

Acropolismus

The opening of the new Acropolis Museum in June 2009 was one of the most important museological events of our century so far. Nick James paid it a visit (Antiquity 83: 1144–51) and we have pleasure in offering three more reactions from different viewpoints.

Behold the raking geison: the new Acropolis Museum and its context-free archaeologies

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New for old

In December 1834 Athens became the capital city of the newly founded Hellenic Kingdom. King Otto, the Bavarian prince whose political and cultural initiative shaped much of what modern Greece is today, sought to design the new city inspired by the heavily idealised model of Classical Hellas (see Bastea 2000). The emerging capital was from the outset conceived as a *heterotopia* of Hellenism, a Foucauldian ‘other space’ devoted to Western Classicism in view of the Classical ruins it preserved. The Acropolis became, naturally, the focal point of this effort. At the same time, however, and as Greek nationalist strategies were beginning to unfold, Classical antiquity became a disputed *topos*, a cultural identity of sorts contested between Greece on the one hand and the ‘Western world’ on the other (see Yalouri 2001: 77–100). Archaeological sites thus became disputed spaces, claimed by various interested parties of national or supra-national authority wishing to impose their own views on how they should be managed — and to what ends (Loukaki 2008). The Acropolis was duly cleansed from any non-Classical antiquities and began to be constructed as an authentic Classical space, a *national* project still in progress. As Artemis Leontis has argued in her discussion of Greece as a heterotopic ‘culture of ruins’, the Acropolis of Athens, now repossessed by architectural renovation and scholarly interest, functions ‘as a symbol not of Greece’s ancient glory but of its modern predicament’ (Leontis 1995: 40–66; see also McNeal 1991; Hamilakis 2007: 85–99).

When we ascend to modern Greece’s ‘sacred rock’ today, we are faced with a vibrant landscape of modernity at work (Figure 1): cranes and scaffolds, architects, engineers and marble cutters, all striving to return the ruins to an imagined ‘authentic state’ — pre-Morosini (when, in 1687, Venetian artillery saw that the Parthenon be turned into a pile of ruins), though definitely post-Elgin (when, in 1801, the notorious Scot removed what he could from the standing monuments in order to make his own investment in Greece’s Classical past). More to the point, we are faced with a simulacrum of a ruin, since a significant percentage of what now stands on the Acropolis is *newly cut* in order to support the old

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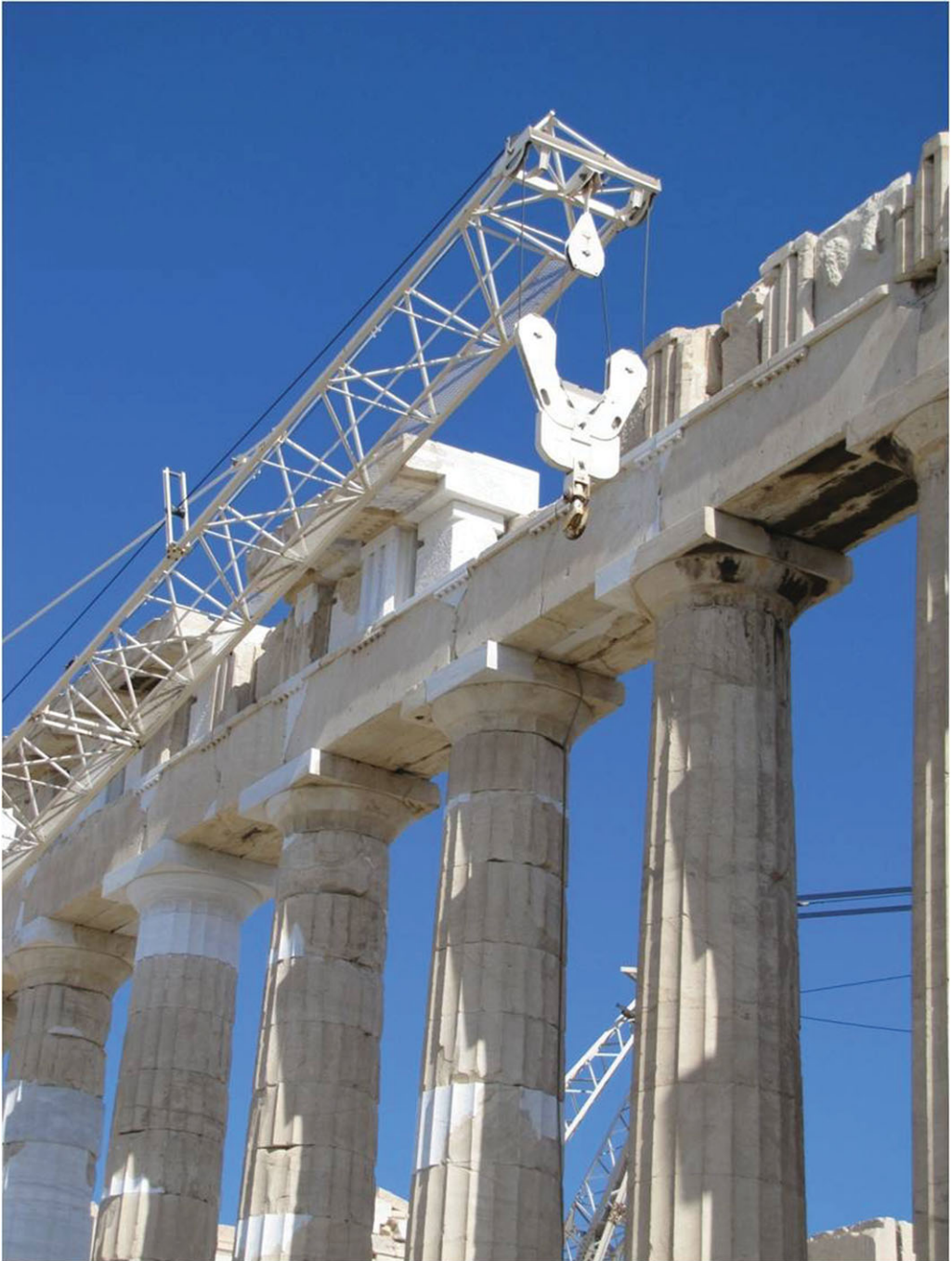


