

Matters Material: On the Meanings of Houses and the Things Inside Them

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And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*.

Victor Shklovsky¹

I. The Familiar:

What is the relationship of a thing to an idea, a house to a home? Rachel Whiteread makes things matter. She takes objects we think we know - a bed, a bath - and makes them into something material that we no longer recognize. Not only is she after defamiliarizing the familiar, she heightens the materiality of the thing, making it seem to be more than what it is in its physical form. In what way do Whiteread's *House* and some of her domestic 'furniture' pieces reclaim place as something more than the just the object *in situ*? This reclamation is a testament to weightiness and place: by doubling the original she guarantees, through her trademark casting techniques, that these objects demand attention. Why do we suddenly take notice care about the materiality and mundaneness of these otherwise everyday objects and the places they occupy?

House (1993-4), by British artist, Rachel Whiteread, explored an interior space in an exterior environment. She moulded the inside of a Victorian row-house slated for demolition. Once the house was stripped away, the concrete she poured into it remained.

The imprint of the former house was now on the outside, or, the house was inside out

¹¹ Shklovsky, Victor, "Art as Technique" *Russian Formalist Criticism; Four Essays*. Translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12

http://www.artangel.org.uk/pages/past/93/93_whiteread.htm#anchorpast.

Through the reconsideration of materiality, Whiteread's project presents a profound contemplation on the space of memory that is home; by locking out the inside with a brutal, raw material, she seals any possibility of penetrating into the past. Whiteread forces the inside out as a space where the abject of domestic, interior, private space might begin to be disclosed. I propose to describe the details of the project to observe how we lose visual sight and physical site as place through two acts of destruction. Through loss and consumption, *House* by Whiteread, created a memorial space on site and out-of-site.

With her domestic furniture pieces (tables, chairs, bookshelves, armoires, beds, sinks) -- not exhibited with *House* but still part of her larger body of work -- Whiteread renders ambivalent any sentiment of possession we might otherwise hold for such objects. These objects are artifacts meaningful to the quotidian, and yet are often rarely acknowledged as such. Each of those objects, and *House* itself ironically suppress the personal in favour of the generic. The possessions that mattered in the most intimate ways (a bath, a bed, a home) are now objectified as things without a private history.

After several unsuccessful explorations of several North and East London neighbourhoods, Whiteread acquired a temporary lease for a Victorian terrace in Bow, east London. Work began in August 1993. On November 23 Whiteread was named the recipient of the contemporary art world's coveted Turner Prize, and that same day, Tower Hamlets councillors (of Bow) voted in favour of the demolition of *House*, effective immediately. (House stood from 25 October 93 to 11 January 94.) Late 19th c. row terraced houses were typical of domestic housing in the East End of London. Some were

destroyed during WWII bombings and others were demolished to make way for “better” prefab housing into the early 1990s. Her cast of a Victorian terraced house in London's East End was hailed as one of the greatest public sculptures made by an English artist in the twentieth century. **House** attracted tens of thousands of visitors and generated impassioned debate, in the local streets, the national press and in the House of Commons.²

Much of the controversy orbited around the rhetoric of familiar controversies about public art. When work is immersed in the everyday environment, communities AND individuals feel entitlement to their say about “modern” art in their neighborhoods. Although no consensus prevailed, many of the local inhabitants objected to what they considered unsightly and inappropriate. Inappropriate indeed, because of their ordinariness; the repetition of that which is not usually noticed now gets noticed and it is this unsettling factor in her project, that is, the awakening and awareness of the otherwise bypassed, that causes Rachel Whiteread’s urban interventions to disturb. More than this, Whiteread not only selects subject matter that memorializes the banal or that which is unregarded, she ensures that we not forget. The process she uses, casting, assures a materiality and place. The weightiness and presence in place of the everyday we no longer see is now seen and this is above all the specificity of her work upon which all other reflections are brought to bear.

As a monument to the idea of House (vs. the nostalgic enterprise of “home” that she rejects), this work challenges concepts of community, place and security. Its physical site

² http://www.atangel.org.uk/pages/past/93/93_whiteread.htm#anchorpast

problematizes the politics of geography and location that necessarily lead to protracted discussions about identity and nationhood. *House* subverts any idea that where we live is simple and comfortable, even neutral, territory. Whiteread's project, through its (eventually) successful battle to get built and - after protests and media events - its unsuccessful battle to continue to stand, shored up at every moment the disruptive nature of architecture in place.

