National College of Art and Design

Faculty of Fine Art: Painting

Rachel Whiteread's House :
Monument to Domestic Space

by
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Introduction

It is my intention, by means of this thesis, to discuss the significance of Rachel Whiteread's sculpture House , in terms of its brief existence as a public monument to domestic space. I intend to explore the difficulties and outcome of placing such a sculpture within a specific location, and to examine the public relevance of such artworks.

House as a sculpture evoked a tremendous response from the general public, the local council, the media, art critics and historians. For some, House was enormously appealing, while others reacted very strongly against it, finding it offensive or simply pointless. In the words of Susan Lacy:

> Being an artist carries with it a great potential and a great obligation,....,In a culture made up of images, sound and stories created by artists who do not hold themselves accountable for that very culture, we have a set up for destruction. (Gablik, 1991, p.132).

Whiteread's House offered an extreme example of the difficulties involved with putting sculpture in public places. I intend to illustrate how the placing of sculpture within a particular community, and the introduction of an urban context, opens the work up immediately to infinitely more interpretations, meanings and understandings, than it could possibly have engendered within the confined space of the art gallery; by the same token, a piece of fine art has the added obligation to bear relevance to the society in which it has been placed as well as addressing more formal issues.

Chapter one of this thesis will be dedicated to describing the background of the work and to clearly depicting the social context within which it existed, through a description of the intrinsic nature of its precise location. This chapter will deal also with the actual making of House, the local reaction, the media response, its' receipt of the Turner–Prize and Worst Artist Award, and finally its demolition.

In Chapter Two the space with which Whiteread has involved the work, the domestic space, will be defined as a social space. The notion of <u>House</u> as a time-space will be discussed, regarding the relationship between the domestic time-space and its urban surroundings; thus further establishing the social context of the work, and the recognition of the house as the primary social space.

Whiteread's casts, in particular <u>House</u>, relate to collective memory. I intend to explore this idea by examining what Jung termed as the 'collective unconscious'. According to Bachelor, memories of childhood often become localised within the home. Whiteread seems, through the casting process, to preserve these memories in time. An attempt will be made to convey how this process facilitates an encounter with collective memory. It also brings a nostalgic aspect to the work , the relevance of which I intend to examine.

In Chapter Three, the functions of the Classical monument will be outlined, in an attempt to examine how <u>House</u> relates to monumental statuary, and public art. The similarity between <u>House</u> and tombs, crypts, or mausoleums will be investigated. This likeness to burial chambers, and the threatening aspect of the work resulting from the relationship between <u>House</u> and Freud's 'Unheimlich' will be discussed.
It is my aim to determine how successful <u>House</u> was as a public sculpture, and how and if, this success effected its credibility as a piece of postmodern fine art.

CHAPTER 1 : A Description of House

Since 1988, Rachel Whiteread has compiled an inventory of domestic life. As a student she made castings from her own body, which she sometimes interpreted as articles of daily use, for example, her back as a shovel. More recently, however, she has cast the spaces beneath tables, bathtubs and beds, the inside of a water-bottle, the space under a sink, a floor or a mattress. Notwithstanding its' mundaneness, according to Stuart Morgan, "all her works have references to the human body, the space it inhabits, and its relation to space in general". (Morgan, 1993, p.128). In compliance with Morgan's critique of her work, and without *literally* representing the human body, Whiteread has created a museum of everyday living.

In her first solo show at the Barbara Carlile Gallery, London, in 1989, Whiteread exhibited Closet. Having removed the fixtures from a wardrobe's interior, and lining its inside with felt, she then filled the wardrobe with plaster. The cast of the interior space, with its felt surface was exhibited as Closet. (Illustration 1, p.8). In 1990 Whiteread exhibited a complete living-room, entitled Ghost. (Illustration 2, p.9). A bedsitter in Archway, North London, was used as a mould for the project. However, in 1993 she would embark on her most ambitious work to date; the casting of an entire house in concrete.

Starting out as an idea in Whiteread's studio in East London, it wasn't until several years later that House was realised. In autumn 1991 Whiteread first met with James Lingwood, the co-director of Artangel[1] regarding the possibility of funding House. Lingwood says of his initial meeting with Whiteread, that although he was aware then that House had the potential to be a contentious work of art, it was impossible to imagine that it would be quite as exposed and controversial as it turned out to be. He was not fully aware at the time .that its transition from private projection to public phenomenon would be so dramatic. (Lingwood, 1995, p.7). Nonetheless, Artangel were persuaded to commission the project, for which they agreed to provide the sum of £50,000. Further assistance was later provided by Tarmac Structural Repairs[2], and Becks[3].

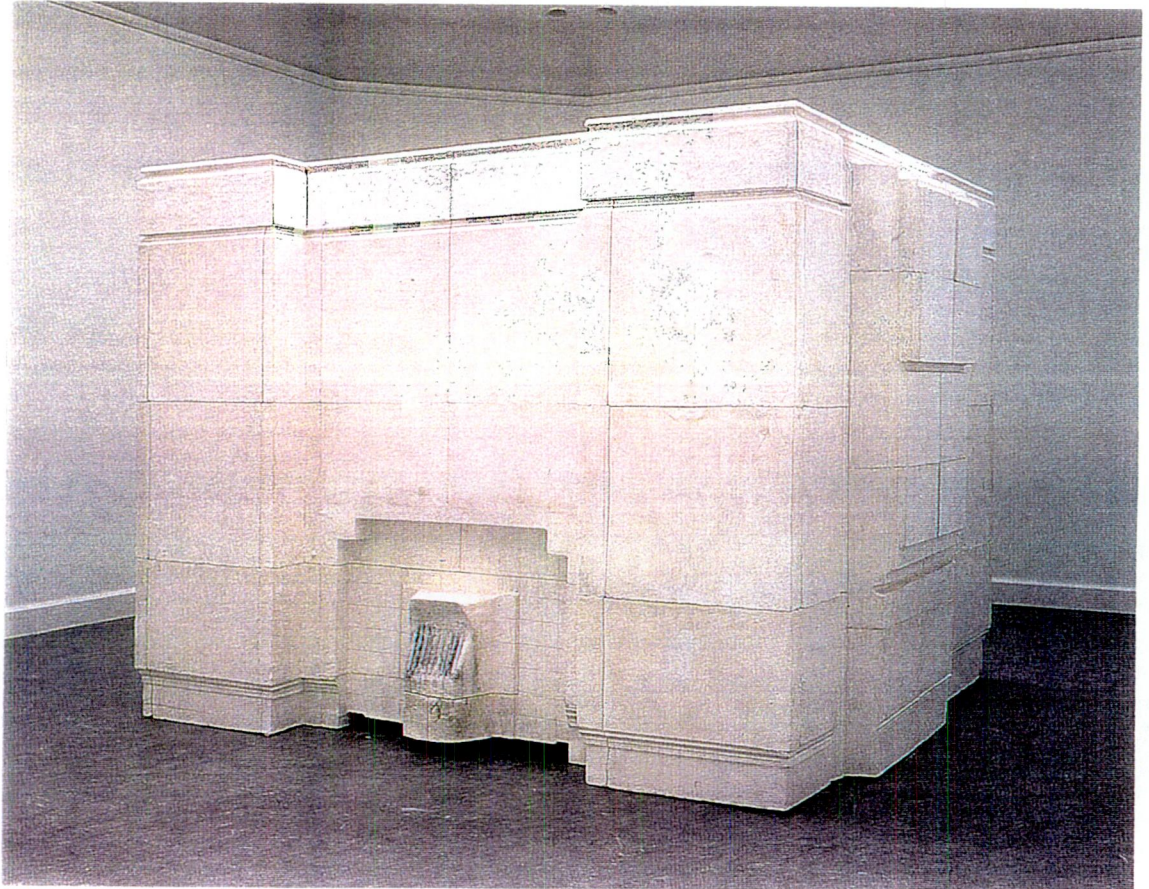Illustration 1 : <u>Closet</u> (1988)

Illustration 2: <u>Ghost</u> (1990)

In February 1992 Whiteread made her first preparatory drawings of <u>House</u> (Illustration 3: p.11). That spring she and Lingwood looked at several terraced houses in North and East London without success. A house in Islington was considered, but the necessary permission was not secured. Another in Hackney was proposed , but it was knocked down before an offer was made to the owner. It was not until late September 1992 that 193 Grove Road was identified as a possible location.