Figure 1. Constructing the ruin: a crane adding the final touches along the north side of the Parthenon in summer 2010.

remains (Figure 2). This is of course carried out according to international standards and state-of-the-art technology (cf. YSMA 2010), but it is nevertheless quite obvious that what is being produced on the Acropolis is a site *restored* to an idealised state of being, one only suitable to current tastes and ideologies. These ruins are indeed restored, enhanced and promoted as Greece's '*most recognizable modern signature*' (Leontis 1995: 66) and the new Acropolis Museum seems to have been designed as a further step in that direction. As weather and pollution threatened the condition of any sculptures still remaining on the Acropolis, their transfer to a secluded space became imperative and soon enough it was decided to move them, along with any other artefacts excavated on the Acropolis since the nineteenth century, to a museum off-site, a grander building that would replace the old museum, by then drastically running out of space. This accentuates the holographic properties of the site in its present state: a make-believe time (an idealised Classical age) and a make-believe place (a hitherto unseen Acropolis) with make-believe remains (since parts of the buildings are rebuilt and all sculptures are now moved elsewhere). A triumph of archaeology, certainly; as the champion of aesthetics on the one hand and politics on the other, since the Acropolis is still enlisted in the service of the nation's international relations and economic strategies, not to mention the agonising efforts to establish Athens as a world-celebrated tourist destination. The Classical past is therefore declared under a state of emergency in order to be rebuilt, modernised and placed in the service of Greece's tourist-based heritage industry.

Re-inventing the past as spectacle, however, had been a project instrumental to Western modernity long before the time when Greece, as a fledgling nation-state, decided to forge its national identity based on its perceived Classical past. Through excavation, reconstruction and exhibition European archaeology managed to represent the ancient world as a picture, in order — to paraphrase Heidegger — to achieve its conquest. By promoting Greece's Classical past, Western archaeology eliminated anything that was created after the end of the ancient world, thus subordinating modern Greeks to their phantasmic forefathers. (Needless to say, pretending not to notice any Greek after Perikles made Lord Elgin's job a lot easier). Talking about a country's past enabled its colonisation and the disciplining of its inhabitants. Hence, this past had to be cleansed in order to suit the project at hand: Classicist as in the case of Greece (see McNeal 1991), Orientalist as in colonised Egypt (Mitchell 1991), and so on. These newly created presences — organised sites, rebuilt temples, massive museums — serve to this day to generate particular value systems and aesthetic or political hierarchies, though in such a way as to render this act of representation totally invisible. Hence, the modern Greek state is happily usurping the same Classicist agenda that was once deployed against its own political standing; through the systematic creation of virtual ruins such as the Parthenon and the other monuments on the Athenian Acropolis, Greece attempts the instrumentalisation of its Classical heritage for the edification of its citizens as well as its visitors.

Modernity at large

The new Acropolis Museum, designed by Bernard Tschumi between 2001 and 2009 (Figure 3), has to be seen as a sub-plot to the strategies outlined above, as a confirmation of Greece's dedication to modernity while at the same time promoting the timeless quality of its

Behold the raking geison



Figure 2. The west side of the Parthenon, during its restoration in 2010: all sculpted decoration (pediment, metopes and frieze) is modern.



Figure 3. The new Acropolis Museum in 2009 (photograph: Nikos Daniilidis. © Acropolis Museum).

