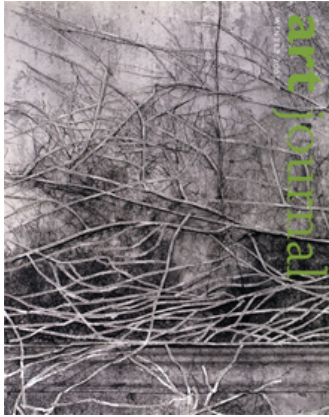


This article was downloaded by: [Illinois State University Milner Library]

On: 21 October 2014, At: 12:51

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Art Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcaj20>

### The Present Body, the Absent Body, and the Formless

Uros Cvorovic

Published online: 07 May 2014.

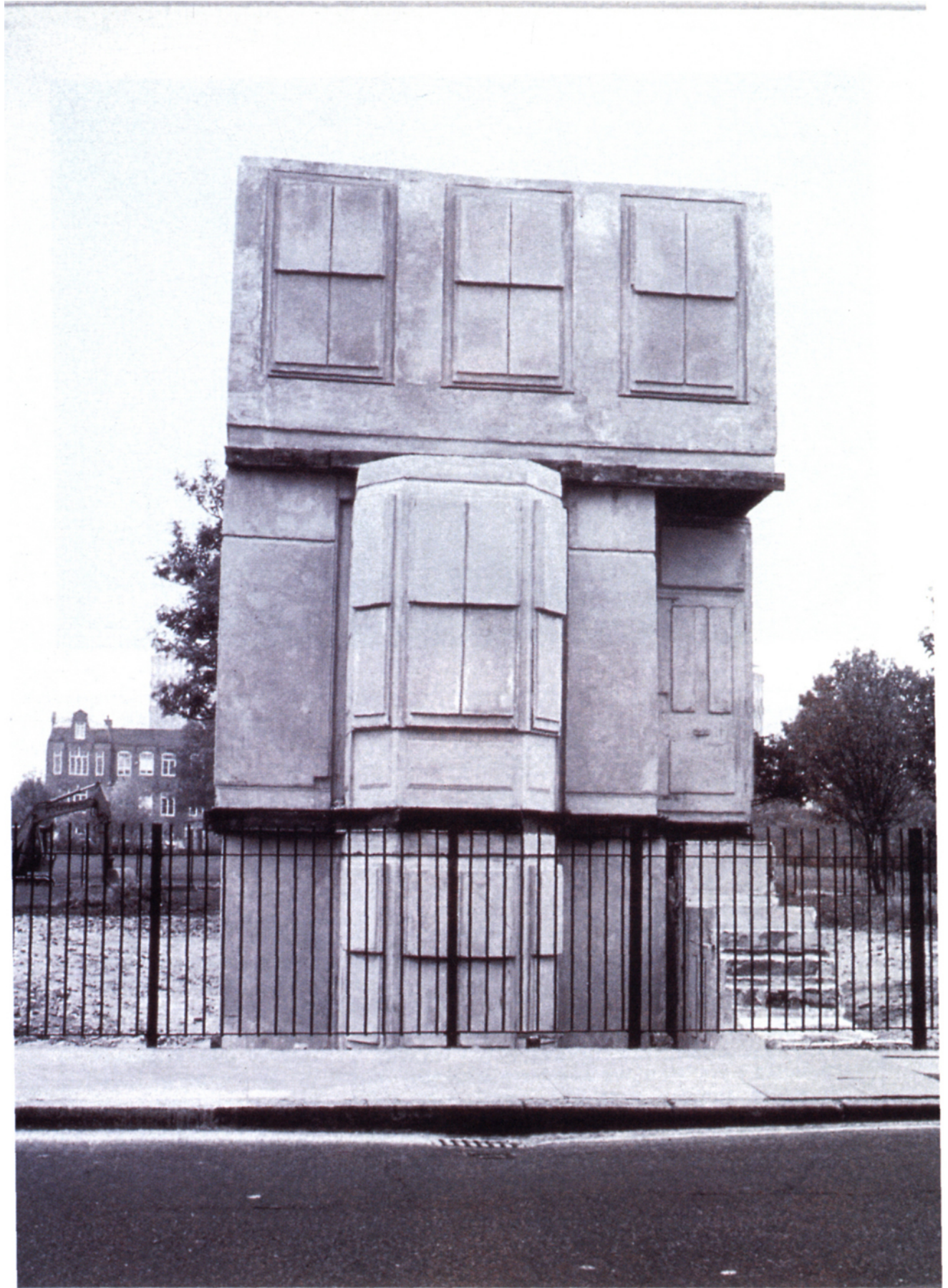
To cite this article: Uros Cvorovic (2014) The Present Body, the Absent Body, and the Formless, *Art Journal*, 61:4, 54-63

