

The Parthenon Sculptures: Narratives of Possibility

Tom Kazas 14th December 2013

This paper is based on the talk I gave on Saturday 16th November 2013 in Sydney, for the International Colloquy, 'Parthenon: Icon of Global Citizenship'.

I am very happy to be here, and honoured to participate in the campaign for the reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures. I'd like to thank Dennis Tritaris for his work in organizing this International Colloquy, and Emanuel Comino for maintaining the charge.

I will say it often and clearly: in full and in place. The Parthenon Sculptures must be *in full*, as much as is now historically-physically possible, and *in place*, at the Acropolis Museum in Athens. A Latin expression captures this imperative, and is wonderful for its brevity and clarity: *in toto in situ*. A Greek translation speaks to the poetry of this plea: *ensomatomena ekei pou oloklironontai*.

In simple terms, I'm using 'in toto in situ' to refer to the Aesthetic Imperative.¹ This imperative is the argument that the Parthenon Sculptures must be returned to Athens, to be reunited with their severed 'counter-parts'. For only in this state can we gain a fuller understanding of the aesthetic qualities these sculptures embody. These qualities are not only those of visual form, but those of narrative itself; the work of literature that the frieze of the Pan-Athenaic procession is, and the drama that the Metopes and Pediments express, especially in their physical relationship to the dimensional qualities of the Parthenon. The Aesthetic Imperative states that the original intention of the sculptors, as far as possible, must be respected. For in this way we respect ourselves.

However, we should be in no doubt that as a campaign for reunification, we are at a standstill. We languish in a kind of post-Mercouri hypnosis. For even though all arguments for retention have been refuted, what is painfully clear is that our desired outcome still eludes us. Clearly much more is needed in the campaign to reunify the Parthenon Sculptures.

However, I would also make the point that the British institutions, that is, the British Government and the British Museum, are themselves stuck. They are a victim of their own history, ambitions, legal system and the contingency of events. We should not accept the divisions that these British institutions have cleverly created in a 1963 parliamentary Act, that keeps the Parthenon Sculptures in a convenient legal circularity, where each institution points to the other as being the ultimate arbiter in the contested question of possession. Former British politician, Andrew Dismore has aptly described this legal operation as "pass the parcel."² So rather than the British Museum being the only responsible party, it is more appropriate to refer to the responsible parties as the 'British institutions', not only to identify this alliance, but to contrast it with the British People. The British government are of course complicit in this refusalism. They not only purchased the Parthenon Sculptures from Thomas Bruce after stating they were 'fairly

and properly acquired(!), fit for purchase for 35,000 pounds',³ but created a legal structure to obfuscate responsibility for their retention.

This complicity, however, does not exclude the argument that the British institutions are themselves stranded. Might all this come down to how they can save face upon the return of the Parthenon Sculptures to Athens? If so, then this is an area where we must concentrate our energies. However, as seen in a recent public debate in London,⁴ the opinion of the British *people* would seem to increasingly favour the reunion of the Parthenon Sculptures in Athens. I believe the British institutions want to find a way out but they cannot, because their contemporary urges remain eclipsed by the long shadow of their imperial history. Part of our task is to find a way to help the British liberate themselves, to emancipate them from their own condition of aesthetic, legal and indeed moral imprisonment.

Our campaign must therefore be framed as a project of emancipation; it precisely becomes an operation of politics. We should not be proud of the boast that our campaign is 'a-political', that somehow it is only a cultural property issue, or a justice issue, or even an aesthetic issue. No, for to do so misses the point. The point is that we must confront the source of our grievances. We should redefine this task precisely as one of politics; of confronting illegitimate authority. One could say that until we understand this as a political problem, the reunification will elude us.

It is in this way that I read the plea by Emanuel Comino that "there are no more excuses."⁵ Indeed there are not. We must be brave enough to accept this political dimension: how each party has contributed to the problem, and how we can break out of the loop in which we are caught. So how do we interrupt this procedure, how do we create an emancipatory crack?

What I want to do in this talk is to investigate one very powerful way of breaking out. This is embodied in the title of my paper: 'Parthenon Sculptures: Narratives of Possibility'. 'Narrative' is many things, and I don't want to get caught up in the different meanings of this word. What I want to do here is restrict its meaning to: the stories we tell about the Parthenon Sculptures. I will show that we have a tremendous power at our disposal, and this is the power of narrative.