Location

Whiteread had always intended for <u>House</u> to be site-specific, and therefore the location was chosen very carefully. The selected Victorian terraced house which stood at 193 Grove Road in the Bow Neighbourhood district of London's East End, represented a rich historical and architectural meeting place. In an article written by John McEwen for the <u>Sunday Telegraph</u>, while the construction of <u>House</u> was underway, the significance of the precise location of <u>House</u> is emphasised.

> Standing beside the old Roman road which still dictates the ground plan after 2,000 years, one can see a rare factory chimney; the traditional C. of E. Parish Church of St Barnabas alongside the Jehovah's Witnesses' and the Victoria Park Baptist Church; grim 1960's high-rises and tarted-up 1980's ones; four of the snug 1880's terraced family homes of which <u>House</u> is an example, and like everywhere else in London, the 21st Century megastructure of Canary Wharf. (McEwen, 1993, p.6)

Adding to the melange of the socio-historical diversity of the chosen site, one old resident of the area told Whiteread that <u>House</u> almost marked the spot where the first V2 rocket[4] had landed, a fact which added more resonance to the historical view.
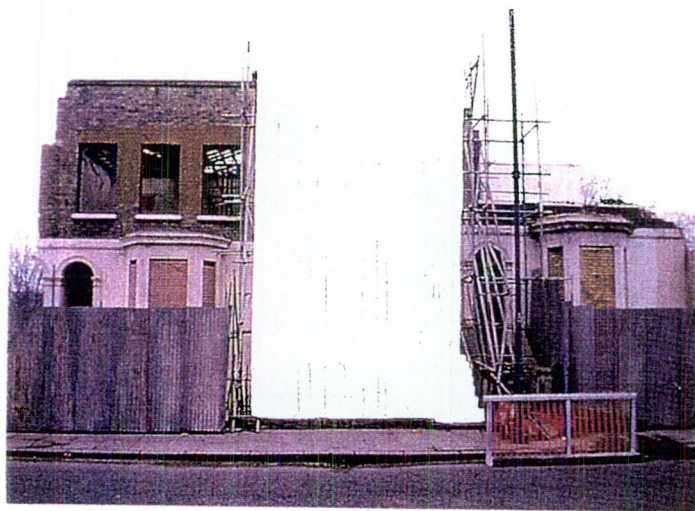
Illustration 3: Whiteread's Sketches *for* House

The particular locality in question, and indeed London's East End on the whole, is a reflection of typical re-development. 193 Grove Road was one of the remaining houses in a Victorian terrace which was soon to be demolished to make way for a public park. With its interesting history, its social links (past and present), and the growth in the quickly developing locality of industrialisation;

193 Grove Road seemed to Whiteread to be an appropriate location for the site-specific public sculpture which she had intended to make. In October 1992 the then tenant of the house, Sydney Gale, was approached. Months of private persuasion and public meetings passed before the councillors of Bow Neighbourhood voted, by a small minority, to give a temporary lease on 193 Grove Road.

Technical notes

With the lease secured on 193 Grove Road, Whiteread immediately contacted Neil Thomas, of Atelier One[5] who agreed to draw up structural plans for the making of House. After several months of waiting Whiteread was finally able to take possession, and the physical making of House began in August 1993, (Illustration 4, p.13). Early discussions about the construction of House included considering building an armature within the existing walls and casting elements of the surface or skin as she had in Ghost. Ghost was cast in plaster as a series of panels, in sections, which were then placed together (supported by an armature) in their original configuration, to recreate the negative space. To use this same process to create House, would, however, according to Thomas, have required a highly sophisticated system, aside from being altogether too expensive and time consuming.

Atelier One had previously used a process known as 'Gunniting', which bore some similarity to the technical procedures involved in the creation of Ghost. The process is generally used in building for reinforcement of existing walls or ceilings. Gunniting involves hanging a reinforcement mesh beneath existing concrete, a bonding agent is then applied to the surface. Concrete is then sprayed under pressure through a
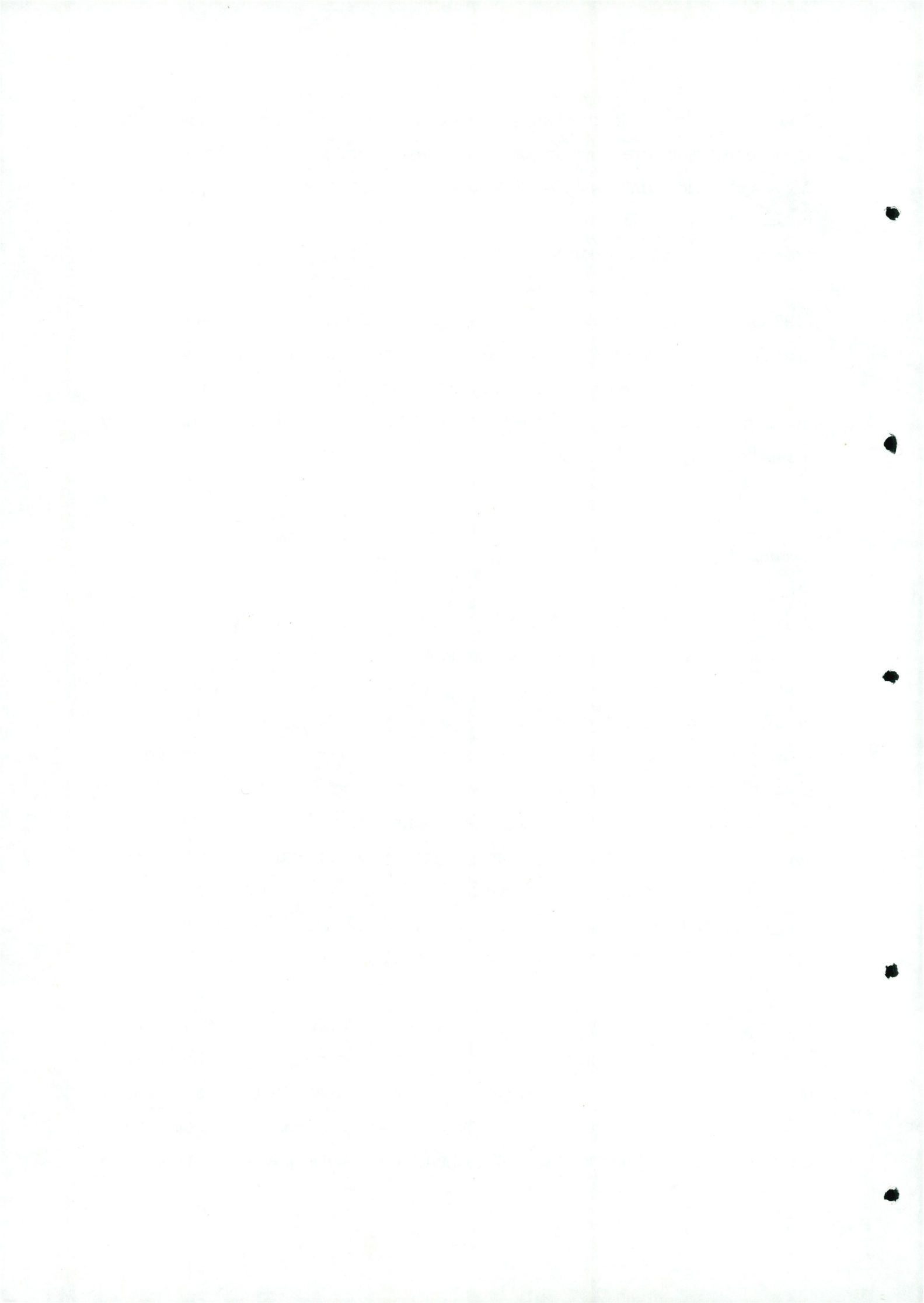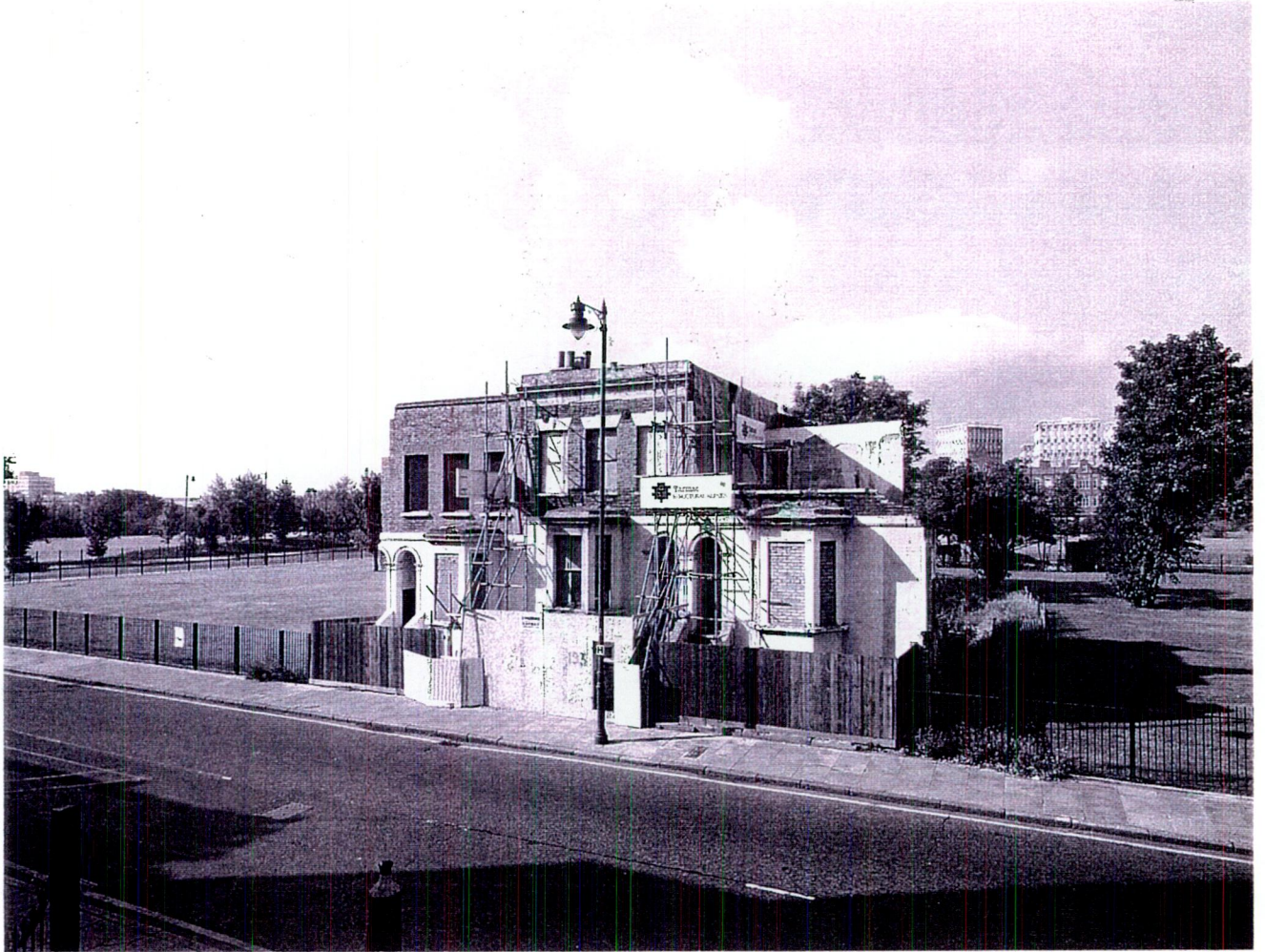
Illustration 4: <u>House</u> under construction (1993/94)