Classical past (Bernard Tschumi Architects 2010). Mass rearrangement of the natural and social environment has become a means to demonstrate the strength — such as it is — of the modern state as a *'techno-economic power'* (Mitchell 2002: 21) and Greece seems to have exerted itself, in the last decade or so, in an effort to prove that modernisation is the thing Greeks do best, after all. Celebrated as a member of an international elite of (st)architects (who are often criticised for sacrificing their clients' needs to their own intellectual pursuits), Tschumi has created a deconstructivist modern landmark in Athens, with sharp lines and imposing fabrics, though one that has already managed to create some controversy (Fouseki 2006, 2007; Plantzos 2008: 14–17; James 2009). Half-asphyxiated by its surroundings, the filthy, untidy Athenian *polykatoikies* that seem to be piled on one another (Figure 4), the new Acropolis Museum appears as an alien creature landed in the heart of Athens, determined to fight for its vital space. Be that as it may, my purpose in this paper is not to critique its architectural merits but its exhibition design, a result of both Tschumi's own approach to what we generally refer to as 'heritage' and the policies of the Greek state regarding the reception of Classical culture and its management. The issues raised by James (2009), as well as those explored here, have not yet been given the attention they deserve by the Greek authorities.

The new museum was designed by the Greek state as a 'new arc for the nation', and the then Greek prime minister, K. Karamanlis, said as much at its inauguration: *'symbol of our confidence'*; *'proof that culture and history unite Greek society'*; *'eternal source of inspiration for the future'* (see Plantzos 2009 for a survey of Greek and international press at the time of the



Figure 4. *Vital space: the new Acropolis Museum in its neighbourhood, seen from the south-west (2010).*

museum's opening). Adopted and promoted by the Greek press, this type of millennialist rhetoric confirmed that the new museum was built in an effort to 'give the nationalist struggle something to revive and admire' (Said 1993: 16). The association of the museum project with Greece's national cause *par excellence*, the repatriation of the Elgin/Parthenon marbles (see Hamilakis 2007: 243–86), suggests that the museum is expected to fulfil a very specific agenda. This, I think, is quite obvious in both its declared and its undisclosed exhibition principles.

Neither bold nor beautiful

The idealist paradigm is dominant in both the conception of the new Acropolis Museum and its reception by the public. 'Harmony', 'beauty' and 'perfection' are the key words throughout the Greek press — as journalists invite the public to pay their '*undisrupted attention*' so that '*the mystery and aesthetic perfection hiding in every drapery-fold* [of the marble sculptures] *may be revealed*' (Tsiros 2009: 4). For some of its admirers, '*the visit to the Museum becomes an act of faith, like listening to a fairytale — or a prayer*' (Lianis 2009)!

Classical antiquity thus becomes timeless and ahistorical, even though stylistic chronology and connoisseurship, Classical archaeology's favoured taxonomic devices, maintain a historicist approach to the past. This idealised history of art was the outcome of the systematic work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), who, through his quest for the 'essence of art' ended up equating a culture with its aesthetics (Potts 1994). Winckelmann's discourse, recognising the incontestable authority of the antique over the modern — by praising the essential simplicity and idealised innocence of Classical art in contrast with the decline of art in later times — is a concession both to humanism and romanticism, especially when it



Figure 5. Conversation pieces: the Archaic Gallery in 2009 (photograph: Nikos Daniilidis. © Acropolis Museum).

promotes a synaesthetic, un-indoctrinated approach to the (art of the) past as ‘it really was’. Classical antiquity becomes therefore modern idealism’s arch-paradigm (Greenhalgh 2005).

Many people, including its makers and managers, emphasise how the new exhibition allows the viewer to enjoy the Classical masterpieces under the ‘natural light of Attica’, as they were ‘originally’ viewed in their own time (Katimertzi 2009; Tsiros 2009; see also Plantzos 2009: 14–15). According to Tschumi, *the light of Attica is different from the light anywhere else in the world... Only under this light may one view the Marbles properly. Indeed... one sees the Marbles differently, as one would if they were still intact on the Parthenon*’ (Tsiros 2009: 20). Be that as it may, such views pay homage to environmental determinism, a celebrated offspring of German nationalism, according to which culture and climate are organically tied. Transplanted to Greece in the late nineteenth century, environmentalist theories were used to promote Greek exceptionalism as well as champion Greek emancipation from an ‘unnatural’ modernity imposed by the West. Thus, for example, in literature the short story was endorsed as a ‘native Greek form’ that thrived ‘like a wild herb’ on Greek soil, as opposed to the novel which was a foreign import, and ‘excessive exposure’ to Western-sent modernity threatened the integrity of timeless Greece (Peckham 2001: 76–88). Similarly, direct visual contact with the ‘masterpieces’ in the new Acropolis Museum, as well as with the Acropolis itself, is what it takes to satisfy — and inform — the visitor, without too much information regarding their historical or social significance (Figure 5). The museum’s director, D. Pantermalis, hinted as much in a recent interview published in the Danish paper *Jyllands Posten*, suggesting that the new museum promotes a face-to-face dialogue between the artefact and the viewer, by ‘showing Classicism without the dust of Classicism’ (Pantermalis

