

Above: Frederick Kiesler with model of *Endless House*, New York, 1958. Photograph by Irving Penn

of hearts, kidneys, bladders, eyes, ears, lungs, breasts, testicles, a uterus, ovaries, brains, and so on, still line the walls of many sanctuaries across Europe. In fact, it is this ritualistic, rather than scientific, function that is at the origin of the earliest forms of casting. The first wax models of bodies made were the death masks used in funerary rites in ancient Greece (ca. 300 B.C.) and the wax models of body parts, for which healing was hoped, offered to deities.²⁴

The similarity between making her work and casting a death mask is not lost on Whiteread, who speaks of her discomfort with the lingering relationship to the inhabitants of the house used to cast *House* because she had already made their death mask: "When I made *House*, I met the previous occupants and we kept in touch for a while. But actually, it made me feel a little bit uncomfortable. It was like I'd cast their history. I didn't want to intrude in that way."²⁵ She understood the careful documentation of the insides of their house before it was cast as a form of dissection and an embalming of the body, a process recalling that used in the direct modeling of the almost obscenely opened bodies at La Specola.

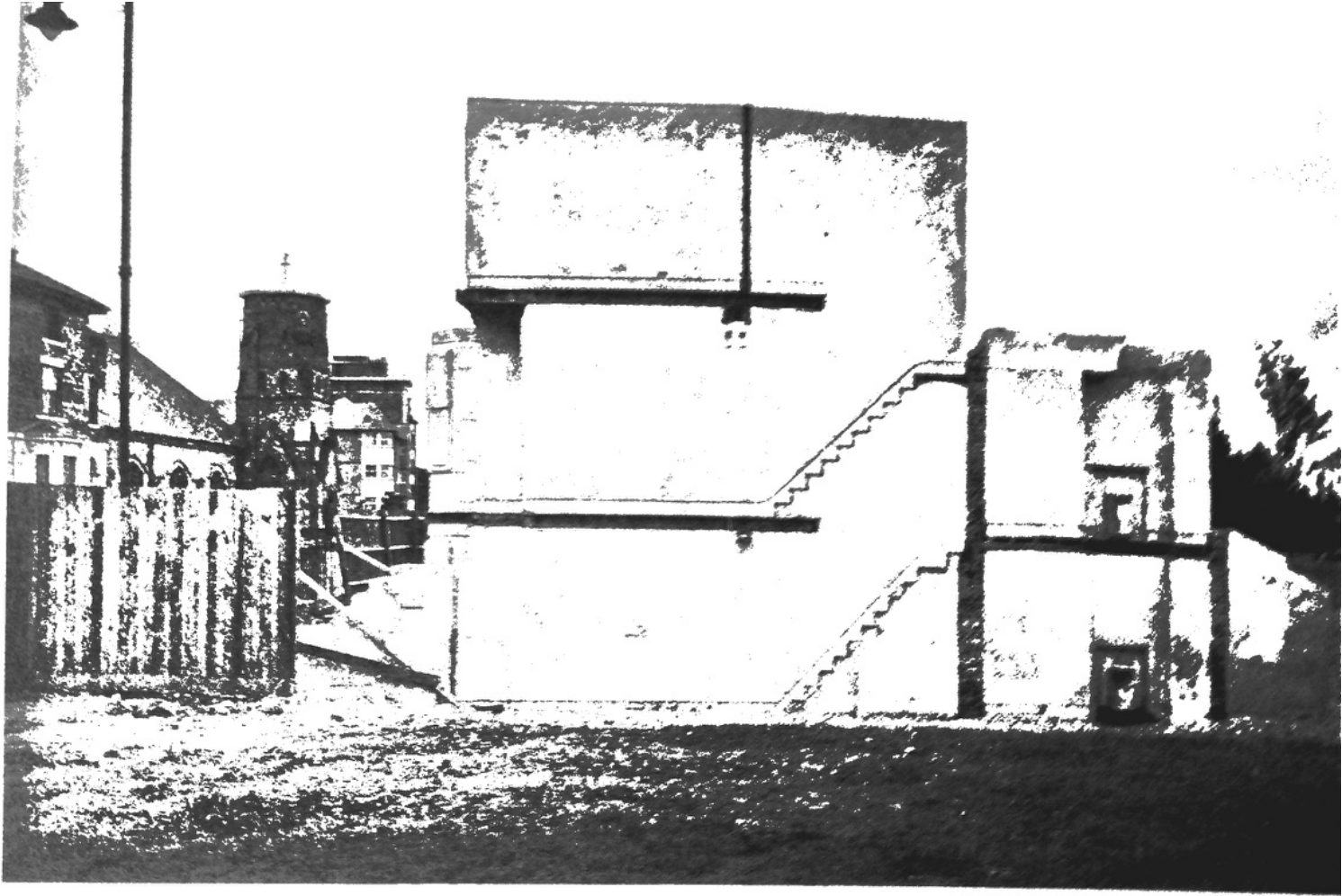
The previous tenants were obviously DIY fanatics. The house was full of fitted

²⁴ Whiteread quoted in Ian Hale and Delya Albergé, "Youth and Beauty," *The Independent* (London), July 16, 1991, p. 17.