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2014.10792136>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>



Rachel Whiteread,  
*House, 1993–94.*  
 Concrete. Front view.  
 Courtesy of the artist,  
 Artangel, and Luhning  
 Augustine. Photograph:  
 Stephen White.

Rachel Whiteread's *House* was always a troublesome work. Its construction in 1993 in London's East End neighborhood of Bow opened a major public debate. Many concerns were raised anew, including complaints against the state of housing and against right-wing conservative racism, issues about the history of the local community and a lost "way of life." Its destruction three months later only further fueled the existing complaints as well as the ongoing "public sculpture aesthetics" controversy that had surrounded its well-publicized life. Materialized as a palpable imprint of absence, *House* also seemingly materialized burning issues in British politics, imprinting itself onto the public consciousness. While much of the public furor that accompanied *House* vanished with the work almost a decade ago, it remains ever present in the arena of contemporary art theory, albeit on a different note. The questions that *House* raised about the articulation of

Uros Cvorc

## The Present Body, the Absent Body, and the Formless

memory as a displacement of past into present, the tracing of absence, and the dialogue between the viewer's body and the materiality of the object remain as pertinent as ever for any serious study of sculpture and memory. It is in this context that I propose to revisit *House*, with the hope of productively reopening some of these questions.

This account of *House* as a disruption of material space through solidification contests an assumption that some recent analyses of the work make.<sup>1</sup> What I wish to take to task in this investigation is the unquestioned assumption that *House* either acted as a symbolic substitute for the body of the viewer—an inverted, disrupted body—or represented the absence of the domestic body. In this analysis, the reductive humanist perspective that is brought to bear on *House* always returns into the symbolic economy of the body. The result of such an approach to the work overlooks, in my view, the conceptual potential of *House* to dislocate the oppositions of work/ beholder, text/ reader, and object/ subject. It is in this context that, by working through theoretical models of the trace and the formless, I will link Whiteread's work to a material operation of sign deferral that contests its very materiality as fixed location and show how it has the capacity to decompose the very coherence of form on which the materiality of *House* has been thought to depend. I intend to indicate how *House* assaults the category to which the subject of body has been attached and in fact excludes the body altogether.

The strategy of putting the formless to work is not a new one. Georges Bataille originally employed it to oppose André Breton's historical materialism with a more basic materialism, a materialism that was devoid of form—the formless.<sup>2</sup> However, in more recent writings, the formless has been brought to prominence by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss as a way of retroactively disrupting the structural binary in the history of modernism that has been used to interpret art as a fundamental opposition between form and content.<sup>3</sup> Bois and Krauss insert the formless into the history of modernism in order to disrupt the unity and stability of visual space in the modernist interpretative grid for art that assimilates the "semantic registers" of objects constituted through the form/content opposition. Bois and Krauss detach the trace of the formless from the visual form, thus undermining the proximity of the trace to the form and the possibility of the trace being absorbed by the form. Their point is that if the trace of the formless is independent of the visual form, it will eschew the binary logic of form and content.<sup>4</sup>

1. Most notably Susan Best, "The Trace and the Body," in Anthony Bond, ed., *Trace*, exh. cat. (Liverpool: Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art in association with Tate Gallery, 1999), 172–77.

2. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford, Eng., and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), s.v. "Georges Bataille," 474–75. Bataille used the materialist position of the *informe* to challenge the authority of the theories of André Breton, who was seen by many as the most prominent figure/ theorist of the Surrealist movement as well as its alleged leader.

3. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless—A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

4. This point is also raised by Charles Merewether in "A Lasting Impression," in *Trace*, see n. 1.

The theoretical line of reasoning proposed by Bois and Krauss in some respects echoes the postulate of Jacques Derrida's project of deconstruction.<sup>5</sup> Derrida seeks to confound the system of privileging one meaning over another that is founded on a binary schema of repression, division, and erasure. What is of interest to us here specifically is the way in which Derrida introduces the operation of the trace, which supersedes the dualism of absence and presence in order to dislocate them.<sup>6</sup> Derrida's model of binary disruption is useful in that it allows us to interpret Bois and Krauss's project in a similar way and, more importantly, to consider Whiteread's *House* as a trace that disrupts a binary model/copy schema. While a detailed discussion of the effect of trace on "structures"—as articulated by Derrida—is beyond the scope of this essay, a few comments will help to introduce its operation.

What is most significant about the effect of trace is the way in which it destabilizes categories of meaning. Derrida's deconstructive trace is founded within a moment of erasure whose operation supersedes the stable notions of absence and presence. The force of the trace emerges not only from placing presence under erasure, but also from destabilizing absence as a category of meaning in the play between absence and presence.<sup>7</sup> The lack of stable ground—the site of the trace that forces the structures of absence and presence to be always deferred—suggests an essential disequilibrium. Thus, the trace highlights the lack of order and balance in structures, and in this respect can be likened to the operation of the formless, which, also like the trace, is concerned with neither meaning nor form, but only with the process of tracing. Furthermore, just as the trace confuses the absence/presence binary, the formless confounds the binary of form and content. In the following section, I intend to suggest that by using the operations of the trace and the formless as models for our reading of *House*, we will open the interpretative possibilities of the work to more democratic ways of reading. More specifically, we will be able to eschew the confounding absent/present binary of the body. In short, I will suggest that just as the trace is without a past, and the formless is without a form, *House* is without a body.

Krauss identifies Whiteread's process of making casts as a way of evoking one aspect of the formless—entropy.<sup>8</sup> Deriving its name from Bataille's "fascination with rot and waste," entropy is a response to an interpretative grid of art analysis that states that the value of a work is measured by its ability to unify itself into a formal plenitude. This grid assumes that every artwork is complete and necessarily absorbs any internal disorder by virtue of its completeness.<sup>9</sup> Entropy marks a degradation of excess energy created by human beings in every structure—including casts—and leading to a state of chaos. It is a process by which the division within binaries is disturbed with no chance of their returning to "order."<sup>10</sup> Entropy eradicates the distances between binary oppositions such as form and content, thus contesting the production of meaning. This marks the expulsion of what Krauss terms the "visual logic of the viewer's body."

Krauss suggests that Whiteread's process of casting carries out the entropic congealing of the possibilities of meaning. The way Whiteread creates objects tests the spatiality of casts and produces antigestures that challenge our perception of space, solidity, and objects. Before I explain how this takes place in *House*, what its implications for the model/copy binary schema are, and its relation to the viewer's body, let me clarify the significance of the casting process.

5. I am here specifically referring to Derrida's argument in *Of Grammatology*, trans., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

6. The discussion that follows will rely on the concept of trace to suggest how *House* disrupts a similar binary schema. I am aware of the difficulties involved in transposing the speech/writing opposition used by Derrida to the house/cast opposition that I propose is at play in *House*. Some of the difficulty may arise out of (one of the simplest of) Derrida's definitions of trace as "an originary synthesis not preceded by any absolute simplicity" (62). I am indebted to Sue Best for her criticism in pointing out the difficulties and the definition of trace.

7. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 47.

8. Rosalind Krauss, "X Marks the Spot," in *Rachel Whiteread: Shedding Life*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1997), 76.