2010). One feels that the museum authorities, as well as most of the museum's admirers, believe that Classical taste is both self-evident and self-contained — so much so that it does not require the clutter necessary for a modern approach to heritage management: wall texts and any other sort of information is kept to an absolute minimum, as if contextualisation might belittle the 'glory that was Greece'. 'This is where the exhibits talk directly to the viewer', repeated Pantermalis on the museum's first anniversary (Adamopoulou 2010). Classicism is at its best, for example, when no reference is made to the extensive traces of ancient pigments still surviving on many sculptured surfaces throughout the museum, pigments that would certainly shock the aesthetes still taken by the pristine whiteness of Classical marbles as idolised by Winckelmann & co. In that sense, it is easy to understand why many authorities, as well as intellectuals of various denominations, insist on referring to the Acropolis as the 'sacred rock' and to the museum's exhibits as holy (see Yalouri 2001: 137–86; Plantzos 2009). In the museum's official agenda, the Classical is a unique phenomenon, timeless and supra-historical, not to be studied but revered, addressed to the spirit rather than the intellect. And, in case anyone might think otherwise, a thoroughly *Hellenic* one.

Mind the gap

Since the nineteenth century, archaeology has been considered as the primary tool for the discovery, study, interpretation, display and promotion of the material remains of the past. Reading material culture is in many ways conducted on a one-to-one basis, whereby 'signs' of the past are treated as privileged, monosemantic signifiers. In the last couple of decades or so, however, it has been realised that archaeology's constituent essentialism threatens the integrity of its narratives (Olsen 1990). In a discipline where context is everything, we begin to suspect that single-dimensional, quasi-authoritative representations undermine the very contextuality we mean to investigate.

The new Acropolis Museum does not seem to ponder over such questions. On the contrary, it appears to push further backwards: the self-satisfying parading of 'masterpieces' precludes any interaction with the public at large and suggests a structural inefficiency concerning the fulfilment of its mission (James 2009). Its much advertised breakthroughs (the 'visual dialogue with the Acropolis', the exhibition of its holdings under the 'natural light of Attica' and so on) are but an improvised retrospective of German romanticism; at the same time, such notions serve the national narrative for the construction of a single, indigenous and continuous Hellenism. Beneath them, however, lies a far more conservative, if not reactionary, discourse. By claiming we 'let the exhibits speak for themselves', we pretend not to notice the thick network of reception strategies surrounding them. On the contrary, we claim that the exhibit and the (presumed) cultural information it carries are inexorably and one-dimensionally bound, safe from any external mediation. As a result, the information is annihilated by the overbearing presence of the exhibit, which is thus turned into a self-referring *signified*. Archaeological discourse then replaces the cultural meaning presumably sought by the spectator: as the visitors reach the famous Archaic pediment from the Acropolis displayed in the new museum, they read a cryptic label identifying the artefact as a '*sima and raking geison*', the English-language text being an exact translation of the Greek-language; needless to say, neither means anything to anyone caring to read

them (unless they are a card-carrying member of the archaeology clan or a particularly conscientious undergraduate). This hardcore approach to scientific integrity seems to have been designed in order to keep the non-initiated at bay rather than inviting the layman to partake of any knowledge the museum has to offer. Such scholarly solipsism, recalling the seemingly objective (empiricist rather than rationalist) ritual of archaeological classification, is typical of all ‘good bureaucrats’, who, as Gellner once remarked commenting on Weber, support the mainframe of the nation-state in the post-industrialisation era (Gellner 1983: 19–24).

As archaeologists we deconstruct material culture in order to reconstruct a simulacrum of it in our ‘scientific’ meta-language (Olsen 1990: 195). Ignoring this reality turns our exhibitions into dull, unimaginative and inefficient piles of stuff, unable to interact with the multi-semantic and multi-focal societies which we ostensibly address. Exhibits thus trap their viewer into an ‘always already’ present narrative of authoritative interpretation. Having convinced ourselves that the real (as in the ‘exhibit’) is self-evidently, one-dimensionally, and unquestionably ‘there’, we choose to ignore the multiplicity of meanings it may be found to contain. Through its simplistic museological approach (a sort of ‘what you see is what you get’ approach to Classical culture at large) the new Acropolis Museum pretends to be cutting the mediation of the (con)text. A seemingly invisible curator invites the non-initiate visitor to seek information through a meta-physical experience developing as a self-awareness trip. Fair enough, but isn’t there a better way to organise a museum exhibition?

Objects react with their users through tactility, visuality, usability etc. and these qualities form a thick network of contextual mediation usually untraceable by archaeology’s standard approach. The contemporary visitor to the Acropolis Museum expects to see and to hear (not just to read) more on the artefacts’ interaction with the community that produced and beheld them — as its sacred idols, as gifts, as social and cultural agents. Instead, we get the same old sterilised approach produced by a quasi-scientific paradigm in desperate need of rethinking. The obsession with an artefact’s identity as an archaeological object (inventory numbers, taxonomy and so on) and its poetic genealogy (‘made by so and so’, ‘attributed to so and so by so and so’) places a grossly undue emphasis on the artefact’s career within the ancient workshop (and the modern library, certainly) but fails to elucidate its interaction within its own cultural context(s).