²⁵ The artist says, for example, "I wanted to incarnate the silence in a room, mummify the air inside the four walls." Whiteread quoted in Mieke van Gersbergen, "The Ghost of Memory," *Artes 2* (Feb. 1993), p. 9.

²⁶ Whiteread in conversation with the author (London, May 30, 2001). The books by Parker that Whiteread mentioned are *Life after Life: Interviews with Twelve Murders* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1990), and *The Violence of Life: Interviews with Life Sentence Prisoners in America* (London: Harper Collins, 1995).

²⁷ Rachel Whiteread in



cupboards, cocktail bars and a tremendous variety of wallpapers and floor finishes. I was fascinated by their personal environment and documented it all before I destroyed it. It was like exploring the inside of a body, removing its vital organs. I'd made floor pieces before in the studio and had always seen them as being like the intestines of a house, the hidden spaces that are generally inaccessible. We spent about six weeks working on the interior of the house, filling cracks and getting it ready for casting. It was as if we were embalming the body.²⁶

This embalming of the house before casting it, like the preparation of an Egyptian mummy, is another form of casting, in which the shape and details of the body are preserved. This double casting is crucial to Whiteread's work. Indeed, if anything, the real cast is the first embalming one. What is shown in galleries and publications is not the cast of an object, or even the cast of the space around an object, but the cast of a cast. All of Whiteread's artistry lies in her decisions about the first cast, what traces will remain and what will disappear, the same crucial decisions faced by the maker of a death mask.

Even Whiteread's working method parallels that involved in the making of a death mask, as can be seen in the following description of that process by Georg Kolbe. He begins by preparing all surfaces and closing all apertures, just as Whiteread starts by sealing off the windows and doors. Kolbe writes:

The eyelids and lips are gently closed, the chin is propped. . . . The hair is combed smooth. . . . Taking the mask is not, or should not be, making a mold from a rigid body—it almost resembles modeling from life. . . . The parts where hair is growing are painted over with a thin solution of modeling clay or with oil, so that the plaster may not adhere when it is poured over. The skin itself contains enough fat and needs no preparation. The outline of the mask, the parts on the neck, behind the ears, and so on, are surrounded with the thinnest of damp paper. Unfortunately there is hardly ever time to mold the whole head, back and front; relatives and friends and undertakers are waiting, and the work must be done speedily, as always in our precious life. A large bowl of plaster the consistency of soup is ladled over the face a few millimeters in thickness; then a thread is drawn over the middle of the forehead, the bridge of the nose, the mouth, and chin. A second bowl of more solid plaster is spread over the first layer like pulp (this is to provide a firmer outer shell), and before it sets the thread is drawn away, dividing the whole in two halves. As soon as the outer layer has set hard, the halved mold is broken apart and carefully detached from the head. . . . The halves thus detached are immediately fitted together again and clamped, the negative is cleaned and refilled with plaster. Roughnesses on the covering outer shell are carefully chipped away with mallet and chisel, and there we have the positive, the finished mask. I do not touch it again, for it must be good.²⁷

The result of this process is a line down the middle of the mask, a scar where the two molded halves are reattached. Similar lines can be seen everywhere in Whiteread's work (for example, in the sink and bathtub pieces). But the brick that shows in rough narrow bands in *House*, indicating where there was a wall between two rooms, a floor, or a staircase, are seen by Whiteread as a kind of failure—the "scars"²⁸ of that piece—as if the casting of *House* and its separation from the mold was a brutal act, with fragments of the old place left behind like battle scars when all she wanted to show was the air, the negative of the space, a three-dimensional figure-ground of the body of the house, perhaps not unlike a three-dimensional X ray.

The basic procedure of casting recalls the "barium swallow" in medicine, used for the examination of internal organs with X rays. The patient drinks a chalklike liquid to cover the interior lining of the esophagus, stomach, and intestines, allowing their outlines to be seen by the X-ray machine and reveal any blockage or inflammation. The chalky liquid hardens like plaster in the system and has to be flushed out after the

Cyprien Richard Whiteread, House, 1993, Gower Street, London, 1993 (Whiteread 1994), Gower

Conversation with the author
p. 16

11 Whiteread in conversation with the author

12 Joseph L. T. Sparrow, "The Development of Anatomical and Sciences: The Carpenter Antonovskis of La Spezia," *Neurology* 46, no. 4 (Oct 1995), p. 894

13 *East London Advertiser*, Nov. 4, 1993; reproduced in Suttler, "The House in the Field: A Psychogeographical Response" in James Langford, ed., *Richard Whiteread: House* (London: Pavilion Press, 1995), p. 22 and extensively quoted in entrance of the piece

14 Pamela Lee, "Object to Be Destroyed," *The Medical Center*, *Massachusetts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), p. 27

15 "Richard Whiteread Interviewed by Andrew Ross," p. 32

16 Scott Duke "History Architecture," manuscript of paper presented at SPACE2: Studies of Architectural Histories of Australia and New Zealand, Conference held in Launceston and Hobart, Australia, 1999, p. 53

