

In Absentia

The columns of the Athenian Acropolis hold such symbolic weight. Thought to epitomise classical civilisation, Europeans scrambled to rebuild their cities in Pantheon-likeness, wanting to capture the essence of democracy. The obsessive replication of this form – coveted and stolen for museums – would ironically become synonymous with colonial power and global imbalance. In this context, the empty base of one of these columns could simultaneously conjure the sense of a democratic ideal or evoke problematic histories, whilst also suggesting the imaginative possibilities of what might come to stand in its place.

As the effective founding stone for Gill Gattfield's extended reality sculpture *In Absentia*, this base has been rendered smooth on top, so that it feels distinct from the order of ruins. Digitally carved in the same white Pentelic marble used to construct the Acropolis, with meticulous attention to detail, *In Absentia*'s base revives the relic as a new, active founding stone. It invites a fresh response to the idea of democracy, a response carefully shepherded by the sculptural dialogue set up between the base and two vertical, crystal glass forms that rise from it. Harmonious with the sense of classical order, they are also columns of a new order, materially of another time and place. Their spectral presence a paradox that signals that *the space they occupy is free*; held open for something, some other possibility.

In an age where capitalism floods everything with information, this *holding open* is quite a feat. A delicate operation to protect the artwork from the coercive power of proscribed meaning. It is not that *In Absentia* does not have meaning; it is that it does not have a single meaning. Here, transparency is upheld as a virtue, both to resist an imposition of reductive readings, but also to accentuate the notions of visibility and invisibility, the tools and products of power. These ideas arise in the artwork's method of making, from nothing to presence, and in its materiality. Where the stone column base is resolutely present and grounded, the glass shapes are barely discernible from certain angles, and disappear into the air in the bright light of day.

When viewed from two "front-on" angles, the two slender glass forms approach but never quite complete a round archway. From these perspectives, *In Absentia* appears as a portal to another space, or a piece of the air cleaved out for self-reflection. It makes it easy to imagine a human form standing on the pedestal, inside the chamber.

In the spirit of revising democracy, transparency works against the concealment and drama of the familiar columns, and the opacity of contemporary governmental structures. In this vexed territory, Gattfield has created a space that is more like a looking glass. Rather than human possibility determined by (often-patriarchal) groups elsewhere – *In Absentia* offers a direct one-to-one communion with other people in a place.

It is significant that being an augmented reality sculpture this experience is rendered on a mobile phone or tablet, devices that often promote isolated experiences – an atomisation of the *body politic* (the people of a state, organised as citizens). As interactive sculpture, it also means that – should you choose – you could walk through the space occupied by *In Absentia*. It is distinct from an imposing physical monument that architecturally controls the use of a place. It remains spatially fluid at the same time as it exists and is experienced in a place in real time and three-dimensions. People walk around the sculpture, reach to stroke the glass and touch the pedestal, and start to trust it is there. Unlike monuments of old, *In Absentia* is "of the people", being intrinsically tied

to those who create it in their own alternative reality. Simultaneously in physical and digital worlds, the monument persists as dreamlike visions and in people's memories.

The artist is someone who knows the qualities of marble or wood, and who has experimented with impossible shapes in hardened glass; who knows how reflections, transparency and shadows, patinas, refractions and planes – can produce remarkable, almost transcendent encounters in space. In this sense, the subtle propositions of *In Absentia* derive from a sensibility honed through physical sculptures, many in Gatfield's oeuvre crossing the divide into the ephemeral. The artist digitally crafts with an obsessive truth to materials that is almost intensified by the codified, virtual form.

Effortlessly crossing from the physical to the digital, Gatfield is also able to explore the strength particular materials bring to the story of an artwork. Being able to craft from the heartwood of a giant primordial tree, preserved in a swamp for over 45,000 years, for example, as she did with *Native Tongue XR*, opens up new means for sculpture. In the case of *In Absentia* it starts with Acropolis marble, that loaded, classical material that makes it clear that Gatfield does not want to pretend that we can simply start afresh. We must start with that fraught, coercive history of democracy and find new ways to repurpose it. This is about allowing audiences to reimagine the role of sacred or profound materials, and to find an unexpected energy or joy in subjects too often squashed by power.

Direct dialogues with democracy are activated by the artist's columnar "I" form. The "I" forms that appear (and disappear) in the crystal glass derive from Gatfield's concern to impart agency and promote encounters in the present tense. These encounters are significant, but do not delimit meaning. There is a useful term in linguistics that describes this well, the *phatic function*. It is the name of a phrase that does not convey information as such, but serves to announce that channels of communication are open (as in the phrase, "hello"). Gatfield's work signals sentient connection without revealing what is being said, and like the use of materials she has honed the use of these figures.

