

The Mind's Eye - Gill Gatfield, *Alter Ego*

In the 1930s, the French writer André Gide recommended that the artists of his time first study geography before art. Today, the reference to place, the exploration of 'site specificity' is part of the toolbox of most serious sculptors - especially when they work for the public space. New Zealand artist Gill Gatfield, however, goes far beyond the usual in her research into the sites, locations and situations of her installations and sculptures. For her, the significance of the place is multi-layered. On the one hand, the cultural-historical significance right down to its geological strata already plays a role in choosing the places of origin of her materials, and on the other hand, equal importance attaches to the intended site of installation, and its physical nature. Her examination of the cultural-historical significance of certain places often literally goes into depths. For it is there in the geological layers that she finds many of her materials. These include woods that lay hermetically sealed in the earth for eons and only came to light when humans upset the geochronology in modern times. She even selects classic sculpture materials such as granite precisely according to its regional origin. Thus in 2019 she brought a veined stone from the depths of the earth's history from Aotearoa / New Zealand to Venice and placed it on a plinth of Italian marble. Quasi doubly anchored in Italy, the sculpture *Zealandia* symbolically connected two continents.

By constantly rethinking geography, the artist brings forgotten narratives and buried strands of development back into consciousness. *Native Tongue XR* implanted in Berlin - a large-scale virtual sculpture that can be realized exclusively via the associated app and with the participation of the viewers - has a twin of the same size in New Zealand. This is made from a huge ancient kauri tree that disappeared over 45,000 years ago in the bogs of northern Aotearoa / New Zealand and was carefully extracted and dried for 7 years only this century to become *Native Tongue*.

In the heart of Berlin, an area that, until the onset of the pandemic, saw itself as an overheating but flexible ideal biotope of contemporary art, a primordial sign from Aotearoa / New Zealand thus materializes via the metaverse. This virtual artwork in public space, experienced in real time and three-dimensionally, postulates an alternative reality for human perception and enables shared experiences in public space. Notably, this is not about the continuation of Virtual and Augmented Realities - the actual interesting reality is a spiritual one, which can be experienced equally in both formats, as real form or as relative and in a way beyond form.

Now, the creation of myths and their visualization is traditionally one of the tasks of art. With Gatfield, however, this is essentially a matter of the Aristotelian idea that cultural memory reconstructs the whole by means of a fragment. This kind of mythical thinking uses remains of events: 'odds and ends' one could say, scraps and fragments, fossil witnesses of the history of an individual or a society.¹ It is the exact opposite of an imposed confrontation with an individual artistic mythology.

The fact that the artist can thereby successfully connect previously unconnected cultural memory spaces and generate meaning beyond accepted boundaries of nations, cultural spaces, epochs, and

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Das Wilde Denken*, Frankfurt 1973, S.35

established artistic significance is due to the fact that meaning is often derived from symbols that have not obviously been consciously chosen. They have happened. They mix and overlap with similar or even identical symbols with distinct roots, for example, in lore in which they played a role, or derived from letters or other linguistic signs.

The "I" format of *Native Tongue XR* is such a figure and has been used by the artist for a series of sculptures. Whether as a positive or as a frame, it remains open in terms of individual perceptions. Depending on the context, it is read as a number, a disproportionate letter, or a symbol. The artist notes "The imprint changes in different languages, like in te reo Māori, where "I" connects the spoken word with the past tense, while in Asian languages "I" is the sound for "love." In the Berlin installation, where the viewer first encounters it on a kind of construction sign, one might even think of a decidedly refined double T-beam, similar in structure to the T-beam familiar from steel construction. Gatfield refers to a totem figure, the twin of an ancient kauri monument (hence Native Tongue) - an indigenous taonga (cultural treasure) carved from the heartwood of a majestic tree from a primeval forest buried during the last ice age in Aotearoa / New Zealand. Simultaneously a personal pronoun and the number one/first, *Native Tongue XR* creates an alter ego or "Other Me". "Rooted deep in the earth," she further describes, "rays of light animate the golden grains of the primeval wood and a fleeting shadow imprints the monument on the land." The virtual medium serves to amplify and release the figure's time-bound materiality and minimalist form; it is primarily a means, not an end.

By providing these different tracks, Gatfield invites us particularly in her virtual sculptures to expand the reality of the city and the landscape, because these - although conceived by the artist for specific situations - accompany the audience and can be conjured individually at any time. They thus change the respective territory, give it the opportunity to stage itself and import new content.