9. Krauss uses Bataille's theory to locate the formless in art history according to four categories of operations: horizontality, base materialism, pulse, and entropy. Each of these operations is a response to an interpretative grid of art analysis. See Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 16.

following pages:

**House, 1993–94.**  
**Concrete. Side view.**  
**Courtesy of the artist,**  
**Artangel, and Luhning**  
**Augustine. Photograph:**  
**Stephen White.**

Casts are what is left over after matter cools down and solidifies. As traces of trapped space and destroyed spatiality, casts embody the compression and congealing of “life,” meaning, and the spatial intervals necessary to sustain them. The force with which entropy sucks out all the intervals between points of space originates in the casting processes’s solidification and eradication of those distances “that regulate the grid of oppositions or differences necessary to the production of meaning.”<sup>11</sup>

As Richard Shone observes, “A cast of an object traps it in time . . . displaying . . . its own past and the past of the object it replicates.”<sup>12</sup> Shone goes on to compare a cast to a death mask, in this regard with the cast standing as a palpable reminder of a particular space or object and a finite period of history. A cast is a connection to the past, a surviving reminder of memorial form governed by the structural possibility of its iteration and repetition. The mechanical authenticity that the cast assumes bears witness to the fracturing of its own condition. Set between the sublime and unsavory ordinariness, between the “truth” of the object and its insufficient aestheticism, a cast is a parody and euphemism of its original. The unrelenting realism of its arrested image marks a space between impression and imprint, between presence and absence. If, as Derrida indicates, the supplement is the incomplete, intermediary component (the in-between), then the process of casting is a repetition of this play between absence and presence. A cast is a supplement to the “original,” the coming of the mark of absence after the original has been removed (erased). In Whiteread’s case, the cast is literally the mark left by empty space (absence). *House* used the inside of a Victorian house for a mold. After the walls were removed, a concrete cast of the empty space inside was left. Thus, *House* was supplementary to an original that came to be a space, nothingness, or void. Insofar as there is no original given or referred to elsewhere, the cast, while acting as a supplement, also displaces the stability of the original object.

Whatever material Whiteread uses for casting, be it wax, resin, plaster, or concrete, resonates with entropy, because it solidifies the space (and the structure within that space) that made the cast possible. The space becomes an undifferentiated, uniform material mass separated from life by its surface texture. Yet this very surface, at least in part, remains attached to the original mold though the markings and imprints left by the mold stuck to the cast. In direct contrast to casting as a “paradigm of any process of reduplication, of spinning out masses of copies from a single matrix or mold,”<sup>13</sup> Whiteread’s casts nourish an indexical relation to the matrix by silently pointing to something that existed in a specific place. In other words, “these are plaster casts that are stuck in a posture of referring to the spot where the real thing existed in all its particularity.”<sup>14</sup> They are traces that, paradoxically, contrast the extreme site-specificity of *House* by pointing elsewhere, away from the site that grips and contextualizes it in a sign system. Paraphrasing Krauss, we can suggest that the very inefficiency and incompleteness as art objects announced in Whiteread’s cast are what deflates the serial nature of *House*.

When the formless is released in the slippery relationships between the cast and its mold, the material integrity of the object itself is called into question. In Whiteread’s work the site functions as a text that is perpetually in the process of being written and read. So the materiality of her work will become a point of

10. As an example of entropy Krauss cites Robert Smithson’s example of a child running in a clockwise circle in a sandbox filled with black and white sand in two even halves. The initial mixing of sand caused by the running will only be furthered if the running is reversed.