One Word: Sculptures

How often are we struck by the power of one word, either by the way it restricts and evades, or by the way it expands and liberates. But usually, before we can notice this power, the word has moved on and been replaced by another, and then another, until the possibilities of that word have vanished. I say we must halt and focus on one such word, and that word is 'Sculptures'. It is impossible to deny the power of language in shaping reality - words shape our thoughts, thoughts shape our actions, and actions shape our reality. So if we want to create the reality of the Parthenon Sculptures returned to Athens, then our task is obvious, we must choose our words carefully. I am constantly struck by the indecision and fractured nature of how these Pheidias works are referred to. It appears that many people cannot decide whether they are 'marbles' or 'sculptures'. These words are not synonymous, and to fall into the trap that they are,

reveals either a lack of precision, an urge for cheap jokes, or an acceptance of a dangerous ideology. This blurring and uncertainty then becomes planted into the reader. It's like we are hedging our bets; 'marbles' as some simple matter of fact term, or 'sculptures' when wanting to emphasize their aesthetic values. It is precisely this lexical interchangeability, this inability to accurately define these Pheidian works that weakens the position of the reunification campaign. These two words have completely different sets of conceptual contents, and by conflating the two, we do the campaign harm. But, this of course plays right into the hands of the British institutional propagandists.

Just two weeks ago in the Sydney Morning Herald, the title of an article sympathetic to the return of the sculptures, (referring to the UNESCO change in policy), had the title: "Rule changes could end Britain's game of playing with marbles."⁶ At a recent meeting in Melbourne, attended by supporters of reunification, I heard a similar joke about "losing our marbles". I claim that such expressions do harm to our campaign because they trivialize and distract from the crucial issues. I say that the reunification campaign is at fault for not insisting on the exclusive definition of the Pheidian works as 'sculptures'. We are at fault for leaving it to others to mark the territory; by falling into the trap that 'marbles' and 'sculptures' are synonymous, and therefore interchangeable. The campaign must claim this definitional space and focus attention on what these objects are - they are sculptures. So it is in this way that the Comino statement of 'enough is enough' is a political plea, a plea to action that must begin with one word. It will be this word, whose use will take permanent root and allow us, or better still the sculptures themselves, to tell their story.

My central point is this, that if we want the return to Athens of the Parthenon Sculptures currently held in London, then we must insist on the exclusive use of the obviously correct term: *'Parthenon Sculptures'*. We must replace the word 'marbles' with 'sculptures' in our discourse: in our conversations, in our writings, in the text-space of social media, in our committee names – in our thinking. We should refer to these items as 'sculptures' since that is what they are.

Sculptures not Marbles

I have yet to find a definition that refutes the claim that the Pheidian works are, first and foremost, sculptures. All references confirm that a sculpture is a piece of art made by shaping processes.⁷ Even at this most basic level, and one that I think is explicitly understood, the Pheidian works are absolutely sculptures. Do we really need to challenge this? I think not. However, my point is much less about an insistence on absolute definition, and much more about what the word 'sculpture' brings with it, and what can be left behind with the word 'marbles'. Language is more about politics than aesthetics, and as such, the change I suggest becomes a pivotal operation.

By replacing just one word - 'marbles' with 'sculptures' - a whole domain of education and activism opens up for the reunification campaign. Firstly, this change allows us to restart the discourse. It allows us to initiate conversation on the nature of sculpture, and its centrality to the Greek Project. In simple terms, we have something important to re-define and to re-broadcast; we take up an offensive. A change of any key word in any discourse would have a similar effect, yet, it is precisely this effect we seek; a way to

break out of the predicament in which we are caught. This insistence on 'sculptures' affords us an opportunity to re-engage with supporters, and perhaps more importantly, those who are indifferent to the campaign. We would have new issues to explain, such as, why this word was changed, why we think it is better, and what the problem was with the old word. This shift allows us to invigorate public attention by raising the status of these Pheidian works to that of their obvious existence as sculptures.

Secondly, this change allows us to reaffirm the Aesthetic Imperative, which I claim is the main argument for reunification. Again, this is the imperative that the Parthenon Sculptures must be *in full* and *in place*: in toto in situ. *In full* means repatriating the Parthenon Sculptures from London back to Athens so they can become, once again, an aesthetic whole. The contemporary reality of *in place* means in the Acropolis Museum - with its dimensional reconstruction of the Parthenon, its direct visual dialogue with the Acropolis hill and the Parthenon itself, bathed in Athenian light that vivifies the Pentellic marble, in context with the physicality of Athens, and wider still, Greece. By making this change from 'marbles' to 'sculptures' clear and obvious, we begin an incision into the standstill of the reunification campaign.

