The Mind’s Eye

Gill Gatfield, 'Alter Ego'

by Susanne Prinz

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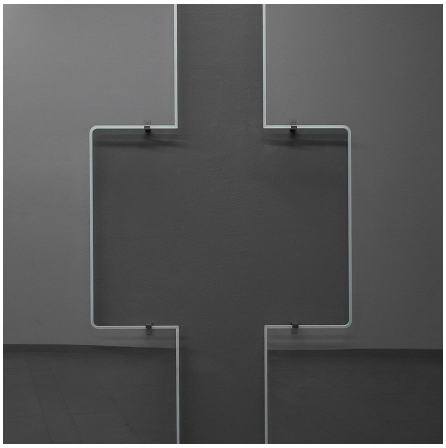
Gill Gatfield, *Native Tongue XR*, 2018-2022. Extended reality ancient kauri (agathis australis) cd. >45,000 yrs. *Alter Ego* exhibition view, Kunstverein am Rosa Luxemburg Platz public gardens, 27 November 2021 - 9 April 2022, Berlin. Photo: Nina Sato Sayuri. Image courtesy of the artist.



Gill Gatfield, *The Muses*, 2022. Crystal glass, heritage pine c.1920, schwarz-grau wall. *Alter Ego* exhibition view, 27 November 2021 - 9 April 2022, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. Photo: Henrik Strömberg. Image courtesy of the artist.



Gill Gatfield, *Aroha*, 2016-ongoing. Indian black granite. *Alter Ego* exhibition view, 27 November 2021 - 9 April 2022, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. Photo: Henrik Strömberg. Image courtesy of the artist.



Gill Gatfield, *The Muses* (detail), 2022. Crystal glass, heritage pine c.1920, schwarz-grau wall. *Alter Ego* exhibition view, 27 November 2021 - 9 April 2022, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. Photo: Henrik Strömberg. Image courtesy of the artist.



Gill Gatfield, *Native Tongue XR* sign. *Alter Ego* exhibition view, Kunstverein am Rosa Luxemburg Platz public gardens, 27 November 2021 - 9 April 2022, Berlin. Photo: Nina Sato Sayuri. Image courtesy of the artist.

Last month the HUM team visited Aotearoa artist Gill Gatfield and her work presented in a collateral event of the Venice Biennale. Now we turn to Gatfield's first solo presentation in Berlin, Alter Ego*, which consists of a project in two parts at the Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz: a large-scale crystal-glass sculpture in the museum foyer and a virtual reality sculpture in the nearby public park, accompanied by related glass and stone works.* Alter Ego *seeks to place*

the audience at the threshold of reality and digital simulation, between the remembered and the imaginary.

In this article, Susanne Prinz, director of the Kunstverein, explores how Gatfield's work speaks to a European audience across linguistic and cultural boundaries, and to this end, examines how the cultural imaginary, the space between the real and the spiritual, manifests itself in Gatfield's work. Important to this is the multi-layered geological history of the materials she uses and the significance of place.

In the 1930s, the French writer André Gide recommended that artists first study geography before art. Today, a reference to place, an exploration of 'site specificity' is part of the toolbox of most serious sculptors—especially when they work for public space. Aotearoa artist Gill Gatfield is particularly thorough in her research into the sites, locations and situations of her installations and sculptures. For her, the significance of the place is multi-layered. The cultural-historical significance right down to its geological strata plays a role in choosing the places of origin of her materials, while equal importance is attached to the intended site of installation.

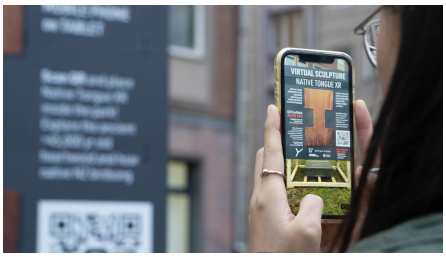
Gatfield’s examination of the cultural and historical significance of certain places often literally goes into depths. For it is there in the geological layers that she finds many of her materials. These include woods that lay hermetically sealed in the earth for eons, until humans upset the geochronology to extract rare and valuable material to be exported from Aotearoa to Asia and Europe for the manufacture of design products. Gatfield’s work seeks to preserve the wood in its original state, to create proposals for a strong cultural heritage that perpetuates its inherent importance.

She also selects classic sculpture materials such as granite precisely, according to its regional provenance. By revealing the special character of each stone, she embeds and releases ideas of origin through the work’s materials, form and situation. Accordingly, in 2019 she brought a veined stone from the depths of the earth's history from Aotearoa to Venice and placed it on a plinth of Italian marble. Doubly anchored in Italy, the sculpture *Ze*

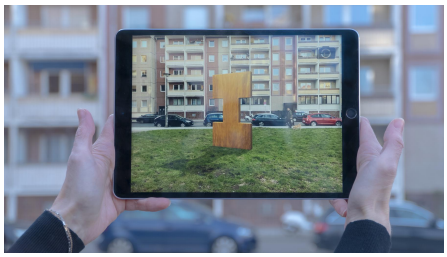
alandia symbolically connected two continents. Over the years, her works have created a 'world conference' of symbols and rituals that are older than the national flags and languages currently in use.