17 See Barry Senghal, "The Dictionary of Emmanuel Hella-Hell-Duc's Encephalic Structure for Architecture," introduction to *Emmanuel Hella-Hell-Duc: The Foundations of Architecture: Selections from the Dictionary* (New York: George Braziller, 1990)

18 Suttler, Catherine, "New Architecture," paper presented to the Society of Architectural Historians, Houston, April 1999. Also forthcoming in Thomas J. Levin, ed., *CTRL [SPACE]: Histories of Surveillance from Brotherly Love to Brother* (ed. col. Harlow: Center for Art and Media, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2001)

19 "A house must be practical. To be practical means to serve. To be serviceable in every respect in any direction. If any direction is closed, the house ceases to be a habitation." Quoted in Suttler

examination. An old medical procedure, practiced since the beginning of the last century and still in use as a first tool of detection because it is considered simpler and less invasive than more contemporary techniques, is in fact, quite invasive and violent.

Whiteread's castings are just as invasive. For *House*, the space first had to be completely altered:

[and] stripped of secondary trappings and cleaned up to provide a smooth finish throughout to which the concrete would be bonded. Windows were filled with plywood to insure that the spraying did not merely blast the glass out through the frame. All the reentrant corners and recesses were infilled to insure that when lifted away the external skin would not pull elements of concrete with it. The walls were coated with several layers of a debonding agent. . . . Reinforcing mesh was fixed to the walls where the concrete was to be sprayed. . . . The concrete was then sprayed onto the mesh in consecutive layers, over several weeks. A small opening in the roof was left for the last worker's exit from the fully sprayed interior.²⁹

After ten days the concrete had cured and scaffolding was placed around the house to allow the removal of the original building. The operation resembled a slow demolition, or at least a radical renovation. The production area of the artwork looked like a construction site with scaffolding, people wearing hard hats and work clothes, holding tools. There is the dust, noise, and smells of construction everywhere. Drawings had to be done, engineers consulted, construction workers recruited, permits from the building department obtained, etc. It was a project. A cast is not simply taken. It is designed. And the design is at once architectural and medical.

In her studio, Whiteread has an image of a preserved body. You see the sinews and bones of the Glacier Man, a body about 5,000 years old: "As a child I saw a book on the 'Bog People.' They were preserved in dense peat and their faces looked like they were made of graphite. I'm always intrigued by information such as the fact that it takes longer for a body to decompose today than in Victorian times because all the preservatives we've consumed."³⁰ Whiteread is fascinated by bodies somehow suspended between decomposition and preservation, bodies disintegrating and being reconstructed with sophisticated technologies. Medical attempts to save the body somehow resonate with the techniques used to keep it intact after death. Her castings suggest the twentieth-century pathological body, the body subjected to increasingly invasive procedures, the body that needs to be seen inside in ever greater detail in order to diagnose it. The inside of the body first brought to us with X-ray images, and barium swallows, then laparoscopy, computer tomography (CT scans), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), ultrasound, Doppler ultrasound, and so on. Even the colors of Whiteread's pieces are taken from those of our insides. She aims for the "color of

semen," or makes a request from a manufacturer for rubber that is "the color of urine"—more precisely, "a dark yellow, the color of the first piss in the morning."³¹ She speaks of the "sweat and urine" stains in the mattresses she has used, and of how you "may get a piss stain in your face" when moving them, but "feels it's necessary to manhandle this stuff,"³² to engage fully in the usually repressed traces of the body. Again, this is an internal story, a private affair, but also the stuff of medical diagnoses.

And of police evidence. Casting is taking the "fingerprints" of a space. In Munich, the Haus der Kunst was relocating. Whiteread cast the floor of the existing museum to be displayed in the renovated space, as if "taking a fingerprint from the old place and putting it into the new one."³³ All the analysis that goes on prior to casting is a kind of detective work, scrutinizing all the traces and deciding which of them should be exposed, as if selecting the key pieces of evidence. Like taking a plaster cast of a footprint or drawing a chalk line around a corpse, Whiteread concentrates on the overlooked details of seemingly ordinary things in order to determine what has gone on in the space. Every object she casts is treated as a crime scene. Every object has dark secrets hidden within its surfaces. She works with traces, patiently studying, recording, and eventually monumentalizing them.

Because it is not just the hidden mechanics of the body that interest Whiteread. She also wants to know what goes on inside a mind, how the mind works. And again, not just any mind. Like the writer Tony Parker, she is fascinated by the pathological psyche. And if, as she did for *House*, Whiteread were to ask Parker to interview her new home, a former synagogue that she recently acquired, it would not be because she might expect it to have a dark secret that could be extricated. Whiteread is endlessly curious about human nature, what makes people lose their minds, commit horrendous crimes: "Obsessive or compulsive disorders, completely irrational activities, the psychology of violence—I find these things fascinating. What makes an individual lose control and kill sixty people. It's a dark area of human unconsciousness that no one can unlock, something we will never fully understand."³⁴ She looks for evidence of this in the overlooked ordinary spaces of everyday life, in the same way that Parker brings us evidence of the ordinariness of many convicted murderers in the stories of the circumstances that preceded their crimes, the mundane details of their life before and after their acts, as told by the perpetrators themselves.