What could be the meaning, for example, for the contemporary viewer, of the information solely accompanying a voluminous Greek pot sitting prominently in its case in the Archaic Gallery of the Acropolis Museum, that the pot in question is a ‘*signed work by the Painter of Acropolis 606*’? Fair enough, this is a simple mistake in translating the Greek-language original label identifying the pot as the ‘name-vase’ of the so-called ‘Painter’, but even so, what could this actually *mean* to people who have never heard of Beazley and connoisseurship, nor were ever interested in the art world’s arcane dealings? These tedious labels, dry in their relentless scientism, in fact signpost the institutional pedantry of Greek archaeology. The urge to surrender to the genius of the author/artist (even when one needs to be invented), in particular, remains a formidable tendency in Classical archaeology, turning museum curation into hard labour carried out by jaded bureaucrats. Trapped in its idealist maxims, the museum keeps repeating itself, idly recycling the outdated epistemological paradigm in the heart of its convictions.



Figure 6. The Parthenon Gallery (west). Parts of the pediment, metopes and the frieze, including casts standing in for pieces taken abroad.

The stones he left behind

Yet, this inertia is not accidental. Despite its volume and ample space, the new Acropolis Museum becomes rapidly famous for the things it does not show or mention. Athens's Ottoman history is an obvious — entirely planned — omission, and so are many others, failing to contextualise the precious exhibits lest they lose their Classicist allure. In terms of absences, of course, one cannot but take the hint of the plaster casts standing in lieu of the 'marbles' taken to London by Lord Elgin in the early 1800s. Planned to a great extent as a counter-argument against the British Museum's claim that the Greeks had no suitable museum for the Parthenon marbles even if they ever returned to Athens, the new Acropolis Museum seems to deal with this matter quite effectively — though for an audience that is bound not to include the British Museum Trustees any day soon.

In what seems to be the new museum's only section actually designed by a professional, the Parthenon Gallery, the temple's three main sculptural groups (the pediments, the frieze and the metopes) are exhibited under the much-advertised visual contact with the monument itself (Figure 6). The by now familiar masses of concrete and corrugated metal are used here to support what is left of the Parthenon marbles (and drapes and blinds are sensibly placed on the glass walls, as an afterthought perhaps, in order to obscure the view to the surrounding *polykatoikies*, commanding our gaze north, towards the newly restored Parthenon). The

whole museum plan, such as it is, urges the visitor to the climactic top floor, following a sequence of one-ways and escalators (though not neglecting, of course, the all-important gift shop and the restaurant, also endowed with a view towards the Parthenon). The exhibition narrative in the Parthenon Gallery is, however, completed with casts of what is missing (the Elgin marbles in the British Museum, of course, as well as pieces in the Louvre and elsewhere), a step ostensibly taken in order to suggest to the viewer how the monument might look like when complete, though in fact used to generate anti-Elgin sentiment among the visitors.

The Greeks are not alone in viewing the Elgin marbles debate as yet another battle in the post-colonial wars. The British Museum rhetoric, with all its salvationist ('we saved them from neglect and destruction') and conservationist ('only the British Museum can offer the marbles the scientific care they require') overtones reeks of colonialist arrogance and dilettantism — the conviction that only an 'Enlightenment' institution such as the British Museum can offer '*lessons in aesthetic taste and historical appreciation that serve as "civilizing rituals" for museum visitors*' (Colla 2007: 5; on the seemingly endless debate, see Beard 2003: 155–81; Hamilakis 2007: 243–86). This view is not confined to the British Museum's Neoclassical premises as one might have hoped, if we are to judge by publications such as Simon Jenkins's 2009 article in *The Guardian* (Jenkins 2009), where the new museum is seen fit to be '[a] *banana republic police headquarters*' (thus killing once and for all any Greek allusion to Athenian democracy and such like) rather than '*a home for the Elgin marbles*'. Reminding everyone of the 'conservation shortcomings' of the Greeks (thus repeating, in true Orientalist fashion, the well-rehearsed argument that the West reserves the right to own and acquire artefacts based on its superior technologies of representation and preservation), Mr Jenkins attributes the new museum's failure to '*the gods of modern museology*'.

