

Between Clouds and Capital

Gill Gatfield's *HALO*: A Counter-Monument in New York



Gill Gatfield, *HALO*, NYC, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist.

New York's blistering heat, and the charged context of Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art (SFSIA) NYC 2024, formed a pulsating backdrop for the launch of *HALO*: a digital monument by New Zealand artist Gill Gatfield, suspended in Manhattan skies. Framed by *Art, Apparatus, and Digital Entanglement in Cognitive Capitalism*, the intensive summer program pressed into urgent questions in philosophy, artificial intelligence (AI), and neuroscience. Presenting her work to the 2024 cohort, Gatfield shared digital-physical projects that examine aura, access, and agency in (de)gendered and (de)colonized systems and bodies. These works stimulate open encounters and new imaginaries through extended reality (XR), a medium she describes as a portal for poetic intelligence, where cloud-based abstractions are hinged to real-world environments, composing liminal space-time. Activated across the city during SFSIA and beyond, *HALO* captured attention and won hearts and minds.

Gatfield's artistic vision resonated within SFSIA's enquiry, particularly in relation to the empathic AI sculpture of transdisciplinary artist Stephanie Dinkins and the technology-enmeshed human imagination described by philosopher Reza Negarestani. In his presentation *Mundus Imaginalis: After Capitalism*, Negarestani posited imagination as innately entangled with technicity—a primordial condition, or climate, subjected to inflation and deflation in cycles responding to the march of technologies. From blockchain and bitcoin to neuroscience and AI, these cycles of pandering and panic produce a FOMO effect, intensified in AI where humans become the makeshift model. Gatfield's XR artworks embrace and invert these feelings of exteriority—an affect the artist ascribes to technology 'othering' its human. In response, her projects place audience agency at their core, expanding access for the imagination through fused physical-digital experiences in relatable and meaningful places. In communal settings, the gentle and contextualized revelation of these new and unseen dimensions diffuses technological anxiety.



Brooklyn Bridge Park, *HALO* activation, 2024. Screenshot courtesy of Gill Gatfield.

HALO, as an XR sculpture, is inextricably bound to the human body and imagination. Its virtual presence is actualized by its audience; it exists only for—and through—those who summon it. People create the artwork at its designated locations through the artist's mobile app, actively engaging with the digital experience until they move beyond its reach. By this

means, *HALO* is a site-specific happening and a performance, while also existing as a virtual sculpture and ephemeral land art. Its genre-bending dimension foregrounds relational aesthetics and resets expectations of what a monument could be.

The artist scripts this artwork's trajectory through sites intrinsically tied to the body politic and cultural currency. First launched over the ancestral harbor of Te Whanganui-a-Tara in Aotearoa New Zealand's capital, Wellington, the monumental circle crowned the country's centre of political power. Its codified stone—a rare white marble formed millennia ago in the Alpine fault lines of the world's eighth continent, Te Riu-a-Māui Zealandia—was extensively quarried in the early 1900s to build civic structures, notably courthouses, colonial monuments, and the Houses of Parliament. Here, *HALO*'s crystalline rock rings the architectures of authority. From Wellington Pōneke, the sky-sculpture was next activated in the Far North on the sacred grounds of Waitangi, circling storied waters where colonial settlers arrived en masse. In this place, New Zealand's 1840 treaty was signed, forming a partnership between indigenous Māori and the British Crown, and where critical debates about governance and sovereignty continue to unfold. These locations are linked across the legendary and digital cloudscape of Aotearoa—meaning 'Land of the Long White Cloud'—as *HALO* zeroes in on a nation's foundational premise: unity.



Gill Gatfield, *HALO*, Waitangi Treaty Grounds, Aotearoa New Zealand, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist and Waitangi Treaty Grounds.

From South Pacific shores, the sculpture's siting over the East River in the unceded lands of Manahatta accentuates the flow of traditional trade routes across lower Manhattan. This island homeland of the Lenape people, who were forced west by European colonization in the 1600s, holds a history of lands lost through broken treaties. While continents apart, Gatfield's circle emblematically bridges these locations marked by colonial legacies and the contingent movements of global capital. Its absent-presence prompts reflections on ancestry, ownership of land and space, and the continuity of cultural histories. Anchored in each place through Global Positioning Systems (GPS), the U.S. government-owned satellite navigation system, *HALO* serves as a virtual reminder of the unseen stringlines of authority.

Codified and transported from one capital to another, *HALO* draws attention to the world's financial centre, where its monumental form is suspended over the waters between Manhattan's Financial District and Brooklyn DUMBO. While Wall Street represents the concentrated financial power and influence of corporate capitalism, DUMBO's transformation reflects the commodification of once-industrial urban areas and the cultural capital that gentrification brings. This tension crystallises broader urban processes where spaces of former labour and production are repurposed into areas of consumption, creativity, and tech-driven economies, reframing *HALO*'s conceptual localization and its relationship with audiences from an entirely different vantage. By engaging viewers in a shared, participatory experience within this juxtaposed landscape, the stone circle transforms the historic public space into a site of regeneration through social interaction and collective meaning-making.