For Whiteread, objects are interesting in as much as they give clues about the lives and deaths they witnessed. She tells the story of how she once almost visited 25 Cromwell Street in Gloucester, the address of Fred and Rosemary West, the couple who murdered eighteen young women in their house and buried the dismembered bodies beneath a bathroom, under a kitchen, in the cellar, and in the garden. A friend of the

"Pseudo-Functionalism in Modern Architecture," *Partisan Review* 16, no. 7 (July 1949), p. 739.

20. Beatriz Colomina, "The Medical Body in Modern Architecture," in Cynthia Davidson, ed., *Anybody* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), and "Krankheit als Metapher in der modernen Architektur," *Daedalos* 64 (1997).

21. "Rachel Whiteread in Conversation with Iwona Blazwick," p. 12.

22. Whiteread, quoted in Darcy Cosper, "Casting New York: Rachel Whiteread's *Water Tower*," *Metropolis* 17, no. 9 (June 1998), p. 109.

23. "Rachel Whiteread Interviewed by Andrea Rose," p. 34.

24. Chen, et al., "The Development of Anatomic Art and Sciences: The *Ceroplastica* Anatomy Models of La Specola," p. 884.

25. Whiteread, interviewed by Craig Houser.

26. "Rachel Whiteread Interviewed by Andrea Rose," p. 33.

27. Georg Kolbe, "How Death Masks are Taken," in Ernst Bankard, ed., *Undying Faces: A Collection of Death Masks*, trans. Margaret M. Green (New York: Norton, 1929), pp. 44–45.

28. Whiteread, in conversation with the author.

29. Neil Thomas, "The Making of *House*: Technical Notes," in *Rachel Whiteread: House*, p. 130.

30. "Rachel Whiteread in Conversation with Iwona Blazwick," p. 14.

31. "Rachel Whiteread Interviewed by Andrea Rose," p. 33.

32. "Rachel Whiteread in Conversation with Iwona Blazwick," p. 13.

33. Whiteread, interviewed by Craig Houser.

34. "Rachel Whiteread in Conversation with Iwona Blazwick," pp. 14–15.

35. "Rachel Whiteread Interviewed by Andrea Rose," p. 34.


36. Whiteread, in conversation with the author.

37. Whiteread, interviewed by Craig Houser.

38. "Rachel Whiteread Interviewed by Andrea Rose," p. 30.

39. "Rachel Whiteread in Conversation with Iwona Blazwick," pp. 12–13.

40. *Ibid.*



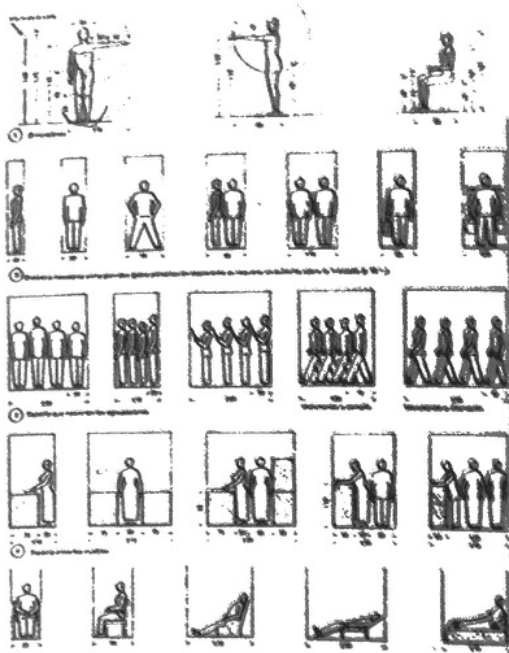
artist was writing a book about the case and invited her over to see the house: "From television coverage there was the suggestion that it bore a relationship to *House*. While I was deliberating whether to go or not, I dreamt that I was a wall in the house, like the image in Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965). I dreamt I witnessed the horrific events of the past fifteen years. I woke up screaming and decided not to go."³⁶ She dreamed she was a wall, a witness. She says she is still glad she didn't see the house because she would have had to live with those images all her life.³⁶ It is as if seeing the site where the murders took place would have amounted to watching the murders themselves.

Whiteread is captivated by the traumatized mind. As if performing a medical diagnosis, she moves from mapping the internal body (casting interiors) to reading its external signs (observing people's reactions to spaces of trauma). When she lived in Berlin for a year, she spent a lot of time at the sites of the concentration camps "people-watching," observing how visitors responded to the environment: "I watched kids picnicking on the ovens, and other people stricken with grief. I saw grandparents with their grandchildren, having the most appalling experiences, trying to somehow tell this younger generation about the past."³⁷ Once again, the issue is not the form of the camps as such but the behavior of people in relation to these spaces and their traumatic memories that intrigues Whiteread.

