

## Monumental Resistance at the 59th Venice Biennale, A Reflection.

In a city full of guidebooks and selfies, it is surprisingly suitable to use tour-guides and phones to participate in art.

Amongst all the speculation and all the strangers everywhere for the opening of the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, Cecilia Alemani's boldly curated 59th reliquary and its wave of concurrent collateral events still resonate. In 2022, the surreal *The Milk Of Dreams* theme stirred connections with international movements interrogating colonial monuments. Not all projects had the sentient scale of Simone Leigh's literal wrapping and reinvention of the US Pavilion to highlight histories of presidential slavery. Two of the most insightful reinventions of monuments didn't really exist at all.



Simone Leigh, *Façade*, 2022. Thatch, steel, and wood, dimensions variable. *Satellite*, 2022. Bronze, 24 feet x 10 feet x 7 feet 7 inches (7.3 x 3 x 2.3 m) (overall). Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo by Timothy Schenck. © Simone Leigh

The performance/relational counterpart to Maria Eichhorn's German Pavilion, *Relocating a Structure*, was an archival collaboration. Eichhorn collaborated with Venice universities and libraries to identify little known places and sites of significance where resistance against oppression existed. From this, three alternate Venice-island-based *Places of Resistance* tours ran bi-weekly. Hosted by Venetian archivists and librarians, these guides provided an extraordinary and gentle insight into

rarely-known-or-visited sites. Spaces, un-monumental but memorialized through these guided stories, spoke of strikes, rebellion, and bravery; standing as historically significant for the city.



German Pavilion at the Biennale di Venezia. © ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen). Photo: Jens Ziehe, 2022

Nearby the Giardini, the European Cultural Center's laguna-facing garden was dominated by diverse sculptures. The most monumental was tiny: a QR code to launch a VR App by New Zealand artist Gill Gatfield. This conjures a seen/unseen towering I shape titled *Native Tongue*. Initially selfishly subjective, the monumental 'I' mirage intermingled through the camera-lens with unaware passer-bys. The potency of the experience extended beyond the in-app monumental I-selfie. The shape is a meticulous render of an ancient swamp-preserved 45,000-year-old forest tree, a treasure to the Māori people of northern New Zealand. This non-me-I is preserved and memorialised by *Native Tongue*. 'I' in te reo Māori is also the past tense, stretching far-beyond-behind ourselves into the ancestral worlds. Now living all over the world, on phones in our pockets, this tongue traces histories once hidden in the earth, now uncovered, and invisible except in the Cloud.



Gill Gatfield, *Native Tongue XR* 2018-2022, ancient kauri (*agathis australis*) od. >45,000 yrs, extended reality, 3.1mH x 1.7mW x 3mD, Photo © Gill Gatfield 2022.

Leigh's reinvention, Eichorn's resistance, and Gatfield's I-Cloud reformulate monuments. These projects alter the material and visible value of a structure, questioning historical motivations. If the Venice Biennale is the writer of art history, these artworks can reshape the way we remember.

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