nozzle at the surface. The sprayed concrete sticks to the bonding agent. Layers can then be built up in this manner. This type of shell surface would not have been strong enough on its own to support the structure of House. As a result, it was proposed that a series of separate concrete boxes which would form the negative of each room, would be cast individually. Using steel mesh and sprayed concrete, each of these boxes would be rigid enough to stand alone. When the new shell was in place, and the existing building removed, these boxes would be stable enough to support the new structure. New foundations would then have to be laid at the base of the boxes to support the weight of the sculpture. A specific sequence of casting each of the rooms was developed in order to ensure maximum stability.

Before the process of casting began, each room had to be sprayed, stripped and cleaned in order to provide a smooth surface onto which the concrete could be bonded. Windows were covered with plywood and all recesses and corners were filled. The walls were then coated in a de-bonding agent and 25mm bolts were drilled through the floor for stability. On August 30th new foundations were laid into the ground to support the cast and reinforcement steel mesh was fixed to the walls.

In September the process of spraying concrete onto the steel mesh in layers began. This took five weeks. A hole was left in the roof, for final exit after the interior had been fully sprayed. On October 12th scaffolding was put up around the house and the process of removing the exterior walls and roof began, room by room, revealing a representation of the negative of each room, which together formed House (Illustration 5, p.15). On October 25th 1993, the making of House was finally complete.

During the process of construction House attracted considerable attention, and there had been many visitors to the site while construction was under way. The District Surveyor from Tower Hamlets visited on several occasions, with a number of different colleagues. According to Neil Thomas, "no one could believe the project and wanted to see it with their own eyes". (Lingwood, 1995, p.130). This was only the beginning of the extensive public interest that House was to generate.
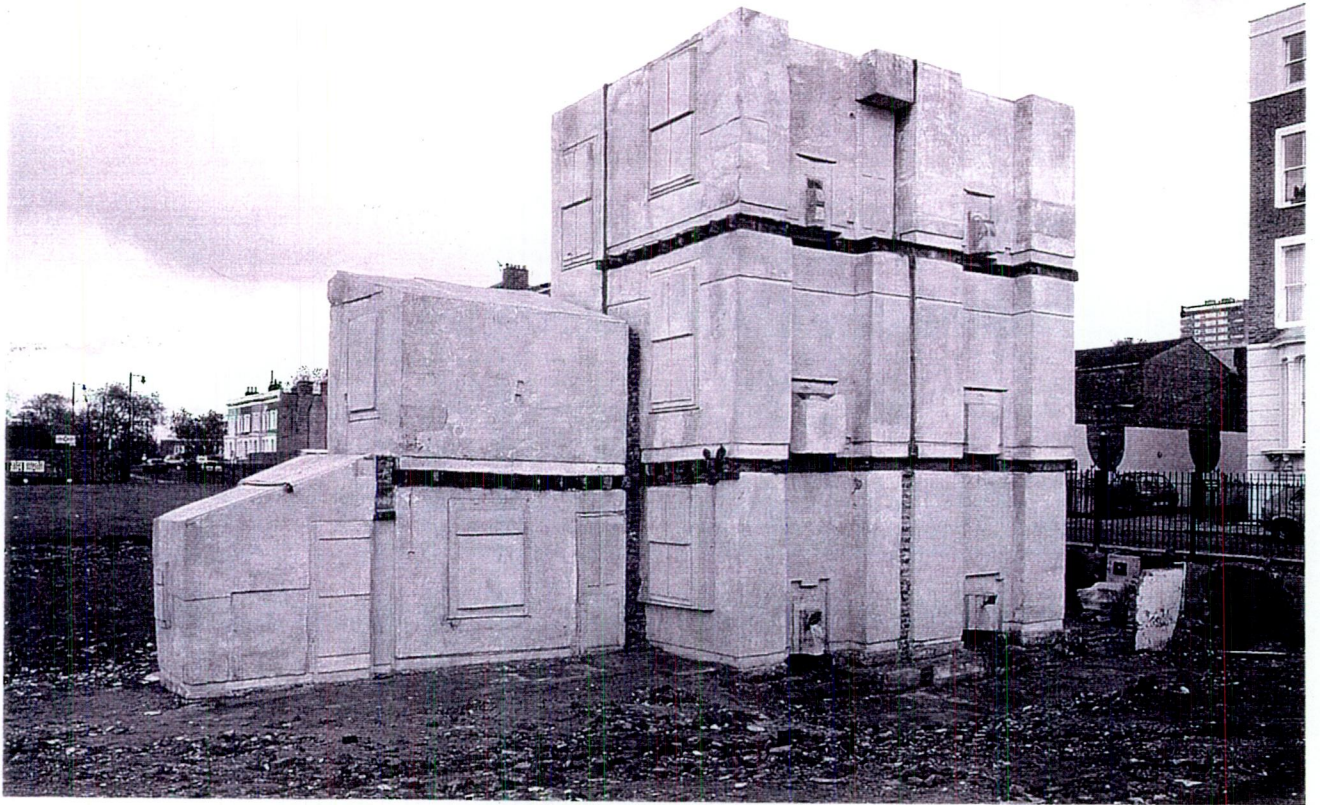
Illustration 5: House (1993/94)

Within four months of its completion, approximately 250 newspaper and magazine articles were printed in reaction to Whiteread's House. In fact, between July 1993 and April 1994, the project commanded a tremendous show of media attention and extensive critical response. "Rarely has any cultural event received such attention as Rachel Whiteread's House". (Cohen, 1994, p.52) wrote David Cohen in a retrospective article examining the impact and general interest that Whiteread's work had evoked, not only among members of the art world, but also among local residents of the Bow Neighbourhood and the rest of the general public.