Her work aims to provoke disturbing psychological states, such as claustrophobia and disorientation. Space pathologies. With her first table piece, for example, she says she was trying to make it a "claustrophobic space,"³⁸ a feeling that is also present in many other works. Sometimes the effect turns out to be unbearable even for her. "With the third bath piece, I drilled holes through the plaster and the glass on top of it so there was an airflow like nostrils. I felt that it was too claustrophobic, like suggesting my own death."³⁹ And about a closet piece she says, "A long time ago I made a work with a wardrobe which I turned on its side in the studio. I had it propped on a bentwood chair and a pillow, with the door open—it was like a trap—I made it and photographed it and then dismantled it because it made me terribly uneasy."⁴⁰ Sometimes these disturbing, unexpected effects are precisely the triumph of a piece, as in the disorientation produced by *Ghost*:

With Ghost, my first architectural piece, I wasn't really aware of everything I was doing while I was making it. It was very complicated to make. I would finish a panel, look at it, put it back on the wall, make another one. . . . I never really saw it until it was finished. Then I took it to the studio to make a framework for it. And one morning after a week or two, I opened the door of the studio, and there was the door of Ghost with the light switch, and the light switch was going the other way and I realized 'I am the wall.'⁴¹

The complication of making architecture means that a work can never be completely



visualized before it is actually built, something that architects have always had to deal with—especially those who think of space in sculptural terms. Adolf Loos, for example, was unable to make decisions about a space before it was actually under construction and “prided himself on being an architect without a pencil.”⁴² Likewise, Whiteread is reluctant to install an exhibition “on paper,” preferring to make decisions in the gallery.⁴³ Engaging for the first time with architecture in *Ghost*, Whiteread was suddenly thrown into the position of a first-time viewer of her work and could see that the only position for that viewer is in the wall. The inverted light switch is that which the wall sees. To look at a Whiteread cast is not to be put in an architectural space or outside of it. Rather, it is to be placed in the wall, as a witness of the space, assuming for a moment the role of the wall.

Not by chance, Whiteread sees the significance of her last cast—the upstairs apartment of the old synagogue that she and her partner recently bought and plan to convert into a home and studio—in the fact that she was finally able to cast those walls as a space, creating a piece as a system of gaps that would look “like a maze.” As she describes it, “with *Apartment* . . . we did an awful lot of casting for six months. . . . The engineering and crazy gymnastic backward thinking that was needed to make the piece was remarkable.” She has also said, “in *House*, the gaps were all filled in with brick, but here, I’ve done a lot of casting to make a wall space. . . . The bit that was missing, that was me. I have now made it.”⁴⁴

Opposite: Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost* (det.), 1990. Plaster on steel frame, 200.2 x 388.6 x 317.6 cm. The Saatchi Gallery, London. Above: Ernet Neufert, from *Bau-Entwurfshilfe*, 1936

41. Whiteread, in conversation with the author.

42. Richard Neutra, *Survival Through Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 300. Loos devised the *Reimplan* as a means of conceptualizing space. As his assistant Kulka recalls, “He will make many changes during construction. He will walk through the space and say ‘I do not like the height of the ceiling, change it! The idea of the *Reimplan* made it difficult to finish a scheme before construction allowed the visualization of the space as it was.” Quoted in Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), p. 269.

43. Whiteread, interviewed by Craig Houser.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Whiteread, in conversation with the author.

46. Whiteread, interviewed by

If Whiteread began by casting her own body, she has ended up casting herself as a gap, the space within a wall. This breakthrough came with a shift in working method. Unlike *House*, where the old building was used as a mold and then destroyed, the old synagogue had to stay. She describes the process: "First of all, I am in the room and I think about how things are going to be removed. Everything is based on the physical size of what you can take out of a door and down the staircase. . . . This is how I usually do things. It is always a question of what can be removed by me or one other person. It requires very careful planning."⁴⁶ Like planning the perfect murder, the first consideration is how to dispose of the body. To get it out of a house usually involves dismemberment. With *Apartment*, the casting was done in sections, imploded, in order to get it out of the room.

This calculation recalls the planning of a traditional house, where the size of a stair (actually called a "coffin stair") is determined by the space needed to take down a coffin carried by three pairs of men, and that of a door is that which allows the passing through of a coffin. The apartments Whiteread has recently cast, presumably built for the synagogue's rabbi and caretaker, are according to her, much like "archetypal council flats": "small rooms leading off a corridor, and usually the rooms are based on the proportions of an arm span."⁴⁶ Architecture not unlike the postwar architecture Whiteread is obsessed with and says is based on the "arm span" and the "leg stretch." Modern architecture, like its traditional counterpart and like Whiteread's casts, takes its dimensions from the body, whether living or dead. Her casts preserve the evidence of this body after the building has gone. In the case of the synagogue, both building and cast remain, but the possibility of the cast outliving the building is always there; it is a record, a document, "like taking photographs or making prints of the space. If those parts of the building don't exist later, I'll still have this archive of the place."⁴⁷

Casting parts of her new building was also a way of "getting to know it intimately."⁴⁸ As in anatomical studies, getting to know an interior involves dissection. Whiteread points out that her new neighborhood, London's Whitechapel, was where Jack the Ripper used to kill his victims. The never-identified murderer performed such skilled mutilations of the bodies of his prey that he was presumed to be a surgeon with "considerable anatomical skill and knowledge," somebody "accustomed to the postmortem room," in the words of one coroner.⁴⁹ Inner organs, and even the content of the victim's pockets were carefully arranged by Jack the Ripper and displayed as a kind of gruesome artwork.