As it happens, Mr Jenkins is right. Even though no museologist, modern or other, seems ever to have set foot on its premises, the new Acropolis Museum is intentionally bound to a thoroughly modern predicament. By promoting its exhibits as the unquestionable paragons of Classical taste, the museum attempts to overcome the Greek handicap against the British and other Europeans who seem to have gone there first. At the same time, the emphasis on bureaucratic archaeological scientism, inherent in Greek modernity as it may be, also serves as a performative reference to Western modernity as such. The obscure archaeological jargon on the labels is the counterpart of the massive metal and concrete surfaces and oblique shapes in the museum's architecture, its escalators and noisy ticket-control checkpoints, as well as the sophisticated machinery on the Acropolis itself, an orchestrated reminder to the world that Greeks 'can be moderns too' — despite their antiquity, at once celebrated and slyly usurped by the West. By reversing the salvationist and conservationist tactics of its rivals, the museum was conceived as a weapon in Greece's effort to claim new ways of centrality in the world cultural system: its exhibits are thus 'modernised', treated as ends in themselves as well as fragments of a wider narrative: nationalist, exceptionalist, anti-colonial. The Acropolis Museum, with its hi-tech outlook and tedious disposition, modernises the Parthenon marbles following the old example of the Elgin marbles, whereby the aesthetic pleasure principle of the eighteenth century is combined with the quasi-scientific empiricist approach of the nineteenth. This process, recently dubbed '*artifaction*' (Colla 2007: 23–66), was deployed as a means of claiming ownership of the/other people's pasts while at the

same time suggesting a clear art-history narrative to a presumably enlightened, exclusively Western, public. As Homi Bhabha has shown, however, when these 'founding objects' of the Western world are taken back to the 'margins of metropolitan desire', rather than proving the centrality of their new owners or the marginality of their old usurpers, they 'become the erratic, eccentric, accidental objets trouvés of the colonial discourse' (Bhabha 1994: 121–31, this quotation, p. 131). Hence, this inversion of the colonisation process cancels any representational authority its instigator might claim. In effect, the new Acropolis Museum ends up being a representation of what modernity ought to look like, or in fact a parody of what modernity actually *is*.

Rather than mimicking outdated practices of appropriating the past, its texts and its contexts (no matter how effective in their time), I would have expected the Acropolis Museum to cast a new, knowingly mediated and defiantly un-Western or un-modern look to the Acropolis, its histories and its remains. One that would also take into account the significance of the Acropolis and its monuments as symbols of Western aesthetics as well as a reflection of the Greek nationalist dream in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (by now ably illustrated by authorities such as Yalouri 2001; Fouseki 2006; Loukaki 2008). Instead, the new museum presumes to act as an unmediated voice of the nation's Classical past, awkwardly and implausibly out of context.

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Museums of oblivion

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The relationship between antiquity, archaeology and national imagination in Greece, the sacralisation of the Classical past, and the recasting of the Western Hellenism into an indigenous Hellenism have been extensively studied in the last 15 years or so (see e.g. Hamilakis 2007, 2009). In fact, Greece has proved a rich source of insights for other cases of nation-state heritage politics. The new Acropolis Museum project was bound to be shaped by the poetics of nationhood right from the start, given that its prime referent is the most sacred object of the Hellenic national imagination, the Acropolis of Athens. This site is at the same time, however, an object of veneration within the Western imagination (you only have to look at the UNESCO logo), a pilgrimage destination for millions of global tourists, with all its revenue implications, and an endlessly reproduced and modified global icon (in both senses of the word).

There is not one but many Acropoleis, on the hill in central Athens, in museums all over the world, in literature, art and cinema, in photography, and on the internet (cf. the photo-blog, www.theotheracropolis.com). There is not one but many stories that this materiality tells, and many claims and causes that this object and icon has lent itself to, some official and top-down, several unofficial, bottom-up, clandestine and intentionally provocative and controversial. And while I concur with many of the valid and interesting points that Plantzos raises in his article, I contend that the exhibition logic of the new museum, its architectural and museographic bodily affordances, cannot be understood in isolation, cannot be critiqued and deconstructed effectively, if not linked with contemporary global museum claims to the material past, and if all the other voices, interventions and provocations, beyond the official, are not taken into account.

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The new museum, before it was even built, from the moment when it was simply a vision in Melina Mercouri's head, and later, a text for an international architectural competition, was linked to the cause for the restitution of the Parthenon marbles (cf. Lending 2009). The outcome, at least in its present configuration, is certainly a missed opportunity to evoke, through materiality, the multi-faceted biography of the Acropolis from the Neolithic to the present, including the history of the multiple contemporary claims and counterclaims over the site. It is a missed opportunity to display, for example, that evocative and wonderfully multi-temporal architectural fragment from the Classical Erechtheion with its 1805 Ottoman inscription in Arabic, a piece that speaks in different tongues, and across ethnic, religious and national boundaries, a living monument to a contemporary multi-cultural and multi-ethnic European capital such as Athens (Figure 1). At present, the few pre- and post-Classical remnants in the museum are drowned in the sea of Classical glory, and almost disappear under the weight of Western Classicist ideals. They are victims perhaps of the misguided belief on the part of the archaeologists in charge, that it is this Classical glory that should be projected as a primary national 'weapon' in the global negotiations of power ('*To do otherwise*', the director of the museum told a journalist in 2007, '*would have approached the highest level of castration*' — *Eleftherotypia*, 2 September 2007). I would further suggest, however, that what Plantzos identifies, rightly, as the lack of archaeological context in the exhibition is also to do with the sacralisation of Classical objects (relics and sacred icons do not need captions, after all), but also with the perception, prevalent in the national imagination, that antiquities (especially anthropomorphic ones), have the status, the autonomy and the agency of persons, and they can thus 'speak for themselves'; they do not need the archaeologist and the museum curator to speak for them (cf. Hamilakis 2007).

