Discovering Rachel Whiteread’s Memorial Process:
The Development of the Artist’s Public and Memorial Sculpture from *House* to *Tree of Life*

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CHAPTER 1
HOUSE: WHITEREAD BECOMES A MEMORIAL ARTIST

Rachel Whiteread is known for her process of casting the space around an object, materializing what is sometimes referred to as negative space, into a positive form. Critics, art historians, and curators have lauded her practice as a means of evoking memory and absence and some of Whiteread’s public sculptures yield not only a general discussion of memory, but rather of memorial. This thesis will analyze the memorial language Whiteread has developed throughout her career. Whiteread created four memorial sculptures over twenty years starting with House, 1993, (Fig. 1.1). House was a concrete interior cast of a two-story, Victorian house in East London. It was also Whiteread’s accidental plunge into the world of public sculpture. Whiteread turned something that is absent into something that is present. She exposed the innards of a private house and disposed of the original house like it was a onetime-use mold. The work’s provocative process and subject matter sparked controversy among local families, activists fighting for housing rights, those against gentrification, politicians attempting to negotiate effective urban growth, and the art world debating House’s validity as an important work of art. Since the discussion about House was both social and formal, Whiteread’s artistic process is important in understanding how she uses her casts to help define the memorial language in her sculpture. It also initiated what would become Whiteread’s longstanding interest in working in and around existing tropes of memorial art.
Whiteread’s Accidental Jump into Public Sculpture

After Whiteread made multiple casts of rooms, such as Ghost, 1990, (Fig. 1.2) the idea to cast a house was the natural next step. For Ghost, Whiteread cast the negative space inside a room out of plaster and preserved its contents. She used materials traditionally used in the preparation of making casts, not in making the final product. To accomplish the seemingly counterintuitive task of casting negative space, Whiteread covered the area, around either the object or in the internal space of an object with plaster or resin, as if she was lining the interior walls of a room. She coated the object with mold releases so the plaster disconnected and also picked up all the traces of the original object. In Ghost, this process left distinguishing features in the plaster such as the negative imprints of a fireplace, patches of wallpaper, a doorknob and light switch, giving the sculpture an eerie feeling through her inversion of a recognizable space. The sculpture was cast in multiple parts so it could be moved and reassembled.¹ The result does not have a ceiling. This process invited the viewer to contemplate the past and memory with its unconventional presentation of a familiar space.

Ghost’s success placed Whiteread at the forefront of contemporary British art and opened up opportunities for more ambitious sculptures. She began to think about what her next sculptural step would be after casting a room. When creating Ghost she had filled in the keyholes because, “if I’d left [the keyholes] I’d have had to

¹ Creating the cast in multiple parts is a tactic Whiteread uses for her later sculptures, including, her staircase pieces to be discussed in later chapters.
² Adrian Searle “Rachel Doesn’t Live Here anymore” Frieze Magazine.
³ Blazwick, “Rachel Whiteread in conversation with Iwona Blazwick,” Rachel
cast the next room, then the next room...

For House she essentially let her process expand through the keyholes to include the entire structure. Even though she started by casting the spaces in and around smaller objects, Whiteread has always remained fascinated by the larger spaces, in which people reside. She says, “Architectural spaces have always interested me.”

For Whiteread the buildings people occupy are living things; they breathe, and absorb the life around them. This irregular classification of buildings stems from the way people treat the spaces they inhabit. Whiteread continues saying the architectural spaces she is interested are the spaces, “we’re building [as] mausoleums for ourselves.”

She is casting the spaces we mark as means of remembering ourselves.

The journey to create House began in 1991. Whiteread was working with the nonprofit art organization Artangel to realize her desire to cast a house. The associate from Artangel who planned the project with Whiteread for years, James Lingwood, talks about how he and Whiteread went to many different locations to find a house for the project. Lingwood writes, “House could have been made elsewhere, in a different place and a different time.” Yet House was not made just anywhere; the location secured by Artangel was in East London, 193 Grove Road in the neighborhood of Bow. All the other houses on Grove Road had been demolished in order to make space for a park. Whiteread was given permission to use the last

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2 Adrian Searle “Rachel Doesn’t Live Here anymore” Frieze Magazine.
4 Ibid
5 Artangel is a British organization committed to helping contemporary artists produce extraordinary art projects for the past two decades.
Whiteread acknowledged the political nature of the project from the start, but it is evident that it was not her intention to make a political statement. Whiteread approached the making of *House* with naivété. She was hopeful than an artist could make something that would transcend the political and that the viewers would react to the art more than the politics.

Once completed, Whiteread’s monument raised many debates regarding urban development in London, domesticity in the public sphere, as well as her eccentric artistic process. At its core, the controversy surrounding *House* was about gentrification. Whiteread’s sculpture made a statement about a slowly disappearing socio-economic sector of London’s East End. She was at once actively destroying the house and simultaneously creating a means by which people could remember the area before it was gentrified. It is similar to the way a photograph captures a moment we want to remember, but it does not literally recreate the memory. *House*

7 Adrian Searle, “Rachel Doesn’t Live Here Anymore.”
created a vehicle for people to rally around and an object on which to project their grievances. Many residents were upset, some even defaced the sculpture with graffiti, inscribing, "WOT FOR", "WHY NOT" and "Homes for all - black and white." (Fig. 1.3) Additionally, in the previous parliamentary election, the Conservative candidate won a seat in Parliament for the area of Bow due to a large debate on housing issues. This particular debate caused a rift in the local community regarding who was for or against the government influencing housing development.\(^8\) Just coming out of the Thatcher-era, many East End residents would have been fearful of reviving the privatization policies used to improve East End areas in the late 1980s. *House*, as a sculpture, did not directly address these issues. The sculpture was not making a direct statement about Bow or even the broader East End. Furthermore, Whiteread used the location arbitrarily, proving that she was not seeking to make a political statement.

Whiteread’s unique sculptural practice did contribute to the controversy of the piece. She turned a home inside out. *House* exposes the interior of a house, establishing the sculpture as a representation of a familiar object. By exposing the innards of a private location, Whiteread is defamiliarizing the familiar. Transforming the comfort of a home into a stark concrete structure is a jarring concept and makes for a more upsetting object. We are used to homes being places of comfort. Society becomes upset when traditional notions of the home are

\(^8\) Doreen Massy “Space-time and the Politics of Location “ in *House* ed. James Lingwood, 49.
disrupted, whether it’s the physical structure or the people who make up a home.\textsuperscript{9} It is important to remember that Whiteread did not title her piece “Home,” instead she called it “House.” Her choice of title emotionally distances the viewer from the object. It is not a home; it is a house that can belong to anyone. A house refers to the physicality of the structure, the walls, the floors, the roof, not the spaces we occupy and call our own. Whiteread may have had a variety of reasons for establishing this distinction. Titling the work \textit{House} may in fact have been a tactic to ward off some of the political undertones Whiteread realized were inevitable. Perhaps she thought calling it \textit{Home} would have upset viewers even more. Another possibility was that she reacted to the forced public nature of the sculpture. As stated, the public part was secondary to Whiteread’s artistic desire to cast a building; homes are private, whereas houses are the generic buildings where people happen to live. Whiteread may have made the distinction in an attempt to control the sculpture’s effect.

Beyond the controversy, the formal sculptural elements that drove Whiteread to create the piece are significant for her development as a sculptor. She said, “I didn’t know I could ever have the possibility of destroying a building in the cause of sculpture.”\textsuperscript{10} Whiteread understood the significance of destroying a building for the sake of her art. In order to create the cast she lined the interior of the house with concrete, a first for Whiteread, and then stripped away the exterior. Whiteread accomplished this by working inside the house the entire time. First

\begin{footnotes}
\item[9] In the US at this time a controversy surrounding the NEA was occurring with exactly these issues lying at the heart of objections to the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and Sally Mann.
\end{footnotes}
Whiteread sprayed a layer of concrete around the entire interior of the house. After she built a supporting structure with steel rods and she then sprayed another layer of concrete over the supporting structure (Fig. 1.4). Finally, she removed the original walls of the house, leaving the concrete cast of its interior. Unlike Ghost, which was constructed in multiple parts to make it portable, and not did necessitate the destruction of the original room, House was a solid structure built from the inside, and required the destruction of the exterior walls. Whiteread only left the concrete imprint she created. She could not remove all of the inner substructures, such as the stairs or some internal walls, due to her inexperience in working on this scale, and because of the nature of destroying the original house. Since she created the sculpture in one piece, on site, she needed the foundational and supporting structures of the house to remain in place so the building could stand during the sculpting process. The fact that she failed to capture the pure negative form of the house has challenged Whiteread throughout her career. She continuously strives to cast hard-to-imagine spaces, like a stairwell. Whiteread describes her desire to “use things that already existed. I wanted to get inside them or beneath them and try to reveal something previously unknown.”

House became a memorial because it rallied a collective voice together over an individual home. House was Whiteread’s first attempt at a sculpture that was focused on the communal nature of domesticity. The Tate’s gallery handout for the Turner Prize reads, “House is a cast. But unlike the bronzes, which commemorate triumphs and tragedies great men and heroic deeds, this new work commemorates

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11 The Tate Britain gallery brochure for 1993 Turner Prize exhibition, Tate Archives.
memory itself through the commonplace of home.” At the time of Whiteread’s Turner Prize nomination for the work, the art world had acknowledged *House’s* place as a memorial. From this description, the Tate is distinguishing *House* from other memorial sculptures. They are also placing it within the context of Whiteread’s oeuvre of everyday objects, which are domestic objects cast in mediums other than bronze. What sets *House* apart from Whiteread’s other everyday, commonplace objects-turned-sculptures, is its incorporation of the aspirations of a community. Artangel describes it as “a mute memorial to the spaces we have lived in, to everyday existence and the importance of home.” Not only did *House* redefine the type of sculptor Whiteread was, it redefined what we expect from a memorial.

**Defining Memorial**

The purpose of modern memorials no longer follows the traditional definition of memorials given by art historians such as H.W Janson, who believed that a memorial or monument must belong in one of three categories: funerary, historical events or great men. Since World War II artists and architects have been implementing new ideals in memorial representation. Modern architecture and urbanism scholar Andrew Shanken writes about living memorials, where people dedicate streets, civic spaces, buildings and such in place of traditional memorial sculptures. He also demonstrates how in a post World War II age; we are striving to

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12 Ibid.
13 Artangel Exhibition Handout for *House*, Tate Archives.
find new means of memorial representation to honor our heroes and events.\textsuperscript{15} Contemporary artists like Claes Oldenburg used metaphors for memorialization through his commemoration of mundane objects like electric plugs or clothespins. Oldenburg satirizes our society by turning banal objects into colossal public sculptures. For example, he designed a monument for Washington D.C. titled, \textit{Proposed Colossal Monument to Replace the Washington Obelisk, Washington, D.C: Scissors in Motion}, 1967 (Fig. 1.5). His design consisted of a pair of giant red scissors with the blades facing upwards, and slowly throughout the day the blades would gradually open and then close overnight. At dawn Oldenburg describes: [they] “joined, forming a structure like the obelisk, catching the sun's light at the tips.”\textsuperscript{16} A monument like Oldenburg's wants the viewer to question the values placed on traditional memorials, such as The Washington Monument. Art like this caused Janson to update his traditional definition of memorials saying, “I am the first to admit that the public monument, as a species, is dead today.”\textsuperscript{17}

Contemporary art historians concerned with public memorial art agree that in our post-war society the reasons for erecting memorials have changed, and that the way artists approach designing them has changed as well. Two approaches to contemporary memorials must be considered in order to understand the conceptual tropes Whiteread incorporates into her memorial sculpture. First, Professor of Holocaust and memorial studies at University of Massachusetts Amherst, James

\textsuperscript{15} Shanken, “Living Memorials in the United States during World War II,” 130.
\textsuperscript{17} Janson, quoted in The Rise and Fall of the Public Monument, cited in Doss, Memorial Mania, 43.
Young, discusses contemporary memorials that extend beyond aesthetics. For his view of the evolution of such work, he uses the term Counter-Monuments, by which he means art that is not about the direct or metaphoric representation of the memorialized subject. Actions bring memorials, “into being, the constant give and take between memorials and viewers.”  

In order for a memorial to be successful, the artist needs to ensure that a constant dialogue exists between the physical object and the patron. Artists are thinking about the way viewers approach contemporary monuments and how such art works relate to the lives of the viewers.

A second approach to explaining Whiteread's memorial aesthetic may be found in the work of American and memorial historian Erika Doss, who writes about the individual within the design of memorials. She discusses how contemporary memorials are breaking out of traditional aesthetic modes of representation; primarily because these memorials are based upon an individual’s assertion of rights, and represent a demand from people to embody and respect the diversity in contemporary life. Doss writes that today’s memorials are “disposed to individual memories and personal grievances, to stories of tragedy and trauma, and to the social and political agendas of diverse [people].” The individual discussed by Doss could refer to either the individual viewer or the individual artist, asserting the need for the memorial. Whiteread’s memorials engage both the dialogical model of Young and the individual focus of Doss. As discussed, House was an accidental memorial,


20 Doss, Memorial Mania, 2.
and it is the individuals involved in the commission as well as the public – viewers who reacted to it – that gave House its memorial status. House works as a memorial because it is connected to a variety of relationships, and addresses its viewer and its subject as individuals. For example, House evokes reactions from viewers because Whiteread cast a house in the East End of London, people in the area, or other individuals who experienced gentrification elsewhere reacted. I will be examining the three memorials Whiteread created in the aftermath of House in order to understand the artist’s personal exploration into the potential and possibilities of contemporary memorial art.

Commemoration versus Memorial after House

There needs to be a distinction between a memorial and a commemorative object in order to parse out the differences between some of Whiteread’s other sculpture and the four memorials discussed here. Commemorations take place through plaques, dedications, and memorials. However, just because something is commemorative does not make it a memorial. Memorials exist as a subset of commemorations. Within art there are many forms of commemorative objects such as, Lucian Freud’s portrait of his mother, or Kara Walker’s depiction of African Americans. These are successful commemorations of persons and cultures, but none of them were designated as memorials. What makes Whiteread’s memorial sculptures distinct from her other commemorative sculpture is that her memorials are not simply there to remember a past event or tell a story. She uses her artistic process to cause viewers to think about large expansive issues such as memory,
mourning, or history to create discourse on a bigger issue. Everyone, not necessarily just those who have a direct connection to the memorialized subject, can appreciate her memorials because they stem from objects familiar to us. *House* garnered the attention of the international community. Even those without a connection to or knowledge of life in London’s East End were moved by the sculpture Whiteread created. The monument ignited passion and strong feelings of support or dislike. Her small-scale sculptures function as commemorations to an object or space, like *House* they focus on negative spaces and traces. What differentiates *House* from *Ghost*, both of which are direct negative casts of a space, is that with *House* Whiteread tells the viewers a story far greater than the object itself. *Ghost*, on the other hand, is about a room that Whiteread cast; it is a commemoration of the original space. Whiteread’s memorials require the viewers to step back from the familiar object. None of the memorials is an indexical trace of the found object they represent; rather they integrate a distance from the cast object, and in doing so articulate a message of remembrance.

**Barthes: Understanding the Cast Object through Photography**

Twentieth century literary theorist Roland Barthes’s writings on photography in his book *Camera Lucida*, provide an interesting context for looking at Whiteread’s memorial sculptures. One of Barthes’s ideas is that when people look at a photograph they are confronting the absence beneath the surface of the image.21 The absence is defined by the index, the imprint left by the original object.

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21 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 100.
According to Barthes, this trace – seen in the photograph, directs the individual not to the lost subject, but to loss itself, to the void created by the image. In Whiteread’s case the void is created from her casts of negative spaces. Barthes writes that the discovery of the void in the photograph “is a memory fabricated according to positive formulas, a pure intellectual discourse.” The object we encounter in the photograph exists because once there was the original object; now all that is left is the memory of it traced onto the photograph. He is stating the memory in the photograph is the product of the viewer. Memory is produced in response to the void, not as a reaction to the subject of the photograph. Nor is memory what is seen in the photograph, but it is the product of the “intellectual discourse” by the viewer.

In a photograph the artist creates an echo of the original composition; the final print is a distanced indexical record of the original world. Barthes writes, “In order to designate reality, Buddhism says sunya, the void.” The absence created is not like a painting. There is no room for manipulating emotion or feeling, but only for directly casting what is there. The photographic image, “mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.” The memories constructed from looking at a photograph act as an echo or a representation of a moment in the past that can never actually be repeated. It is as if the photograph is the death of the moment in the image. All we have left to remember is Death and our survival as well as the survival of the photograph is what causes the absence in the photo.

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22 These are either the indexical traces, like the negative casts, or in the case of the memorial work, the objects or installations created from those casts, similarly to how a photographic print is made from the negative film.
23 Ibid, 93.
24 Ibid, 5.
The experience of encountering a photograph described by Barthes is how one interacts with Whiteread’s casts of negative space. Her casts of objects are what we know, but they are unfamiliar to us in some way. Whiteread is not casting the object in order to make a copy of it, which is the reason why her casting practice is different than traditional modes of casting. In a similar vein to photography, she creates the reflection or echo of the work. As Barthes describes, when the viewer approaches Whiteread’s work, recognizes it as a negative cast of some object, only then does the sculpture resonate with void and memory.