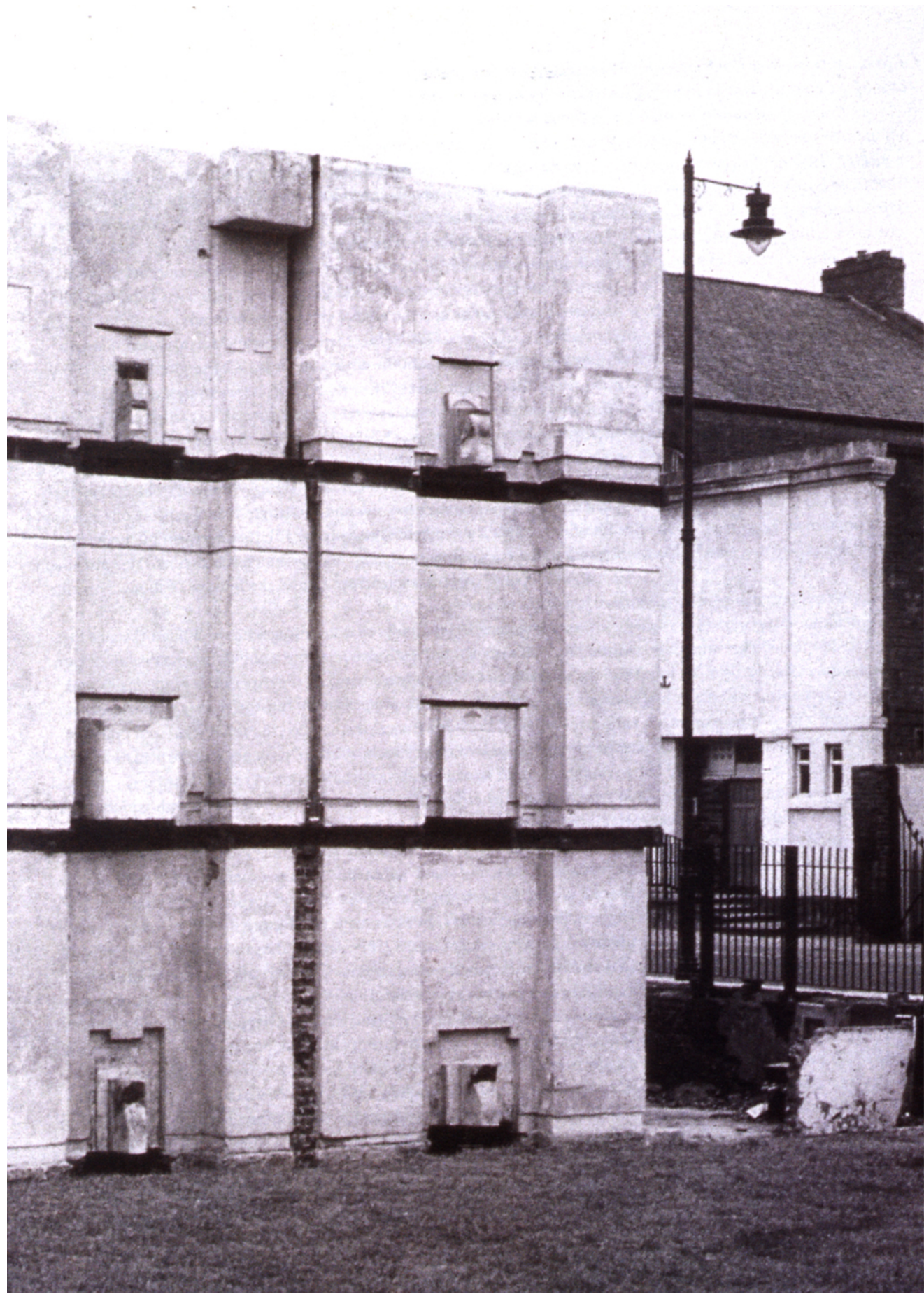
11. Krauss, “X Marks the Spot,” 76.

12. Richard Shone, “A Cast in Time,” in James Lingwood, ed., *House/Rachel Whiteread* (London: Phaidon Press in association with Artangel, 1995), 52.

13. Krauss, “X Marks the Spot,” 217.

14. Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 180.





intersection between processes, and any attempt to establish itself as a stable object or location will be subject to the process of slippage and deferral of meaning. The materiality of *House* will be identified with slippages between the categories of object and body, public and private space, absence and presence.

Shone suggests that Whiteread's method of production is constituted by a set of revisions of the material object that offers a way to gain insight into the overlooked, mundane aspects of that object. The way in which Whiteread manipulates the materials and the materiality of her objects invokes the shaking and disturbing of material reality constituted through baseline concepts such as house and home, structure and foundation, and materials such as plaster and concrete. This is a notion of materiality that cannot be bound to specific conditions of space and place. The displacement of the static environment it entails likens it to an event "in which the environment is problematised," as Nick Kaye points out, and through which "the event comes between sign and object." Whiteread's art practice identifies the logic of materials as catalysts for processes of transformation and change, aligning the nature of materials with notions of event and performance and "challenging the material integrity of the object and stability of place and location."<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Whiteread's objects precipitate a slippage between the processes and exchanges that constitute our experience of the world. These include the material affinities between the body, the object, and the environment it defines and by which it is defined. Her placement of materials operates against the attempt to read the interior of the work or the work through interiority.