Gill Gatfield, *Zealandia*, 2018. NZ stone, Italian granite, stainless steel. *Time Space Existence* exhibition view, organised by the European Cultural Centre at Giardini Marinaressa during the Venice Architecture Biennale 2018. Photo: Jennifer Buckley. Image courtesy of the artist.



Gill Gatfield, *Native Tongue XR*, 2018-2022. Extended reality ancient kauri (agathis australis) cd. >45,000 yrs. *Alter Ego* exhibition view, Kunstverein am Rosa Luxemburg Platz, 27 November 2021 - 9 April 2022, Berlin. Photo: Nina Sato Sayuri. Image courtesy of the artist.



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By constantly mixing geographical sources, the artist brings forgotten narratives and buried strands of historical and geological development back into consciousness. *Native Tongue XR* (2018-22), one of the two works implanted in Berlin as part of the exhibition *Alter Ego* from 27 November 2021 to 9 April 2022, is a large-scale virtual sculpture which can be activated exclusively via an associated phone app and with the participation of the viewers. It has a physical twin of the same size in New Zealand titled *Native Tongue* (2011), made from a huge ancient kauri tree that disappeared over 45,000 years ago in peat swamps of Te Tai

Tokerau Northland which was carefully salvaged and dried for seven years only this century to become *Native Tongue*.[01] As with all of Gatfield's works, there is a strong connection between form and title, closely linked to the material and its shape. In this case, the title can probably be traced back to the special material of the sculpture as kauri is today a protected and precious native wood in Aotearoa, while the sculpture's enormous size of over three metres symbolically lends a loud voice to the tree itself. Meanwhile, its austere abstract form in the shape of an I or Roman 'one' oscillates between word, number and object.

In the heart of Berlin, an area that, until the onset of the pandemic, saw itself as a buzzing but flexible ideal biotope of contemporary art, a primordial sign from Aotearoa thus materialises via the metaverse. This virtual artwork, accessed through a QR code and experienced in real time and three-dimensionally, postulates an alternative reality for human perception and enables shared experiences in public space. The sculpture's materialisation on the screens of mobile phones and tablets via the custom app, rather than in 3D-glasses, allows multiple viewers to participate in the same experience and further share it through social media. If you want, you can follow the soft voice of the curatorial Cicerone in the app and listen to native birdsong. And while the brain enters the new merged realities of image, object, and context, the Berlin winter keeps you rooted in the old. Notably, this is not about the continuation of virtual and augmented realities; it is not about total immersion—experiences usually sought in the metaverse. The actual reality is a spiritual one, which can be experienced equally in both formats—the physical and the virtual, extending the work beyond its form.

The creation of myths and their visualisation is traditionally one of the tasks of art, or more precisely of the objects and images we now call art, although originally they were created for spiritual purposes. 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. To avoid misunderstandings: Gatfield's works use the language and formal means of contemporary sculpture. They do not impose an

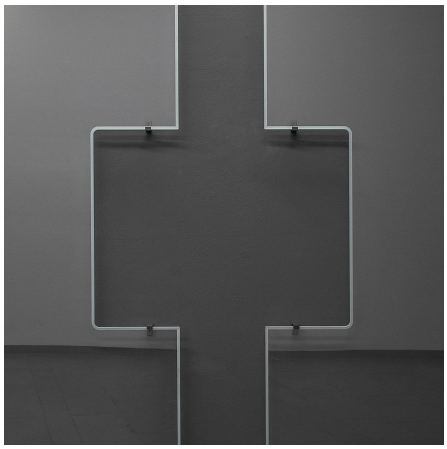
individual artistic mythology on the viewer. The fact that the artist can thereby successfully connect previously unconnected cultural memory spaces and generate meaning beyond accepted boundaries of nations, cultural spaces, epochs, and established artistic significance is due to the fact that meaning is often derived from symbols that have not obviously been consciously chosen. 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.



Gill Gatfield, *The Muses*, 2022. Crystal glass, heritage pine c.1920, schwarz-grau wall. *Alter Ego* exhibition view, 27 November 2021 - 9 April 2022, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. Photo: Henrik Strömberg. Image courtesy of the artist.



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Gill Gatfield, *The Muses* (detail), 2022. Crystal glass, heritage pine c.1920, schwarz-grau wall. *Alter Ego* exhibition view, 27 November 2021 - 9 April 2022, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. Photo: Henrik Strömberg. Image courtesy of the artist.



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The 'I' form 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".[02] In the Berlin installation, where the viewer first encounters it on a kind of construction sign, one might even think of a decidedly refined Finnjoist beam, similar in structure to the I-beam familiar from steel construction. Simultaneously a personal pronoun and the number one, *Native Tongue XR* creates an alter ego or "Other I". "Rooted deep in the earth," Gatfield further describes, "rays of light animate the golden grains of the primeval wood and a fleeting shadow imprints the monument on the land."[03] 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 and any place using the same app. Ultimately, *Native Tongue* and *Native Tongue XR*, like all of Gatfield's works, are knowledge-based objects with inclusive, culture-forming potential based on cultural biographies of objects, materials, and signs. In the play of persistence and actualisation, these simultaneously become carriers and generators of meaning. They store memories and at the same time open up multiple narratives.