The indexical quality of Whiteread’s sculptures further solidifies the parallel to photography. In a photograph the image made from the negative is the index of the photograph. In her memorials, Whiteread is also capturing that reversed index from an object, either by re-casting it from another mold made from the original object, or by altering the cast in some way, so that it is not a direct representation of the original. Rosalind Krauss describes the index as:

As distinct from symbols, indexes establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents. They are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify. Into the category of the index, we would place physical traces (like footprints), medical symptoms, or the actual referents of the shifters. Cast shadows could also serve as the indexical signs of objects ...^{26}

Whiteread is capturing the spaces that exist only in relation to the object, as Krauss puts it, “to which they refer.” For example, when Whiteread casts the space under a table, an object that previously existed around the space defines the sculpture. The original table left the indentations and markings that allow the viewer to associate and assign the plaster form as the space beneath a table. For *House*, Whiteread left

^{26} Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” 70.
the cast of the house as the index of the original. In her later memorials she moves from the indexicality of the negative (or the photogram) to the one-step-removed quality, similar to a photographic print that makes it a memorial. When Whiteread placed her practice of casting the negative space in the public realm, she opened up a discussion about the index as memory to the things we once had. In the same way, Barthes dictates the idea that memory is something we produce in discourse at the inspiration of an object or image. Whiteread’s cast created an index of a house as a means to forever remember what that intimately private space looked like, down to the last crevice.

In her essay, Krauss discusses the indexical quality of Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Splitting*, 1974, (Fig. 1.6). In *Splitting*, the artist sawed through a house crosswise, removing a slice to create a wedge-shaped void in from the roof to the foundations, and is commonly cited as a precursor to Whiteread’s *House*. Krauss writes, “In the piece by Matta-Clark...the procedure of excavation succeeds therefore in bringing the building into the consciousness of the viewer in the form of a ghost.”27 In Matta-Clark’s piece it’s the cutting away of part the house that invites the viewer to think about the way we use our houses and what it means to become a void. Again this emphasizes Barthes’s fundamental idea that memory or void arrives from our discourse created from looking at the image. Whiteread strips her house entirely of its shell, leaving only the negative cast behind, so the viewer is struck with a solid absence of what used to be, the “ghost” that Krauss describes.

The temporal nature of a photograph is what moves the echoed image from just a memory into a memorial. One moment we are in the present looking back into history, or forward into the future. Barthes describes this phenomenon as if one is “drifting between the shores of perception...without ever approaching either.”

Then the viewer begins to understand how memory and its absence relate to the image as he encounters it. If someone looks at a photograph of a stranger, there is an acceptance that the photograph was taken for a reason, to commemorate that moment in time and to create a physical representation of it, essentially marking it as important even on the smallest scale.

Whiteread employs temporality as a mechanism in creating her memorial sculptures in a similar manner that Barthes uses with photography. Through her casts of negative spaces, Whiteread manipulates not only the viewer’s sense of space but time. She uses void to shift the linear notion of time, as simply past, present, and future. Whiteread’s sculptures capture what cannot be portrayed through painting, drawing, or even traditional sculpture. Her sculptures are casts of areas that can only be seen in an instant, expressed through the absence of the initial object. When looking at Whiteread’s work, the viewer is encountering a solid portrayal of what can only exist in a memory. A critic describes the sensation when viewing Whiteread’s works as, “[being] taken to another world, like and yet completely unlike this one: the world of the photographic negative, with its phantom-like reversals of known fact.”

Each sculpture captures a moment. Respectively

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29 Graham-Dixon, “This is the House that Rachel Built.”
remembering either what once was literally, or figuratively, just as a photograph captures a singular moment in time, never again repeated.\textsuperscript{30}

**House’s Influence: Whiteread’s New Frontier**

*House* was, and still is, Whiteread’s most influential sculpture. Not only did it place her on the map of world-renowned artists, but also it changed the way she worked for the next twenty years. She said, “When I made *House* it was a memorial... but I didn’t know that at the time [how] everything just informs the next thing.”\textsuperscript{31} *House* became a platform from which the rest of Whiteread’s oeuvre is founded. *House’s* influence is evident in her three other memorials, *Holocaust Memorial*, 1995-2000 (Fig. 1.7), *Embankment*, 2005 (Fig. 1.8), and *Tree of Life*, 2012 (Fig. 1.9).

Whiteread has been constantly aware of the way her previous work affects the pieces after, as she said: “I work in a linear way, and when I made *Ghost*, I thought it would be interesting to explore the possibility of casting an entire house.”\textsuperscript{32} The same line of thinking extends past *House*, but she reorients the nature of that linear process. What makes *House’s* influence on these subsequent three public sculptures so interesting is that Whiteread constantly tried to reverse the mistakes she made in *House*, while at the same time attempting to repeat it’s many successes. With each

\textsuperscript{30} In Barthes’s writings it doesn’t matter whether the photograph was staged or candid, interesting or boring, but a moment in which he categorizes as the subjects “impending Death.” I take that Death to mean a moment in the past that cannot happen again, therefore it is representative of what once was and can never be again, insofar as to say that evanescent quality is translatable into the future memorializing practice of the subject, i.e. how they will be remembered.

\textsuperscript{31} Rachel Whiteread, in conversation with A. M. Homes, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston October 18, 2009.

\textsuperscript{32} Rachel Whiteread in conversation with Ina Cole “Mapping Traces,” 38.
successive memorial, Whiteread addresses an aspect of *House*, to either change, expand upon, and incorporate it into her next project.

The largest effect *House* had on Whiteread’s art was an expectation for her subsequent sculptures to be public pieces. As mentioned, her intention was not to create a public sculpture; it was to cast a house. The result was the art world waiting for Whiteread to follow up on the success of *House* and make her next big public sculpture. Her name was spoken alongside other contemporary public sculptors like Richard Serra. Whiteread’s newfound association as a public sculptor led her to be invited to compete for a commission for a Holocaust memorial in Vienna.

In Whiteread’s first deliberate memorial, *Holocaust Memorial*, to be discussed in chapter 2, she continued with the domestic motif but altered her approach of casting a house. She based the structure of the monument on a 19th century bourgeois interior that would be found in the area near Judenplatz, Vienna, the monument’s location. However, she invented the space rather than casting it from a preexisting room.33 Conceptually, she let the site and the history of the Holocaust influence her design for the memorial. In this commission, Whiteread purposefully started selecting objects to cast with specific meaning. In her earlier sculptures, the object was simply an object of interest, and the meaning came to being with the final product. As opposed to *House*, Whiteread embraced the public nature of her sculpture. She says, “The difference between *House*... and the Judenplatz monument is that *House* was in effect a private sculpture being made public by default,”34 whereas *Holocaust Memorial* was a specific public commission. For *Holocaust*

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33 *Judenplatz: Place of Remembrance*, 26.
Memorial Whiteread used domesticity in the work to help convey the message and meaning of the memorial to the public. Here, she also created a clear distance between the objects represented in the casts and the memorial. Whiteread invented the structure for the monument and that invention is based on the architecture of Vienna, abstracted into an object that is cast and then those casts are used as building blocks for the final object.

For Whiteread’s next project, Embankment, she created an installation whose memorial qualities come out because of her artistic practice.35 Embankment’s prodigious stacking of negative casts of cardboard boxes is memorializing an aspect of the home, the storage in an attic or closet, all the while becoming architectural pieces in their own right. Whiteread allows the viewer to see how she plans and creates studies for the project, casts the object, and how she places objects in a specific way. That transparency is what makes the installation not simply a sculpture imbued with memory, but a memorial. Whiteread also moves away from the site dictating the memorial, like House did, and instead relies on the sculpture’s engagement with the audience to define the memorial. This recalls Barthes’s theory that the memorial quality of a photograph is the result of the viewer’s actions of looking and creating discourse about the image. Additionally, the visual nature of the project changes for Whiteread. She still cast the negative space of objects, but in Embankment she thought about how the casts interact with each other, and how the viewer moved through the installation. She also manipulated the finished casts into

35 In Embankment there is an immediate activation of the viewer in space that is self-consciously explored. It is the part that was not considered in House and was programmed for Whiteread in Vienna through the commission, and now is considered on her own.
an installation. She created different architectural elements with the finished product: no longer can the negative cast existing on its own to be a memorial, here experience and interaction are required. Another way *Embankment* expands on *House*, is it adapts the loss Whiteread accidentally incorporated into *House*; she wanted a house, yet she got a home with a social agenda. For *Embankment*, discussed more thoroughly in chapter 3, she is intentionally bringing to light the idea of containing the memories of immensely personal experiences and objects.

In Whiteread’s most recent memorial, *Tree of Life*, she solidified her interactions with the audience. She took the strategies for distancing gleaned in Vienna and the appreciation for handling space in *Embankment* and developed a public memorial art. By adapting mechanisms from the work discussed in chapters 2 and 3, plus several other commissions including *Water Tower*, 1998 (Fig. 1.10) in New York City and *Boathouse*, 2010, (Fig. 1.11) in Norway, she redoubled her interest in the experience of the viewer. Also Whiteread can be seen moving into a increasingly visual sculpture, bringing to the forefront the experience of how we look at it, not how it exists on its own. *Tree of Life* decorates the façade of the renowned Whitechapel Gallery, an indispensable art institution in the East End. She returns to the source of the controversies raised by *House*. She wanted to produce a sculpture that speaks about the area of London. Unlike *House, Tree of Life* is very controlled by Whiteread; she does not let the message become controversial, and instead subtly embraces East London.

The following discussion of these three memorials will facilitate one’s understanding of how Whiteread can be identified as a memorial artist and as a
public sculptor. She represents a range of people in her memorials; through

_Holocaust Memorial_ she commemorates an annihilated society, _Embankment_ is a personal homage to her mother and memories in general, and _Tree of Life_ functions as a memorial honoring the history of London's historic East End, a neighborhood that has played a large part in her own career. The Whitechapel Gallery has served as a buttress for contemporary artists in London. _Tree of Life_ exalts that artistic culture and history. She says, "I am trying to preserve something; it has to do with the way our culture treats death, other cultures celebrate it and we try to brush it under the carpet."³⁶ Whiteread’s process of making sculpture invites viewers to create a discourse around her work and the everyday objects in our lives.

³⁶ Blazwick, “Interview with Rachel Whiteread,” 16.
CHAPTER 2
Whiteread’s First Premeditated Memorial

Holocaust Memorial, Vienna 1995-2000

Holocaust Memorial (Fig. 1.7) is Rachel Whiteread’s most arduous and controversial memorial to date, and yet it is still is her most traditional and straightforward memorial. For both the design and concept of Holocaust Memorial, Whiteread drew on the history of the Austrian Jews murdered in the Holocaust. It is her first, and only, purposefully commissioned memorial. Whiteread uses history to create a public sculpture, then the sculpture functions as a historical text. The same way a historian writes a text influenced by his or her own interpretation of historical events, Holocaust Memorial is influenced by Whiteread’s understanding of Viennese Jewry and the Holocaust. Whiteread asserts the subjectivity of history by inventing the object she is casting. She combines many smaller objects, uses their positive and negative casts to sculpt an imagined environment for Holocaust Memorial. Walter Benjamin writes, “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.”¹ This “instant” to which Benjamin is referring establishes a connection between the past and present; something that Whiteread does in many of her sculptures, including House (Fig. 1.1). As Whiteread matures in her career as a public sculptor, she becomes more deliberate with her choices and better understands how to present conceptual elements into her larger scale sculptures. In Holocaust Memorial, Whiteread is controlling the negative space in her work to create a deliberate void.

¹ Benjamin, “These on the Philosophy of History,” Illuminations, 255.
in order for the viewer to grasp the intent behind her art. This returns to Barthes’s theory when he writes that photography, “mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.”2 The mechanical repetition is about propagating a present into the future, a new concept in Holocaust Memorial. A way in which Whiteread utilizes a void for this mechanical repetition is through merging her historical interpretation with sculpture.

When discussing void in a memorial sculpture, Barthes’s words extend beyond Whiteread’s sculpture and apply more generally. When man creates an image of something, whether photograph or sculpture, he is on one hand perpetuating the past, but on the other selecting what to remember in the future. Barthes writes, “History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it.”3 For Barthes the photograph confuses and modifies history. To him history only exists in the context of himself, before him is history and history is recreated through the art object. In Barthes’s case it is a photograph, for Whiteread it is a sculpture. Historians act in a similar vein, if they are not perpetuating history in a way contemporary audiences will understand, and then memories and stories will not be transferred from generation to generation. Benjamin adds to this idea by stating “one of [history’s] own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”4 For Whiteread appreciating the history is derived from an understanding that the specific events people recognize are what become historical; it is more than simply style and communication, it is about memory.

2 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 4.
3 Ibid, 65.
4 Benjamin, “These on the Philosophy of History,” Illuminations, 255.
Instead of creating a traditional equestrian statue or monument, which may have been effective in the past, artists such as Whiteread are looking for new sculptural approaches and values to create memorials. These artists are taking the history and adapting it into new visual tropes that their contemporaries can understand. According to James Young, in his discussion of Counter-Memorials, contemporary artists are foregoing traditional modes of representing history particularly regarding the Holocaust and related subjects.\(^5\) Instead they try to find artistic and aesthetic links to the destruction to better understand the horrors that our world is capable of doing. Young writes, “History itself [becomes] a composite record of both events and these event’s transmissions to the next generation.”\(^6\)

Whiteread is translating histories into her art, yet, she also uses history interchangeably with memory; one does not need to supersede the other, allowing her sculpture to function differently than other public sculptures by her contemporaries.

**Casting a Void**

Whiteread also integrates history within her artistic process. As a caster, Whiteread partakes in a historic sculptural practice. In the 19\(^{th}\) century, casters supposed that casting was a process that destroyed an object, only then for the artist to resurrect the original object in bronze. To make a cast the artist takes an object, creates the object they want to cast out of clay, and then creates a ceramic or plaster cast around the original object. After removing the clay from inside the

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\(^5\) Young, *At Memory’s Edge*, 2.

\(^6\) Ibid.
plaster sheath, the artist is left with a negative mold of the object, which by some is considered the “death” of the original. Traditionally, artists would then fill the cast with a rich material such as bronze; to create something more durable and beautiful than the object was in real life. Many times they were able to produce multiple reproductions. The middle stage of the actual cast was seen as lowly. Further, societies have judged casts based on their relativity to reality.

Whiteread’s cast sculptures stay stagnant in the middle stage of death, never becoming resurrected in bronze; rather they become the negative spaces she is known for creating. She is changing the historical process of casting in her memorial work. Historian Ina Cole asked Whiteread in an interview, “How important is the historical casting of space to your work?” Whiteread responded by saying, “Casting has now become a language I work in, but when I was looking for that language I was definitely looking at [the past]” Whiteread had to be consistently looking at the history of casting. One important historical cast, which she has never seen, is Pompeii. Whiteread said, "I've never been to Pompeii, quite intentionally...I think the image I have in my mind is probably stronger.”

Whiteread is also very cognizant of the stages in casting and her adaptation of historical “middle stage” in her memorials. She takes the negative spaces and inverts it to create a solid object. Whiteread is making another stage in casting, she said, “You go from plaster to mold, to wax, to a metal, and I think that in those stages there are already enough changes. I have to very clear as to what the end

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
result is going to be...”\textsuperscript{10} Adapting the stages to create her distinctive process was no small feat, “I had to spend 15 years developing the language [for casting].”\textsuperscript{11} Altering the historical process of casting was not a swift action. From her earliest works as a sculptor, Whiteread used her different casting process to convey memory in the sculptures. As she progressed in her career, she used the same visual language to create her sculptures connected to history. Previously, Whiteread used memory very superficially, casting objects such as closets or mattresses, as commemorations of the original object.\textsuperscript{12} As she adapted and grew in her casting process she took that concept of memory and implemented it in a more grounded way with history. Whiteread is now melding memory with history, thinking about how the two complement and digress from one another.

\textit{Holocaust Memorial: Whiteread’s Invented Space}

Whiteread is drawing on historical artistic practice to create art with her own interpretation. She is crafting history and then subsequently placing the art in the public realm. Whiteread uses the historical process of casting, which acts as a method to duplicate preexisting objects. She then alters the process to simply use the middle stage of casting, all to comment on the objects, places and events she is memorializing. For the Vienna commission, Whiteread had to come up with a design for the sculpture. She turned to what was most familiar to her, domestic spaces.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, 41.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} As discussed in chapter 1, when Whiteread makes the distinction between \textit{House} and her other sculptures, the commemorative objects are sculptures that are just remembering the actual object: Whiteread’s cast of a mattress is just the space around a mattress etc.
Whiteread devised a plan to create a cast of a 19th century Viennese room. Unlike her normal studio practice, Whiteread did not cast an actual room. Instead, she created casts of the different parts of the room and subsequently placed them together. The pieces only come together after Whiteread places them there, and they are not innately part of the same object. In 1993, Whiteread sculpted another cast of a room titled *Untitled (Room)*, (Fig. 2.1) that was exhibited at the Tate Britain for her Turner Prize exhibition. This sculpture was also an invented cast. Whiteread did replicate a room like she did in *Ghost* (Fig. 1.2), but she assembled the parts of many different rooms in order to create an unidentifiable room. Whiteread wanted to stimulate the generic feeling of a space that could be in any building. Whiteread said “I wanted to make something fundamentally dull and basic.”\(^{13}\) In *Holocaust Memorial*, Whiteread takes that fundamental thinking of creating a more universal experience but adapts her process not to make something dull, but instead make a room full of meaning.

*Holocaust Memorial* is concrete and the majority of the sculpture is the walls. Whiteread presented a library 23 by 23 by 12 ½ feet in dimension. Whiteread decided to have the room be a library, but instead of having the shelves of books line the inside of the room, as one would expect, she has them become the exterior of the space. She creates positive casts of the books, with the spines facing inwards, and negative casts of the shelves. The result is rows and rows of books that appear to be floating, not sitting on a shelf, as one would anticipate. All the casts of books are identical. Whiteread leaves us with no way to differentiate one book from another.