Ultimately, *Native Tongue* and *Native Tongue XR*, like all of Gatfield's works, are knowledge objects with inclusive, culture-forming potential based on cultural biographies of objects, materials, and signs. In the play of persistence and actualization, these simultaneously become carriers and generators of meaning. They store memories and at the same time open up multiple narratives.

In the moment of presentation, the artworks develop an intense presence and topicality in dialogue with the location and the viewers. Standing in front of *The Muses* in the foyer of the Kunstverein, one seems to have caught the three I-figures in a kind of in-between-ness, in the transcendent moment when the minute hand trembles a bit and has not yet reached the next stroke. This impression is reinforced by the glass - a material that has coagulated out of flux into a smooth, reflective surface and out of fire into a cool crystalline aggregate state.

Charged with time, many of her works seem to pause in their respective installations. Conceived as signs of tangible cultures, beliefs, and systems of knowledge, her objects and installations create situations that often lead the viewer in directions different from those that were original and exemplary for their creation. Like all epistemic things, they are objects of knowledge that have so many resistances that you have to work your way through to understand them. A certain degree of indeterminacy, with which the artist gives the viewer leeway, makes them the more interesting

objects of knowledge. One inevitably wants to know more about them and wonders where the title comes from, why certain signs are repeated, what difference the context makes in which the sign appears, and why the size and the material were chosen.

Furthermore, the sculptures are a distinctive kind of 'organic abstraction', which does not derive, abstract and synthesize from the forms present in nature, as for example with Hans Arp or Henry Moore, but draw their energy from the natural materials, whose inherent radiance is captured in austere forms.

Abstraction, as it successfully appeared in the last century as a symbol of completely autonomous art, returns in Gatfield's work as a kind of *Deckerinnerung*, so to speak. In her work, it is at once a natural and, in a sense, industrial form of what belongs to reality and expresses itself in objects that cross millennia. The term *Deckerinnerung*, which goes back to Freud, appropriately suggests in its English and French translation as *screen-memory* or *souvenir-écran*, the screen as the most suitable place for recording the memory, the *Deckerinnerung* itself.

From this point of view, the Berlin XR-version of *Native Tongue* is axiomatic, able to bring the viewer into an individual and personal and very transcendent connection with past events. The difference between an external, historical and an internal, spiritual, possibly unconscious reality dissolves completely. The sculpture thus becomes a project that is both personal and communal.

What Freud, however, still somewhat perplexedly called "archaic remains" because he could not accommodate it in his drive theory, his student Carl Jung finally identified it as that which connects us, as it were, underground with the original, innate and inherited forms of the mind. "What we call a symbol is a term, a name, even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown or hidden from us, something buried (*Verschüttetes*)."² A great number of Gatfield's works take simple forms which are known all over the world. Take the cross of *Zealandia* or the I-shape of *Native Tongue*, *The Muses* and other works. These are forms we know but do not grasp the full width of their symbolic meaning since we perceive them under certain conditions and with a particular consciousness. This limits our perception of the world around us. But, Jung suggests, although one may educate oneself and train one's conscious knowledge about objects and signs or employ scientific instruments to compensate for the deficiencies of our senses, there will always be spontaneous unconscious recognition that stems from the deeper layers of our consciousness in front of every concrete object and particularly of an artwork.

As many have argued since then, this more speculative approach refers to a broader cultural imaginary, which took the possibility of extrasensory perception into the shaping and formation of knowledge showing the relationships between 19th century psychic research, early 20th century psychology and the emergence of modern neuroscience. All of them relevant to the development of modern media and the recognition of the importance of psychological processes and practices, including those which extend the human into a web of relational connections with human and non-

² Carl G. Jung, *Approaching the Unconscious*, London 1964, p.20

human actors and agents, blurring the boundaries between the material and the immaterial, the human and the technical, the dead and the alive, and the human and non-human.³ From a German point of view this is also about ceasing to take for granted a distinction between *Natur- and Geisteswissenschaften*, Nature and the Humanities

Gatfield's sculptures carry their stories within them. What they all have in common is an interest in the dialectic of the mutable and the archaic. Associations and narratives serve them as links between the past and the present - which does not mean that they refer directly to concrete memories or even the conscious. Rather, these sculptures express new thoughts that had not previously reached the threshold of consciousness, using the given synchronicity of art as a principle of causal connections.

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³ Lisa Marie Blackmann, *Loving the Alien, A Post-Post-Human Manifesto*, available at: https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/21680/1/Blackman_Lisa_Loving_the_Alien_2016.pdf.