



Between Clouds and Capital

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

New York's blistering summer and the critical context of Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art (SFSIA) NYC 2024 combined as a vibrant backdrop to the launch of *HALO*, a suspended digital monument by New Zealand artist Gill Gatfield in the skies of Manhattan. Focusing on *Art, Apparatus, and Digital Entanglement in Cognitive Capitalism*, the summer institute investigated hot topics in philosophy, artificial intelligence (AI), and neuroscience through lectures, discussions, and workshops. Presenting her work to the 2024 cohort, Gatfield shared new digital-physical projects that explore aura, access and agency in (de)gendered and (de)colonized systems and bodies. These projects invite 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, creating liminal space and time.

Gatfield's artistic vision resonated deeply with discussions throughout SFSIA, and notably 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 *Mondus Imaginalis: After Capitalism*, Negarestani posited imagination as innately entangled with technicity; a primordial condition or climate that is subjected to inflation and deflation in cycles of response to the march of technologies. From blockchain and bitcoin to neuroscience and AI, these cycles of pander and panic produce a FOMO effect, accentuated in AI where humans are 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 prioritize audience agency at their core, creating and expanding access for the imagination through fused physical-digital experiences in relatable and iconic spaces. Often in communal settings, the gentle and contextualized revelation of new and unseen dimensions serves to empower audiences and diffuse technological anxiety.

HALO, as an XR sculpture, is inextricably bound to the human body and imagination. Its virtual presence in specific environments is actualized by its audience, for and through whom it momentarily exists. People activate *HALO* at its designated location through the artist's mobile app, 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, spatial digital art, and ephemeral land art. A genre-bending dimension which highlights relational aesthetics and disrupts expectations of what a sculpture should be.

Presented first in New Zealand's capital city Wellington, *HALO* was then activated on the sacred ground of Waitangi, the place of the 1840 signing of Aotearoa New Zealand's foundational treaty between indigenous Māori and the British Crown. Beyond those shores, *HALO* was next launched in New York above the storied waters of lower Manhattan, the Island homeland of the First Nations Lenape people who were forced West by European colonization in the 1600s. In this unceded territory, *HALO* manifests as a monumental virtual stone circle, spanning 21.3m (70ft) and hovering 50m (165ft) above the East River. Its material codifies a unique New Zealand white marble, formed millennia ago in the Alpine fault lines of Te Riu-a-Māui Zealandia, the world's eighth continent. Valued for its beauty and strength, the marble was extensively quarried in the early 1900s for civic structures, notably for parliament buildings and colonial monuments. These crystalline rocks built architectures of governmental authority, solidifying the boundaries between those inside and outside the centers of power. Symbolically linked to capital, stone of this ilk reinforces structures of governments, commerce, and courts across the globe.

Codified in virtuality and transported from one capital to another, *HALO* draws attention to the world's financial center, where its monumental form is suspended over the waters between Manhattan 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 illustrates broader urban processes where the spaces of former labor 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 backdrop. By engaging viewers in a shared, participatory experience within this juxtaposed landscape, *HALO* transforms an iconic public space into a site of regeneration through social interaction and collective meaning-making.



Brooklyn Bridge Park HALO Activation July 2024, iPh13 Screenshot. Courtesy Artist Gill Gatfield

Viewed from beside Brooklyn Bridge using personal mobile phones, the monument crests the skyscrapers of Manhattan. When *HALO* emerges, people express awe and delight. The cityscape is viewed through fresh eyes, 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", appearing as a global symbol, a celestial sign, or a mysterious alphabet, with textual and semiotic significance. At hyper-scale, the 'big O' notation is also a metric for determining an algorithm's efficiency. The 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 skies. Its ephemeral nature makes permeable the architected borders which contain and control access and power. Rather than reinforcing the authority of the capitalistic center, *HALO* destabilizes it, inviting autonomy in participation and malleability in place of perpetuity.

As a monument, *HALO*'s classical sculptural form and digital casting simultaneously reference and subvert archetypes. From a technical standpoint, the three-dimensional object could exist only in digital form, as its monolithic shape, scale and suspension defy the laws of physics in real life. It could only be achieved through computation and statistical rendering of its materiality at such large scale. The artist has digitized the rare New Zealand stone, seeking to preserve and protect nature's raw materials, in continuity and at source. Diverging from traditional monuments that typically convey permanence and reinforce power structures, *HALO* embodies impermanence, existing through the audience's sensory experiences and memories, and in the fleeting nature of digital data. Its existence is contingent on the audience's active choices and engagement, unfolding in fluid locations and contexts, representing both a counter-monument and new archetype.