\(^{13}\) Searle, “Rachel Doesn’t Live Here Anymore.”
These floating, uniform books result in a combination of minimalist form with a surreal placement of objects. The forms and colors follow in the minimalist tradition, but the way the books protrude from the walls and the gaps between the rows give off an eerie feeling. This can best be explained when examining the corners. Due to the nature of the positive casts extended out from the walls at the corners Whiteread's sculpture is left with a “V” shaped void where two rows of books meet from two different sides of the wall (Fig. 2.2) Those four meeting points are the only times Whiteread allows the viewer to get a glimpse of the spine from the side. The viewer can then imagine the casts as complete books, as opposed to the open side visible on the rest of the sculpture. This “V” shape now gives the positive casts of books a second void (in addition to the void of the negative casts of bookshelves).

At the front of the sculpture Whiteread pauses the continuous rows of negative shelves for a set of double doors (Fig. 2.3). Here she took the negative cast of a double door and put it in front. The doors are not functioning; they are sealed shut and are also a negative cast. Where the doorknobs should be are concave forms, and there is no functioning keyhole. There remains a concave impression where the doorknobs would have projected out. The interior of the space cannot be accessed. Atop the sculpture, Whiteread took a negative cast of a traditional Viennese ceiling with a floral motif at the center, cast so the viewer sees the shape of the original details. They are not the actual ornamentation but an imprint of it. Those living in the surrounding buildings or flying above would be the only people
able see the decorative cast on the top. Both the negative doors and the ceiling are replicas of ones that would typically adorn Viennese bourgeois interiors.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{The History and Site of Holocaust Memorial}

Whiteread received the commission for \textit{Holocaust Memorial} through a competition. She entered a proposal for the memorial at the end of the controversy surrounding her first large-scale memorial, \textit{House}. She was the youngest artist in the contest organized by esteemed Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal. The guidelines stipulated that the winning entry memorialize the 65,000 Austrian Jews who perished in the Holocaust. Along with nine other world famous sculptors and architects, such as Peter Eisenman, Whiteread proposed a memorial for the Judenplatz Square.\textsuperscript{15} She was unanimously selected as the winner. At the time of the competition, the only monument in Vienna commemorating the destruction was Alfred Hrdlicka’s \textit{Monument against War and Fascism}, 1988.\textsuperscript{16} The sculpture is composed of four statues associated with the Fascist reign and the Second World War. The smallest of the four sculptures, representing the Holocaust, is a bronze piece depicting a Jew washing the street on his hands and knees, covered in barbed wire (Fig. 2.4). Located in Albertina Square, the sculpture offended many who have a connection to the Holocaust, in particular Wiesenthal.\textsuperscript{17} Many people do not even notice the sculpture as they have coffee in Viennese cafes or visit the Albertina

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Judenplatz: Place of Remembrance}, 26-27.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Judenplatz: Place of Remembrance}, 23.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 22.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
Museum. It gets lost in the commotion of central Vienna. Whiteread talks about how her memorial is in direct dialogue with Hrdlicka’s sculpture:

My piece is a reaction against Alfred Hrdlicka’s *Monument against War and Fascism* [1988] by the Opera in Vienna. It’s a statue made out of granite and marble, consisting of screaming figures wearing gas masks. On the ground nearby, there’s a bronze Expressionistic lump, which is a Jewish man on his knees scrubbing the streets. People used to come by and use this particular piece of sculpture as a seat, or a picnic snack. It is unbelievable. Eventually bronzed barbed wire was placed around it.\(^{18}\)

Previously, the absence of a significant Holocaust memorial in Austria reflects how the country deals with its post-war psyche. Unlike Germany, a nation entrenched with post-Nazi self-reproach; Austria has traditionally played the role of the victim since the end of World War II. Despite bearing the identity of Hitler’s birthplace and the home of half of the Nazi S.S, Austria has never assumed responsibility for the war like the Germans did.\(^{19}\) One reason the commission piqued Whiteread’s interest was her artist residency in Berlin in the early 1990s. She immersed herself in the city’s post-war culture, viewing the countless memorials and many of the nearby concentration camps. She went in assuming, “very innocently, that Vienna would be an equivalent to Berlin, and it would be an interesting place to try to make a memorial to such atrocities.”\(^{20}\) She talks about the contrast of the two cultures, “When I went to Vienna, I didn't realize that the politics would be so different from the politics in Berlin.”\(^{21}\) The lack of a memorial corresponding with the absence of Austria’s sense of collective responsibility made

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\(^{19}\) Young, *At Memory’s Edge*, 110.

\(^{20}\) Craig Houser, interview with Rachel Whiteread, *Transient Spaces*, 58.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
Whiteread’s void-oriented design fitting for Vienna. Not only is the void in *Holocaust Memorial* about the casting of negative space, but also it is about the absence of a commemoration in Austria for the 65,000 people who perished.

Originally, the commission was set to be completed by November 9th 1996, the 58th anniversary of Kristallnacht. Due to a variety of factors, political, commercial, religious and social, the memorial was not completed until 2000. There was a lot of tension regarding the delay, and Whiteread became irritated with the process and bureaucracy in Vienna, describing it as “a minefield.” The issues ranged from Viennese citizens not wanting an intrusion in their square, and the Jewish community upset that Whiteread is not a Jew herself. Whiteread describes the tension from the Jewish community in an interview before the sculpture’s unveiling in the British newspaper *The Guardian*: "There were also disputes within the Jewish community about the nature of the memorial itself. But you can't make public sculpture by consensus.” Whiteread could not focus on meeting everyone’s needs. She understood that to make the sculpture successful, she needed to just move on from the controversy. By the end, after almost giving up, Whiteread was just ready for the sculpture to come into fruition. She said upon the sculpture’s unveiling:

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22 Kristallnacht is regarded as the first major violent attack toward the Jews in Germany and parts of Austria on November 9-10, 1938. Kristallnacht means the night of broken glass focusing on the hundreds of broken Jewish-owned storefronts and synagogue windows the Germans left covering the streets. Over 90 people were murdered that night and over 30,000 were arrested and shipped to work camps.

21 Walsh, “Rachel Whiteread: 'I've Done the Same Thing Over and Over.'”

24 Searle, “Making Memories.”

25 Later in this chapter I will discuss her reaction to the controversy surrounding the Vienna sculpture through the sculptures she created for the 1997 Venice Biennale. They were a direct reaction to the arduous nature of the Vienna project and helped Whiteread move past her breaking point.
completion; “I’m really looking forward to seeing the memorial being absorbed into the city, to seeing it in guide books. I’m wondering how they’ll describe it.”26

Another important reason for the delay was the discovery of a destroyed synagogue directly underneath the designated area for the memorial. In 1995, excavations uncovered the remains of a medieval synagogue in the center of Judenplatz (Fig. 2.5). The temple was destroyed in 1420-21 in a massive pogrom. The instigators of the pogrom starved and tortured the Jews of Judenplatz leading to a mass suicide. Many first-hand accounts were found listing names of community members who were involved and detailed descriptions of the events.27 Whiteread’s sculpture is now directly atop the ancient synagogue ruins. In the same way, a tombstone rests on top of burial plot. By placing the memorial directly on top of the ruins, all access to the ancient synagogue was interrupted. The Jewish community ensured that the memorial did not rest directly over the area of the synagogue where the ark would have been; as to comply with the Jewish law that one cannot knock down a synagogue to construct another building. On a practical level, the city of Vienna was not going to leave an archeological site like that open for anyone to literally stumble into. The Jewish Museum in Vienna, in conjunction with this ancient discovery and Whiteread’s memorial, opened a branch of the museum in Judenplatz. This was a means to honor the entire history of the square and allow Whiteread’s sculpture to focus on the Holocaust. From inside the museum one can walk underground and access what remains of the destroyed synagogue underneath Whiteread’s sculpture and the rest of Judenplatz. Originally the plan for Whiteread’s

26 Searle, “Making memories.”
27 Judenplatz: Place of Remembrance, 103- 105.
sculpture was to allow access into the archeological remains. Whiteread discusses the specificity of the site:

It was very specific in terms of location. Judenplatz is a square in the center of Vienna, it is a place of unique architectural and historic character that bears the scars of centuries of anti-Semitism. The site lies immediately above the excavations of a thirteenth century synagogue. 28

The sheer quantity and weight of the loss in Judenplatz is emphasized when going to see Holocaust Memorial by not only thinking about the destruction of the Holocaust but also through standing above the ancient remains.

The placement of Holocaust Memorial directly on top of the ancient site along with its formal elements, such as the impermeable doors, leads one to think about the literal death and entombment (or lack there of) of the massacred Austrian Jews. Whiteread’s cast of the negative space around the books, along with the interior of the room, embalm the 65,000 Austrian Jews, not all of whom have identified burial spaces. Whiteread created a reverberated representation of the death of the Austrian Jews by showing the viewers doors they will never use and the books they will never read. This relates back to Barthes, he compares the echo left by the photographer to one’s ultimate death. In the case of a sculptor creating the “cast” of an image, one that existed in that particular moment in time is equivalent to remembering someone post-mortem. Accordingly, Barthes states, the photographer, “fears this death in which his gesture will embalm me.” 29 It is no coincidence that Whiteread is using her alternative casting practice in dialogue with the literal death her memorial represents. She is depicting the gesture which Barthes refers to when

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29 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 14.
he speaks of death: the ability of the artist to manipulate the viewer’s sense of time and think about this physical manifestation of death.

Communicating death in conjunction with the domestic structure in the work furthers the notion of temporality in Whiteread’s memorial. Whiteread invites the viewer to think of death through depicting a staple of life, the home. She does not depict death by portraying the dead or typical images related to death,\(^{30}\) she allows us to see what life was like for the people who were living. Further, the specific choice of casting a library represents the growth of intellectual pursuits. However, these living quarters are not complete, through the voids Whiteread leaves the viewer with many questions. A piece of knowledge about the library is withheld from the viewer, who lived here and what did they place in their library? The objects and spaces Whiteread chose to cast cause the viewer to be transported back to when Jews were part of the sociological makeup of Vienna.

**Books and Memorial**

The temporality of history in *Holocaust Memorial* is evident from Whiteread’s reconstruction of a 19\(^{th}\) century bourgeois room. Whiteread is taking the viewer back to a specific sector of Viennese Jewry, the wealthy ones. However, her use of domesticity in this manner creates a conceptual distance between the viewer and his or her understanding of the bourgeois room in the memorial. Unlike *House*, a

\(^{30}\) Unlike Hrdlicka’s depiction of a Jew, she is not creating a literal representation of the people who perished. Even on the occasions early in her career when she represents the body it is always through objects - a hot water bottle or mattress. Possibly the lack of figures in her oeuvre is a reason the judges of the commission were so enamored with her.
sculpture whose memorial qualities came into being through its ability to relate its use of domesticity to a broad audience, *Holocaust Memorial* fails to convey its domestic message to a wide range of people. People who pass by *Holocaust Memorial* associate its architecture with a lifestyle with which few Viennese citizens were accustomed. One reason these architectural elements are jarring as a Holocaust representation is because Whiteread is taking the viewer back to a specific moment in history not typically associated with Holocaust visual language. When one thinks of European Jewry, images of ghettos and cramped living quarters come to mind, not bourgeois private libraries. Whiteread approached the sculpture wanting to engage viewers with different memories and moments in history rather than those normally associated with the Holocaust.

Even with the amount of destruction and mourning associated with *Holocaust Memorial*, such as the destroyed synagogue and the remembrance of 65,000 murdered individuals, the sculpture’s everyday function in Judenplatz is not the austere contemplation one would imagine. While many people place rocks and flowers on the base of the memorial, others rest along the base to take in the sun, have a snack or just take a break after a long day. Whiteread has embraced the way the public interacts with her monument and it was a consideration in deciding on the light-gray concrete. She says, “Initially the monument may seem rather blank but over the years with weathering and erosion it will change. I think with time it will become a testament to its own history.”\(^{31}\) Yet, the erosion Whiteread is speaking about is not caused by spilled food. She is referring to the degenerative nature of the

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material over time or even intentional destruction stirred by an emotional response
to the work; not a blatant disregard for the sculpture as a memorial object.
Following *House*, Whiteread wanted to ensure that the monument would not be
ruined if parts were defaced with graffiti like *House* had been; she made replaceable
parts so nothing could permanently scar the monument. The day-to-day interaction
with the memorial adds another layer of history to the site. Whiteread’s sculpture
uses the multitude of historical layers beneath *Holocaust Memorial* to create
additional histories and memories to the site. Potentially the new memories created
in Judenplatz will differ from the past and look towards a different future. Clearly,
Whiteread was thinking about the future of her monument when she designed it.
She uses books to unify the assemblage of past, present and future histories.
Whiteread is commemorating the survival of “the People of the Book,” a people
whose joint identity traditionally links back to the longevity of “the Book.” It is what
unites them in their history and what joins others against them.

Whiteread’s choice to incorporate books has a dual function within *Holocaust
Memorial*. They are consistent with Whiteread’s oeuvre of choosing of an ordinary
object; however, the books have an iconographic function in the memorial and she
uses them to create a deeper meaning for it. Books are an evocative symbol of the
Jewish people and the loss that occurred. On the surface a nameless library is a
plausible representation for the “People of the Book,” but the meaning extends
beyond the surface. When standing near the memorial one imagines that the spines
(and subsequent titles) of the books are visible on the inside of the room. The books
are sculpted in such a way that one wants to pull it off the monument and read.
Whiteread enables the viewer to encounter the possibility of titles through placing the double doors on the front of the monument. This gives the viewer the desire to enter and actually see the titles, embracing human nature to find out what is behind the closed door. However these traditional Judenplatz doors are negative imprints of actual doors, removing the possibility of leaving or entering the library.

Historically books have been popular objects in Holocaust commemorations. In 1948, upon it's founding, Israel sought out ways to honor those who recently perished in Europe. Some of the new nation’s leaders suggested dedicating newly published books for each victim of the Holocaust. There were traditionalists who suggested erecting monuments around the country commemorating the loss. David ben Gurion and other early Israeli leaders decided on the idea of the books. They believed that it highlighted the living nature of the Jewish people. Only a thriving and sophisticated cultural entity could produce upwards of six million volumes, making the ultimate statement to prove the Nazi’s failure.

Books continue to play a large role in contemporary art Holocaust memorials. Israeli artist Micha Ullman was invited by Berlin to create a monument in Bebelplatz, where the Nazis burned over 20,000 books on May 10, 1933. Ullman, a conceptual and installation artist known for placing sculpture underneath the ground, produced a memorial of negative spaces in the square. The square has no positive forms barring the spectators who are peering down into Ullman’s installation, *Bibliothek*, 1995, (Fig. 2.7). Under glass windows are stark white rooms with rows of empty bookshelves, representing the books that were destroyed in that

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exact location. For a different genre of memorial sculpture, Emily Jacir created a
memorial out of white books in 2006 titled *Material for a Film (Performance)* (Fig.
2.7). She created a room filled with a thousand blank white books, each pierced with
a bullet hole shot by Jacir herself. Jacir’s memorial is in memory of the Palestinian
intellectual Wael Zuaiter. He was murdered in 1972 by the Israeli military in
retaliation for the 1972 terrorist attack at the Munich Olympics. When Zuaiter was
murdered he was carrying a copy of *One Thousand and One Nights* in his pocket. The
volume was pierced with a bullet, and in her installation, Jacir recreates that
imagery one thousand times, leaving the 1001 volume blank. While her message is
course, the way Jacir places the volumes of books in delicate rows and columns
renders a moment of solemn contemplation about the loss, not just of Zuaiter, but
the loss of the many thousands of people who were murdered and whose stories
were never completed.

Whiteread’s use of negative space creates both a literal and emotional sense
of isolation. The viewer on the outside is aware that he or she can never access what
is locked inside. Whiteread created a metaphysical void. She did not create an actual
room but instead created the sensation of the actual room, inviting the viewer to
emotionally access a space that never existed. Through the invented room she is
creating, there exists a physical absence inside the memorial, but nothing is in there
except the knowledge that tens of thousands Austrian Jews perished in the
Holocaust projected onto the memorial by the viewer. Even if by chance Whiteread
put the titles of the books, or anything else inside the walls, the viewer will never
know.
Further, when thinking about the class issues Whiteread presents with the bourgeois domestic elements, one associates it with the isolating nature of class distinctions. Through the atrocities of the Holocaust, many Jews lost their fortunes, mainly to their European neighbors. There were many wealthy Jews in cities such as Vienna, but through years of anti-Semitism and sanctions issued by the Nazis many Jewish families lost their wealth. Aside from material wealth, Viennese Jews were some of the most prominent intellectuals and cultural icons before World War II. Figures such as Sigmund Freud, Theodor Herzl, and Gustav Mahler are just some of the many notable Jews who would have lived in a space similar to Whiteread's bourgeois composition. Whether or not Whiteread is making a class statement directly relating to the Holocaust, her choice of architecture creates a more complex remembrance for the 65,000 murdered Austrian Jews. Young writes, “Ms. Whiteread is preoccupied less with the Holocaust’s images of destruction than with the terrible void this destruction has left behind.” Whiteread neglects to include traditional Holocaust imagery. To an extent she is so preoccupied with the void left by the destruction that she disregards portraying the actual destruction in a relatable way. The intended void, as well as the void caused by her lack of clarity, is realized through the public’s interactions with the sculpture.