This museum will need to be understood primarily as a material intervention within the politics of vision. A direct visual link with the Parthenon and the Acropolis was the main argument for its current location, on the top of the important Classical, post-Classical and medieval material remnants that it has partly destroyed, and partly incorporated in its own design. The management of the gaze is the primary concern of its archaeological and museographic apparatus. Glass architecture enables visual contact with the monument and lets light in, but it can have another advantage: it makes the control of viewsheds from the vantage point of the museum possible, and the vistas experienced by the visitors, changeable (hence the drapes and blinds Plantzos refers to, which hide 'ugly' modern blocks, and direct the gaze towards the Acropolis). Buildings such as the Neoclassical and art nouveau structures between the museum and the Acropolis were to be demolished, because they obscured the view towards the hill, or rather they did not fit in within the new monumental landscape that the museum has produced. During the opening ceremony, the walls of the museum and of the surrounding buildings became projection screens, where an animation movie was projected (called 'Reflections') in which statues and themes from Classical vases 'came to life'. Surveillance and the tight control of the dissemination of visual signifiers are the obverse side of the spectacular politics of the museum: entry is subject to X-ray and metal-detecting monitoring technology for visitors and their possessions, and photography is prohibited inside the building. I was stopped even when I attempted to photograph the Acropolis from inside the museum. When I protested, I was told that this is because when,



Figure 1. Architectural fragment from the Erechtheion on the Athenian Acropolis with an 1805 Ottoman inscription in Arabic (photograph: Fotis Ifantidis, 2007, reproduced with permission).

in its first days of operation, photography was allowed, visitors would pose in front of the objects and turn the whole space into a ‘Hollywood set’. Aesthetics as sensory perception, says Rancière (2004), is inherently political, because it is to do with the distribution of the sensible, with what is allowed to be seen and what is not, what is deemed appropriate to

be experienced bodily and multi-sensorially, and what is not. The creation of this museum was seen by many as a national success, a matter of national pride, and at the same time, as providing a space that would allow more objects to be shown to the public, and also enjoyed in a three-dimensional, kinaesthetic manner. And yet, this whole aesthetic-cum-political project has also been challenged from its start, and continues to be so: activists would film the construction of the museum to protest against the destruction of the antiquities underneath, and upload the video on YouTube; the attempted demolition of the art nouveau buildings faced huge opposition in the courts, on the streets, as well as on the internet, and has been successfully stopped, at least at present; visitors (including myself) take their own clandestine photographs inside the museum; and artists (e.g. Eva Stefani) produce installations and video art that challenges the whole ideological basis of this project. In other words, these unofficial renderings, produce a 'dissensus', to evoke Rancière again (2004), they enable alternative sensorial experiences of the materiality of antiquity.

What perhaps the official promoters of this project have not fully appreciated yet, is how the goalposts of the global heritage political terrain have moved. Rather than arguing over ownership rights, custodianship, context, and proper exhibition conditions, or even the primacy of the Classical, some global players posit instead the desire and the ability to articulate universal narratives on people, things and history. The Acropolis Museum's tacit partner in this dialogue, the British Museum, attempts to counteract restitution claims and challenges to its authority by proclaiming itself a '*universal museum*', which can hold the whole world in '*its hands*' (MacGregor 2004). It can tell the history of the whole world with the objects that it currently houses, a history that, the museum claims, can unify and show commonalities in an increasingly fragmented world. Yet this rhetoric, which attempts to project a specific, totalising version of human history as seen from Bloomsbury, comes straight from the nineteenth-century imperial grand fairs and exhibitions; they too wanted to hold the globe in their hands; and to rule over it (cf. Abungu 2004; Curtis 2006; Sandis 2008). And while in radio programmes such as the British Museum's 'History of the World in 100 Objects' (broadcast by the BBC in 2010), the evocation and power of materiality was fully appreciated, and transmitted successfully to millions, the logic behind the whole project can thinly disguise its neo-colonial undertones, especially since the nationalist and colonialist heritage of institutions such as the British Museum are not confronted head on. It is a logic that, as some reviewers of the radio programme and of the accompanying book have noted (approvingly, it seems), attempts to '*forget colonialism*' (Beard 2010) and perform an image makeover (Holland 2010), an image without history and politics. Forgetting the multi-temporal and multi-cultural life of the Acropolis in Athens; forgetting past and present colonialism and imperialist appropriation in Bloomsbury. These are museums of forgetting, of oblivion. As in Athens, in Bloomsbury too, this top-down, official view of material history needs to be challenged.