Whiteread's dissections focus on the walls. She says: "Internal walls are always ill conceived in architecture, in social housing. They are used to block one thing from another."⁵⁰ In *Apartment* she opens up the body of architecture in order to reveal the blockage. The viewer can peer into narrow spaces that retain the marks of light

Opposite: Rachel Whiteread, *Monument, Trafalgar Square, London, 2001*. Resin, 6.5 x 6.0 x 2.6 m

Casey House

47 Ibid.

48 Whiteread, *Apartment*, p. 102.

49 Ann: "A Sculptor Who Loves a Long Shadow" *Sunday Telegraph*, Review (London), June 17, 2001, p. 5.

50 "Coroner Whistles: Saviour's summation of the case of the murder of Anne Chapman."

51 Whiteread, in conversation with the author.

52 Whiteread, interview by Casey House.

53 "Rachel Whiteread interviewed by Andrew Ross," p. 32.

54 Lynn Barber, "Surrender My Flesh With Care," *The Guardian Magazine* (London), May 27, 2001, p. 26.

55 A photograph taken by Genter Delbode of the artist standing inside *Monument* was published in *The Independent Magazine* (London), May 26, 2001, p. 16.

I am grateful to Jarmar Kunkin for her research assistance.

switches, electrical plugs, and so on. That these traces are, once again, seen in terms of the body is evident in Whiteread's discussion of the ceiling, which has also been cast. The ceiling had a light fixture in the center that, she says, will now be "a kind of belly button" of the piece, visible when seen from above. Even though the viewer cannot see the marks on the walls made by the electrical plugs, switches, and fixtures, Whiteread thinks it is "incredibly important" that they are part of the cast and insists that a panel be remade if a worker forgets to include those details in the cast.⁵¹ If the wall is a witness, is the electricity always buried within it standing for the optical nerves?

Perhaps it is not surprising that once the wall has been conquered, Whiteread changes medium and method. From plaster and concrete to transparent material, from the Brutalist architecture of *House*, to the delicate glasslike architecture of *Monument* (2001), a replica in clear resin of an empty plinth in Trafalgar Square. Set on top of the original granite plinth as its "ghostly mirror image," it reflects the buildings, the people, the traffic, the pigeons, the clouds . . . and changes color with every shift in the light. Fourteen feet in height, weighing eleven and a half tons, *Monument* is the largest piece of resin ever cast. In many ways the piece is a development of her cast resin *Water Tower*, installed in New York in 1998, of which Whiteread said: "All my previous work had a definite solidity to it. I wanted to make a work that had an inherent transparency so that its internal as well as its external structure could be revealed. . . . I tried working in glass at one point but it's not possible on that scale."⁵²

With *Monument* Whiteread has achieved a much higher degree of transparency than with *Water Tower*. Like a building of modern architecture, it is a clear frame for the world around it. It seems to represent a fundamental shift in Whiteread's work. The negative cast exposing the secret life of an absent domestic object gives way to a positive cast juxtaposed with the original granite plinth, a piece of city furniture. But the medical body has not been left behind. On May 27, 2001, a journalist from the *Observer* described Whiteread putting the finishing touches on the piece in "surgical gloves wielding a dentist pick in one hand and a syringe in the other, going around the cast picking up blisters on the surface, and injecting more resin to fill the holes."⁵³ And in a photograph of the almost completed work in the *Independent Magazine*, Whiteread even appears looking down at us from inside the transparent surfaces of *Monument*. She is finally in the wall.⁵⁴

Casting is a process. It takes steps. A surface is encompassed, flooded, or smeared with a material that hardens over and against it. Eventually, the material can be pulled away. A mimetic transfer has been left on the material. It has acquired an imprint, a negative, of the surface. At this point another set of steps can ensue, since the negative itself can be cast in turn, becoming then a mold for pouring a new object. If cast again, the surface returns, positively mimetic. Here, we say, pointing a finger high, is the true copy. But is this copy the caster's one true end? Casting being a process with steps, it can become a flight of steps, or it can stop on one and stay.

Rachel Whiteread typically stops her work midflight, on a step. The process of casting is ancient, progressive, traditional, but Whiteread's sense of casting allows her some range within the rule. She does not, like Rodin, model a statue in plaster, make a mold of it, and cast a bronze positive from that, arriving more classically at a *Thinker* or *Gates of Hell*. She usually casts from found objects or found spaces and stops after making the mold. Her cast stays content with the negative, the first step, the inversion, the conundrum. This can bring different confusions to bear, as with her interiors of rubber hot-water bottles, solids she decided to name *Torsos* (1988–96), adding that they looked like headless, limbless babies, pinched and poked in the casting, rather like pillows.¹ Sometimes a cast becomes a mold from which she makes another cast to achieve, for example, a completely hard air mattress. All of her steps seem to carry the best and worst associations. *Ghost* (1990), her first cast room, she explained, "was like a 'plaster cast' covering the room in plaster, inch by inch, building it up and securing it with scrim, a tactile process. It was like covering a broken limb."²

Over the years her materials have shifted. There have been plaster, rubber, concrete, pink and yellow dental plaster, resins whose colors derive from their catalysts, felt, iron, aluminum, and patinated bronze, but her choice of casting as the process through which to get a form to come, life-size, has not. Almost always Whiteread casts from used objects or surfaces. She wants her material to bear the shadow of the object, the residue of anonymous use, although she can always control the amount and look of the residue by manipulating the process.³ For the casts commissioned by the Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin of synagogue apartments and staircases, a blank release agent let the surfaces there go very white. We look upon all of this from the outside.