Whiteread does not literally present the destruction of the war, but by trying to encapsulate the void left by the war through her disregard of traditional Holocaust iconography, Whiteread creates more deliberate confusion surrounding the memorial than intended. One looks at this box of inverted books and is struck by

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33 James Young quoted in Judenplatz: Place of Remembrance, 27.
its stark emptiness, manifesting an exterior void. Yet the viewer is also questioning, why assemble the books in this format? Concurrently, the viewers approach the doors, assuming there is a space inside, but the space is unreachable. Whiteread chooses not to use Holocaust imagery, but does not use abstraction; instead she creates her own iconographic language to represent the Austrian Jews in the Holocaust. The issue is that the viewer may get lost in this new imagery before realizing its purpose of representing the void of the society lost. However, when one approaches the front of the monument looking at the negative casts of doors surrounded by the countless rows of books, there is an understanding of the memorial’s significance. In that initial moment of looking at a void manifested by the negative space gives the viewer another means of understanding how destructive the Holocaust and anti-Semitism was to Viennese Jewry.

The temporality in Whiteread’s piece extends beyond simply thinking about the past to thinking about the future as well. Having the viewer think about the past along with the future can be understood through further examination of the books. The books not only function as a historical reference for the Jews as a nation, but they symbolize the surviving and living nature of the Jewish people and Jewish identity. Books represent knowledge, and knowledge is a decisive tool in not only remembering a tragic event but ensures that it does not reoccur. While writing about his own collection of books, Walter Benjamin quotes Anatole France in discussing the significance of a book, “The only exact knowledge there is, is the knowledge of the date of publication and the format of books.” Benjamin took great pride in the uniqueness of his personal library and way of organizing his collection.
Education and knowledge are pillars of the Jewish home. Traditionally, educating Jewish children came before most other material needs. Whiteread’s piece had the books but not the knowledge. Benjamin continues, “You have all heard of people whom the loss of their books has turned into invalids... And indeed, if there is a counterpart to the confusion of a library, it is the order of its catalogue.” 34 Benjamin is assuming that any decent library has a catalog that one knows exactly where to find for what they are searching. This familiarity with one’s books is of the upmost consequence as far as Benjamin is concerned and that the categorizing system one employs should be selected thoughtfully.

Whiteread is acknowledging the importance of books to Jewish knowledge and culture. She is poignantly portraying that the Nazis did not turn their victims into “invalids” or “criminals” (as Benjamin later calls them), people who lost their books. The Nazis did literally steal and destroy the Jews’ books (as Ullman memorializes in his piece) and Whiteread is using books here as a means to revalidate the Jews as well as their intellectual pursuits. Similarly, Jacir used books (not in a Jewish context) to shed meaning on decriminalized Palestinian intellectuals and others who were unjustly murdered. Whiteread takes the symbol the Nazis used to criminalize the Jews and instead uses the books to show the thriving and growing nature of that intellectualism. Yet, at the same time, Whiteread does not reveal the titles of the books. Benjamin calls a library without a catalog utterly confusing. Whiteread is still making sure the loss is underscored. Not having access to the names reminds the viewer why this sculpture is here in the first place: to

34 Benjamin, “Unpacking my Library,” Illuminations, 60.
remember the 65,000 murdered Jews and the lack of knowledge about the Holocaust in Austria. It also represents a break or pause of the knowledge passed down by Jews generation-to-generation, necessary in continuing the religion and culture. The promise of future Jewish growth is secondary to the remembrance of the destruction in this memorial, but nevertheless there for us to interpret.  

Over the five years it took to complete Holocaust Memorial, Whiteread sought out ways to create sculptures using books. When Whiteread represented Britain at the 1997 Venice Biennale, she created an entire room lined with shelves of negative casts of books titled Untitled (Paperbacks), 1997. (Fig. 2.8) She also created another monumental sculpture Untitled (Ten Tables), 1997, (Fig. 2.9) that is a negative cast of the space underneath ten tables. Whiteread merges the ten tables into a large rectangular box, so it appears like one big table. Both sculptures reflect the struggle and arduous nature of Holocaust Memorial. Untitled (Paperbacks) conceptually helped Whiteread resolve how the books would be cast. For the Venice piece she decided to sculpt negative casts, reversing the concept of the positive books in Holocaust Memorial. With the negative books, the viewer is confronted with the area between the shelves and the books cast in plaster- seeing the imprint of the pages left behind.  

Another major difference between the Venice book casts to those in Vienna is that from the negative cast Whiteread was able to leave behind bits of remaining

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35 This idea reminds me of a Jewish custom to leave a section of one’s home unfinished in commemoration of the destruction of the temple. This custom is prevalent in Israel and Israeli’s say “zecher l’horban” (to remember the destruction [of the temple]). The theological and social purpose of this is to have one constantly be reminded that they are never complete, that destruction still happened to their ancestors and should always be remembered.
color from the book jackets giving the different segments of the sculpture distinctive features. Holocaust Memorial’s positive casts are completely uniform. No one section of books differs from another. For Untitled (Paperbacks), Whiteread replaces the presence of the book with its absence, we can see where each individual book would sit on the shelf, variations of height and width and color. The absence where every book should be sitting has individual features. Whereas in Vienna, she includes a physical manifestation of a book, but through the erasure of difference leaves a bigger absence. Formally, for the Vienna books Whiteread abandons her practice of creating an object where there should be empty space. She again uses her signature “middle stage” of casting for Venice in Untitled (Paperbacks).

Untitled (Ten Tables) address the social nature of Whiteread’s dealings in Vienna, having to deal with the stringent bureaucratic hurdles put forth by the Viennese government and citizens. The endless conference room tables Whiteread sat around over her years in Vienna inspired the piece. At this point in her career Whiteread thought that institutions were a hindrance to the creative processes, almost grinding them to a halt.36 Perhaps during all the frustration with Holocaust Memorial Whiteread desired to return to the studio and out of the conference room,

36 Carley, “Rachel Whiteread’s Soundings of Architecture.” Whiteread’s rejection of an institution is interesting because additionally, in the same year the Royal Academy of Arts offered Whiteread the opportunity to become a Royal Academician. She would have been the youngest artist since JMW Turner to be appointed to the post. However, she publicly declined saying that she had no interest in meetings and committees and would rather be working in her studio as often as possible. (The Independent Friday 13 June 1997 David Lister, Art News Editor)
thereby creating these two monumental sculptures, and allowing her to briefly return to her artistic comfort zone.\footnote{37}

**Cataloging the Memorial**

Returning to the discussion about the physical surface of Whiteread’s *Holocaust Memorial*, it is important to note that on the base of the memorial Whiteread inscribes a limited amount of words. It reads simply in Hebrew, flanked by both English and German, “In commemoration of more than 65,000 Austrian Jews who were killed by the Nazis between 1938 and 1945.” (Fig. 2.10) Along the sides of the library are listed the 41 concentration camps where those Jews were murdered (Fig. 2.11) There are neither names of victims nor history. Whiteread continues the nameless structure she set forth to initially create.\footnote{38} Those 41 places may have been the final resting places for the Austrian Jews but many of the other eleven million people who perished in the Holocaust died there as well. Whiteread is extending the memorial past the immediate demographic of Vienna, and allowing a multitude of viewers to appreciate her work. Listing the names of the death camps is

\footnote{37} It also may be reflective of Whiteread’s values towards negative and positive casts. \footnote{38} There is a brief statement on a plaque nearby that was placed by the Judenplatz museum with some brief history connecting the memorial to Judenplatz’s greater history and helps the patrons understand Whiteread’s use of casts. It reads, “The ‘Memorial to the Austrian Jewish Victims of the Shoa’ reminds us of the 65,00 murdered during the Nazi regime. The outer sides of the reinforced concrete cube by the British artist Rachel Whiteread (*1963) present themselves as a library shelves. 41 names of places where Austrian Jews were murdered are engraved around the bottom of the monument. The object is a symbol for the Jewish culture of books, which not only offers a sphere of refuge, but also stands as a living sign for the surviving Jewish mind. This square- Judenplatz- was home to one of the largest synagogues in Europe. It was destroyed during the pogrom of 1421. The remains of the synagogue are located below the Shoah- memorial and can be visited at the Museum Judenplatz.” (sic)
Whiteread’s way of inviting the viewer to catalog the atrocities in their minds. The catalog Whiteread is providing is not a list of titles or authors but of locations where millions of lives were lost. Benjamin writings echo how a collector personalizes their collection to fit their unique set of books. He writes, “To the reader of a catalog the book itself must speak...To a book collector, you see, the true freedom of all books is somewhere on his shelves.” Benjamin is making a distinction between the owner, who designs the library, and the reader who uses it. Whiteread is fulfilling the role of the owner, creating many ways for the reader to understand her library and piece together the different ways in which she catalogs her memorial.

This discussion of names, numbers and identity of victims is one of the mechanisms Whiteread uses to give the viewer a means to catalog her library. As previously discussed, Whiteread’s usage of books allows one to find hope for the future. The uniform identity of the books in Whiteread’s sculpture further develops that idea. She is remembering the deceased while also building the future. As Benjamin writes, “The Torah and the prayers instruct them [the Jews] in remembrance...this does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous empty time.” While the act of remembering the past is an important, theocratic ideal in Judaism, the future cannot be forgotten. Rachel Whiteread’s Holocaust Memorial shows what is no longer there with a stern front and reminds the Jewish people (along with the city of Vienna) that a future still exists for the Jews.

39 Benjamin “Unpacking My Library” Illuminations, 64.
40 Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Illuminations, 266.
As discussed, another way *Holocaust Memorial* catalogs its content is by listing the names of the camps instead of portraying images. Whiteread is in part taking Benjamin’s cataloging practice while combining them with Barthes’s notions of “drifting between the shores of perception.” Whiteread wants to bring the viewer to the concentration camps, but she does so through text rather than image. She “drifts” (as Barthes describes) between the visual language of the books and the bourgeois house and using text to directly spell out part of her message to the viewer. Using these two forms of communicating with the viewer, Whiteread is constantly shifting the perceptions of the viewer from a direct, poignant Holocaust message, to a more abstract visual association. In the sculpture, Whiteread gives the viewer different experiences by the way she catalogs, or organizes, her message for the viewer. Benjamin emphasizes the importance of an individual’s cataloging technique and Whiteread presents the viewer with a number of ways to catalog her library in our minds. Benjamin writes, “For a true collector the whole background of one item adds up to a magic encyclopedia.” Whiteread allows the viewer to parse through all the elements that make up her collective catalog for the memorial. She gives the viewer the list of names of the camps, the nameless books, and the social context of the bourgeois architecture to catalog and analyze together.

The use of text on the sculpture and the use of minimalist sculptural vocabulary highlight a comparison to one of Whiteread’s inspirations, Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 1982, (Fig. 2.12). Whiteread said, “The Maya Ying Lin Vietnam Memorial in Washington is extraordinary, in my opinion one of the few

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41 Barthes *Camera Lucida*, 20.
42 Benjamin “Unpacking My Library,” *Illuminations*, 60.
great contemporary memorials.” Lin’s monument has all 58,476 names American soldiers killed or missing in action inscribed on two 240-foot walls of reflective black granite sinking into the ground and meeting at a wide angle. As the viewer walks along the sculpture, the wall rises up beside them, starting off down by their feet until it is high above the average viewer’s head. The viewers read the growing list of names as they walk, becoming engulfed by the names. It is as if they are in a massive gravesite, or a scar forged by the war. The memorial is made of highly reflective stone, allowing for the viewer to see their own likeness amongst the name of the killed soldiers. Lin designed her memorial so that the viewer becomes part of it, placing themselves with the names.

Both Whiteread’s and Lin’s memorials use history in their respective memorials. Lin focuses on the history of the individual as well as the collective. She does not give the viewer any knowledge of the background or historical context of the war. Instead Lin focuses on the individual soldiers, inviting the viewer to contemplate who each soldier was, the life they led, and the continued life they were not able to lead. Many visitors come to Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial to find the name of their loved one or friend, someone to whom they are personally connected. Visitors can make a pencil etching over the name of whom they came to mourn. She is exonerating the dead and missing soldiers, but the piece does not address the history of the war, or the history of the deceased or veteran soldiers.

Whiteread’s piece is steeped with the history of a community. This digression between Lin and Whiteread, in terms of history, influences the way people come and

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interact with the completed sculptures. Whiteread uses history in her choice of the book, the object associated with the Jewish people. She uses traditional Viennese domestic bourgeois architecture to create a structure to incorporate the broader social history of the location in which the memorial appears. Also, Whiteread removes our ability to single out any individuals, thus permitting the viewer to focus on the broader history of the Jewish people and the war. Entire communities and cities of Jews were destroyed. The nature of the disaster lends it to the substitution of communal history for Lin’s poignant emphasis on the individual. Whiteread’s focus on the community is something that she began to explore in House and in Holocaust Memorial assessed in a more deliberate manner. The focus on the community is a motif Whiteread adapts and improves upon for each of her memorials, altering it to fit the needs of the community or event she is memorializing.

In her second memorial Whiteread creates a sculpture through the composition of a variety of domestic objects and uses those objects to discuss the history and events the memorial is addressing. She did not make a memorial to books or doors. Those are objects that do appear in her regular sculpture, as with Untitled (Paperbacks), but in Holocaust Memorial those objects were chosen to tell a story. However, she does not fully detach the memorial context from the object. The books carry significant weight, literally representing the “People of the Book,” and the intellectual nature of Viennese Jewry. With her choice to base the sculpture off Viennese domestic architecture, Whiteread showed her commitment to relating the
monument to its urban surroundings. The attempt is there, but with an unsuccessful outcome. Whiteread’s nameless library does not blend into the Judenplatz Square and its location stirred up controversy. In her subsequent two memorials Whiteread will continue to address these formal issues of the sculpture's relationship to both the landscape and its memorial’s message.
CHAPTER 3
Solidifying the Distance Between the Object and the Memorial

Embankment, Tate Modern, 2005

As Whiteread continued to explore her boundaries as a public artist, she began to experiment with the ways in which her sculptures adapted the memorial qualities set forth in House (Fig. 1.1) and Holocaust Memorial (Fig. 1.7). In 2005, roughly five years after the completion of Holocaust Memorial Whiteread received a commission from the Tate Modern that would allow her to add a new dimension to her memorial language. After her first two controversial, overt memorials, Whiteread started to explore the idea of creating a subtler memorial. Her intention was that the memorial qualities are not as obvious to the viewer. The following discussion will explore how Whiteread attempted to accomplish this by incorporating experiential elements into her work and staging the environment in which the sculpture is encountered.

For the Tate Modern’s annual Unilever Series, Whiteread had to fill the colossal Turbine Hall, which is one of the world’s largest museum exhibition spaces devoted solely to cutting edge contemporary art. For the commission, Whiteread decided to cast the interior of a cardboard box. Then cast it again. Then cast it again. Whiteread wondered what would be the result if she compiled 14,000 polyurethane negative casts of cardboard boxes and placed them together (Fig. 3.1), and titled it Embankment, 2005. It was the result of various studio experiments with plaster and other materials that led her to use polyurethane, ideal in this case for its physical lightness. The translucent and optical luxuriance of the material gave each cast a
slight translucent sheen and enabled them to be hollow. The casts in
*Embankment* are the space inside a box, not the box itself, however, Whiteread
negates her traditional negative casts. *Embankment* is not comprised of negative
casts of boxes, but positive casts of the space inside those boxes. Further, the
original cardboard boxes would have been one time use; the initial cast would have
destroyed the cardboard. Whiteread would have made a mold from which she then
casted the 14,000 boxes displayed at the Tate Modern, they could not have been
directly casted from a single (or six) cardboard box, it is almost as if the casts in the
exhibition are the second generation from the original boxes, taking the viewer a
step away from the actual object. Whiteread wanted the casts to feel light and
effortless to convey that notion as she assembled the architectural spaces and
created a second element to the sculpture. She creates an installation, a first for her,
as opposed to a traditional sculptural form, such as placing a sculpture forward
facing on a pedestal or in a square.

Whiteread does not negate everything from her previous memorial
experiences; there are elements she incorporates into her continued work. An
example of that is the way she uses the ordinary object for a memorial. For
*Holocaust Memorial*, the books were part of a larger narrative distinguishing the
sculpture from Whiteread’s similar projects and gave it a deeper meaning. In
comparison, the distance Whiteread sets up between boxes in *Embankment* and the
viewer provides the inspiration for the form and the content. In a review of one of
her earlier exhibitions at the ICA in Boston, art historian Jean-Pierre Criqui writes,
“The strength of Whiteread's work will have been, in one respect to give this
indirect gaze an original form.”¹ The distance or “indirect gaze,” as Criqui describes it, is what sets *Embankment* apart from Whiteread’s other public art as a memorial. It also allows us to understand Whiteread’s sculpture in the context of its environment, and what signals her greater concern for creating public art.

**Collecting**

The distance she creates between the sculpture and the viewer is echoed in the catalog where Whiteread presents more information, such as images of people all over the world using cardboard boxes and literature to ground the work in meaning. These are things that could have been chosen to be included in the exhibition but instead were set aside for the catalog, giving the viewers all the information, but only if they chose to seek it out. Just as she did in her early work with mattresses and tables, Whiteread went out into the streets and documented everything she could find. She would then document found boxes meticulously through photographs, and occasionally taking home ones of interest. Collecting these boxes and images from around London shows the universality Whiteread was thinking about as she developed this project.