Creating this artwork via the artist-designed GatfieldXR app involves active audience participation, a collaborative dimension that prescribes personal and communal connections through the interactive nature of XR technologies. Floating as data in the open air, *HALO* articulates space and gives time for people to breathe and experience a depth in perception beyond the screen. As public art, its purity of form and honesty to its medium catalyze a meditative state for creative thinking to flourish. It engages with complex topics — geopolitics, critical aesthetics, philosophy, and computational technology, yet its execution and presentation remain accessible without overt explanations. This minimalism intends for a broader public participation, avoiding the alienation and exclusion that can often happen with digital artworks. In GatfieldXR, the artist prioritizes humanist UI design and hardware compatibility, using technology as a conduit to democratize access and expand possibilities rather than centralize it, a methodology that also echoes in transdisciplinary artist Stephanie Dinkins' AI work.

At SFSIA, Dinkin's described how audiences expressed care towards 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. When NTOO fell silent or conveyed confusion, people sought to sooth. 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. Expressions of care for *HALO* extends to its 'physical' placement and its integration with the built environment, the Bridge, and the river, 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 one feels when looking for a lost treasured object. These happenings prompt joyful exclamations, with remarks like: 'There it is!' and 'Oh look, my *HALO* is here!'

Activated around sunset from a picture-perfect corner on the floating pier at Brooklyn Bridge Park, *HALO* invokes a twilight zone, an ephemeral being suspended in a moment of transition between lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. As the midsummer sun sets over the city, the change from light to dark, and sun to moon, parallels the shifting time and space perceptions created by the artwork. As *HALO* floats above the tidal river, its shadow – a fleeting digital imprint – ripples with the moving waters below, further blurring the lines between the physical and the virtual. As the sculptural form hovers in this fleeting moment, the interplay of light and shadow emphasizes the suspension of matter, a metaphysical encounter existing only in the viewer's perception. Much like *HALO*'s setting above a flowing tidal river, its fluidity mirrors the dynamic flow of data and the transitions it facilitates, inviting continuous transformation and interaction. Similarly, the monument's XR medium liberates imagination, transcending the limits of the physically possible.

HALO's transience is also rooted in its geolocation. Though anchored to a specific GPS point, its presence shifts throughout the day and night, responding to movements of people en masse. The stone disc gravitates toward the stock market during trading hours and shifts closer to Brooklyn Bridge as commuters return home, embodying the unseen interactions between humans and data infrastructures. Drawing on geolocation data and signals from surrounding cell towers, *HALO* becomes a living reflection of the city's rhythm by adjusting its positioning in real-time, transforming the virtual monument into a dynamic mixed-reality experience.



Activations of *HALO* in New York became happenings. People took selfies, shared phone screens, and discussed the virtual artwork with strangers, generating curiosity, community and fun. At one activation, a New York tour guide tracked down *HALO* and live-streamed the experience for 3,000 followers across upstate New York and in other cities - Orlando, Denver, Atlanta, Houston, Toronto, and London. Thus, the real-time digital activation was also republished through the internet for remote public engagement.

HALO captures presence in absence, digitally hinged to a place while allowing the audience to freely and actively engage. The physical experience cultivates an awareness of their bodies with their surroundings. For the duration of the summer, the artist entrusted the sculpture to the location, allowing participants to become caretakers who sustain the life of *HALO*. There is an intrinsic integrity in the precision of this abstraction, where acts of giving and generosity weave new spaces to create a tapestry of shared experience.

Gatfield's *HALO* serves as a portal, anchoring itself in the world's financial capital New York while inviting the audience to reconceptualize their relationships with technology, time and place. The concrete world becomes more fluid as perceptions and notions of presence shift through extended reality — a reflection that feels both personal and collective. With the co-evolving synthesis of human interaction with digital networks and infrastructure, the virtual monument enacts a continuous transformation marked by sentience and care. Envisioning a future where capital and imagination are disentangled, *HALO*'s tranquil presence offers a tenderness that humanity quietly yearns.

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