It is particularly in the moment of presentation that Gatfield's artworks develop an intense presence and topicality in dialogue with the location and the viewers. Standing in front of *The Muses* (2022), a group of three glass reliefs floating in front of the wall in the foyer of the Kunstverein, one seems to have caught the three I-figures in a kind of in-between-ness of time, 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.

Conceived as signs of tangible cultures, beliefs and systems of knowledge, the artist's 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 as 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 synthesise from the forms present in nature, as for example with Hans Arp or Henry Moore, but draws their energy from the natural materials they are made from.

Abstraction, which successfully appeared in the last century as a symbol of completely autonomous art, returns in Gatfield's practice as a kind of *Deckerinnerung*, or screen-memory, 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 *screen-memory* or *souvenir*-écran, the screen as the most suitable place for recording the memory.



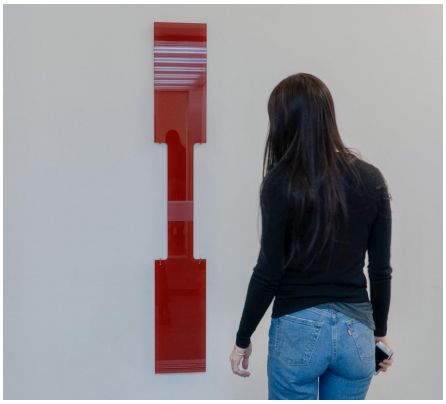
Gill Gatfield, *Aroha* (detail), 2016-ongoing. Indian black granite. *Alter Ego* exhibition view, 27 November 2021 - 9 April 2022, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. Photo: Nina Sato Sayuri. Image courtesy of the artist.



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Gill Gatfield, *Siren* (detail), 2021. Tempered glass, red ink. *Alter Ego* exhibition view, 27 November 2021 - 9 April 2022, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. Photo: Nina Sato Sayuri. Image courtesy of the artist.



Gill Gatfield, *Siren*, 2021. Tempered glass, red ink. *Alter Ego* exhibition view, 27 November 2021 - 9 April 2022, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. Photo: Nina Sato Sayuri. Image courtesy of the artist.

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" were those isolated remnants of memory that seem to

emerge at random from the strange amnesia of early childhood. He developed the model of the infantile screen-memory to accommodate them. They are what his student Carl Jung finally identified 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)*.”[04] A great number of Gatfield’s works take simple forms that 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 breadth of their symbolic meanings since we perceive them under certain conditions and with a particular consciousness. This limits our perception of the world around us. But, as 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.

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 that extend the human into a web of relational connections with human and non-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.[05] From a German point of view this is also about ceasing to take for granted a distinction between *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften*—Science 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 realm. So it is not a matter of representation, but of latency. These sculptures empower their beholders to make new connections between what already exists but had not previously reached the threshold of consciousness.

Footnotes

01. As described in the video *Gill Gatfield, Native Tongue - A Taonga (Treasure)*, 2018.

02. Gill Gatfield, Artist Statement 'Alter Ego' 2021/2022.

03. Gill Gatfield, Artist Statement 'Alter Ego' 2021/2022.

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

05. Lisa Marie Blackmann, "Loving the Alien, A Post-Post-Human Manifesto", www.research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/21680/1/Blackman_Lisa_Loving_the_Alien_2016.pdf

Biographies



Gill Gatfield transforms ancient and futuristic materials and media into otherworldly abstract forms, sparking connections between nature, time, humanity and place. Her work has won international awards, commissions for place-making art, and is held in public and private collections in NZ, Australia, USA and Europe. International exhibitions include European Cultural Centre Venice Art Biennale 2022, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz 2021/22, Sculpture by Sea Perth Australia 2021, VSC Alumx USA 2020, Venice Architecture Biennale 2018, A18 New York, Chicago Expo 2018, SCAPE Public Art 2017, and Sculpture by Sea Aarhus Denmark 2015.

Gill Gatfield holds an MA(Hons) from Auckland University. Awards and recognition include sole Juror, WomanMade International Open Chicago 2015, residency and solo exhibition Kvindemuseet/KØN Denmark 2015, international CODAaward 2017 Public Art Landscape Award, New Zealand Woman of Influence award 2018, Sculpture Fellowship and residency Vermont Studio Centre 2019, Creative NZ Art Grants 2019 and 2020, CODAworx Creative Revolutionary 2020.



Susanne Prinz is a curator and writer based in Berlin. She studied art history and politics in Leipzig and Munich. Currently she is the director of the Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. There, her special focus is on art in the public realm while organising a programme of exhibitions by national and international artists in the Kunstverein and elsewhere in Europe. In addition to her curatorial work, she has taught at the art academies in Kassel, Berlin, Salzburg, Linz and Montpellier.

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