Whiteread collects in different ways. Many times she physically accumulates objects and other times she photographs objects on the street, in their natural state of decay. She says, “The earlier pieces I made have to do with the London environment and its general neglect. Old mattresses, bed bases etc.”² She avoided picking up those objects because it was either too arduous a task to carry a large

¹ Criqui “Rachel Whiteread: Kunsthalle Basel,” 82-83,  
piece of furniture to her studio, or the object had gone past the point of usability for a mold. However, she would document these pieces of furniture and treat those photographs with the same importance as the actual object. She said of her collecting “as much drawings, for me, as the drawings themselves, and they’re related to casting and they’re sometimes related to domesticity.” Whiteread’s practice of combining drawing with photography furthers the comparison to Barthes’s theories on photography with her work. When asked by curator Iwona Blazwick about her sculpture’s association with photography early on in her career, Whiteread responds, “I wasn’t conscious of that association until some years ago. I think it’s a beautiful parallel.” Whiteread understands that there is an unintentional connection between her completed sculptures and photography and that connection is solidified through her use of photographs in her drawing practice. This further solidifies the connection between Barthes’s writings on photography to her sculptures. Barthes’s words have a different application in regards to Whiteread’s actual photographs as they do for her sculptures. Whiteread’s photographs are her thinking process, her drawings; she is literally trying to take her objects, giving them life. However, once she casts them she creates an echo of that life.

The documenting of boxes is important for the process of producing 

*Embankment*, especially when examining it as a memorial. Whiteread chose to assemble a photo-essay of the boxes she found throughout London for the exhibition catalog and not the exhibition. She did this to create a hierarchy between

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3 Curiger “Interview with Rachel Whiteread: ‘The Process of Drawing is like Writing a Diary: It’s a Nice Way of Thinking About Time Passing,’” 60-69.
the cast objects and her photographical research. While her research is important in understanding *Embankment*, it is not a necessary component; showing that understanding the memorial aspects of the work was, for Whiteread, only important for those who understood her experience of unpacking.

**Creating an Environment**

Whiteread completed her installation at the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall by filling the cavernous space with stacks upon stacks of her casts of the spaces inside boxes. Like miniature versions of the rooms in house, and miniature versions of the void used in the Vienna memorial, Whiteread cast the interiors of six different boxes so the installation consisted of a variety of shaped cubes, each of which retained features of the original boxes such as the seams, openings for handles, and crevasses from their previous contents. When looking at *Embankment*, it is apparent that the casts are all of boxes, but with slightly different characteristics. Whiteread did not consistently line the boxes up symmetrically or in the same position, instead she allowed each of the six of the casts to be arranged in endless variations. In one instance, she juxtaposed identical casts one atop the other in the same orientation so one might see straight, vertical, or horizontal seams flowing from one cast to the other effortlessly (Fig. 3.2).

The experience of seeing *Embankment* started as one walked into the Turbine Hall and descended down a gradual ramp. Almost immediately the visitors encountered the first of Whiteread’s negative casts. The piles started off low and as the viewer delved further into the installation the stacks of casts grew taller and
varied in shape. They began to overwhelm the viewer and created a labyrinth for the viewer to walk through. Surrounded on all sides, anyone who walked through Whiteread’s installation saw the huge pyramidal-shaped towers in the back, but soon realized that the towers that initially seemed slightly less substantial in front were close to two stories tall. Whiteread meticulously stacked the casts in different arrangements of piles. Some stacks were constructed in a straightforward cube formation, like boxes in a warehouse (Fig. 3.2). Other piles of casts appear to be cluttered, assembled with no obvious thought, resembling a brick tower that is crumbling, or in the midst of demolition. Towers of blocks surrounded the paths dictated by Whiteread’s installation. Around the circumscribed walkways through the galleries, Whiteread installed some casts in neat, straight walls and others strewn across the floor, appearing as if they had just tumbled over. The masses of boxes created deep shadows onto the floor and onto other stacks of boxes creating an intense contrast to the light shining onto the stark white polyurethane.

Initially it is Whiteread’s reference to the pyramid that gives Embankment its memorial tone. Each of the monumental stacks varies slightly, creating this evocative experience of being surrounded by these translucent boxes while walking amidst the far-reaching structures. Many of the piles are assembled on a steep incline, culminating at a point similar to the Great Pyramids of Ancient Egypt. The resemblance to the Great Pyramids is amplified as one imagines the casts as the square stones constructed by the ancients and stacked one atop the other and recalls that that today those stones are in a state of decay (Fig. 3.3). This visual
relationship with the pyramids conveys an immediate response from the viewer in their quest to realize *Embankment’s* memorial message.

To contemporary viewers the Pyramids memorialize not only the kings buried within, but also the great civilizations long gone. Bartomeu Mari agrees that Whiteread’s work relates to Egyptian mortuary architecture. Whiteread’s adaptation of architecture is not defined by the typical “terms of limits and superstructures,” but instead about “invisibility of architecture” as it merges with its surroundings. Whiteread casts objects causing the viewer to think about death and simultaneously gives the casts a minimalist vocabulary. Through simple geometry and installation techniques, she equates the casts in *Embankment* to the pyramids in Egypt as they rise up to the sun, leaving the beholder to focus on the simple form. Whiteread’s sculpture is a “reminder of a funerary dimension at the heart of what is ordinary bears witness to a joyful vitality.”

This architectural analogy is a mechanism Whiteread utilizes to remind the viewers that the boxes did once contain memories of the belongings they once held. Now the boxes share the collective memories of its contemporaries.

We can turn to Walter Benjamin’s writings regarding mourning and remembrance to further understand the mortuary themes in *Embankment*, Benjamin writes, “The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture...in the fleeting expression of a human

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6 Criqui, “Rachel Whiteread: Kunsthalle Basel.”
face.’” Benjamin’s writings correspond with Barthes’s notion of producing memory from within a void. One empties out a deceased loved one’s house, which “offers a last refuge.” Only after someone is gone do we acquire a “value of the picture.” Whiteread avoids creating a direct image of death. The image of death is what Benjamin associates with remembrance of loved ones. In *Embankment* we were struck with remembering loved ones through negative casts not images, Whiteread casts the indexical qualities the objects left on the cardboard boxes. She goes beyond simply dismantling the image and used the indexicality left from the boxes to convey its former contents and the memories associated with them to the viewer. As Whiteread cleaned out her mother’s house, the box offered one more moment of remembrance. The box Whiteread found could be seen as an index of her childhood memories, much like the photographs Barthes describes. As Barthes writes the indexical quality of a photograph “mechanically repeats what could never be repeated.” It creates a physical manifestation of the paradoxical “image which produces Death while trying to preserve life.” Whiteread projects memories onto the original box as if the box can reincarnate the fond moments from her childhood, the reason she saved that box.

### Cardboard, Boxes, and the Things People do with them

People fill boxes with things they wish to remember sometime in the future. In practicality, the crux of that remembering happens after they have died. Those

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9 Ibid, 92.
boxes and memories resurface after their decedents clean out the closet or basement filled with those boxes. Once the cleaning and sorting is complete, they have to decide what to do with the contents, keep them or dispose of them. Often the physical box will be destroyed just as Barthes writes, “this photograph which yellows and fades, and will someday be thrown out, if not by me...at least when I die?”

The boxes and objects inside them eventually will become trash. Barthes’s words about the temporal nature of the photograph and its associations with death remind the viewer of what they have lost, in a way that is similar to Whiteread’s original box and the second generation of casts.

The idea to cast a cardboard box stemmed from the death of Whiteread’s mother. The artist was cleaning out her mother’s house and was overcome by the memories. Whiteread claims when she discovered one particular box she was overwrought. The box (Fig. 3.4) formerly held Sellotape and became the perfect home for many of Whiteread’s childhood objects. Whiteread’s mother had passed away suddenly, and it took a long time to sort through the boxes and objects in her home. Whiteread describes sorting through her mother’s belongings as, “everything looked like a still from a film; a film of my life. And I felt I was going mad.” The idea of unpacking an entire house was unnerving for the artist, “having to repeat these memories,” which had not been unearthed in over 30 years. As Barthes discusses, the hollowness felt from losing one’s mother, “would be absolutely and entirely

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10 Ibid, 94.
11 Equivalent to Scotch brand tape in the United States.
12 Wood, Embankment, 25.
13 Gordon Burn “Interview with Rachel Whiteread,” Embankment, 74.
unqualifiable (without quality).” The loss creates a void so great, that it is unable to be captured.

This act of remembering is multiplied through the installation of Embankment. When interacting with the installation, people walk through the mountains of boxes as a unit. The space guides them along through prescribed pathways. It is as if they are exploring their memories while they simultaneously create new memories. This unpacking of memories correlates to Benjamin’s thoughts when unpacking his boxes,

I must ask you to join me in the disorder of crates that have been wrenched open, the air saturated with the dust of wood, the floor covered with torn paper, to join me among piles of volumes that are seeing daylight again after two years of darkness, so that you may be ready to share with me a bit of the mood. The experience of maneuvering through the assorted boxes is a shared practice according to Benjamin. Together, a community of people unpacks the box’s contents. In Benjamin’s case he is literally unpacking boxes. For Whiteread it is more metaphysical, her audience is communally unpacking memories. Whiteread is employing the same mechanisms as in Holocaust Memorial. She is utilizing temporality to bring the viewer back in time with his or her own memories,

While the decision to cast boxes stemmed from a specific box unique to Whiteread, many viewers can relate to the experience of losing a loved one and unpacking boxes filled with memories. Whiteread found a way to physically represent her grief in a way that is relatable to many other people who would view

14 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 75
15 Benjamin “Unpacking my Library” Illuminations, 59.
her sculpture. As Tate curator Catherine Wood has noted, the Sellotape box is a highly specific object that many of Whiteread’s generation would have recognized from their childhoods. The blue tape-like “S” on the side of the carton would be an instantly recognizable logo to Whiteread’s contemporaries. Yet, Whiteread has never actually cast this particular box, the sentimental value is immeasurable to risk its destruction. It hangs on the collage wall in her studio. Whiteread still sought boxes with history behind them; it did not just exclusively have to be her own history. As previously discussed, the boxes she collected extend the context of the sculpture beyond her personal experiences, allowing a collective audience to appreciate the memorial.

Whiteread is a collector of many things. She collects objects that function as studies for her work. Many of her most prized processions are the boxes and wrappings her eBay purchases come in. Specifically the eBay purchases relate to another one of Whiteread’s collections. She hoards dollhouses from eBay, and when they arrive in her London studio, “It’s always a completely weird package...this is what people do to them.” Whiteread’s obsession with boxes is a great way to examine her artistic practice of collecting objects as studies for sculptures and her fascination with the diverse habits people have with their personal belongings, such as boxes. Through her collection of boxes Whiteread surmised a reaction of awe from her audience, because they are objects we all have, but not ones we are used to

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18 Ibid. Whiteread exhibited her Dollhouses as an installation in 2008 first in Naples and then in Boston.
seeing cast in a museum.\textsuperscript{19} While everyone interacts uniquely with their personal cardboard boxes, the vast majority will not have faced a labyrinth of 14,000 interior casts of boxes.

These boxes are “skins” for “what’s actually happened to the interior; the traces left by what it once contained.”\textsuperscript{20} The boxes she selected had “personality inside.”\textsuperscript{21} Each box retains minor remnants of its previous contents, maybe some color wore off, or indentations pressed into the cardboard, or there is residue of moisture. It is apparent the boxes have been used, but only to a certain extent, most likely a person would not be able to specifically identify the former contents.

Whiteread was fascinated by the space inside of a box, the space occupied by memories. That fascination relates to her desire to collect them. When Whiteread finds a discarded box on the street, it may still contain its original contents or it may not. It is up to Whiteread to establish the importance of that box; maybe it is its shape, the label (or lack of label) on a box, or the location where she finds it? The ambiguity of what created the markings and dents on the cardboard boxes that invite questions about memories and past experiences.

Whiteread was also fascinated with cardboard in particular. Cardboard is a sponge, a sturdy sponge but a sponge nonetheless. Cardboard retains the shapes, colors and smells of its contents. Cardboard boxes become scratched and dented in storage, absorbing everything that happens around them. Primarily, it is what happens on the inside of the box that causes the cardboard to develop its unique

\textsuperscript{19} Gordon Burn “Interview with Rachel Whiteread,” \textit{Embankment}, 80.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 77.
characteristics (Fig. 3.5). Whiteread casts the area inside a box to capture those moments where the cardboard was altered by its contents, “the place where all the flaps are shut. It’s inside there.”\textsuperscript{22} It is the space we cannot see. In order to strongly convey the character of the boxes Whiteread selects boxes that are infused with memories from their previous contents, ones that the viewer can see have been used for some purpose. Whiteread collects cardboard boxes that in her opinion have personality. As opposed to Holocaust Memorial, Whiteread is exposing the void. The memories are not entombed inside the casts; instead what the viewer encountered was the void: the place we normally “cannot see.” She wanted to expose the entrails of our memories, the things we hide in a closet or an attic far away from prying eyes.

Another way Whiteread invites her audience to memorialize the unpacking of the boxes together is through her research about cardboard boxes. A series of emails Whiteread sent to Catherine Wood in May 2005 (Embankment opened in October 2005) showcase different global narratives that inspired her.\textsuperscript{23} Eventually some of the articles she researched were put in the exhibition catalog alongside photographs of boxes from around the world (aside from those she took herself around London) She collected (and subsequently emailed) many press articles with a central theme of stories in which people use cardboard boxes. Most of them related to a death, loss or absence. One story was about Polish immigrants to the United Kingdom attempting to build a new life, during which they would sleep in cardboard boxes.\textsuperscript{24} Another example discusses how police found a cardboard box

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 75.
\textsuperscript{23} Whiteread, “Photo essay” Embankment.
\textsuperscript{24} Email from Rachel Whiteread to Catherine Wood 28 April 2005, Tate Archive.
containing a deceased infant in London. In a third, somewhat different example, Whiteread offers an example from a discussion surrounding the election of the previous Pope. The article examines the different Cardinal candidates. Whiteread highlights a passage about Jorge Bergoglio, a Jesuit from Argentina and now the current Pope, “He lives a simple life, cooks his own meals, rides buses and works with the people in the cardboard cities of the Argentine capital. At the same time he has gained a reputation...for being a deeply spiritual man.” Whiteread mentions that he is a man to notice. Using this diverse array of articles, Whiteread was attempting to broaden the scope of her audience and show how the memorial is relatable in a global context. It also shows Whiteread’s interest in cardboard cities, citing another influence for the way she assembled the casts. Rachel Whiteread chooses the commonplace object of a cardboard box from her personal history. However, she validates its importance in the realm of memorial objects though proof from around the world. All the articles are from different nationalities of people: Polish, English, and Argentinian.

25 Email from Rachel Whiteread to Catherine Wood 3 May 2005
www.wsfa.com/global/story.asp?S=3137420&nav=0RdEY1RN, Tate Archive
26 Email from Rachel Whiteread to Catherine Wood 3 May 2005
This article was written in 2005 when the Catholic Church was selecting Pope Benedict XVI. The Cardinal referenced by Whiteread in her research has since been named Pope Francis on March 13, 2013.
27 Whiteread also emailed articles with similar stories about people from South Africa. Further the article discussing the selection of a new Pope addresses a global audience, even though her highlights focus on one nationality.
Memorial to Memory

Additionally, the Tate channeled the idea of a communal unpacking in their publicity for the exhibition. The opening invitations, the posters, and gallery pamphlet were all designed in the shape and texture of cardboard boxes. The invitation was a cardboard box that one needed to be opened to find the information inside, placing the idea of storage and unpacking in the viewer’s minds before they even got there. Further, the memories of *Embankment* now remain in cardboard boxes the Tate uses for archival materials. The ephemeral quality of this memorial to memories only exists through our memories, and inside new cardboard boxes.

Together, all the visitors are embracing these memories. The viewers evoke old memories of cleaning out their loved one’s closets (which can, as it was in Whiteread’s specific case, be a collective activity with multiple people). As filmmaker and feminist theorist, Trinh T. Minh Ha writes, “mother always remembers. And what she remembers she never forgets to weave it with what her mother, her grandmother, her great-grandmother remembered.”28 Trinh is pointing out that remembering is a collective action. It is constantly added onto person by person. This relates to Barthes’s theory that the each viewer projects a photograph’s significance onto the image. Each memory contributes to the next, mutually building on what came before. Trinh also points out that memory is humanity’s way of maintaining wisdom in our lives. She writes that memory is the wisdom not to forget what happened in the past. The same memories that are “constantly shifting

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the frontier between reality and fantasy; and to questioning.”\textsuperscript{29} The wisdom described by Trinh also relates the practice of reimagining frontiers, boundaries, and our changing place in the world, a function of contemporary memorials. Memorials teach us what has come before, and how to improve our past actions in the future. Whiteread’s boxes stacked one atop another created a physical manifestation of those memories accumulated in our minds, providing another lens through which to comprehend the work.

Whiteread is making a memorial to memory. It is an interesting concept, how does one memorialize our memories? One would think that memories are not something in need of a memorial. If a memorial’s purpose is to promote awareness of past events in order for future generations to learn from them, we should be able to remember and honor our own memories. Further, one generally defines memorial sculpture and memory sculpture as different entities, albeit ones that can overlap. In \textit{Embankment} Whiteread is combining both. Whiteread says one of the reasons her sculptural practice is so successful is because, “It’s very difficult to turn a space into an object in your mind...”\textsuperscript{30} One of the greatest challenges to Whiteread’s work is understanding her practice of casting space, not objects themselves. For \textit{Embankment} Whiteread is again challenging her audience in two ways: to grasp the notion of her casting the space inside a box. Using the interior space of a box as a manifestation of memories, Whiteread is making a statement that memories are temporal and something to hold onto, as she experienced with the sudden death of her mother. Her audience should walk away with the understanding that memories

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 99.
\textsuperscript{30} Rachel Whiteread in conversation with Ina Cole “Mapping Traces,” 38.
are not something to take for granted. Gordon Burn refers to the *Embankment* casts as “emergency coffins” that one sees in a newsreel at a time of war or emergency.\(^{31}\) Whiteread is creating a similar mechanism for her viewers. Her casts probably will never ease the pain of realizing how our time and memories are fleeting, but she is raising awareness and giving the viewers a means to honor those already gone.