Thirdly, this change also allows us to subvert the ideology of retention. It allows us to disrupt the narratives invented by the British Museum that are inextricably bound up in the word 'marbles'. Not only would we invest the campaign with a positive message, with a reality-check, but we would identify the colonial ideology of appropriation, and begin to remove the conceptual obstacles inherent in the term 'marbles'.

So why must 'marbles' be abandoned? Firstly, it shares a long association with the term 'Elgin', and for this reason alone it should be abandoned. Most of us have dropped this term, but it still influences wider thinking and mainstream journalism.⁸ This 'ownership by association' with 'Elgin' must be broken. The media in general still like to refer to the Parthenon Sculptures as the 'so-called Elgin Marbles', because we have not effectively challenged this usage. The word 'Elgin' gives an advantage to the British institutions because it adds unnecessary scandal and complexity that delays the rightful reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures. This becomes clear with the contention surrounding the supposed 'firman', which is in reality only a 'letter' by a subordinate, translated and purposefully misconstrued to achieve a permission to plunder. There is no contention here, but only an art that remains fractured and separated. So while we are distracted by such a scandal, the British Museum quietly continues its possession. 'Elgin' is a misleading term because it allows the sculptures to exist in separation by virtue of the privilege afforded to a British lord. The elite position of Thomas Bruce supposedly adds authority to the claim of possession. One can see the ideological operation here. I believe that by abandoning the term 'marbles' we can start to sever the link between 'Elgin' and the British possession it entails.

Secondly, the term 'marbles' reduces the Parthenon Sculptures to 'property'. It is a reduction that signals their status as 'only' marbles, namely, that they are a loose collection of *individual* pieces, and as such can happily continue in their current disjunction. 'Marbles' allows the sculptures to be more easily possessed as fragmented pieces of property by hiding their original embodiment in the *whole* of the Parthenon. Furthermore, it strives to absolve the crimes of theft and vandalism; these acts become

less severe because they are 'only' marbles. The term 'marbles' helps to disguise the real nature of these works as sculptures, that are arguably the epitome of their art form. In doing so it demeans them and supports the ideology of retention.

Thirdly, they are not unmediated geological objects. They are not random pieces of irregular shaped rock, nor are they 'found objects' in any sense. One must not confuse the material these works are made from with the objects they become after human transformation. It is embarrassing to state that they are a product of the 'plastic arts'. They are not the little glass balls that children play with, nor are they the slabs that are often used as kitchen bench-tops. If we want to avoid such trivializations and obfuscations then we must abandon 'marbles' in favour of 'sculptures'.

One of the problems this shift poses is the question: what happens to the names of a number of campaigning committees that use 'marbles' in their titles? The Australian and British committees use 'marbles', yet the American committee uses 'sculptures'.⁹ Why is there a difference? What does this disparity tell the world? In the Twitter handles of many, including the Australian committee, the term is again used, as with @MarblesUnite. I claim that if we want to take a leap further down the path of reunification, then this naming problem has to be addressed. You might see how opportunities like this rarely present themselves, especially in a case that is 200 years old. So I make a plea to the committees to embrace this opportunity and replace the word marbles with sculptures.

The combined acts resulting from the exclusive use of 'sculptures' would create a new solidarity in our cause, which in itself is a desirable outcome, and play no small part in the equations of education and activism. It signals a new motivation and allows us to make the point even sharper and stronger. So I say this is not a trivial operation, and this change becomes an important precursor to action. When 'Parthenon' and 'Sculptures' are joined we have the full and proper nomination. We have the full narrative in front of us - where they belong and why they are important - in toto in situ. This is the real power of narrative, to let the sculptures tell their own story.