House inspired very diverse responses from public and critics alike. Some approved of the work, others did not, but almost everyone seemed to have an opinion to offer! In an article in the Independent, Tobias Meyer, head of contemporary art at Sotheby's, was asked his opinion of the work. "She's completely utterly brilliant.. he responded , "The sculpture is beautiful. The idea is interesting, the location is controversial". (Meyer, 1993 P.17). The same article quotes a local builder describing the work as an amazing piece and a real achievement. Others responded, however in fervent condemnation of House, insisting that it was nothing short of a monstrosity and an eyesore. According to James Hall , Public Sculpture in general, "provokes" people, since it has almost always been imposed on public spaces by ruling regimes and cultural elites. (Hall, 1997, p.122). (Illustration 6: p.17).

The fact that there is so much poverty and a considerable amount of homelessness in this area of East London ensured that many people were offended, seeing House as a gross misplacement of funds, and as a result they responded to it with condemnation. Others saw it, however, as a political statement, an indictment of homelessness, (although it was never intended by Whiteread as such), and they responded approvingly because of this. According to David Cohen:
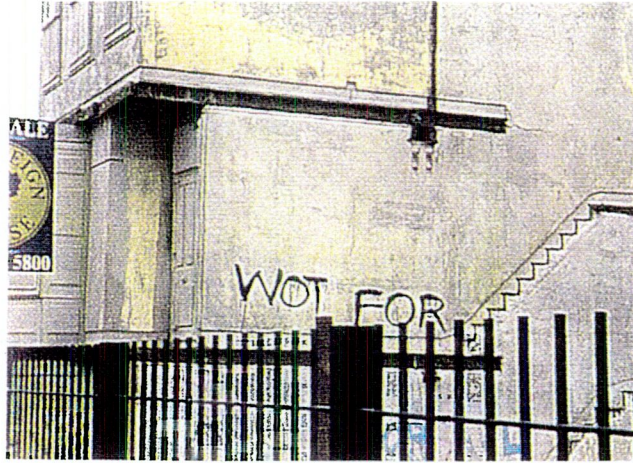
Illustration 6: <u>House</u>, detail, (1993/94)

> Underlying this whole affair was an unsavoury element of class conflict. The mood was of a challenging, arcane piece of conceptual art being foisted on a poor community by an art establishment whose noises about the work's accessibility were unconvincing. (Cohen, 1994, p.52).

Whiteread was fortunate, in that, in addition to all the tabloid articles and letters to local newspapers, House generated quite a considerable amount of serious analysis and response; and as well as being seen as controversial to the general public, by critics, House was regarded also, as a contentious work of art, which addressed legitimate issues raised by postmodernism.

Awards

On November 23rd Rachel Whiteread was awarded the 1993 Turner–Prize at the Tate Gallery, London. The presentation was shown live on Channel 4 television. Whiteread was the first woman to win the prestigious Turner award of £20,000. She was chosen from a shortlist of four artists including Sean Scully, Hannah Collins and Vong Phaophanit. Whiteread was a popular choice and her receipt of the prize was far from unexpected.

That same day, on the steps of the Tate Gallery, having only moments before receiving the Turner–Prize, Whiteread was awarded the K Foundation Prize for being the 'worst artist' of the year ! The spurious prize consisted of a £40,000 in cash, which was nailed to a board and surrounded by a picture frame. Whiteread initially refused the award but after threats by the K Foundation to set it alight if she did not accept it , she relented and took the money. It was immediately announced that she would be giving £10,000 to 'Shelter', the Housing Charity, and the remaining £30,000 would be split between ten artists, as the 'Whiteread Awards'.

The K Foundation was set up by two former members of the KLF pop group, Bill and Jimmy Cauty, who retired from the music business in 1992, after having a string of hits and building up very healthy bank accounts. The presenting of the award to Whiteread was only the beginning of a trilogy of exhibitions by the K Foundation, entitled "Money – A Major Body of Cash". In the months preceding the presentation of the 1993 Turner–Prize, the K Foundation spent £200,000 on newspaper advertisements. Slogans such as **Abandon All Art Now** , appeared in the British press. The public were requested to send their votes for the artist, of the four short-listed for the Turner–Prize, whom they felt had produced the worst body of work. On the evening of November 23rd a group of journalists were invited by the K Foundation to witness "the Amending of Art History". (Bailey, 1994,p.5).They were collected in Limousines and each given a sum of £1,600 in cash. They were then driven to a remote location outside London, where they were shown £1 million in notes nailed to a picture frame. Having, on request nailed all the cash they had been given earlier to a second frame, the journalists were driven back to London where the £40,000 was presented to Whiteread. Incidentally , Cauty and Drummond later burned the aforementioned million, an act which they reportedly since regret!

The presentation of the K Foundation award triggered a somewhat indignant reaction from the Tate Gallery, since it undermined the prestige of the Turner Prize. For Whiteread, the K Foundation award was an embarrassment, and an unwelcome distraction at the time, since on that same evening she had also been, ironically, informed of the Bow Neighbourhood Council's decision, in Tower Hamlets, to order the demolition of the twice winning installation.

Demolition

Although the sculpture in London's East End was never intended to be permanent, the decision to demolish it so soon provoked a storm of anger in the art world. paradoxically, it was the battle to both prevent and hasten its destruction which propelled the issue into the news, and caused an explosion of media interest. The sponsoring body, Artangel, which funded the £50,000 to build House , would have

liked to see it last the six months originally agreed upon by Whiteread and Lingwood. Since the Bow Council had initially been five months late in allowing access to the site, work on House began much later than had been intended, and so the sculpture was to stand for only one month of the proposed time.

As a result of the decision to refuse an extension of the lease on 193 Grove Road, Bow Neighbourhood Centre was besieged by representations. A motion was set in parliament by Mildred Gordon MP and Hugh Bayley MP, calling for Tower Hamlets to allow House to remain for three months so that local people could be properly consulted, the motion collected over 50 signatures. Organisations and individuals, including Channel 4 and Becks, reacted to the Council's decision by offering to lease the site from Bow. In addition to all of this, a petition calling for a stay on House collected over 3,500 signatures on the site within twelve hours on November 26th. This was met with a counter petition urging its demolition which collected only 800 signatures over the coming weeks. Finally, Bow Neighbourhood Council agreed, on principle, to lease the site until January 12th, 1994.

As an outcome of her receipt of the 'worst' artist award, the negative reaction of many locals, and the council's demands for House to be abolished, Whiteread's name carried with it a whiff of scandal, while apparently causing no lasting damage to her reputation this gained for her a certain notoriety . According to Art Historian, Paul Usherwood, this in effect , "ensured her a place among the heavyweights of 20th Century sculpture, such as Epstein, Moore, Mach and Gormley", whom he describes as having also suffered some eruption of British iconoclasm. Usherwood insists, in fact, that these controversies, "also confirmed her position as a key talismanic figure in the East London Artistic Renaissance". (Usherwood, 1996, p.13).

Regardless of Whiteread's acclaim, on January 11th, 1994, House was demolished. "In less than two hours, one of the most controversial pieces of art in Britain in years, was reduced to a pile of rubbish". (Kloster, 1994, p.4), lamented a local journalist. On March 10th 1994 the site was turfed over.

Footnotes

[1] Artangel – is a trust that supports outdoor temporary works such as performances and happenings, etc., and public sculptures. Based in London, the co-director is James Lingwood.