It is important to note that *Embankment* is a site-specific work. It was created with the intention of never being shown again. From the onset, Whiteread wanted the installation’s existence to be finite. She said, “It was also a piece that I knew I wanted to have destroyed. It’s about making it and being the moment and quietly getting rid of it.”\(^{32}\) The destruction of the 14,000 boxes was no small task and it was one she planned from the onset. Her primary reason for such a drastic measure was that she had no desire for the piece to be divided (after subsequent sales) into smaller parts, which would have inevitably happened with a work of this scale.\(^{33}\) *Embankment* is a collective unit; its parts need to exist together. Otherwise the memorial quality of the work would be nonexistent.

The site for *Embankment* is essential to its role as a memorial. The Turbine Hall was originally secondary in terms of its significance as a memorial, but Whiteread worked to incorporate the location as an important part of *Embankment’s* memorial qualities. However, she is giving the space this temporary place of importance for everyone who visits. The vast, empty void that is the Turbine Hall adds to the void from the boxes. Once a place of economic importance,

\(^{31}\) Gordon Burn “Interview with Rachel Whiteread,” *Embankment*, 79.

\(^{32}\) Rachel Whiteread, in conversation with A. M. Homes, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston October 18, 2009.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
as one the old factories along the River Thames, it now functions as one of the most important installation spaces in the world. As Catherine Wood says, “The memorial has always been a point of reference for Whiteread,” she continues, “and here the boxes might appear not only as monuments to individual lives and people’s things but also as a reflection of the museum’s status as keeper of collective memory, or as a lament on the obsolescence of industrial production.” The embankment along the Thames was an engineering feat of the 19th century and became a prominent part of the city’s urban development and landscape. It protected the city from floods and allowed the notoriously filthy river to be cleaned up. Whiteread’s title reinforced the relations to the history of London and its civil engineering.

One can no longer go and see Whiteread’s negative casts of boxes as a unit (she has since made individual ones for commercial gallery sales). As Whiteread said, “Things generally are made to be a specific moment, that is what they are, an object and they sit in space. A piece like House and Embankment were [sic] meant to be destroyed, but they were the only two objects that were made like that.” After having the viewers think about their own personal memories and the collective ones they forged while walking through the installation, at its core, Embankment represents London. Whiteread said, “I thought of it as something that was built up, 

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34 Further, the history of the building adds another element to Whiteread’s choice of title, Embankment, as specific to London’s histories and landscape.
35 Wood, Embankment, p 32.
36 The title was how Whiteread included the urban framework and history of the city, an element that will take become important later on.
and built up out of other materials, something that was completely connected to London and, specifically, resonated with the river location.” In the end, *Embankment* was her first intended, albeit temporary, memorial in London.

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38 Gordon Burn “Interview with Rachel Whiteread,” *Embankment*, 82.
After *Embankment* Whiteread had accomplished making a memorial where the object she casted maintained a distance from the memorial’s meaning. She had yet to create a memorial that addressed and created a successful discourse with the landscape. In *Embankment*, Whiteread tried to address some of the environmental elements that were not successful in *House* (Fig. 1.1) and *Holocaust Memorial* (Fig. 1.7). For *Embankment* (Fig. 1.8) Whiteread moved her memorial practice indoors and attempted to create her own landscape for the memorial; it was a significant step in accomplishing that goal but not a final product. She said in a 1997 interview, “I’m fascinated by landscape, by the traces of weathering and geological movement that make up our environment.” ¹ After *Embankment* the next public sculpture Whiteread makes is not a memorial, but is a sculpture that decided to make in order to figure out once and for all how to create a visual dialog between her public art and it’s landscape, *Boathouse*, 2010, (Fig. 1.11).

**Sculpture as Landscape**

*Boathouse* was commissioned by a bank in the region of Gran, Norway, about an hour outside of Oslo. It is by far and away Whiteread’s most remote public piece, her first not commissioned for a dense urban environment such as New York, Vienna or London. Located on a lake in Gran alongside a lake in the municipality of Røykenviken, Norway, the sculpture is a concrete cast of the interior of an old

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boathouse. Through her negative cast, she literally turned the boathouse inside out, capturing a moment in time, casting the building precisely as it was in the instant she created it. It is not a memorial, but a commemorative object. Whiteread is casting the boathouse, and the sculpture is simply about the object that she casts. There is no greater context for understanding the symbolism of the boathouse in terms of why she selected the initial object. Whiteread decided to cast this boathouse because a boathouse is an object associated with the region. When she was exploring the area of Gran she saw many beautiful boathouses scheduled for demolition. Boathouses are buildings on the water where people stored their boats. They are common structures throughout Norway, which is mostly surrounded by water. It is logical that historically boats would be a primary mode of economic transport. In order to save the memory of this part of the region’s social and economic history Whiteread said, “I have mummified the air inside the boathouse. I wanted to make a shy sculpture, a sculpture that would stand there peaceful and noble.” The language of Whitehead’s statement shows her emphasis on the sculpture exists. For the purpose of casting it, Whiteread had the original boathouse transported to her studio in London, where she made the cast and brought the cast back to Gran. It is situated right on the edge of the lake, exactly where the preexisting boathouse would have been. This allows for the water to rise up against the concrete, just as it would on an actual boathouse (Fig. 4.1). Depending on the

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5 Conversation with Whiteread’s gallery Luhring Augustine, January 29, 2013.
height of the tide, the work’s placement on the edge of the lake causes it to appear to be floating on water.

_Boathouse_ follows in the tradition of _House_ and _Holocaust Memorial_, Whiteread’s two other concrete public sculptures. One was a family’s home, another was Whiteread’s imagined notion of a past home, and one was a house for boats. This common theme of a house is significant in the discussion of Whiteread’s public work. Yet, unlike _House_ and _Holocaust Memorial_, _Boathouse_ is not a memorial. It is a sculpture reflecting the object that once stood there, an object that otherwise would have literally been destroyed. _Boathouse_ is not inviting the viewer to contemplate the past or meaning, but just to continue the history of the boathouse in a visual, permanent way.

Another unique aspect of _Boathouse_ is that the sculpture received little to no press and Whiteread scarcely mentioned it in any interviews. Whiteread said about the piece, “It was my intention to make an ‘invisible’ sculpture.’ I wanted to place something in the landscape that was discreet. It was also my intention to not make a ‘fuss’ about it.” A “discreet” sculpture, according to Whiteread, is one that simply replacing what came before. _Boathouse_ is not something that will stop people in their tracks or something to be sought after. Almost as if she subverted reality so the viewer does not even see it as different than the original. It is not surprising that

6 Aside from a press release and the website of Skulturstopp, the commissioning organization, I could not find any press articles about the piece aside from a few Flicker and Tumblr mentions on line. Whiteread mentions it in passing once in an interview with The Independent in June 2012, two years after _Boathouse_ was built, for the release of her most recent public sculpture _Tree of Life_.
7 Whiteread in email to the author December 3, 2012.
Whiteread felt this way for making her third house structure. The first two received an unimaginable amount of attention, and took a great deal of energy away from Whiteread and her desire to just create art. For Boathouse, Whiteread was presented with the opportunity to continue this theme that is apparently very important to her creative process and to do it low-key, no pomp and circumstance, the only thing that matters is the art and its surrounding landscape.

Boathouse is not the first time Whiteread has vocalized the desire to create an invisible sculpture. When she created Water Tower, 1998, (Fig. 1.10) immediately after House, she wanted it to disappear in the sky, to literally become invisible. Whiteread decided to cast an old water tower and install it on a rooftop blending in with the Manhattan skyline. Whiteread proposed to create a negative cast of a water tower, one that was aged, but had never been used so the cast would be able to pick up traces of the wood grain. The sculpture would sit on a standard, metal frame. Whiteread cast the piece in resin and left the core hollow. Water Tower has a hollow core for logistical as well as aesthetic reasons. She wanted the light to pass through in a certain way and it had to be physically able be raised on the roof. She cast it in two parts, the cylindrical base topped with a resin cone. The cast was to sit atop a roof with no special markings, to blend in as any other water tower would. Conceptually, by leaving the cast hollow in addition to creating the cast in a translucent resin, Whiteread is creating a literal void in her representation of a void.

Water Tower was Whiteread’s first attempt to make sculpture that flows with it’s environment. Her decision to use resin allowed the sculpture to disappear

9 Neri, Looking Up, 25
in the sky and Whiteread’s choice of object was made to be compatible with the urban environment of New York. When Whiteread chose to cast a water tower she “tried to think of the furniture of the New York. What is domestic there, and available if you want to see it.” The decision to cast “the furniture” of the city is Whiteread’s way of saying she wanted the sculpture to blend in and belong on that roof. However, Water Tower was still a high profile sculpture, with a large amount of press and even its own book. In contrast there is almost no press or scholarship written about Boathouse, something atypical for an artist as prominent as Whiteread.

The decision to create a sculpture that is about the landscape opened a new door in Whiteread’s career. Whiteread’s choice of words, describing the object’s place in the landscape as “discreet” is significant in its site-specificity. If the character of the sculpture is contingent upon placing it precisely where the original boathouse stood, then the work can never be moved. Boathouse is an indication of the new way Whiteread is approaching site in her public sculpture highlighted in comparison to Water Tower, Holocaust Memorial and House. These earlier works raised questions about how they relate to their site. Before House was destroyed, there was brief talk about moving it to a different location. Water Tower was commissioned for a Manhattan rooftop in SoHo and is now located on the roof of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; as opposed to her other public sculptures where she was subjected to the approval of art and civil institutions With Boathouse

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Whiteread had complete control of the logistics. As a result, Whiteread says this will not be the only time she incorporates landscape into her public sculptures. She says

This is an ongoing project where I am casting generic buildings in the landscape. They are site specific and cannot be moved. I intend to make a book when a number have been completed. I am currently making two more in the desert in Los Angeles, one in Norfolk, England...and possibly one in New York. Watch this space - it is a lifetime project.11

This new trend in her public works to create sculpture that visually blends in with its surroundings will be a very interesting mid-career shift for Whiteread. Her first years as a public sculptor were influenced by immense attention and controversy surrounding her public pieces, how they stood out and offended people. This new direction for her public sculptures is different than what she attempted with Water Tower. In New York, Whiteread was not thinking about creating a sculpture in the landscape, she wanted to create a sculpture that could altogether disappear.

**Tree of Life, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2012**

It is only after Whiteread’s success with *Boathouse* that she is able to create a memorial that is successful both in terms of its landscape and subtlety of form. In June 2012 Whiteread installed a relief, titled *Tree of Life*, (Fig. 1.9) on the façade of the Whitechapel Gallery in East London. It was Whiteread’s first permanent public commission in her hometown, and it also functions as a memorial. Whiteread creates a sculptural frieze in memory of the late 19th and early 20th century artistic traditions and values on which the Whitechapel Gallery was founded. This is her first public sculpture in London’s East End since *House*; therefore, Whiteread created a duality by making the sculpture in recognition of the many artists who

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struggle and create art in the East End, as Whiteread herself does, in addition to remembering the founding artistic values in the area. In her fourth memorial, Whiteread merges major themes from her three previous ones. Similar to *Holocaust Memorial*, the site of this sculpture is crucial to its functionality as a memorial. Additionally, as with *Embankment*, Whiteread’s personal history is steeped into the memorial. However unlike her other memorials, Whiteread implements an experiential element to *Tree of Life*, requiring viewers to look up at the sculpture, and distance themselves from it, to glean its memorial qualities. Through this memorial she raises awareness about past artistic traditions and the dense urban landscape in East London. Whiteread also uses this public sculpture to expand on formal and conceptual themes she used in her earlier public sculpture, *Water Tower* in New York.

**Memorial to London’s East End and The Arts and Crafts Movement**

Historically, the Whitechapel Gallery has been a core institution in the East End of London. It is one of the few remaining institutions left from the days when East London was being feverishly settled by the working class and immigrants. The gallery was founded at the turn of the century, at the urging of Henrietta Barnett, one of the most important developers of the East End at the turn of the century. She wanted the area to be recognized as an independent cultural entity and not just become an intermediary for new immigrants as they moved to more established areas in London. The Whitechapel Galley did indeed help form a place for art in the

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East End. It greatly encouraged artists to produce work out of the East End and highlighted British art. In its first decade it mounted exhibitions titled, “Artists in the British Isles at the Beginning of the Century” and “Modern Pictures by Living Artists, Pre Raphaelites and Older English Masters.” It also exhibited work produced by children in local primary schools and shows titled “Amateurs and Arts Students.”

The gallery created a base for which more local art could be produced. As it grew, the Whitechapel brought in groundbreaking exhibitions to London, such as displaying Picasso’s *Guernica*, and Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothoko’s first shows in Britain. Architect Charles Harrison Townsend (British, 1851 –1928) constructed the Whitechapel Gallery in 1901 in the Arts and Crafts style. Originally, Townsend designed the building to have a large decorative frieze, which was never completed, by Walter Crane, an important British illustrator and designer in the Arts and Crafts Movement. Remaining consistent with classic Arts and Crafts style, the building constructed in asymmetrical, simple forms, wide doorways and a relatively flat façade. Keeping with the Arts and Crafts Movement’s vernacular, Townsend used commonplace materials such as stone and tiles. Flanking the building are two fictive stone towers. The towers are like bookends, contiguous with the empty stone façade in between them. On the towers are terracotta representations of the Tree of Life. The trees represent the ideals of growth, renewal and knowledge; all values the institution was founded on as the first free temporary exhibition space in London.

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14 Press Release: *Tree of Life*. 
This further highlights the mission of the Whitechapel gallery to bring great art to London.\textsuperscript{15}

The East End’s devotion to art expands far past just the Whitechapel. Over the last half a century the area has become home to throngs of artists. Areas such as Hoxton Square and Shoreditch have become homes to many of London’s established and amateur artists. Older artists such as Gilbert and George live there, as well as many of the Young British Artists (YBAs); Rachel Whiteread is one of those many artists. As the daughter of an artist herself, Whiteread has lived almost her entire life in the East End borough of Hackney. Further, one of first major group shows to feature her work was at the Whitechapel. She was selected to be in their 1988 Open Exhibition, wherein the Whitechapel requested open-call submissions from artists who lived in the East End. The Whitechapel felt it was the institution’s “duty” to give the local artists a chance to display their art.\textsuperscript{16} Whiteread also participated in a series of open studios in the late 1980s organized by the Whitechapel (where many artists opened their studios to the public on specific weekends). The institution and the area are important to Whiteread. She said at the sculpture’s unveiling, “Having lived in this area of London for so long I feel very connected to the Whitechapel gallery and I hope my work will have a positive and lasting impact for the area and communities here.”\textsuperscript{17} Now, she had the opportunity to fill a century old gap on a historic East End building. An element of the memorial is in response to Whiteread’s days as a young East End artist, back when the area was teeming with aspiring

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Internal memo from the 1988 Whitechapel Open, Whitechapel gallery archives.
\textsuperscript{17} “Rachel Whiteread Unveils Whitechapel Frieze” Phaidon.
artists. Whiteread discusses her time living in, “if you could survive Carpenters Road [her first studio], you could survive anywhere.”  

The area has always been in a constant state of renewal and in particular since the Thatcher years with Canary Wharf and the redevelopment of the docklands (the industrial area along the Thames). Whiteread wanted to create a “gift to the area, something that will brighten up someone’s day.”

Influenced by the architecture of the area, Whiteread decided to expand on the motif and materials already in place. She casts the leaves in bronze and gilds them and creates negative casts of windows out of terracotta. The frieze is installed on the upper register of the Whitechapel façade so it can be seen from down the street and the glittering leaves can brighten up the cloudiest of days, stopping people in their tracks. When one walks down the street, or comes up from the tube next to the sculpture, it truly accomplishes those things. The frieze is simply beautiful in the sunlight and against the dreary London sky. It is not everyday one comes across gold leaves blowing along the façade of a building, Whiteread successfully encourages the local pedestrians to simply stop and look.