Stare.

Landing.

It is possible to be satisfied with the negative, satiated by a negative, flooded mentally in one's own turn, perceptually thrust into the zone called surprise.⁴ The surprise has

Casting Out
Molly Nesbit



already invaded the process of casting, since the hard negative can only be seen for the first time when the cast is pulled away. Before revelation, obscurity; before the seal is broken, the grim backside of the cast: large screws, wooden stays, a project broken down into panels, rough fiberglass reinforcements giving the impression of thatch. Only when the cast, rough nest, is pulled away does the right side show, an eggshell, newborn, fine. It holds the vision of something that does not exist visually. It can capture air's blanketing touch. But forget the implications that reside in this language of flights and shells and air; birds will not come now to sing. Close and far, this casting uses its steps to take distance from nature. We have been stepped to the other side of life.

Is it death?

Whiteread used to tell odd, ghoulish stories when interviewers came to ask about her work. She told of hours spent in the Egyptian collections of the British Museum, of an odd job cleaning up in Highgate Cemetery. She might go on to tell of a TV documentary showing how the metal coffins at Christchurch Spitalfields had puddled up.⁶ She talked of mummifying the air in *Ghost* and the concrete Victorian *House* (1993).⁶ Her mother, the artist Pat Whiteread, called *House* "an Assyrian tomb, a monument, with an extraordinary quality of stillness." She said it reminded her of the war, "after the bombing, when the sites of the houses revealed traces of the lives of human beings."⁷ And the mattresses?

"Old mattresses, bed bases, etc.," Rachel Whiteread volunteered in 1997, "are very much a part of London's detritus and you see them abandoned everywhere on the streets. I remember seeing a television documentary about a particularly run-down housing estate in Hackney, East London. As the documentary progressed you became increasingly aware of the degradation and poverty in which these people lived. An old blind man living on the estate reported a terrible stench coming from the adjoining flat. Eventually the council intervened and found a man who had died in his bed. He had lain there for two weeks and had sort of melted into his mattress. The corpse was removed and the council cleared his furniture onto the street with the intention of taking it to the rubbish tip. No one came to pick it up. There was this dreadful image of young children playing on the mattress that the old man had died on. I must have seen that film over six years ago but the images have stayed with me. . . . There are all sorts of stories related to the pieces I make. When you use secondhand furniture it is inevitable that the history of objects becomes a part of the work."⁸ Stories like these hovered around her work even before it was cast. Stories lay on the

side of the road in the city. Without really knowing them, Whiteread was picking them up. She spoke of taking these things home to cast as one of her ways of drawing. She was consciously using London as a sketchbook.⁹

Can the cast be a story?

Can a story be cast?

Later, all this changed. After spending a year and a half in Berlin and seeing what it meant to use Berlin as her sketchbook, she refrained from bringing stories so directly into play when she discussed her current work. The German side of World War II had cast a long shadow over that city. Now she grew formal when questioned. She asked:

"Have you ever read *The Periodic Table*?"

This question of hers opened a book. Why this book? Why now? For *The Periodic Table* was written in 1975 by Primo Levi. It took Levi's life story, beginning with his Jewish ancestors, scions of Piedmont, and told it as a function of materials, specifically, the elements: the inert (noble) gases (his example was argon), hydrogen, zinc, iron, potassium, nickel, lead, mercury, phosphorous, gold, the list goes on. Was he some kind of caster too? Levi had begun as an aspiring chemist. The elements came to figure into his education, his experiments, his work, his life. His understanding of the Fascist rhetoric of racial purity was filtered through his newfound concepts of chemical impurity; he became the defender of impurity: "I am the impurity that makes the zinc react," he wrote, "I am the grain of salt or mustard."¹⁰

A grain among the elements, Levi did not sculpt. He became the interrogator of nature herself, Mother-Matter, he called her then, the creator of his enigmas, a sphinx. If he first thought of the elements as allegorical figures for himself and the rest of humanity, his understanding of their place and shape soon changed. His life set him on a path where he allowed matter many figures and forms; his route was punctuated by the confrontation with specific, basic, extremely inflexible elements, defined by properties more than purities. Matter came literally. Levi himself was physically overtaken by the Fascist definition of purity and deported to Auschwitz. There his training as a chemist gained him some small consideration, but his life was saved only by a capricious scarlet fever that kept him behind, left to die, while the Nazis marched the rest of the camp away, hoping to keep the final solution from being overtaken by the Allied advance. Most of his friends from the camp perished in that march. Levi was saved by the Russian liberation. That story however is not

Opposite: Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (Floor)*, 1992. Plaster, 8.9 x 27 x 15.9 cm. Edition of 12

1. "Rachel Whiteread in Conversation with Ivona Blazwick," *Rachel Whiteread*, exh. cat. (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1993), p. 8.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 14. Also see Whiteread's description of casting in an interview with Hélène Gille, *Un Siècle de sculpture anglaise* (Paris: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1996), pp. 384-85.