[2] Tarmac Structural repairs – a group who worked voluntarily in association with Artangel and Atelier One on this project

[3] Becks – Beer provided assistance by leasing the site from Bow Council in order to enable a stay of one extra month on House.

[4] V2 Rocket – London, and in particular this area, was heavily bombed during the Blitz.

[5]Atelier One – is a group of structural engineers including Neil Thomas, Reg Allen and Aran Chadewick who often work in association with Artangel on such projects.

CHAPTER 2 : <u>House</u> , an Urban/Domestic Time-Space:
Collective Unconscious; Localised Memories; and Nostalgia

Rachel Whiteread's sculpture <u>House</u> secured a domestic space solidly in time. The social space of this particular home, based in its' specific locality was also representative of a particular era. In effect, it refers to the periods that have evolved, and the changes which have taken place in urban domestic life from Victorian times to the 1990s. <u>House</u> was a concrete representation of the social space which it contained within a domestic environment.

Social Space

Social space was examined and defined by modernist philosophers like Lefebvre , and De Certeau. Lefebvre believed that space could be divided into three fundamental categories: 1. <u>material space</u>, which is made up of actual buildings and information; 2. <u>social space</u>, which contains personal space, mental maps of occupied space, and spatial discourses and interactions; and 3. <u>spaces of representation</u>, where the imagination exists and breeds. Lefebvre considered the house to be the primary example of social space. He refers to it as an "almost absolute space". The streams of energy which run through the house by every imaginable route, are intertwined webs of social interaction, which according to Lefebvre extend to our street, and to the wider network of social relations which make up the entire city . (Lefebvre,1974,p.120-121). De Certeau, based his studies of social space on tracing footsteps in the city. "Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together", and so create the city through daily activities and movements. "They are not localised; it is rather that they spatialize". (Harvey,1989,p.213).

The social spaces which we occupy do not merely consist of tactile things and our relationships to these things; they consist also of less tangible aspects which we ourselves construct through social interaction. The social energy contained within the home, extends also to our street and creates the complex webs of social interaction of the entire city. According to Doreen Massey:

> Social space is not an empty arena within which we conduct our lives; rather it is something we construct about us. It is this incredible complexity of social interactions and meanings which we constantly build, tear down and negotiate. (Massey, 1995, p.36)

Time-Space

As we create a space for social interaction and a geography for our lives, albeit constantly changing, we create a time-space within which we can conduct our lives. Whiteread's House, while circuitously stressing the significance of domestic space, seemed to work simultaneously as a disruption of social time-spaces. There are a number of ways in which this disruption was exposed.

First , House clearly displayed the evidence of a familiar past, of another era, within the space-time of today. In Massey's opinion "it made present something which was absent". (Massey, 1995, p.36).

Secondly, The house used was turned inside-out and the private was, in effect, made public. In this way certain intimacies were exposed to public view. The personal space occupied within the living-room, the bathroom or the bedroom, and the more precarious, personal and informal spaces where most daily life was lived was, in a sense, exposed for the entire neighbourhood to see.

A third way in which House disrupted our usual sense of time–space was by apparently solidifying the volume that was once the interior of the house. In the words of Bachelard , "In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time .That is what space is for." (Bachelard, 1964, p.8). In this case, however, the openness of the living space had been filled in; what had been air had been turned to solid. Domestic, social time–space was effectually deadened. "The movement, the noise, the interchange; these things through which we create the time–spaces of our lives were gone". (Massey, 1995, p.36).

When Whiteread filled the domestic space with concrete and removed the shell of the house to reveal the result, the social space which had been contained within the walls of the house seemed to take on a new significance. Through casting the house's interior, Whiteread shut out the possibility of further social interaction within that domestic space, the value of the living space which had been there , was now consequently emphasised, it had been intentionally preserved in time.

Social Energy

Although Whiteread's House was cast in concrete, and the social space within which the domestic life of this particular dwelling had been enacted was muted, there remained traces of the domestic life of the household, representing the living energy that the house had once exuded. The negative of sockets and wires, of windows, doors, stairs and fireplaces, along with the traces of old wallpaper and paint, are all reminders of the energy of living which flowed throughout the various rooms of the house. These "fossil–like" remnants of domestic life were, "quite literally traces of the past" (Zelevansky, 1994, p.26), they clearly represented the social interactions which had taken place within the walls of 193 Grove Road. (Illustration 7: p.25 and Illustration 8: p.26).
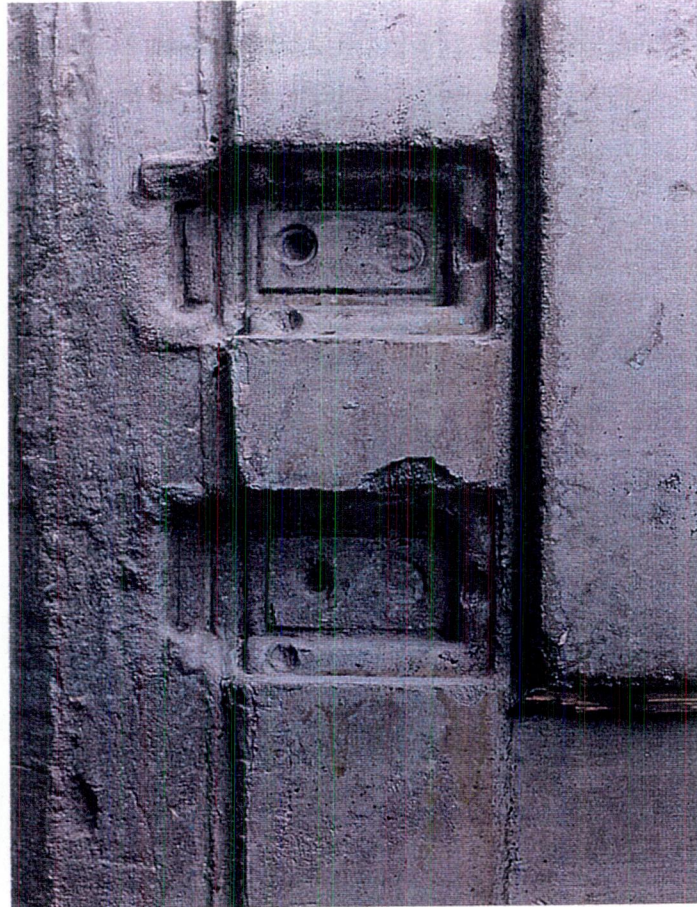
Illustration 7: House, detail (1993/94)

Illustration 8: House, detail (1993/94)

The house as described by Lefebvre is a "two-faceted machine, analogous to an active human body" (Lefebvre, 1974, p.92). He discusses the outcome of stripping the house of its concrete slabs and walls, which are "glorified screens", and of uncovering the streams of energy which run through it. An image of "a complex of mobilities, a nexus of in and out conduits", and a convergence of waves and currents would then, according to Lefebvre, be disclosed.