Parthenon as Singularity: Local not Global

More speculatively, I would like us to consider how the argument of 'global citizenship', as stated in the title of this conference, *Parthenon: Icon of Global Citizenship*, has problematic implications. For example, if one is a citizen of the globe, doesn't this negate the need for a singular residence? Doesn't this undermine the claim for the importance of the singular site of the Acropolis? If we as supporters of reunification answer 'yes' to these questions, it would appear that we unwittingly undermine our cause. Accompanying ideas of 'universal heritage' and 'global culture' are not only ill-defined and contentious, but converge dangerously close to, if not become the same as, the arguments the British Museum use to justify their retention. The British Museum emphatically advocates for the 'universal museum', that is supposed to be an institution 'of the world for the world', that can somehow "transcend political boundaries."¹⁰ These curatorial narratives are a construction of a point of view that supports the claims and spoils of empire. The proximity between the notions of 'global citizen' and 'universal institution' emerge as problematic because they conflate two quite separate things.

Namely, that there exists a specific physical location whose aesthetics has been vandalized and whose integrity we are trying to restore, with, the idea that in defining a 'world culture' we must allow the fragmentation of artworks because it somehow tells a more 'important' global story. Is this latter account anything other than a 'curation myth' that supports retention by framing the possession of the Parthenon Sculptures in a British colonial story? It seems important to clarify that these types of stories are only ever inventions, contingent and never free from bias. If we are to neutralize these operations we might focus on the problem from the other end.

Could we speculate that the cultural products of Ancient Athens belong to a 'local' culture, as opposed to a 'global' culture? Can we say that this culture was in fact a 'singularity'? Is the Parthenon itself a singularity? A 'singularity' speaks of a specific location in space and time. It speaks of meaning as being embodied in that location in space and time, created by the unity and continuity of these sculptures being 'in full and in place'. This conception does not deny the impact of Classical Athens on World Civilization. It does not seek to revoke the near-global ubiquity of its cultural products or the necessary reinterpretation of this culture by subsequent societies. What the *local* argument does say is that the situation in Athens precedes all later retro-active interpretations and selective cultural appropriations. In this way, the claim for reunification is *precisely* the claim that the local context is paramount, and not its obverse, that of a diffuse global condition. The conception of 'local singularity' is more akin to the somewhat forgotten phrase of 'think globally, act locally'. It is from this local context that the proliferation of meaning follows, and from this singularity that cultural iterations begin. The Parthenon Sculptures do not, at all, have the same meaning outside their reunified embodiment.

The British institutional narrative attempts to subvert the idea of 'local' phenomena. They would have it that the Parthenon Sculptures in Athens are only part of a smaller 'local history' that should be subsumed to the importance of a larger 'global history', and that this is only possible by their retention in London. This is the rendering of a binary opposition that privileges 'global' over 'local' to justify retention. We are left with the patently absurd proposition that to understand Classical Athens we must fetishize it from afar; that by being fractured, the Parthenon Sculptures can tell a superior story, and that only in an 'encyclopedic-universal-museum-story' can their global significance be understood.

I want to draw attention to the work of art historian, Tom Flynn, who critiques the concept of the Universal 'encyclopedic' Museum.¹¹ He examines the history of this institution from its origins in the 16th century 'cabinets of curiosity', to its Enlightenment compulsion for taxonomy, and through to the imperial ideologies of acquisition and possession that support the mythologies of empire. My speculations on 'location' and 'singularity' are partly inspired by this work.

I think what we need to be saying, in the campaign to reunify the Parthenon Sculptures, is that the Parthenon has a 'citizenship of place', as opposed to it being a 'global citizen'. This 'citizenship' and this 'place' reassert the idea of the Aesthetic Imperative, that the Parthenon is an unparalleled edifice whose singularity must be respected, and although it exists in this particular place, it becomes a citizen of the world by subsequent and

successive choices, by it being invited in to the collective psyche of civilization. Citizenship of place does not become an end point, but a beginning.

The Day They Came Home

I'd like to conclude with a far simpler idea, and one that I believe could have a huge impact on the reunification campaign. If we continue with the importance of the *power of narrative*, we can trace a movement from the potential in 'one word' to the vitality in 'one story'. This is the story of 'The Day They Came Home'. This is a story that will speak of the return of the Parthenon Sculptures to Athens. This story, in fact the many stories, will be the beautifully written, imaginative accounts that will describe the events of this day. It is essential to create these 'future narratives' because to imagine this day is to bring it closer to reality. This imagining will provide the maps required to navigate the Parthenon Sculptures back to their home.

Let's stop and imagine that day...

Will it be a Saturday?

What type of ceremony will there be: simple and solemn, a cultural spectacle, a jubilant party?

Will it become a public holiday for Greece?

Which composer shall we engage for the music?

Who might we ask to write a poem for that day?

How many poems will be written?

What route will the delivery take?