*House* was a material reminder of domestic space as solidified absence that invited the spectator to constantly decipher the ambivalent relationship of sign to referent. *House* enacted a slippage between the experience of the inside and outside, site and object, public and private, home, materiality (solid space and actual home), and the body. Because it included the solidification of everyday space, it implicated and provoked the viewers' presence and participation, only to disrupt them. It worked to disturb the viewers' sense of their body's physical integrity and spatial differentiation from the material object with which they were confronted.

To paraphrase Shone, in *House* every spatial interval, every material mark can be final, and yet each of these "moments" retains a memory of the trace of the process of which it is a part in the material. Thus, its materiality simultaneously suggests the processes of solidity of materials, historicity and memory, a phenomenological experience of the world, and at the same time a negation of all of these. Hence, the concrete materiality of Whiteread's artwork defines itself not as a stable category but as a point of intersection between historical and memorial processes, a swinging motion that levitates between materials and events. It has no fundamental or ordinary materiality, and, just as the trace is always under erasure, the repressing of its materiality is necessary for the functioning of the absence/presence binary. Materiality is the underside, the transgressive other, the third, disrupting term in a binary. It represents an image/object by anterior default of presence; its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of emptiness. It is a slippage between categories that releases the formless.

In her article *The Trace and the Body*, Susan Best addresses the relationship between the viewer's body and the materiality of *House*. Associating *House* with

15. Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.



the viewer's body as the index of its absence and of the spatial structure in which that body operates, Best suggests that *House* configures space in such a way as to imply a relation to the body. *House* raises a sense of disturbance in the body, primarily as the result of its carnal effect and affect, and possibly even without the knowledge of the particular history or general typology of the work. As Best puts it, the eliciting of "strong feelings of bodily discomfort" raised by *House*, the sense of immediate disturbance and unease caused by having a domestic space presented as solid object turned inside out, reflects the bodily endeavor to conform to space. This demonstrates that our response to the work "is indeed first and foremost a corporeal one."<sup>16</sup>

According to Best, then, we expect accommodation from *House* and we are disturbed when it is denied. We are willing to take up its inside-out view as part of our bodily constitution and feel that its spatial dislocation is a problem with our body rather than with the work. Best suggests that this is how *House* summons a carnal formula of its presence in the body so that the body responds to it. We may elaborate and say that if the trace is, as Best suggests, a play between subject and object, and if *House* demonstrates a play between the body and its surroundings, it is a play in which corporeality "needs to be turned inside out to realign itself again" with the displaced materiality of *House*.<sup>17</sup> If the body feels that it needs to turn itself inside out, it is in order to respond to a "metaphorical inversion of the body, a reversal of interiority and exteriority, structure and void."<sup>18</sup>

It appears, however, that there is more at stake in determining why *House* is so disturbing. Best uses Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of the trace to establish a link between the body and the world through the art object. At the same time, she seems to be relying on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological humanism, according to which the upside-down or the inside-out view is problematic regardless of whether it involves the human body or not. Perhaps the best indication of the inherent humanism in this argument is the generic and universalized use of the terms "body" and "bodily response." While we may accept that a viewing body would respond to *House*, it is important to clarify that even on a phenomenological level, this type of response would be qualified by habituation. It would involve a specific response to a particular house, one we have lived in or one very similar to that. Therefore, instead of a generic body, we should talk about the body of the viewer—or better still the bodies of viewers and their respective homes.

Viewers felt sympathy for the other (the absent symbolic or proverbial inhabitant of *House*) as if they experienced the inhabitant's disturbance. In this context, it appears that *House* was disturbing because it represented an assault not only on body orientation, but on the orientation of perception. Its materiality disturbed the body not only because it was inverted, but because it was primarily an assault on a system of perception for analyzing art that also determines the category of body. *House* entailed a loss of the humanist subject and a "leaking away into the nondifferentiated."<sup>19</sup> Through a material reordering, it took the place of the body and became a witness to a palpable corporeal absence, leaving the audience as the intruder into private space. *House* became a nonhuman of the corporeal. It was also an attack on the body without an affirmation, where the humanist body was denied, excluded, and turned into the formless.

16. Best, "The Trace and the Body," 175.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Jon Bird, "Dolce Domum," in Lingwood, ed., *House/Rachel Whiteread*, as in n. 12, 122.

19. Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 171.

