenua, a land post, marking these histories and holding a space for regenerative ideas. In Venice the sculpture was given a twin title: *Lingua Madre*.

The scope of the sculpture extends beyond national and cultural identities. It reflects on the autonomy of natural beings (mountains, rivers, forests, trees) as spiritual and legal entities. Projecting the grain of a majestic ancient tree buried in Aotearoa New Zealand for over 45,000 years, the roots and origins of the sculpture come from the depths of Mother Earth, known in Aotearoa as Papatūānuku, the one who gave birth to all things. Unearthly and primal, *Native Tongue XR* recalls the spirit of a Living Ancestor and affirms this treasure / taonga as an independent entity. The I/One affirms the sovereignty and status of natural beings, long recognized by indigenous peoples and ancient cultures, and addresses the growing conflict between Nature and Man by projecting the voice of the land.



Gill Gatfield, *Zealandia* 2018. Government House Auckland New Zealand

**You have used different materials, precious and linked to your origins, how does this choice happen?**

The choices of my materials are intuitive: something draws them to me or forces me to discover them. They are often anchored to the Earth or to natural elements, such as glass, a fusion of silica sand, sodium carbonate and limestone. They can be hidden in hard to reach places or be hard to work with, they take time to take the shapes I see in them. For the I-shaped micro-figures of *Harmony*, the rare New Zealand marble and the pounamu (jade) from Te Waipounamu, the South Island, support a tiny "I" of gold. Each material has a symbolic presence, combined into a collective One/I.



In each artwork, the genealogy of the materials is unique and is part of the provenance of the work, their origins and properties being intrinsic and interwoven with the shape, positioning and meanings. The interrelations do not begin as predetermined intentions but merge in the process of creating the work. When resolved, the materials are re-grounded in a new sphere, revolving around the intentions embodied by the artwork, and the potential for transition into matter.



Visitors to Palazzo Bembo. Ph. Matteo Losurdo

**From paintings composed with living grass to stone monoliths, both on a large scale and in miniature, you have developed a language of conceptual abstraction. Giuseppe Uncini also comes to mind, transmitting complexity into simple forms. What is your opinion on minimalism?**

Minimalism attracts me for its inclination to objectivity. Under certain conditions, it also has the potential as a scaffolding for universality. I am intrigued, as Uncini was, by the spatial dynamics of sculpture, the shadows of the shapes, the punctuation of space and the geometry of lines. I deal with erasing extraneous details while being in constant conflict between the desire to free the beauty of raw materials and the force imposed to fold them into minimalist structures with smooth planes and strong lines. The process is a counter-intuitive imposition on the instinctive progression of the work of art.

Within each combination of process, methodology, materials and form, there are internal operating systems that enhance the work of art and allow its activated potential. Space is left open for the mercurial and the unknown. This emerges in the unexpected rooting of *Native Tongue XR*, and insertion in the reality of Venetian life, and in the aura of *Harmony*, a golden shadow on a field of black velvet as the light of the Grand Canal spreads across the room. In Venice *Lingua Madre XR* marks time and *Harmony* shines.

Bohdan Stupak

For information on UNITY in ECC Personal Structures 2022 exhibition  
[www.gillgatfield.com/projects/unity-european-cultural-centre/](http://www.gillgatfield.com/projects/unity-european-cultural-centre/)  
[www.personalstructures.com/participants/gill-gatfield/](http://www.personalstructures.com/participants/gill-gatfield/)

Published 7 October 2022

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Italian translation by Luca Iannino



Gill Gatfield, *Zealandia* 2018 in the gardens of Government House New Zealand