These "I" forms have appeared before as physical sculptures with equally ephemeral effects. In *Ally Sloper* (2013-2022) they were realised in tempered polished glass, a single curved "I" suggesting both a shelter and a kind of loafing character. In *The Muses* (2022), where three I-figures stood together against a dark wall like enigmatic materialisations, they suggested a divine impetus from another world.

With *In Absentia* (as in other works), the "I" forms can be read as the letter "I", and so could stand for the ego, the self. But equally, given a practice based in Aotearoa New Zealand, they could be the Māori "i" which pertains to a different conception of time (*i mua* means "before" in the sense of time passed and what lay before; *i muri* means after and behind us¹). Or they could be columns, architectural references resonating with the Greek context for the first showing of the work. The title, *In Absentia*, then an allusion to the gaps in the façade of the Acropolis, sustaining thoughts of how they signal the colonial theft of treasures by British forces. Then again, because they are glass, you can move around and read one "I" through the other, an "I" in an "I". Or, from the side, "II", the Roman numeral for two, that which is divisible and therefore distinct from the unity of the one.

All of these readings have different connections to democracy, but the idea of numbers can clarify the critical role that openness has here. *In Absentia* is both one and two, and in its making by the hand of multiple people in unlimited places, it is Infinite too. Plato

¹ Stuart, Georgina Tuari (2021) *Māori Philosophy*, Bloomsbury, London, p.66.

saw numbers as the epitome of ideal forms, superior versions of the world that exist in a pure, higher dimension. This position however, effectively assumes that (higher) power exists elsewhere, out of the reach and hands of people in the material world. It is the founding stone of world religions centred around the idea of a higher realm, to which life is merely a pale prelude. It is disempowering of the present, earthly realm.

Alain Badiou's study, *Number and Numbers*, begins by enumerating the many ways numbers govern modern life. Numbers rule politics where votes and opinions are counted; they underpin science, statistics and data; they constitute the economy; they even – Badiou says – inform our souls and how we *account* for ourselves. At the end of the analysis of mathematical theories, his conclusion is:

“It is ... possible to maintain that the contemporary ‘banalisation’ of number is outside all thought. The reign of number, ... is intransitive [...lacking an object...]. Number, which is an instance of being as such, can support no value, and has no truth other than that which is given to it in mathematical thought...”

“In our situation, that of Capital, the reign of number is thus the reign of the unthought slavery of numericality itself. Number, which, so it is claimed, underlies everything of value, is in fact a proscription against any thinking of number itself.”²

Badiou takes the position that things in the world (in being) always have multiple meanings (that expand as much as we invest in thinking about them), and therefore, can never be reduced to a single truth. So, what he is saying here about numbers is that capitalism is so coercive that it forces them to take on this strange “unthought” role. Capitalism makes us treat numbers as a kind of machine that we never question, just blindly obey. Perhaps, we might characterise the worst versions of “democracy” in the same way – reduced to something that is just about control, hierarchy and power, rather than the potential of being. *In Absentia* resists this singular numerical hierarchy too. The work validates the individual (the “one”) as a vessel for the infinite. Rather than a person reduced to the “unthought slavery” of being numerically counted (a vote, a taxpayer, a demographic) they are positioned in experience as co-creators of the work and its collective envisioning of a future democracy.

When Gatfield talks about exploring an “abstract language of humanist-geometric forms” it seems to be about finding a way to restore being. In the case of *In Absentia* this becomes a political project staged against the symbolic foundations of democracy. It is an invitation to return to presence, to remove that foreclosure and prejudgement that capitalism dictates, and rethink participation. Being with *In Absentia* stimulates the need to be present in public space. Indeed those who have experienced *In Absentia* in Greece declared publicly they will always ensure they vote and that they have seen through this portal and reconnected to something vital.

Being digital, the artwork can continue to shape shift and appear, fixed yet transient, in different locations. So far, re-sited beside the Athenian Acropolis, inside the Acropolis Museum, near Mount Aenos, on the beach, in underground caves, centre-stage in a theatre, and in the room with the Acropolis monuments at the British Museum, the virtual sculpture activates in each space. *In Absentia*'s call to validating the multiplicity of ‘One’ can relocate to other profound archaeological, social and geological sites. Wherever it travels, it will harness the latent energy of a place and become a forum for an open politics. The phatic function of *In Absentia* – engaging viewers as people,

² Badiou, Alain (2008 [1990]) *Number and Numbers*, Polity Press, Cambridge, p.213.

opening a channel – leaves it to them to determine how the ground beneath their feet or sky above their heads will speak about their role in the future of democracy.

James Clegg, 2023