Whiteread expands on William Morris’s fundamental ideals about ornamentation for the Arts and Crafts Movement. He writes, “all art should be ornamental, and when it is not ornamental...it fails of a part of its purpose.” He also discusses the necessity for ornamentation on buildings, and how decorations are the “nobler form” of art. Morris writes, “a building duly provided with all the

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18 Cooke, “Rachel Whiteread: I couldn’t say no. It felt right to do this one.”
19 Masters, “Rachel Whiteread Unveils Golden frieze at Whitechapel Gallery.”
necessary furniture, decorated with all due ornament, according to the use, quality and dignity of the building” are what creates a “happy exercise of energies.” 21 The focus should be on purity and elegance of a silhouette, not concerned with the meaning or weight behind the object. The politics behind Morris’s ideals stem from his desire to bring art back to the people.22 He desired for art to return to craft and not remain confined to the upper ranks of society. The Arts and Crafts Movement, along with Morris, emphasized the importance of materials when creating art. As mentioned, the use of everyday materials was important for the Movement’s objective to move away from the grandiose style of architecture and design traditionally extolled by British society. Morris also accentuates that art’s choice of medium should go beyond just everyday materials, there should be more thought put into what an artist uses. He writes, “When you fence anything in a garden use a live hedge, or stones set flatwise...in short, anything but iron”23 While Whiteread does not follow his words directly she avoids creating the leaves with a harsh material such as iron, or a harsh material traditional to Whiteread’s oeuvre, such as plaster or concrete. Morris continues that a garden should, “look like part of a

22 Morris’s ideal about “art of the people” is interesting when compared to Whiteread’s generation of artists, the YBAs (Young British Artists) who rose up during the Thatcher years in England to bring contemporary art to the forefront of a nation very much steeped in tradition and “academic” art. One of the goals of the YBA generation was to make art accessible to all, and create opportunities for contemporary artists to succeed as artists. It should also be noted that the majority of those artists’ studios were in the East London.
house,” something Whiteread does by blending her sculpture in with the preexisting motif on the building and the integration with London’s rooftops.

Whiteread created a sculpture in constant dialogue with the local urban landscape, like she did with *Eembankment*. In addition to the terracotta leaves already sculpted on the façade of the Whitechapel, Whiteread was inspired by the local East End plant buddleja, or as Whiteread calls it “Hackney weed,” which “[is] popping up all over the place.” She was inspired to gild the cast bronze as she stood on the roof of Saint Paul’s Cathedral and looked west. The idea of the gold color connecting with the greyness of London inspired her. She wanted to bring life to the area, and the gold leaves do that. Whiteread said, “It is a monument to serve the people of East London.” She continued, “It’s connected with the architecture, the sociology and the anthropology of the area. I’ve worked with the local foundry, so it’s all very East End based.” She is not only exploring the architecture and historic urban development of her home in a new way, but also incorporating the citizens of the East End; echoing Morris’s words, “the handicraftsman, left behind by the artist...must come up with him, must work side by side with him.” When artist and handicraftsman work side by side, Morris writes “there should be no difference between those employed on strictly ornamental work.” Whiteread is not only sculpting a memorial for the East End, but also inviting the East End to sculpt it alongside her.

24 Ibid, 98.
25 *Press Release: Tree of Life.*
26 Cooke, “Rachel Whiteread: I couldn’t say no. It felt right to do this one.”
27 Masters, “Rachel Whiteread Unveils Golden frieze at Whitechapel Gallery.”
Understanding Whiteread’s choice to use gold in context of Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement creates a problem. Gilt bronze is not a medium that exemplifies the austere values of the Arts and Crafts style architecture and design. The gold on Tree of Life allows for a formal connection to Olbricht’s Secession Building (Fig. 4.2). When designing Tree of Life Whiteread was reminded of her time in Vienna. When she was in Vienna working on Holocaust Memorial she says, “I did spend a lot of time there...and the Secession was always a beacon in all my misery. But I was also thinking about the Arts and Crafts Movement.”\(^{29}\) For Whiteread there is a connection between the Arts and Crafts Movement and the Vienna Secession, which she combined in Tree of Life. The Whitechapel had similar blank spaces (before Whiteread’s sculpture) glorified in the Secession Movement. While Morris was attempting to revive the artisan culture in London, there was no need for a revival during the Vienna Secession, but a necessity to retain a fledging artisan society.\(^{30}\) The Secession Building even proclaims on its façade, “To the age its art, to arts its freedom.”\(^{31}\) This notion of freedom for arts parallels similar artistic goals stated by the Whitechapel Gallery upon its founding. Formally, the Whitechapel frieze is addressing the art and architecture Whiteread saw in Vienna while working her other memorial. Another architectural element Whiteread extracts from the Secession style is the Secession’s desires to create architectural language for the modern urban man. In the ever-changing fast moving world the Secession founders wanted to create a style to help ease the new world that Otto Wagner describes as

\(^{29}\) Cooke, “Rachel Whiteread: I couldn’t say no. It felt right to do this one.”


\(^{31}\) Ibid, 219.
“painful uncertainty.” They did this, according to Carl Schorske, through finding new ways of utilizing the wall, to proclaim its two-dimensionality and to “present symbolically the abstract essence of the illusory world of substance.”

The Secession accentuated the flat nature of walls, not valued in traditional European architecture, in order to create a new artistic use for exterior façades. This new wall architecture can be seen on the Secession Building and Wagner’s apartment houses on the Wienzeile (Fig. 4.3). Whiteread adapts the gold, organic, tree-like design used on Secession architecture for *Tree of Life*. She also uses the upper registers of the Whitechapel in the same way as the Secession, accenting the flatness of the wall to create her first permanent sculpture in London.

Whiteread’s decision to base her design for the Whitechapel façade on the fictive towers relates to another theme Morris greatly admires in architecture. In his opinion, the Gothic period of art and its motivation to expand to great heights was an even greater achievement than Greco-Roman advances in architecture. Many of Morris’s theories on patterning and design were influenced from his love of Gothic art created by “men like you and me, handicraftsmen, who have left no names behind, nothing but their work.”

Morris lauded Gothic art and architecture because it created art for the masses. Craftsmen designed and produced Gothic Art; an ideal Morris strove to bring to London in the late 19th century. The Whitechapel does indeed have elements of Gothic architecture strewn into the façade. The large archway over the door is reminiscent of arched doorways on Gothic buildings.

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32 Ibid, 85.
33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
addition, the building’s towers culminate with miniature pointed arches. This choice follows in the pattern set forth by *Holocaust Memorial* and *Embankment*: the objects Whiteread chooses to cast for her memorials are about the context of the work and not about the objects themselves. Here Whiteread is not commemorating leaves and windows, but what those leaves and windows represent in their historical context.

The discussion of the Whitechapel’s Gothic architectural influence creates a foil for Whiteread’s negative, terracotta, cast of the windows. In addition to the high steeples and towers in Gothic architecture, the stained-glass windows are an important characteristic of the style. Whiteread creates the antithesis of stained glass. She creates four, heavy, solid, terracotta windows. One associates light and weightlessness with stained glass. Terracotta is just the opposite; it is earthenware taken from the ground. However the windows she is representing are echoed in Morris’s work as heavy and large. The windows allowed too much light to come into the average Englishman’s home.\(^\text{36}\) They are rectangular and gridded, much like the ones on the Whitechapel, a feature Whiteread chooses to replicate. The convex windows serve as reminders of important architectural trends in London.\(^\text{37}\) Her decision to use the heavy medium of terracotta can be seen as a way to assuage Morris’ dislike for the windows of his day as she memorializes the artistic style he created. The Arts and Crafts Movement would have approved of terracotta as a medium for its simplicity. Whiteread was inspired to cast windows because of the following when she says, “There were two funny little windows belonging to the


\(^{37}\) *Press Release: Tree of Life.*
caretaker's flat that had been blocked off. It was a way of reintroducing the life that had once been lived there,” furthering the memorial qualities of Tree of Life.

Another possible thematic reason for choosing terracotta could be to complement the gilt bronze leaves and branches that make up the rest of the sculpture. Here, Whiteread can be making a symbolic connection between the terracotta windows and the leaves billowing around them. In her decision to honor the tradition of the Arts and Crafts, Whiteread creates what is most probably her most ornamental sculpture yet.

The mediums and techniques employed by Whiteread represents a drastic shift in her oeuvre. She drastically shifts her choice of medium from a stark concrete or plaster, to terracotta and gilt bronze. Whiteread’s choices are grounded in the purpose of honoring the site and the historic East End community it memorializes, but in terms of her career they are striking choices. By creating positive casts of leaves, she is no longer casting what the eye cannot see or the space between things. The leaves on the Whitechapel, like the books in Vienna, are positive casts of objects. They are not the area surrounding the objects, but the objects themselves.

Through the books, Whiteread was making a statement about a persecuted nation who persevered and will continue to learn and grow. With the leaves, besides from being objects that literally grow, Whiteread’s sculpture is memorializing the historic artistic growth of London’s East End while simultaneously hoping for a productive future.

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38 Spence, “Gilding Among the Grime.”
39 In Vienna, the absence where the shelves should be are the negative space Whiteread casts, and on the Whitechapel façade the cast windows are the negative casts of the actual Whitechapel Gallery windows.
Morris holds that viewers are sometimes required to seek out great art, and not to look in the obvious places. He writes that people who “seldom go five miles from their own doors in such places, have seen work so delicate, so careful and so inventive that noting in its way could go further.” In his mission to revive medieval artistic values in Britain, Morris wants the viewer to pursue art outside of a museum or gallery space, into the artisans’ homes or tucked away where you least suspect it. While Whiteread does not place her sculpture completely out of site, she reevaluates the traditional placement of memorial sculpture, and in honor of the artistic traditions set forth by Morris installs her memorial in an atypical viewing space: above the viewer’s line of vision.

Whiteread is following in a tradition of established British artists donating art to London’s East End residents. Henry Moore sold his sculpture Draped Seated Woman, 1957, (Fig. 4.4) at an extremely discounted rate to the London County Council in order to bring some light to the economically fledgling neighborhood of Tower Hamlets. Moore sold the work on the condition that it would be shown in the public spaces of the borough so all the residents would have access to art. Fondly referred to as “Old Flo” by local residents, the sculpture has been a landmark in the area. Moore’s actions are very similar to what Whiteread is doing with Tree of Life; bringing art to the people walking down the street who might not have the opportunity otherwise.

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**Water Tower, New York City, 1998**

Whiteread implemented some of her artistic practices for *Tree of Life* that she established in her earlier public sculpture *Water Tower*. In 1994, the Public Art Fund gave Whiteread an open offer to come to New York and create a sculpture anywhere. She scoured Manhattan and Brooklyn looking for a location, immediately ruling out any traditional public art locations such as the Seagram Plaza or the narrow wedge-shaped island in front of the Flatiron Building or Madison Square Park. She said, "I finally realized there was no way I wanted to work on street level. New York is completely mad. There's no peace in this city. It's chaos. I tried to find a quiet place."  

Whiteread's *Water Tower* expressed her desire to create art that blended in with its surroundings, the antithesis of *House*. She wanted to maintain her practice of casting a banal object, one that would not disrupt the average New Yorker’s day. As mentioned, she wanted to cast the, “furniture of the New York. What is domestic there, and available if you want to see it.” The decision to cast “the furniture” of the city not only speaks to her desire to connect it to the urban landscape but also is consistent with the rest of Whiteread’s oeuvre casting household objects. For example, her piece *Untitled (One Hundred Spaces)*, 1995, (Fig. 4.5) Whiteread uses resin to cast the space beneath a variety of chairs, casting the negative spaces of furniture found in most everyone’s home, similar to finding water towers atop the majority of New York City buildings. These forms are typically associated with her prevailing usage of domestic objects. She choses to connect

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41 Vogel, “SoHo Site Specific: On the Roof.”
water towers with her other sculptures addressing domesticity, thereby creating an inversion of the domestic and the public in her work.

*Water Tower* further influenced *Tree of Life* through its ornamental function. For *Water Tower*, Whiteread equated an exterior utility object to her other works of beds and tables. An interesting part of Water Tower is that it is cast from an object that in contemporary society has little purpose, but lives on as symbol on many New York City buildings. Many water towers built earlier in the twentieth century have become obsolete. However, they remain scattered all over the Manhattan skyline becoming rustic accessories and rooftop party backdrops. The water tower is a nostalgic icon of the city. When asked about nostalgia in her work Whiteread says, “not sentimentality I hope. Nostalgia is fine to work with.” The nostalgia in *Water Tower* is just another way Whiteread uses memory in the public sculptures without turning them into memorial objects. Whiteread captures this nostalgia by creating a physical representation of the void within the water tower. Creating a context for the importance of nostalgia in the viewer’s life. Nostalgia is the sentimental longing for the past, and here Whiteread formalizes this through a void within a void. Modifying her use of nostalgia into memorial sculpture, Whiteread uses the casts in *Tree of Life* as decoration to encourage Londoners to look up and see Whiteread’s adaptation of the artistic ideals of Morris, through ornamentation and materials, and

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44 Rachel Whiteread in conversation with David Batchelor.
Also nostalgia is a theme English artists have traditionally memorialized. According to Jennifer Gross, Gainsborough, Ruskin and Houssman are classic examples of Englishmen who use art and literature to memorialize nostalgia. [Towsend, *The Art of Rachel Whiteread*, 41.]
the Whitechapel Gallery. Whiteread is transforming the nostalgic success of *Water Tower* into a deliberate ornamental sculpture for the Whitechapel memorial.

Whiteread experimented with a new medium for *Water Tower*. She toiled to find the correct type and mixture of resin to cast, at the time, what was one of the largest resin sculptures ever cast. Now considered commonplace in her œuvre, then it was new and arduous. The experimentation employed in *Water Tower* can be seen in *Tree of Life*. Her use of bronze, gold and terracotta are a large change from anything she has done previously. Whiteread is exploring new materials for sculpture, public or not, for which she is known. Further, *Tree of Life* differs from Whiteread’s other public sculptures because it is her first relief. While *Tree of Life* is influenced by *Water Tower* in its high placement, for *Tree of Life* Whiteread needed to adjust the scale simply so the cast objects could be seen from directly beneath. She needed to add layers and give the casts a more substantial width. She does this by creating a structure to project the leaves slightly away from the brick façade. (Fig. 4.6) In addition, Whiteread’s choice to use gilt bronze, lends a certain heaviness to the leaves unlike her other works; which have a tendency to appear light and effortless. For *Water Tower* a large part of her proposal was that she was going to cast the object in its original scale, even though she was placing it high above the ground. She also wanted the sculpture to drift in and out of the viewer’s consciousness; using resin enabled *Water Tower* to disappear in the sky. This is true for most of her other work, she casts them as they are, and does not manipulate their scale or cause them to feel more substantial.
By placing *Water Tower* far away from the bustling streets of New York, Whiteread introduced an unknown factor into the work – how were viewers going to relate to the sculpture? A sculpture that is viewable, yet inaccessible from street level, was something the Public Art Fund had yet to confront. Further, Whiteread proposed that the piece be a negative cast of a preexisting water tower. While it would be a massive work, the scale would be equivalent to all the other water towers in Manhattan, departing from prevalent trends in public sculpture to create spectacular larger-than-life size works. She wanted to create “something not there,” and according to art historian Molly Nesbit, Whiteread was attempting to bring the street level up to the sky and bring the sky down to the street.\(^45\) In the same way Morris describes walking five miles to find the good art of his day, *Water Tower* challenges the viewer in a similar way. Those who seek out Whiteread’s discreet sculpture appreciate its uniqueness. Adapting her earlier work, Whiteread takes the same approach for installing the *Tree of Life* but with the hopes that the viewer will be rewarded, but understanding the meaning behind the piece, aside from being just another beautiful public sculpture.

Whiteread experimented with the way in which people look up, or even go up at another point in her oeuvre. In her staircase pieces, *Untitled (Upstairs)* and *Untitled (Basement)*, both 2001, (Fig. 4.7 and 4.8) Whiteread alters the traditional way we ascend or descend in an architectural environment. Stairs are something Whiteread had wanted to cast ever since *House*; she felt that *House* was incomplete as a sculpture because it lacked the fundamental interior structures a house would

\(^{45}\) Neri, *Looking Up*, 100.
have – staircases. Whiteread casts staircases in plaster, then she turns the stairs on its side, or zigzags them; she does not assemble them in a functional manner.

Whiteread discusses how she wanted to alter the “experience” of walking up or down a staircase. Particularly in Untitled (Upstairs) she purposefully assembles the piece so the viewer can walk underneath and create “confusion about its relationship” to the normal function of going up or down a staircase. Her staircases cause the viewer to question the ways in which people physically go up and down. Her staircases become disoriented, not ascending straight up, but times going in a circular motion or just not making sense. However, these are sculptures created for a traditional gallery space not the public realm, but they show how Whiteread has been thinking and exploring the way people go or look up throughout her career.

Looking Up in the Urban Environment

The concept of art that requires the viewer to “look up” shows just how much Whiteread implemented elements from Water Tower into Tree of Life. Both of these public sculptures are in an urban space. For Water Tower Whiteread strived to have the sculpture function as “furniture” to have it blend in with the city. For Tree of Life she takes the opposite approach, insisting it stand out as much as possible.

Whiteread needed it to function as a memorial that would remember the past while looking forward to the future. Whiteread is drawing on her use of nostalgia in New York and translating it into ornamentation for London. For Water Tower, she takes

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the object and makes it translucent, exposing the insides with a semi-transparent resin; thereby having it blend in with the sky and fade entirely at night. For Tree of Life, she uses bronze and gold to make the decorative frieze pop out and light up the street. The question she posed to herself is, “How can I make it really sing so it won't disappear in the grime?” Whiteread is very particular about the material used for her casts, as she said, “I'm incredibly interested in materials.” Through the use of resin, Whiteread was purposefully not forcing the sculpture in the face of New Yorkers; however, the city was rewarded when it sought out Water Tower.

Although Tree of Life is about an arts institution and the renewal of art, Whiteread intended for more than just the art community in the East End to appreciate her design. Choosing the theme of the tree of life with the incorporation of positive casts, Whiteread refutes some of Barthes's theory on memory and the monument. He writes, “societies managed so that memory, the substitute for life, was eternal and that at least the thing which spoke Death should itself be immortal: this was the Monument.” Barthes is saying that society clings to memory to hold onto the past. The way in which that happens is through the monument; society strives for eternal life through immortalizing death. Contemporary societies do this through the monument or memorial. Other ancient societies used mummification as a way to eternalize life; both examples are creating a means for constant remembrance. In her earlier works Whiteread was embracing the morbid side of memory, however, with this monument she appears to be altering her approach. For

47 Spence, “Gilding Among the Grime.”
48 Corrin, “Interview with Rachel Whiteread,” Rachel Whiteread, 23/
49 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 93.
this memorial, her first public sculpture since Water Tower, Whiteread is not creating art historical associations with ancient Egyptian funerary monuments or doing something with her usual elegiac undertones; instead she has us look up, both physically and emotionally.