Whiteread's sculpture House seems to embody Lefebvre's ideas, and to present visually an image of what Lefebvre describes as the certain outcome, of stripping a house of its walls to reveal its interior. The living energy of 193 Grove Road seemed to run throughout the structure of House. The evidence of this living energy was preserved in the negative indentations made by sockets and plugs, by pipes and fixtures, and, in particular, by the two stair-cases which dissected one side of House diagonally. (Illustration 9: p.28). Living energy is what turns a building into a social space. The same energy also turns a street into a community or a neighbourhood. Within House this energy had become fixed in time , a fate reminiscent of Pompeii. The silencing of the living energy of this particular dwelling, triggered off a sense of mourning for the foregone domesticity which had once resided here. According to Jon Bird what was mourned also was the "loss of the street as a site for the life of local communities and the social interaction that transforms an area into a neighbourhood". (Bird, 1995, p.118). Not only did House instil a sense of domestic loss, but through the fact that it stood alone (the other Victorian houses in the terrace having already been knocked down) it also mourned the loss of the social energy of an entire neighbourhood.
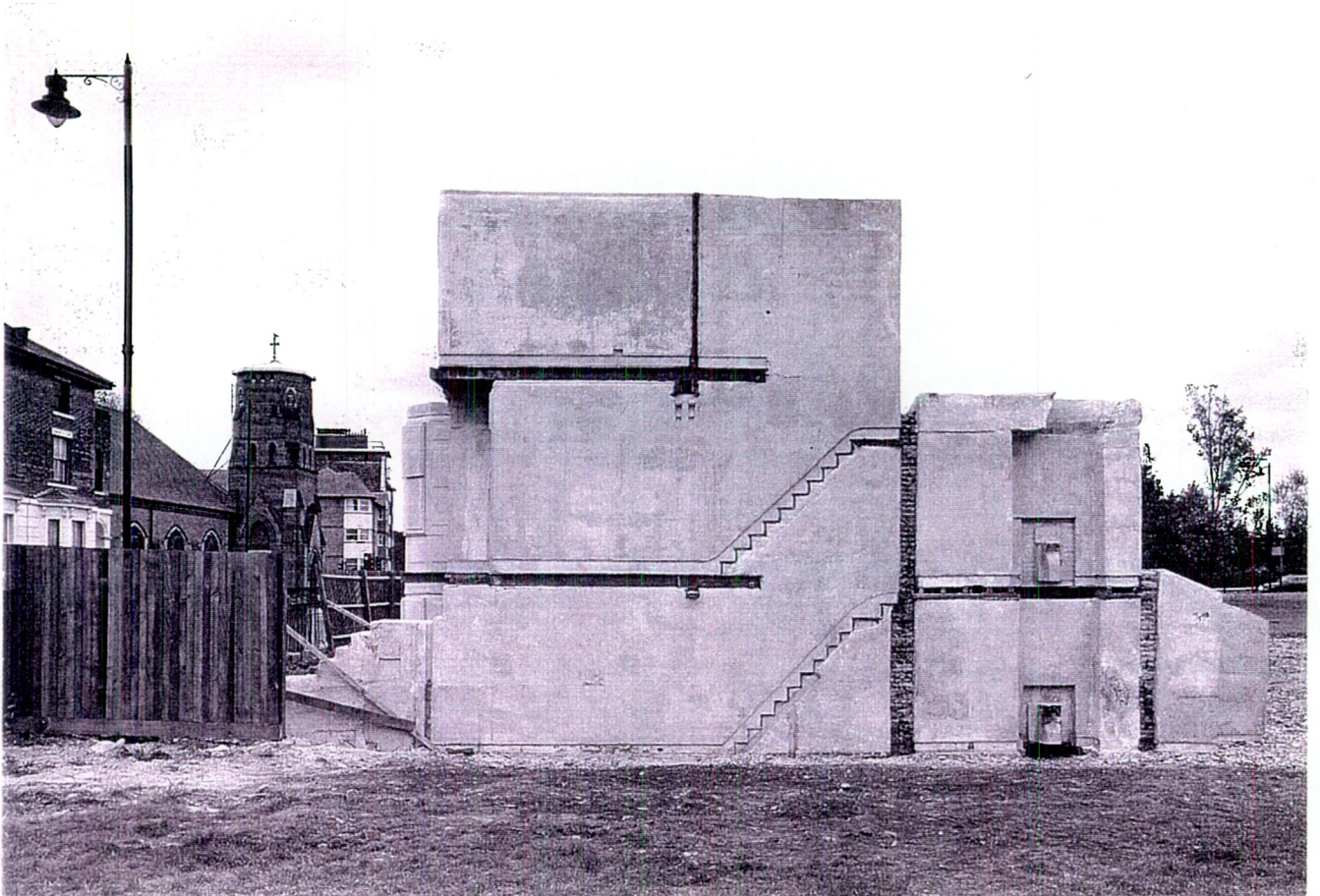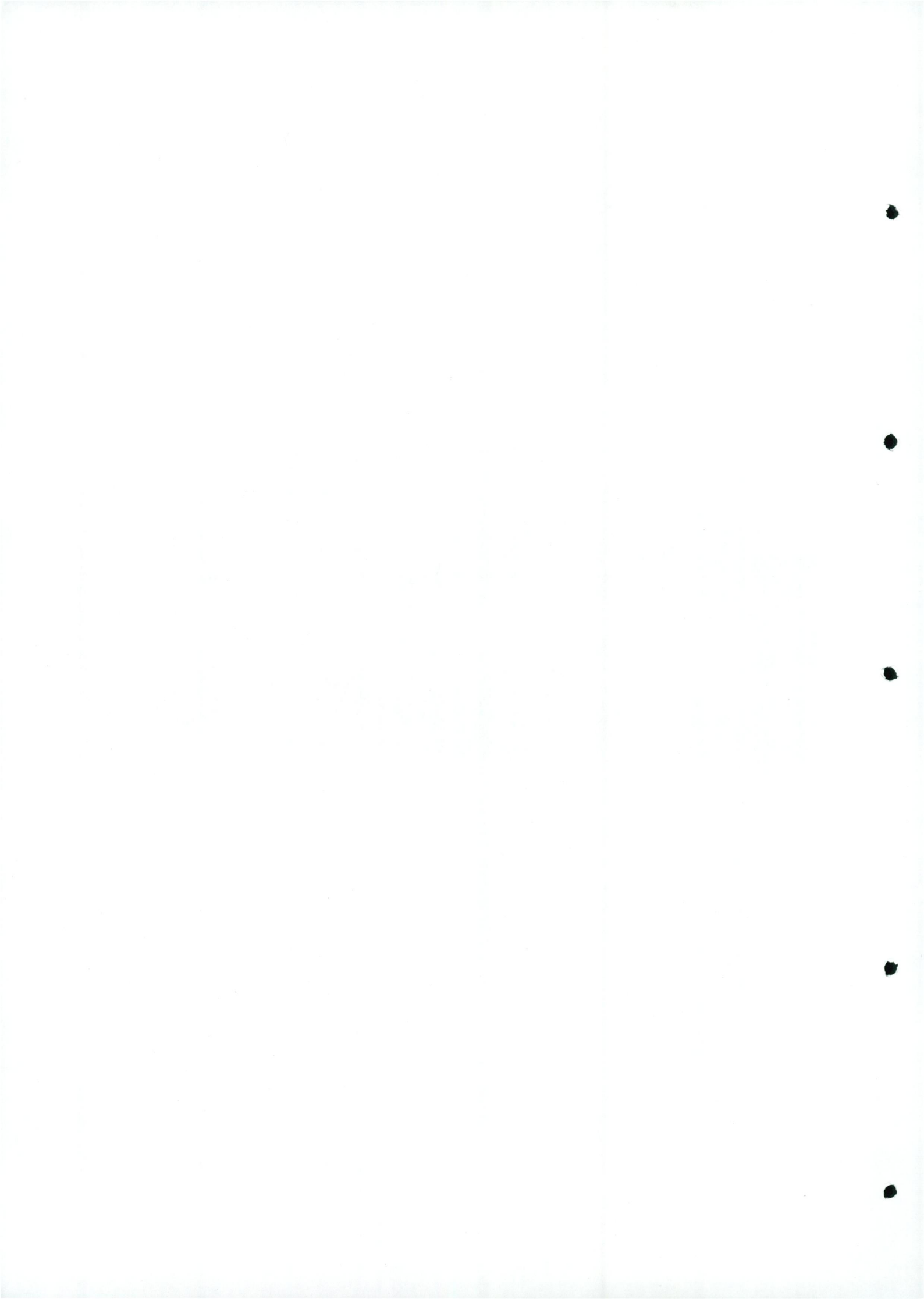
Illustration 9: <u>House</u> (1993/94)

Memory and the Collective Unconscious

A considerable amount of the comment on <u>House</u> was focused on memory, on the making 'real' of memories, on <u>House</u> as a 'memorial to memory' itself. Most of our memories of childhood and of growing up were formed in the home, many of our opinions or observations of life, were also gathered there. This is not to say that everyone's childhood memories of houses will be the same or even similar. There are, however, a considerable amount of rememberings which fall under the category of shared experience, or collective memory, through their relationship with the 'collective unconscious'.