In fact, this house is not a house and can be considered uncanny. Uncanny, that is, in the sense Freud suggested for it's in a class of things we consider frightening: as a result, this object leads us back to what feels comfortable, what is known and familiar.³ The conundrum is that we cannot determine what is known and familiar about this house because it is entirely unknown and cannot be known – we cannot enter this house. It is full and its insides - or, its 'fullness' - are now on the outside. The internal mass of the house has *de facto* become its exoskeleton forming a barrier, a kind of opaque cage, that excludes penetration and protects the mythical interior.

Taken all too lightly most of the time, architecture - an object, a frame, a shell, a placemaker - is often ignored. To wit, her stairs. Whiteread's house-that-is-not-as-house demonstrates this powerfully. We carry on our daily activities always in, through, around architectural spaces yet we are almost indifferent to them. In fact our lives are modulated, mediated and moderated by the spaces of architectural configurations (walls, streets, pathways, corridors, roofs, and so on) yet we would be hard-pressed to remember

³Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trs. James Strachey, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth, 1953), p. 195.

precisely the dimensions or details of a place we frequent such as the office, or the home. In a way, this is a good thing. The shapes in which we function become moulded to our projects, our patterns. We wear the architecture of our everyday lives like a skin with the expectation it will always be there to protect us and continue to provide the shell within which we become defined.

Rachel Whiteread's House is all that Freud conveys when he discusses the unusual semantics of the terms Heimlich and unheimlich. In the first sense, Heimlich conveys the familiar, or the known. But curiously, the other meaning of the word, Heimlich, is that which is unknown, or that which is secret. To further complicate matters, the term which is, in principle, its opposite: unheimlich usually conveys that which is unknown and unfamiliar, but also that which is unconcealed or unsecret. Therefore, Freud's argument is that unheimlich or the "uncanny" is that which is concealed, but also that which is known and familiar. Two opposite interpretations that overlap, that double, as one.

If doubling those interpretations gets at the essence of Whiteread's objective for her piece, then House, we could say, is rich in its connotations of intimacy and the personal as well as it is rich and controversial about all that we share as public and familiar.

Whiteread ensures that this doubled reading is argumentative, political and bold. In fact her work as is about doubling as a process understood best through the experience of the object. In each of Whiteread's projects there is a heightened consideration of the material process, of the hand process lost to the process of the multiple (hinted at by the process of casting). Her work is about loss (of the object, thus absent or reversed). But more than this, it seems to me that Whiteread's projects are always the objects doubled, or the spaces doubled, through the process of the mould and its cast.

II. Doubling, Materiality, Place

Casting is a technique to ‘form [an object] into a shape, by pouring it when melted or soft into a mould, where it is allowed to cool or harden.’⁴ The cast for *House* was the house at Grove Road itself (its walls, floors, staircases, in short, the surfaces of its complete interior). Filled up with liquid concrete, the private insides (of the outside) registered the impression of the surfaces, nooks and crannies, onto its surfaces. The outside house that served as the mould was then demolished. *House* was a giant dental impression, a fossilized remain as much as it was the complement to the frame or exterior.

Unlike sculptors generally categorized as those who traditionally either build up (in terracotta, wax, plaster), or carve by breaking down a monolithic material (marble, granite, whittled or carved wood). By taking the imprint of found large-scale architectonic objects (plinths, water towers, bookshelves, furniture, houses), she is commenting on the deeply rooted relationship we hold to the quotidian and to objects integral to our everyday lives. Because we should take notice, she frames the objects with a mould and exposes what she wants us to pay attention to and separate out from the everyday. Through the process of taking an impression, literally, what is the imprint left in the material that serves as a fossilization under pressure?

Does casting try to shape the object that will then disappear? She uses resin, rubber, dental plaster, and re-examines ancient materials used in casting such as concrete then she plays with the methods of casting and the idea of shaping a “thing”. Instead of moulding the object as object and then filling that mould with resin, for example, she

⁴ Oxford English Dictionary

creates a cast to frame the object and then fills the space between the mould and the object with resin, rubber or other. Her frames of space that are shaped on the inside by the absence of the object once the mould and the interiorized object is removed, is the nature of her practice.

Another strategy she uses to shape 'things' is somewhat more traditional to the extent that she shapes a mould around the object she identifies, say a mattress, and then eventually fills the empty space created by the mould occupied earlier by that object, the mattress. But defiantly, she transforms the tactile knowledge we all carry of a mattress (soft, pliable, bouncy and dense) in an almost subversive move: rubber and high density foam replace the quality so familiar to us. Furthermore, she saturates the new material with an amber hue and straddles the mattress halfway up a wall. Its function is unclear; its familiarity rendered foreign.