Shall we choreograph a new Pan-Athenaic procession?

How will we, necessarily, acknowledge the British?

This last question is crucial. What stories will we now start to tell of the British? How will we affirm the integral role the British have played in the story of the Parthenon Sculptures? How will they be celebrated for their gesture of return?

One begins to get lost in the possibilities of 'The Day They Came Home', but this is precisely its power. It will be in these stories that we will explore the actualities of return - the ideas and practicalities of reunifying the Parthenon Sculptures in Athens. Storytelling becomes a glimpse of the future.

The campaign for the reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures requires an agitation that must wield many powers. But we must also harness the power of narrative - the politics of sculpture, the function of a singularity, and the poetry of return. It is these powers that will change thinking, and this in turn will change reality, making me believe that the reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures is much closer than we think.

Thank you

Notes

¹ See Christopher Hitchens 2008, *The Parthenon Marbles: the Case for Reunification*, Verso, London.

² From the video of a talk given by Andrew Dismore 2012, *Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles. A Legal Perspective*.
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wwlWg3kHU8>>

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Such as the Intelligence Squared Debate in London on 11/6/12, with the motion '*The Parthenon Marbles Should be Returned to Athens*'
<<http://www.intelligencesquared.com/events/parthenon-marbles/>> What is interesting is the swing in audience voting. Prior to the debate the audience voted thus; for the motion 196, against 202, undecided 158. After the debate the audience again voted; for the motion 385, against 125, undecided 24. A rather striking message.

⁵ This plea by Emanuel Comino, chairman of the IOC-A-RPM, was an introduction to the 2013 International Colloquy, Sydney 15/11/13, '*Parthenon: Icon of Global Citizenship*'.
<<http://www.parthenonmarblesaustralia.org.au/colloquy2013/index.php/emanuel-j-comino-am>>

⁶ From an article by David Hill in the Sydney Morning Herald, 8/11/13
<<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/rule-changes-could-end-britains-game-of-playing-with-marbles-20131107-2x49r.html>>

⁷ The Parthenon Sculptures are additionally many things, including architectural elements, but this additional context does not negate their status as 'sculptures'. Perhaps 'sculpture' as defined by '*The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, On Historical Principles*, 6th Ed., Vol.2, N-Z, 2007, p.2718, cuts to the essence, "The art or process of creating (now usu. large) representational or abstract forms in the round, in relief, or (formerly) in intaglio, by chiseling stone, casting metal, modeling clay or some other plastic substance, carving wood, etc., or, now also, by assembling parts, the practice of this art."

⁸ Such an example is the article '*Top Ten Plundered Artifacts*' in Time magazine (online version, undated)
<http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1883142_1883129_1883001,00.html> What is interesting in this article is that, apart from the erroneous term 'Elgin Marbles', the Parthenon Sculptures are the only 'plundered artifacts' that are not referred to by an original cultural name. Instead, they are referred to by the name of the plunderer.

⁹ The following three committees collaborate in the campaign for reunification of the sculptures, whose names are as follows: *'The International Organizing Committee – Australia – for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles'* (IOC-A-RPM) <<http://www.parthenonmarblesaustralia.org.au/>>, *'The British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles'* (BCRPM) <<http://www.parthenonuk.com>>, *The American Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures'* (ACRPS), <<http://www.parthenonmarblesusa.org/>>

¹⁰ The British Museum webpage on the Parthenon Sculptures, that introduces the self-appointed concept of itself as a “resource of the world.” <http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/statements/parthenon_sculptures.aspx> Both Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, and James Cuno, President of the Getty Trust advocate for the Universal Museum in their many books and talks. For a critique of the language and ideology of retention at the British Museum webpage on the Parthenon Sculptures see Tom Kazas 2012, *'Part 3, Parthenon Marble Cake: Having and Eating it Too'*. <http://www.tomkazas.net/tom_kazas/Pentellics__The_Parthenon_Sculptures.html>

¹¹ See Tom Flynn 2004, *'The Universal Museum: a valid model for the 21st century?'* <<http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/tomflynn>>. See also <<http://tom-flynn.blogspot.co.uk/p/the-universal-museum-valid-model-for.html>> for a video of his talk on this subject at the Parthenon Marbles colloquy 2012. For a transcript of that talk see <<http://www.elginism.com/similar-cases/the-structural-and-philosophical-problems-confronting-the-universal-museum-concept/20120717/4845/>>