The collective unconscious is a Jungian term for that aspect of the unconscious which is commonly shared by all. It is considered to be inherited, transpersonal, and to consist of the residue of the evolution of man. The collective unconscious is described as a 'potentiality' inherited from primordial times in a specific form of mnemonic images, which Jung refers to as the 'primordial' image, or the archetype[1]. Jung believed that the artist does not follow an individual impulse, but a current of collective life which arises from the unconscious of the modern psyche. As a result of being a collective phenomenon, identical fruit is borne in the most widely separated realms of painting, literature, sculpture and architecture. There are no inborn ideas , but there are inborn *possibilities* of ideas , and in the words of Jung;

> They appear only in the shaped material of art as the
> regulative principals that shape it; that is to say, only
> by inferences drawn from the finished work can we
> reconstruct the age old original of the primordial
> image. (Jung, 1966, p.81)

A symbol always stands for something more than its' obvious meanings. There are symbolic thoughts and feelings, symbolic acts and situations, which are not individual but *collective* in their nature and origin . These symbols are collective representations , emanating from primevil dreams and creative fantasies , in this way they are linked to primordial or mnemonic images and are connected to the collective unconscious and collective memory. A house can embody such

symbolism. In concurrence with Jung's teaching, Gaston Bachelard claims that: "There exists for each one of us an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past." (Bachelard, 1964, p.15). the house is experienced in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams. An entire past comes to dwell in a new house and the daydream deepens to the point where an immemorial domain opens up for the dreamer, of a home beyond mans earliest memory.

Localised Memories

According to Bachelard, "the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (Bachelard, 1964, p.7). Bachelard considered the house to be an "embodiment" of dreams, in that, in each of its nooks and corners lay a 'resting place' for daydreaming. In other words, specific places particularised the topic of the daydream. In these particular places we acquired habits relating to, or perhaps perfected details about, a certain daydream. To the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives, the locations of memories, Bachelard gives the name –Topoanalysis[2]. A topoanalytical study, then would define our localised daydreams and their relationship to particular objects. The memories which we associate with certain 'locales' are therefore the result of these daydreams.

According to Fiona Bradley, "Whiteread's sculptures hold and occupy space, speaking to the viewer of domestic land-marks of human experience". (Bradley, 1996, p.8). The first Whiteread cast to effectively portray the locale of a specific collective memory was Closet[3]. A wardrobe, of course, is something which is filled with symbolism. In his Poetics of Space, Bachelard points to the function of wardrobes , he claims that with their shelves they act as, "veritable organs of the secret psychological life". (Bachelard, 1964, pp 78, 81). As a symbol of the human psyche, wardrobes represent organisation and order in our lives. In them we store, not only clothes, but quite often, also shoe-boxes full of memorabilia such as old

letters, journals or photographs, and, in this way, we 'shelve' our thoughts and feelings, as a means, perhaps, of bringing order to them. For a child, a wardrobe can represent feelings of confinement and security. There is also a magical aspect, as depicted in the C.S. Lewis classic– The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe – in which the fantastic experiences of Lucy, on having entered into a magical world through the back of a wardrobe, are recounted. In a similar vein, Closet was created as a result of an attempt to recreate a childhood experience of rummaging about in a wardrobe. The wardrobe used as a mould was one which Whiteread herself went out and bought; it was an old wardrobe, similar to one with which she had been familiar as a child. In the option of Von Drathen, on experiencing Whiteread's Closet......

> Memories of childhood come to life: hours or minutes? Spent crouching in confinement and total darkness, unable to see your hand in front of your face, losing sense of place and time, encountering fear. (Von Drathen, 1993, p. 29).

This losing sense of place and time is often connected with dark, confined spaces. Though Fear and dark, confined spaces may not *necessarily* be connected. Von Drathen's image of a child sitting in a wardrobe losing sense of time and place *is* mnemonic, and so implies the involvement of what Jung considers to be the component of collective memory. Whiteread identified the particularity of a memory, associated with a familiar object, and related it as something universal. (Illustration 1: p.8).As Grunenberg proclaims Closet transposes a "personal remembrance of the artist into a generally imaginable collective experience". (Grunenberg, 1995, p.14).

Whiteread's sculptures are manifestations of memories. Bachelard asserts that."Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are". (Bachelard, 1964, p.9). And indeed Whiteread's casts have a strongly material presence. This is true, to a greater extent of her larger works, such as Ghost and House. French historian, Pierre Nora, claims that "memory centers on the concrete in space, in the gesture, in the image and object" and that "the localities of memory are above all vestiges (of truth)". (Grunenberg, 1995, p.23).

Adding to their solidity and concrete presence, Whiteread's sculptures make a statement about the surrounding environment and our society in general, thus giving them an historical dimension (Illustration 10: p.33). As Nora points out, we live in a society that gives precedence to the new over the old, the young above the aged and the future above the past. Through her sculptures Whiteread seems to be warning us against the loss of memory and intentionally provoking thoughts about present and past, the values intrinsic to our society, and the worth of these which it embraces. As an extension of such stock-taking of values, House evokes a sense of melancholic nostalgia.

Whiteread tries, in her work, to bring order to chaos, as it were, to make sense of the myriad of impressions and the barrage of memories which are the phenomena of Postmodern society. According to Grunenberg;

> The monolithic forms of her works oppose the temporal, quantitative and spatial fragmentation of the present, and attempt, through the materialisation of autobiographical as well as collective memories, to create a certain degree of stability and order. (Grunenberg, 1995, p.24).