3. "I always use secondhand materials, as I want to imbue the residue of use on the surface of the pieces," she explained to Beryl Wright in a March 1993 interview in Berlin. Reprinted in *Options 46: Rachel Whiteread*, exh. brochure (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993), n.p.

4. The most complete discussion of the issues raised by casting, by Georges Didi-Huberman, can be found in Didi-Huberman, ed., *L'Empreinte*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1997). It should be added here that in recent years the imprinting associated with casting has been discussed as a kind of linguistic sign known as the index, which was first isolated as such by Charles Peirce in an October 12, 1904 letter to Lady Welby. In Peirce, *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 391. Peirce constantly elaborated his sign system and, therefore, the index. See, for example, "Lectures on Pragmatism," in Peirce, *Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, vol. 1, Max Fisch, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), pp. 471-88, and "A Survey of Pragmatism," in Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 5, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), pp. 317-45. The more recent discussion on the topic was initiated by Rosalind Krauss in "Notes on the Index," reprinted in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 196-219. I have not used the term here, since once identified it now tends to stop discussion, as if a com-

narrated in *The Periodic Table*. Levi had already told it too well in the very first book he wrote.

Levi wrote that book, *Survival in Auschwitz*, immediately upon returning home to Turin in 1946. It too was a life story but abbreviated. It recounted, as faithfully as possible, the experience of a life after it had been cast into the camps.¹¹ Levi began writing a testimony, writing as witness, not judge, he said, his chapters meant to be laying out evidence. Tales emerged as he did so, shaped by the shadows of his reading, the words that others had used before him to express the spaces of infinite catastrophe: the Black Death and Hell. The canto of Ulysses came unannounced to him one day while he went with a fellow prisoner to get the day's soup. He recited, grasping the part of Dante he could remember, the stanzas in which a wavering flame fights against a wind. The tongue of fire threw out a voice. It was language. His memory had skipped to the lines:

Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance
Your mettle was not made; you were made men,
To follow after knowledge and excellence.¹²

In the camps, where brutish ignorance came with the soup, it was not clear just what men had become or what their language was. *Survival in Auschwitz* worked to give their descent shape.

Forty years later Levi summed up the experience of the *lager*, the camp, as a gray zone. If he could name it now, he otherwise refused to simplify the experience, resisting the pressure to reduce the knowable to a schema. Nothing about it came to him as the poem had. "The world into which one was precipitated was terrible," he wrote, "yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but also inside, the 'we' lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers, which stretched between each of us. One entered hoping at least for the solidarity of one's companions in misfortune, but the hoped for allies, except in special cases, were not there; there were instead a thousand sealed off monads, and between them a desperate covert and continuous struggle."¹³ He was describing a remove, another kind of remove, to the other side of life.

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"Have you ever read *The Periodic Table*?"

Whitbread asked me the question while her project for a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust in Vienna was under way.¹⁴ She had been reading Wittgenstein, Levi and others since her arrival in Berlin, as if reading could help her, through the translation from London, help her to use Berlin as a sketchbook, help her understand the way the past was traced on the surface of the city. She entered the competition for the Vienna memorial in 1993 and she had already seen if she could take the deathwatch already present in her work to the point where she could take steps in sculpture in the wake of this knowledge. She was capable of casting toward it. She had gone to the site before she could take a photograph there.¹⁵ She visited often and she was amazed at the way others around her responded, the way Parisians came and broke down, the way older people came and broke down. She wanted to see if she could herself make a work that provided a place for grief, and so she made a work, a monument, for thinking these things outright, in public. She saw the problem of shape.

The *lager's* gray zone of immorality had spared no one, Levi was beaten away from their former humanity to different extents. There was a place somewhere between life and death. "Our manner of living," he wrote later, "was not very different from that of donkeys and dogs."¹⁶ Levi saw many of his fellow inmates men, living men, and he waited equally to die in the gas chambers a death that others might recognize. Those who survived the gas molecules, he said, have no story, or rather, the same story: "They slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea."¹⁷ No stories were provided no one with comfort. The zone was structured, if not by the word, by a recurring dream common among those trapped in the *lager*. In the dream the prisoner was free, back in the outside world and trying to remember what happened on the inside, but no one believed him.

The first of Levi's books wrote through this dream. The book hoped to remember and destroy it. Language emerged legible. Increasingly, his testimony became an accumulation of stories, the stories of Levi and the people around him, who succeeded, as the people did, through zones—impassive, cruel, grinding, where perfect happiness was obviously unrealizable. But so too, Levi concluded, perfect unhappiness, all because, he concluded, the human condition is everything infinite.¹⁸ On this side of infinity things settled into molecules and moments, and of them he would write.

The stories he kept writing pulled the details forward, containing the time that crossed into another, the time of the reader. They saved something

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