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Soft targets and no-win dilemmas: response to Dimitris Plantzos

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Most of the opposition directed at the new Acropolis Museum (hereafter NAM), both before and since its opening in June 2009, has turned out to be politically motivated, mainly from the Left in Greece, mainly from the Right in Britain (the *Daily Telegraph* called it ‘a hideous visitor centre in modern Athens’ before it was even built [Wilson 2006]). Dimitris Plantzos comes at the museum from a different angle, but he too is determinedly on the attack. A first sign of this is his total silence about the protection and exhibition of the archaeological site underlying the museum, one of its major positive (and innovatory) features.

His opening salvo is anyway aimed not at the NAM at all but at the Acropolis itself and its long-running restoration programme. Recent progress made with this huge project (work on the Propylaea drawing to a close in 2010, the Parthenon itself kept scaffolding-free for a spell in the summer) has impressed even the British Museum, which has been hosting a presentation on it. Plantzos, concerned here as elsewhere to emphasise the scale of modern interventionism, can only say of the restored stonework that ‘a significant percentage... is newly cut’, to the point of generating ‘make-believe remains’. This is a grossly overblown claim, and he illustrates it, oddly, by showing (his fig. 2) the modern replacements for the sculptures. For the Greek authorities, these pose a classic no-win dilemma: leave the originals in place and get abused for neglect; replace them, and attract this kind of gibe.

From the architectural profession, the NAM has won a chorus of praise and, wisely, Plantzos does not engage (much) with this aspect. But his claim that the museum is ‘half-asphyxiated by its surroundings, the filthy, untidy Athenian polykatoikies’ is supported by a much-foreshortened photograph (his fig. 4) which entirely suppresses the attractive plantings of grass and olives that ring the building.

His real target, though, is a museological one: the displays inside. They are ‘context-free’, ‘unmediated’, with ‘wall texts... kept to an absolute minimum’: their claim to ‘talk directly to the viewer’ is cover for an authoritarian, monosemantic promotion exercise, a reactionary

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discourse. This is supported by ‘*bureaucratic archaeological scientism*’: when background information *is* provided, it uses stuffy technical jargon or commits a translation howler. From a sophisticated or specialist viewpoint these points may look valid enough. But Plantzos is not entitled to subsume, under his critique, the needs of the wide and heterogeneous clientèle for whom the museum’s designers knew they had to cater, and for whom ‘masterpieces’ is a word that can be used without Plantzos’ inverted commas. Some of his discourse is just as far over the heads of the general public as is any talk of the ‘*raking geison*’.

As it turns out, it is the same (world) public who, by voting with their feet, have shown that they do not feel patronised or excluded by this presentation, and have repeatedly singled out this very directness for praise. In its first year, the NAM attracted over 2 million visitors, already many more than have entered the Duveen Gallery in London in any year (though the British Museum can hide this by citing only its total annual visitor numbers). Then, to disparage the ‘*agonising efforts to establish Athens as a world-celebrated tourist destination*’ is, for any country in Greece’s present economic situation, to snipe at too soft a target.

Yannis Hamilakis’s response is also very critical of the museum, notably of its exclusive presentation of the ‘official line’, of its neglect (again) of archaeological context and of its failure to take account of the recent claims to ‘universal narratives’ on the past of certain museums elsewhere. Admittedly, there has been little attempt to match those other museum displays that show the possibility of a multivalent, multi-layered presentation, with the unofficial and provocative ‘dissensus’ also given its place. But was this really the right place for that? And would it have been compatible with providing, simultaneously, a lot more contextual information (information which is anyway in very short supply for a display centred on sculptures unearthed some 150 years ago, as both writers well know)? These critics are asking a lot. At least Hamilakis, unlike Plantzos, does mention the archaeological site underneath the museum, but only in the context of the pre-emptive protests against its ‘destruction’, and without adding that these protests proved empty of justification.

Then there is the ‘universal museum’ rhetoric, which Hamilakis rightly denounces for trying to disown colonialism, but to which he nevertheless feels the NAM should somehow have shown a more sensitive response. It is not at all clear how this could have been done; nor that the doctrine deserves sensitive acknowledgment. Its full disingenuousness was clear to see in 2002 when, in its founding document, the ‘Declaration of the importance and value of universal museums’, the statement was made to ride piggy-back on a denunciation of the trade in illicit antiquities (this over the signatures of the Metropolitan Museum, the J. Paul Getty Museum and others); and its full deviousness also made clear by the omission of the name of the drafting institution, the British Museum, from among the signatories. There have been some effective rejoinders to the doctrine, but I do not think it was fair to ask a museum display, on its own, to offer another one, on top of all the other demands made of it here.

Of course, the NAM is not, and should not be, above criticism. But with fellow-citizen critics like these, who needs hostile foreigners?

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