One of her fellow British sculptors, Antony Gormley said when he saw Tree of Life, "Rachel’s genius is that she allows the past to become present in a way that nobody else can."50 While Gormley’s statement rings true for all three of Whiteread’s memorials, in Tree of Life she changes her conceptual approach of bringing forth the history of the sites, or the memories they contain, in new and beautiful ways.

Whiteread is bringing the artistic ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement back to the present. Aside from her formal usage of ornamentation and patterning in the work, Whiteread is transparent her studio practice for Tree of Life. Whiteread, in conjunction with the Whitechapel, created videos for the gallery’s website showing the public how she is sending her work to the foundries and utilizing more craftsman-like techniques to produce this work.51

Moreover, Tree of Life, specifically functions as a foil to her last East End public sculpture House. Amid all the controversy, at its core House was making a statement about East End life and social development. While Tree of Life is addressing life and history of East London, there is no controversy. Whiteread wants to make East End residents proud to associate with the area though remember its

50 Masters, “Rachel Whiteread Unveils Golden frieze at Whitechapel Gallery.”

Even though she was creating a sculpture that is in the tradition of handcraft, she still created editions of the gilt bronze leaves, being sold at the Whitechapel for upwards of £5,000, creating a venue for her “handcraft” sculptures to be sold in the Fine Arts market.
history. Iwona Blazwick, the current Director of the Whitechapel Gallery, said at the unveiling of the project:

Rachel Whiteread is one of Britain’s leading artists, and we’re delighted to unveil her new work of art for the Whitechapel Gallery’s century-old façade...She uses the existing architecture of the facade to draw attention to the history of the Gallery. This new work of art is now part of the fabric of the building for future generations to enjoy, as they walk along the busy high street and simply start looking up.  

People who have been looking up to see the relief responded that it is a breath of fresh air on this cluttered street, or a gust of wind blowing gold as opposed to the normal litter. Bystanders have also responded by saying, "it is good to see a bit of investment into the area." Looking up is precisely a way Whiteread conveys the many layers in her work. Layers are a common thread throughout her memorials and Tree of Life is no different. She also adds that the layered leaves correlate to the layers of London. A city built on layers from the Roman era until the present the city continues to rebuild, and 2012 was a big year of rebuilding.

Tree of Life’s transformation of the Whitechapel Gallery’s façade is intended to give the street a “moment to pause.” Whiteread discusses that because of all the chaos she wanted something that would “bring a spark to the streets.” In his writings on “The Painter in Modern Life” Baudelaire discusses the role of the crowd in the modern art of his day. As he writes, “He who easily weds the crowd knows the feverish ecstasies, eternally deprived the selfish, locked like a coffer, and the

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52 Press Release: Tree of Life.
54 Ibid
56 Whiteread, “Rachel Whiteread Interview” Whitechapel Gallery video.
lazy, incarcerated like a mollusk. He adopts as his own all professions, all joys and sorrows circumstances present to him.”\(^{57}\) Communicating in a crowd is an art form to Baudelaire and it is an intricate virtue of a modern urban dweller. Whiteread considered the nature of urban life when choosing to create a sculpture that physically interacts with its viewers. Baudelaire’s sentiments about urban life and the crowd are a point of focus in Walter Benjamin’s analysis of Baudelaire’s writings. Benjamin holds that the nature of the modern crowd requires man to utilize his eyes in communicating, more so than his ears. Whiteread is drawing on that urgency for viewers to use their eyes to engage in their urban surroundings. 

Aside from the density of activity happening in the city, Benjamin notes that the modern inventions of busses and trains forced people to stare at each other for long periods of time. Benjamin writes, “Baudelaire insists on the magic of distance...as much needs to happen when the spectator steps too close.”\(^{58}\) Both Baudelaire and Benjamin agree that the artist needs to take into account modern alterations to urban society and Whiteread is doing so by creating that distance between the viewer and the object. She is inviting the urban dweller to use their eyes in a way to emphasize distance, not contending with the bustling urban streets. She insists on maintaining a distance between the patron and the art, not letting them come close but restricting the engagement with the object from the crowded streets below. This was a key element she wanted to bring into *Tree of Life*, wanting to avoid Baudelaire’s urban flanuer receiver, one who simply looks and dismisses because of

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\(^{57}\) Baudelaire, “Les Foules (The Crowds),” *The Painter of Modern Life: And Other Essays*.

\(^{58}\) Benjamin, *Illuminations* 191-192.
his “important” city life. Whiteread wants those who want to look to be a part of the sculpture. Now not only is Whiteread separating the object from the viewer in a conceptual way like she did in *Embankment*, but she is physically separating the viewer and the sculpture in a manner unlike that which occurred in her colossal stacks of boxes.

The incorporation of the viewer directly into the experience of the sculpture leaves a great deal of room for interpretation. While *Tree of Life* is on the Whitechapel façade, it can hold a different meaning for different East Enders. Eliminating the traditional forward facing way to examine a sculpture or memorial creates a challenge for the artist to convey his or her specific message; a message that would normally would be conveyed on a plaque or pedestal. Lifting the sculpture into the sky creates a figurative, as well as literal, disconnect between the viewer and the work and artist. As Cher Krause Knight writes in regards to public art, “knowledge of an artist’s wishes can illuminate our understanding and appreciation of art.”\(^5^9\) But in this instance the viewer can completely disregard that knowledge. After all, since Whiteread’s own personal history and memories are steeped into the piece; one would believe that her desire to convey the memorial quality of the work would be of the utmost importance. She talks about the place she and her family live is designed, “so that we’re living on the roof, looking straight onto this ever-changing East End environment.”\(^6^0\) Not only is her past history as a struggling East End artist reflected in *Tree of Life*, but also Whiteread’s current family dynamic is connected to the sculpture. She wanted an improvement in her


\(^6^0\) Cole, in conversation with Rachel Whiteread, “Mapping Traces.”
own life as much as anyone else living in the East End. Incorporating this experiential element to the work is a large gamble for having it successfully function as memorial.

Examining Tree of Life after Whiteread’s other memorials highlights how her style of memorial sculpture is shifting not only formally, but also conceptually. In Embankment and Holocaust Memorial the viewer was confronted with a more traditional, frontal approach to memorial sculpture wherein Whiteread invited her audience to contemplate death and voids in a manner characteristic to the rest of her oeuvre. Regarding Tree of Life, Whiteread’s addition of an experiential element for the viewer to look up, and memorializing an artistic tradition, has moved away from a somber approach to memorial making. As Blazwick said, Whiteread’s goal is for people to “simply start looking up,” in order to contemplate the values of the Whitechapel Gallery and the historic East End. Yet it should be noted that along with this different approach to memorial sculpture, Whiteread is relinquishing a certain amount of control and passing it to the viewer. By having the viewer engage in an unorthodox fashion with the memorial, the artist has to have a leap of faith for the experience of the memorial to be understood. In a work like Tree of Life the viewer could accidentally walk by the sculpture and potentially miss it. A spectator of Water Tower said, “Either you see it or you don’t…Its unlike traditional public sculpture – more haunting, more fragile, more fleeting, more respectful.” While that comment was made about Water Tower it rings true for Tree of Life. It is a sculpture specific to the history of the Whitechapel and the East End, but for every

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61 Burt Barr, artist, quoted in Looking Up, 173.
person who walks by the sculpture it can allude to something different. Along those lines, even if a viewer notices the sculpture, Whiteread is running the risk of having an average passerby miss the specific memorial quality. Benjamin writes that people in modern urban city, “rarely even [bother] to spare a glance for the others. The greater the number of people that are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and offensive becomes the brutal indifference.” Whiteread said regarding Water Tower, “it seemed ridiculous to contend with New York at street level, so I began to look upwards. The piece will bear a direct relationship to New York’s urban landscape.” In Whiteread’s mind, the risk to place the sculpture above the streets was a risk worth taking. She was willing to face the fact that the viewer might see the work, and then continue on, without any of the contemplation.

The fact that the Whitechapel Gallery is a cultural stronghold in London is echoed the commissioning of Tree of Life as part of the London 2012 Festival. The Mayor of London established this festival, along with the city of London, in accompaniment to the London 2012 Olympics. They funded a number of social improvements and cultural events in London throughout the year. Not only will Whiteread’s monument serve as a memorial to the Whitechapel and the East End, but it will also commemorate the 2012 Olympics. It should be noted that the Olympics were brought to London in hopes of reviving and rebuilding East

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62 Rose, “Interview with Rachel Whiteread,” *Venice Biennale 1997*
London.\textsuperscript{64} The Olympics were intended to bring in a plethora of new jobs and the promotion of business with the influx of tourists. In a sense, the Olympics were repeating the ideals Henrietta Barnett stood for; having London residents and new immigrants develop the economy in the East End.

As Rachel Whiteread’s newest commission develops and finds its place within London, its status as a memorial will grow. Hopefully it will continue to inspire a region and prompt the economic and social growth London hoped to achieve in 2012, while still memorializing an important moment in the city’s history. As Morris wrote, “In England only, there has been a great improvement in architecture and the arts.”\textsuperscript{65} Morris considers England’s art world in high regard in terms of constantly improving the state of art accessibility. Whiteread’s monuments will continue to make great strides in the world of art and architecture as the world adapts around them. Through her memorials Whiteread invites her viewers to look at their lives in a different light, by way of a commonplace object. According to art historian Robert Storr, Whiteread’s monuments become a part of urban landscapes to, “not ‘show’ us what she can do, but instead to leave behind something that can be seen at our leisure, drawing attention to the kindred presences long ignored.”\textsuperscript{66}

Storr’s words ring true for \textit{Tree of Life}; it is a simple structure that almost cannot be ignored, whether walking out of the Tube station or wandering past the building. Whiteread points out the “presences long ignored” by not only creating a sculpture

\textsuperscript{64} In fact the Olympic Aquatic Center is located exactly where Whiteread’s first studio was on Carpenter Road. [Cooke, “Rachel Whiteread: I couldn’t say no. It felt right to do this one.”]
that should have been built 100 years ago, but reminds the viewer of the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Whiteread's new modes for creating her public sculptures, such as the choice of medium and casting technique, employed in Tree of Life show her moving forward to a new stage in her career.
Conclusion

Examining Rachel Whiteread’s memorial sculpture from *House* through *Tree of Life* highlights two motifs that constantly arise in her work. Whiteread creates a distance between the object casted and the meaning behind the memorial; and she creates a dialog between the memorial and its environment. For better or worse, *House* has defined Whiteread’s career; she continuously tried to adapt the formal and conceptual elements in *House* to create more successful public sculptures and memorials. She wanted to make sculptures that exist devoid of controversy, but full of meaning, for those viewers who allow time to contemplate and seek out the issues brought forth by the work. Whiteread said regarding *Holocaust Memorial*, “I hope that it will be experienced as a monument which will encourage people to contemplate one of the great tragedies of recent history.”¹ She used two approaches to achieve this: first is creating distance from the initial cast object and the trace left by that object, only using the indexicality of the cast as a vehicle to create a discourse around her sculpture. The distance set forth between the original cast and the meaning of the memorial related back to Barthes’s discussion about photography and specifically his theory that every photograph is guided by two voices: one of banality and one of singularity. Each photograph is of something trivial and ordinary. Then the individual person lends emotion and voice to their own photograph.² Whiteread’s memorial casts invite viewers to project meaning onto the objects she cast for the memorial, distancing the meaning from intrinsically

² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76.
being connected to the cast object. She uses objects to initiate a memorial process to make the viewers recognize and extrapolate meaning from the object for the memorial. Her memorials are not about boxes, books, and leaves, but about how we project and interpret them into something greater.

The second approach Whiteread used to create successful memorial sculpture is creating a formal relationship between the sculpture and its landscape. The awareness of the sculpture with its environment, and creating a distance between the object and the memorial, are both reactions to House. In terms of blending in with its environment, House was the opposite of subtle. Art historian Patricia Phillips said that the public is constantly changing states that the ephemeral qualities of the public realm are more defining of public art than the location of the art or the exposure it receives.³ It reaches out to a multitude of artistic, personal, social, and political issues as opposed to attempting to appeal to a single audience. Public art needs the flexibility to adapt with time, or to be temporary. Whiteread tried to create that flexibility and avoid that ephemeral quality that happens to public art when it is just placed into a square or park, to be displayed for a few months, and then be forgotten. She wants her public sculptures to belong in their environment, whether temporarily or permanently, they should be able to adapt to the constantly changing audience. Whiteread wants her work to become one with its environment in a way that it will constantly adapt to appeal to a large audience. House was destroyed because it failed to achieve this, a mistake Whiteread did not want to make again. Her work would thereafter be destroyed on her terms.

³ Knight, Public Art: Theory Practice and Populism 298
Whiteread’s attempts to achieve these two formal approaches to creating memorial sculpture, distance from the object and having it merge with the landscape, can be found in the three memorials after House. In terms of creating distance with the object in Holocaust Memorial, she made a sculpture that was not about doors and books, but about an annihilated nation and an atrocity that had for too long gone unmarked in Austrian society. The distance is created through her use of an invented space, created with different objects to manufacture the library. Embankment is not about boxes or stacks of boxes but it is about how we use boxes in our lives and their importance in containing the memories of our lives and the lives of our loved ones. She created her casts not directly from cardboard boxes, but of other casts she made of the cardboard boxes. Lastly, Tree of Life is not about leaves and windows; Whiteread uses those objects to present a rich culture, an artistic tradition and the history of a region, casting the preexisting leaves on the façade and modifying them with gold to further the memorial. Returning to House, it, too, was not simply about the house, although Whiteread originally intended it to be a direct representation of the original object. The controversy surrounding House was about the greater context of what the house represented to the East End community and to families around the world who were affected by gentrification.

While Whiteread managed to be successful in creating a distance between the object and the memorial early on in her career, it took her significantly longer to parse out the issue of the landscape and, in many cases, the urban environment. In 1992, when House was still just a thought, curator Iwona Blazwick asked Whiteread
in an interview “Have you ever wanted to cast the landscape?” Whiteread responded discussing the English countryside, “I saw these massive scars [in the landscape] and wanted to pour something into them to cast them and then reveal them. It was interesting to think of making something derived from the organic source.” While it may not have been feasible for Whiteread to make a direct cast of the landscape, it was possible for her to create a cast that complemented the landscape. This allowed her to expand the definition of landscape beyond the countryside and interact with the urban landscapes where most of her public sculptures reside. As mentioned above, when Whiteread made House one of its primary issues was that it stuck out like a sore thumb. She said regarding the sculpture, “I would have liked [House] to have been there long enough for it to have become invisible.” She continues, “I never had a quiet moment to contemplate House as a sculpture.” Whiteread made these comments in 1997 amidst the controversy of her Vienna commission. Achieving this sense of invisibility was something that constantly remained important in her public pieces.

When creating Holocaust Memorial Whiteread drew on traditional architectural language of the city, but the sculpture was amidst constant controversy and does not blend in with the square at all. Her next sculpture, Water Tower, was Whiteread’s reaction to the controversy of House and Holocaust Memorial; she wanted it to literally blend in with the sky, but also to become “furniture” of New York City, intending for the sculpture to blend in with its urban environment. Whiteread takes a slightly different approach for the dialog between

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Embankment and its environment as she creates her own landscape for the sculpture. Since the work was indoors, Whiteread took full advantage and used the casts to create a landscape out of boxes. Through the work’s title, she engages with the urban development of London and allowing associations with the city’s urbanization to come into the work.

With Boathouse Whiteread succeeded in subverting her cast into the landscape. The success of Boathouse enabled Whiteread to create Tree of Life, a memorial that creates a positive discourse with its environment. Whiteread has complete control of the how Tree of Life interacts with its landscape. She intentionally wanted the sculpture to pop in order to brighten up the high street, and it does. Yet, she accomplishes this in a way that echoes the surrounding areas. Whiteread talks about how the gold was inspired by the gold gilding sparkling around London down by Saint Paul’s Cathedral and on the royal emblems. The leaves on the sculpture relate to the original architecture of the Whitechapel, and also to “hackney weed”, which is a plant that grows around buildings in east London. As Whiteread mentioned regarding Boathouse, this notion of creating sculpture that subverts itself into the landscape, or becomes invisible, is something she plans on continuing throughout her career. She said in April 2013, "What I’m not into is what I call ‘plop’ art. Making things and just putting them in places for the sake of it. I don't like much sculpture in the street. It really needs a reason for being there, but when it does, it can be a wonderful thing… it can enhance daily life, reflect our times and, in that sense, change the way you think and are.”

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6 Wroe, “Rachel Whiteread: A Life in Art.”
Archives Visited

Luhring Augustine, New York, NY  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Boston, MA  
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY  
New York Public Art Fund Archive, New York, NY  
The Royal Academy of Art, London, UK  
Tate Modern, London, UK  
Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK  
The Yale Center for British Art, New Haven CT

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*Rachel Whiteread: Shedding Life.* Edited by Fiona Bradely. London: Tate Liverpool, 1996. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name shown at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, and the Tate Liverpool.


Index of Illustrations

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