

The contact of an absence.

The collision of a *here* and a *not-here*, of a *contact* and an *absence*. That the imprint is, in this sense, the contact of an absence would explain the power of its relationship to time, which is the ghostly power of 'returns', of survivals: things that have gone far away but remain, before us, close to us, signalling their absence to us¹.

Two Rooms, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland: *Archive of Dust, Room 18*. The exhibition represents a convergence of absences and presences, as it establishes a mnemonic imprint of a referential origin, its counter-form and in/visible hollow. This referential origin is Room 18 at the British Museum, home to fragments of the Parthenon – metopes, friezes, and large sculptures from the pediments, brought to the UK in the nineteenth century by Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin. Dane Mitchell's installation establishes an active dialogue between Room 18 and Two Rooms, prompting reflections on concepts of gaps, adhesions, traces, proxies, and displacements.

Displayed at eye level, the British Museum's Parthenon marbles evoke an immediate connection to the past, allowing viewers to engage closely with their materiality, aesthetic qualities, and graphic narratives. However, this impression is increasingly obfuscated by a growing awareness of absence. The lack of architectural cohesion becomes apparent – the marbles, presented as isolated fragments, emphasise their dislocation from their original context. This sense of fragmentation is further amplified by the presence of videos showing digital reconstructions of the original Parthenon. Within the museum, the ruin transforms into a ghostly presence of an absence. Powerful in its mutilation, it resonates with a voice that mourns something that no longer exists. We become acutely aware of the gaps in material culture, struck by the altered aura of the Parthenon, as individual pieces are reordered and recontextualised along the museum walls.

The growing demands for repatriation by countries affected by cultural expropriation have led to experimental creation of high-quality facsimiles using advanced photogrammetry and scanning techniques. Considering the repatriation of the Parthenon marbles and their potential replacement with replicas in the British Museum opens the door to a radical reimagining of museums and the artefacts they might house in the future. Tony Bennett's concept of the 'exhibitionary complex' highlights the 'specific politics of truth that shaped the nineteenth-century development of the public museum²'. The use of 3D reproductions could expose the arbitrary and often violent

¹ Didi-Huberman, G. (2008) *La ressemblance par contact: archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit (Paradoxe), p. 47. Translated by the author.

² Bennett, T. (2018) *Museums, power, knowledge: selected essays*. London ; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group., p. 5.

foundations of that truth. These reproductions would function as multidimensional objects. They would refer back to the original while incorporating an expanded educational dimension to uncover, and critically reflect upon, the artefact's colonial-museological history.

However, as we are increasingly used to engage with an original through its simulacra – photographs or renderings circulating across media – it raises the question of whether presenting facsimiles at the British Museum holds meaning when the originals could be viewed in Athens. Afterall, visitors to the museum are more global than ever, and numerous accurate plaster copies exist within the UK (and possibly already in the museum) to compensate for the absence of the original. If only dust and air were to remain after the removal of the Parthenon marbles, then perhaps dust and air deserve deeper scrutiny as potential proxies for the artefacts.

The dust settling on the Parthenon marbles may itself be a *form through contact*, a kind of in/tangible mould – a presence simultaneously tied to and autonomous from the original object. Dust could be considered the first copy, the very initial imprint of the artwork. Dust is both gap and touching surface, hollow of both air and object. Dust is anachronistic – it embodies the pastness of the artworks and the presentness of their surrounding environment.

In the series *Archive of Dust, Room 18* (2001-ongoing), magnified images of dust reveal its bacterial components. Inkjet prints reproduce a cultivated landscape of dust that carries within itself the imprint of both the artwork and its environment. While evoking Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray's *Élevage de poussière* (*Dust Breeding*, 1920), dust in this context becomes the *essence of contact* – its infinitesimal particles encapsulating their referential origin. The magnifying tool, the flatbed scanner, serves as the operative field through which this essence is revealed. Through it, we discover individual forms of life, where culture and nature spontaneously and colourfully mesh.

The dust, trapped on glass plates, parallels the way the British Museum confines the Parthenon marbles – through an archival gesture. Ariella Azoulay³ refers to this act as the *imperial shutter*, the violent operation by which looted objects are transformed into works of art. Dane Mitchell's *Archive of Dust*, thus, becomes a critical space to reflect on the nature of the museum, questioning its practices of containment, representation, and appropriation.

The air in Room 18 is saturated with the smell and particles of bodies, bacteria, and objects. It is a contact signifying the presences and absences confined in the space at a certain moment in time. Encapsulating the air in a hermetic void, Dane Mitchell's *British Museum Room 18 Air Sample* (2025) creates a momentarily hollow space that suspends and captures a present. This present contains the mnemonic imprint of bodies, bacteria, and objects, now transported to another space and time, dialoguing with us through the hermetic canister's glossy surface. Mitchell's work

³ Azoulay, A. (2019) *Potential history: unlearning imperialism*. London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso.

amplifies questions of displacement, here exploring the most radical form of expropriation or appropriation: the capture of air. Yet air regenerates, and its presence in Tāmaki Makaurau does not result in a gap in London.

The exhibition at Hayden's may have functioned as an experiment in futuring the museum emptied of its objects⁴. That void becomes a space for radical reimagination, a *Museum of Without*⁵ which, according to the artist, would be 'one without objects, artifacts, and artworks; a museum of proxies and gaps – an unhinged museum that presents itself to us in a full state of absent-hood, held together by its hermeneutical framing practices alone, displaying its techniques of enclosure⁶'.

In the *Museum of Without* what might survive are the support structures once used to hang or display objects. These mounts would stand as a *collection of losses*⁷ – contact of absences simultaneously referring to the missing object and its histories of hollowness and imprisonment. Over time, perhaps future generations would forget what the imperial museum looked like. This emptied museum would become a site of speculative memory. *There was adhesion*, they would wonder, *but adhesion to what, at what moment, to which original body?*⁸.

Though dust, air, and mounts would remain as the legitimate bearers of contact, their previous referents might dissolve into obscurity. Without the ability to identify their origins, we would begin to appreciate these remains for their own qualities, sensing that beyond their im/materiality, there once was presence. The *Museum of Without* of the future would manifest as a same, emptied, space iterated across museums worldwide. In these spaces, through their proxies and gaps, we would finally confront the creative potential of the contact of an absence itself.

Francesca Zappia, 2025

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⁴ The idea of reimaging the empty museum strongly resonates with Françoise Vergès's decolonised museum. See Vergès, F. (2024) *A programme of absolute disorder: decolonizing the museum*. English language edition. Translated by M. Thackway. London ; Las Vegas: Pluto Press.

⁵ A term used by the artist to entrap multiple artworks.

⁶ Mitchell, D. (2022) *The Museum of Without*, *ArtAsiaPacific*. Available at: <https://artasiapacific.com/ideas/the-museum-of-without> (Accessed: 26 January 2025).

⁷ See Dane Mitchell's exhibition *Unknown Affinities* presented at Two Rooms, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand in 2022.

⁸ Citation is from Didi-Huberman. *Ibid.*, p. 309.