At the same time, *House* did not belong to the viewer's body. It had to be the other to the space it replaced in order to replace it. The very negation of the original produced a supplement, just as the very act of repetition articulated the freestanding condition of the signifier. *House* thus constituted a black hole in the viewer's perception, stripping the world to a characterless isotropic desert. To paraphrase Bois, in this context it revealed the precariousness of the confidence in bodily and material solidity. In part, this assault was only possible because *House* was a reminder/remainder of a domestic and familiar space. The basis of this relation depended on what domestic space represented for its audience. According to many accounts, it was precisely the "domestic" character of Whiteread's intervention that touched the public nerve. *House* seemingly struck a blow at the archetypal space of homeliness. It was, in Anthony Vidler's words, a "silencing of the past life of the house," where the traces of that former life were "rendered dead but preserved."<sup>20</sup>

Home is the "mythical point of origin" that represents a crucial component in the constitution of identity.<sup>21</sup> Home represents not only the focus of our desires and longings, a point of origin and return, but a way of acquiring a place in the world of social relations. It is also the point of reference for a spatial politics that guides our differentiation between interiority and exteriority, immediate environment and wider culture. Whiteread solidified this space of interiority and comfort. In part, this meant exposing it to the scrutiny and questioning of the public other. *House* materialized the fragile symbolic barrier between absence and presence and private and public, between things that should be hidden and things that should be shown. Possibly it disturbed its viewers by removing the things that were intended for display, leaving only the bare familiarity of things that ought to have been hidden but have come to light: the uncanny. What disturbed the meaning in Whiteread's work is "the psychopathology that lies beneath the everyday; the repressed fears, desires, prohibitions that lurk within social routines as the uncanny stalks the familiar, and the inanimate threatens to come alive."<sup>22</sup>

Viewers felt distressed because they experienced the invasion of the exposed nakedness of *House* and realized that this could have been their house and their private space. Yet it has been noted in many accounts that the most disturbing aspect of *House* was its blank, blocked windows. Some of the responses to *House* were reactions to "the literal impossibility of entering into the house itself" and the possibility "that its closed form held unaccounted secrets and horrors."<sup>23</sup> Contrary to a "traditional" site-specific work, *House* refused the right of entry to its audience. As Jon Bird noted, Whiteread thus denied all chances of the nostalgic return to the womb by refusing access to domestic familiarity, even banishing the uncanny itself. If nostalgia marks a primal desire to return to the womb, then *House* was decidedly and extremely antinostalgic; it was a past to which one could not return.

*House* was an impossible, "lost" object of memory, a trace of a trace. It was erased with no real relics or souvenirs other than the traces that remain: public and private memories, second-hand accounts, and photographs. Souvenirs are the traces that replace the event with narrative, and the desire for them arises from the impression of unrepeatability of the event, or longing for the vanished original. *House* was not an original, it was a mark of a past that never was, a

20. Anthony Vidler, "A Dark Space," in Lingwood, ed., *House/Rachel Whiteread*, as in n. 12, 68.

21. Bird, "Dolce Domum," 122.

22. *Ibid.*, 124.

23. Vidler, "A Dark Space," 71.

present that never quite added up and a future that never came. Its physical erasure was only a part of its affectivity.

House was imprinted by the trace structure, by the repressed term that deconstructs that structure. This trace is not a sign, “empirical or evanescent,” it does not point to anything outside of itself.<sup>24</sup> It does not rely on memory to reproduce the past, it does not depend upon notions of revelation that refer to an originary site or mark a return to such a site: the economy of presence. The trace is founded within a moment of erasure. This is an erasure because Whiteread’s object is a cast, an impression made by a void whose appearance is constituted by the erasure of such marks.<sup>25</sup> The very structure of the sign is determined by the trace of what is forever absent. The presence of materiality of House took on meaning from its being an addition that replaced absence. It represented an irreversible past event, one that is always obliterated, a memory of what has never been present.

Uros Cvorovic completed his undergraduate studies in 2001. He is currently working on his Ph.D. thesis at the University of New South Wales, College of Fine Arts, Sydney. His area of interest is museums, memory, and national identity.

24. Merewether, “A Lasting Impression,” 167.

25. *Ibid.*