Viewed from beside Brooklyn Bridge through personal mobile phones, the monument crests the skyscrapers of Manhattan. *HALO*'s emergence sparks an intake of breath and widening eyes, quickly followed by expressions of awe or delight. The cityscape is re-seen through fresh eyes, now merged with the symbolic essence of an otherworldly entity gracing the sky. Its innate complexities are abstracted into a singular form—a circle, a zero, a digital "O" (at hyperscale, the 'big O' notation is a metric for determining an algorithm's efficiency). The monolith appears as a mysterious alphabet, with textual and semiotic significance: a universal symbol or celestial sign. Its circular symbolism, associated with the divine feminine, cosmology, and spirit realms, imparts a sense of openness that counters the tight-knit, muscular towers that penetrate the sky. Rather than reinforcing the authority of the capitalistic center, *HALO* destabilizes it, inviting autonomy in participation and malleability in place of perpetuity. Its ephemeral nature makes permeable the architected borders that contain and control access and power.

As monument, *HALO*'s classical sculptural form and digital casting reference and subvert archetypes. Its three-dimensional presence can exist only in mixed reality, where it bends the laws of physics. Its vast materiality can be achieved only through computation and statistical rendering, informed by the artist's field studies of the mountain rock. Gatfield

digitized the rare New Zealand stone to preserve and protect precious raw materials, in continuity, at source. In seeking to develop a sustainable sculpture, she draws attention to the anchoring presence of Earth's bedrock through a monumental gesture of impermanence. Diverging from traditional monuments, *HALO* embodies ephemerality, existing only through sensory experience and memory, and the fleeting nature of digital data. Its existence—contingent on the audience's active choices and engagement—unfolds in fluid locations and contexts, representing both a counter-monument and a new archetype.



Brooklyn Bridge Park, *HALO* activation, July 2024. Screenshot courtesy of Gill Gatfield.

Creating *HALO* through the artist-designed *GatfieldXR* app invites participation and a collaborative dimension. Floating as data in open air, the work deepens perception through each viewer's handheld phone: as people move, the circle re-forms from shifting angles and distances, becoming visible on others' screens and forging connection. As groups gather at the water's edge, the real-time encounter links strangers into a shared event. More than technological enticement, *HALO* sustains a purity of form and an honesty to its medium that can induce meditative attention. It engages geopolitics, critical aesthetics, and computational technology, yet remains accessible without overt explanation; its minimalism avoids the clamour that can stymie digital artworks. In New York, activations became happenings—selfies, shared screens, spontaneous conversations—extending from the shoreline into broader networks when a tour guide live-streamed *HALO* to 3,000 followers across cities including Orlando, Denver, Atlanta, Houston, Toronto, and London. Across the summer, the artist entrusted the sculpture to its location, allowing participants to become caretakers who sustain its life: a precise abstraction held by acts of giving, generosity, and shared experience.

In GatfieldXR, humanist UI and hardware compatibility seek to democratize access and expand possibilities rather than centralize power, a methodology amplified also in Stephanie Dinkins' AI work. At SFSIA, Dinkins described how audiences expressed care toward her digital entity *Not The Only One (NTOO)*, a sculptural form using voice-activated AI to build and express the multigenerational memoir of a Black American family. As *NTOO* fell silent or conveyed confusion, people sought to soothe. By mindfully encouraging people to engage at their own pace, both *NTOO* and *HALO* reimagine autonomy and care in computational technologies by creating conditions for empathy. In New York City, expressions of care for *HALO* extend to its 'physical' placement, its integration with the built environment, and its susceptibility to perceived hazards—a helicopter, a ship, or a jet ski approaching at speed. This care conveys a sense of human responsibility for *HALO*'s fragility. When the digital being slips out of sight in a glitch moment, people express the concern felt when losing a treasure, and make joyful exclamations on the sculpture's reemergence, with remarks like: 'Oh, there it is!' and 'Look, my *HALO* is here!'



Gill Gatfield, *HALO*, Brooklyn Bridge Park, NYC, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist.

An evanescent being, *HALO* presides over realms of transformation. At sunset, in a picture-perfect corner on the floating pier at Brooklyn Bridge Park, the virtual circle invokes and occupies a twilight zone. As the midsummer sun sets over the city, the transitions from light to dark, and sun to moon, parallel the shifting time-space perceptions created by the artwork. Its shadow on the tidal river—a fleeting digital imprint—ripples with the moving waters, further blurring lines between the virtual and the real. Simultaneously, the digital

being holds steady as winds funnel between Brooklyn and Manhattan, and clouds rush across the sky. In these darting moments, the interplay of light and shadow across *HALO*'s stone faces emphasizes the suspension of matter.

Paradoxically, the circle's transience is also rooted in its geolocation. Though hinged to a constellation of GPS points, *HALO*'s presence adjusts throughout the day and night in response to the mass movements of people and the dynamic flow of data. The stone circle gravitates toward the stock market during trading hours and shifts closer to Brooklyn Bridge as commuters return home, embodying the shifting draw on satellite data and signals from cell towers. Manifesting this flux of unseen interactions between humans and digital infrastructure, *HALO* becomes a living reflection of the city's rhythm, mirroring the citizenry in real time.

With a co-evolving synthesis of human interface with digital networks and infrastructure, this virtual monument signals an ongoing transformation marked by sentience and care. In *HALO*'s cloud presence, Gatfield posits a new paradigm for public space—one that reflects the mutability of capital, the continuity of culture and nature, and the evolutionary potential of human imagination in the fluidity of digital life.

Tianran Qian

November 2024

Based in Brooklyn, Tianran Qian is a transdisciplinary creative practitioner, strategist, and producer. Her research explores the aesthetic mediation of computational writing and its transmediality, and experimental space-making practices. She holds a Master of Fine Arts in Design and Technology from Parsons School of Design at The New School, and a Bachelor of Arts in Contemporary Culture and Creative Production from New York University. She attended Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art New York City 2024 and *HALO* activations at Brooklyn Bridge Park, prompting this reflection.