In each, the works address presence by mass and weight. The contents of her pieces never really move. *House*, is perhaps the quintessentially stable, rock-solid, symbol of place and endurance in a collective of houses. Indeed *House* by Whiteread, as a result of its weightiness, seems to harness virtual energy in order to revisit the pace of the standstill. This is a return to the notion of monumentality best understood through the mystery of the great monuments of the past - think the Parthenon, the Colosseum, the Pyramids. Each of these continues to mystify in part by its design but largely as a result of its scale and weight. This weightiness or monumentality marks the material presence of *House*, and is sensed in the spirit of the furniture units as well.

III. Matters Immaterial made Material

When we think of a house or the furniture elements that are requisite to it, we are hard-pressed to consider a house for its *houseness*. Rather, we are deadened by its convention in our everyday lives. In fact, to perceive a house and its function from the inside is not an active process. We are far more accustomed to admiring house facades and their concatenation on streets; its interiors are private spaces for which invitations are necessary. As for our own house interiors, we know them all too well, or do we? Rachel Whiteread's primordial tale, the one that resonates above all else, seems to be the presence of this object, this House. It is something that is voluminous, solid and massive, in the way of something else, immovable, incomprehensible. It is strangely familiar yet ultimately unfamiliar. It is an expression of art that exists, as best stated in this circumstance by Victor Shklovsky, 'that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*.'⁵ What Shklovsky argues for is an ability to begin to recognize the object in front of our eyes because until the time that this object was 'declared' art it was an object we never saw. We are thrown into an 'automatism of perception' as he suggests, that is remedied only by art that succeeds by describing a process in detail through the act of *ostraneniye* or 'defamiliarization'.⁶ While these Formalist theories were first written in 1917, they are, to my mind, the most apt way of understanding the specificity of Rachel Whiteread's *House* and furniture. And it is not a simple technique that Shklovsky offers. It is one that is not simply about naming but naming parts never before named. Shklovsky uses Tolstoy's example of 'pricking the conscience' with aplomb. He quotes from *War and Peace* in order to demonstrate how Tolstoy, among others, transformed meanings by replacing common associations

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Literally meaning in Russian, "making strange."

attached to rituals and customs, particularly those religious in nature, by seeing things and describing them outside the parameters of their accepted contexts. As a result, his work was considered sacrilegious to many. But the process, employed by other Russian Formalists such as Boris Tomashevsky for his analyses of Swift and Pushkin, signalled the wake-up call for considering the art itself. In other words, the defamiliarization process shifted the attention back to the object itself. Our previously skewed view of the known object (a house, a bathtub, a table) is shaken into an awareness, indeed a new awareness, of the ordinary, and the object draws attention to itself. Suddenly the details of the mundane (electric outlets⁷ windows, walls) focus our attention on what we had never seen, and particularly on the materiality of the house, its *stoniness* (or concreteness).

And while the Modernist duality of form and content can never be separated, nor should we even think of these two categories as the governing concepts in considering works of art, there is, nevertheless, a visceral response to the tactility of the material: its presence and sheer imagined (and at least, visual) weight wholly engages our eye and sharpens our focus on the nature of materiality altogether. And in a deft move, she reconfigured that strategy: for *House*, she used the real house as the mould and filled up the inside. Once the outside was demolished, the inside stood, bare and revealed. *The* bipolarity of the process requires that one of the two parts is removed from its place, rendering the notion of place placeless. Yet her work can easily be seen as a completion of the circle since we're only given one half through which we're asked to imagine the whole. Concrete fills up all the spaces of the inside and when the outside walls are demolished, when that

⁷ Chris, I would like the image on p. 38 of the electrical outlets in Lingwood, editor *House* (Phaidon).

mould is peeled away, House stands alone with all its insides declared: a solid mass of inside, out. We behold that which is never valorized by others: a denuded place, a house stripped bare of its *houseness* with its entrails revealed curiously inside the outside now gone. All the cultural values – and secrets -- expressed in a home and invisible to the outsider, are sedimented in concrete, at once almost erased and preserved in what could have been taken as a monument – at least while *House* stood -- to the lost object.

Here before our eyes is the never-before-seen: the space of interior life is fossilized and denuded, a house, to play with Marcel Duchamp's title: is stripped bare of its *houseness*. Even though now exposed to the public and never really revealed at all. It stays imprisoned functioning as a metaphor for the meaning of everyday, private life. All the cultural and private values expressed in a home -- for the most part invisible to the outsider -- are sedimented in concrete and preserved in this monument to the lost subject and to memory entombed.

Through a conversion of a subjective space to an objectified site, *House* becomes, by virtue of its commemoration to the secrets of personal life, a public monument to private histories. Even though once highly visible, the standing object, before its demolition, is raped of its protective skin. It is no longer in sight and we have lost its location on that site. We have therefore lost *sight* and lost *site*: first, of the initial object, House, to demolition and later, in a doubling of that destruction, *House*, by Rachel Whiteread.