This attempt to make sense of and consolidate memories is represented in House through the formation of its structure; the rooms which were cast one at a time look like blocks of concrete which may once have been separate, though appear to have been placed together again to form the structure of a house. These rooms each seem to enshrine their own specific memories of events in the form of fossils of the past, they seem to correspond to what Morgan calls, "blocks of the collective consciousness". (Morgan, 1993, p.5). The joins in walls and stark dynamics of the staircases, resist any attempts to unify memories and collective histories and represent them as a single entity.
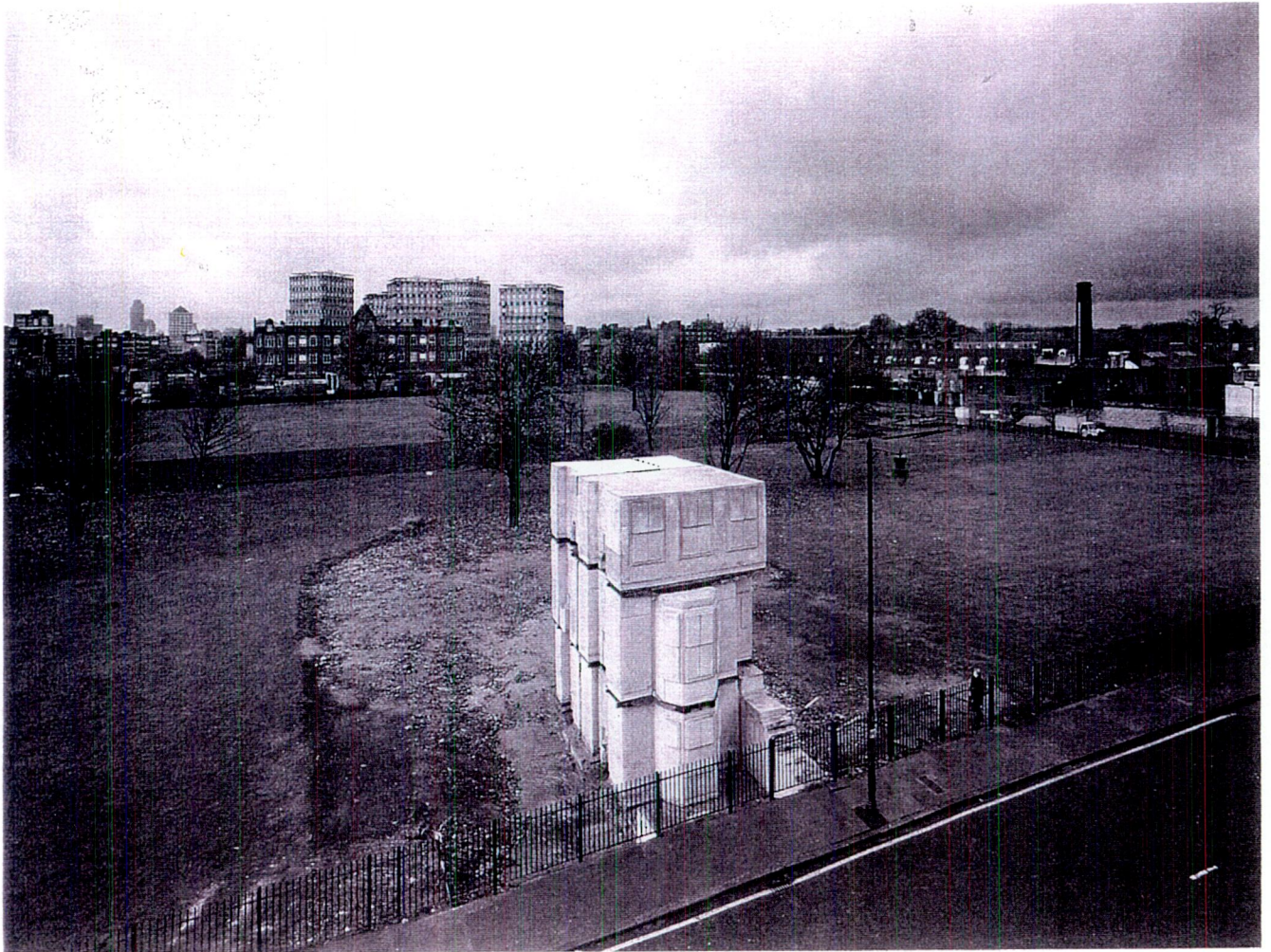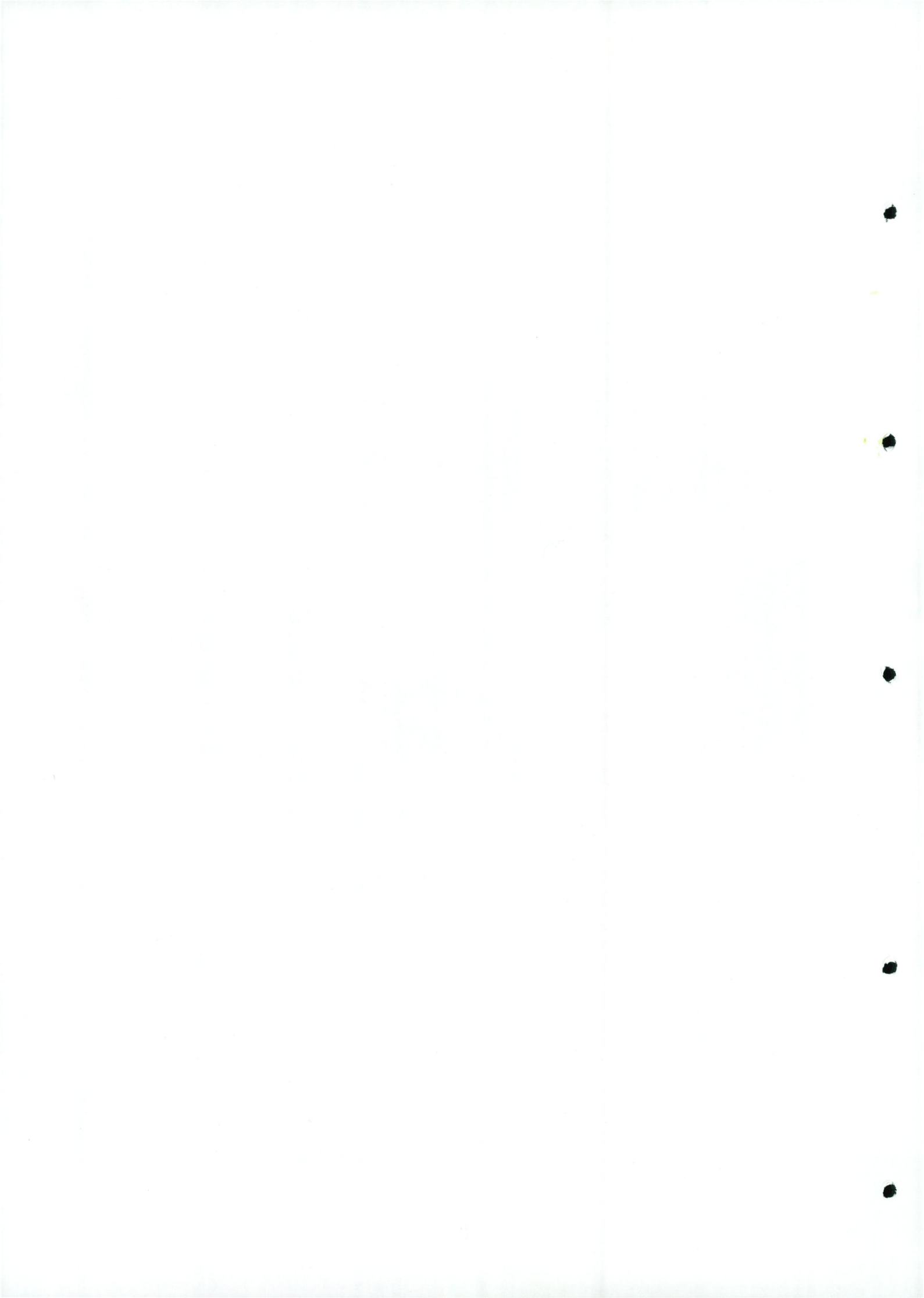
Illustration 10: House (1993/94)

Nostalgia

As a result of the arousal of certain emotions, a sense of absence or lost values, a lament for the passage of time or the transience of life – House evokes feelings of nostalgia. Doreen Massey concurs, of the public reaction and media response to Whiteread's sculpture, that "House, clearly aroused memories and provoked thoughts about nostalgia, moreover it did so, and quite deliberately, at a specific moment in space–time". (Massey, 1995, p.41).

Nostalgia is frequently interpreted as a symptom of the Postmodern condition. Such nostalgia is sometimes perceived as futile, in that ,this type of retrospection is carried out as a form of denial of the present, or refusal to face up to the future. Indeed, commentators such as David Harvey, see in nostalgia, little more than a "defensive response to the new burst of the globalisation of capital, the new accelerated phrase of time–space compression". (Massey, 1995, p. 36). According to Massey, such a response could be seen as a negative evasion of the real issues, and, in effect, she suggests that "nostalgia for a place, is likely to end up in political reaction".
(Massey, 1995, p.36).

It may be possible, however, to understand nostalgia in this context, by seeing it as a product of the present era, without necessarily condemning it so hastily. In an article written by David Greene, commenting on the recent popular trend of 'the home' as a theme in art of the nineties, Greene remarks that;

> Increasingly art no longer plays the role of the avant-
> garde literally where culture is heading, so much as it
> represents what culture has dropped along the way or
> is in the act of neglecting; the place, marginalised or
> otherwise where culture just will not go. It seems that
> we should be paying attention if only to see what we
> are missing. (Greene, 1996, p.96).

Perhaps such popular nostalgic treatment of places by artists (in particular the home), is in fact, a symptom emerging in response to the lengthy repression of all forms of nostalgia by Modernism in its various forms. "Postmodern nostalgia", suggests Massey, "is the return of modernism's repressed". (Massey, 1995, p.37).

It is possible for nostalgia to promote a sense of the individual as being non-alienated, a feeling of having belonged to a specific group, in a particular time and place, can develop. This inspires a sense of 'home'. Nostalgia of this kind can be problematic, it can be harnessed to reactionary claims for a return to a past, that in reality wasn't quite as it seems when looking back, or which was open to dispute. The Feminist argument that home is not always, necessarily, a place of rest, that it is also a place of work, of conflict and especially of entrapment, is pertinent here. Since it is not possible for a nostalgic sense of 'home' to be all-inclusive, the reality of the memories which are being called to mind must be clearly differentiated.

There were, as has previously acknowledged, wide and varying opinions and understandings of Whiteread's work, regarding nostalgia. According to Richard Shone;

> She is urban and contemporary in her sensibility, but illuminates a shared domestic past with no trace of nostalgia or sentimentality. Rooms, baths, furniture, encapsulate collective memory, yet spark in each viewer a volley of subjective allusion'. (Shone, 1993, p.838).

In contradiction, others feel that "she is able to make personal memories, experiences and nostalgia universal" (Debbaut, 1993, p.3). This is a somewhat utopian view of Whiteread's work. As has already been pointed out, there is no such thing as a "universal" sense of nostalgia, and an attempt to create one introduces the danger of misrepresentation of the past, as events and instances are 'remembered' as they never quite happened in reality.

Footnotes

[1] **Archetype** – the term .Archetype. is often misunderstood as meaning certain definite mythological images of motifs. But these are nothing more than conscious representations; it would be absurd to assume that such variable representations could be inherited. (Jung, 1964, p.67).

[2] **Topoanalysis** – is detailed description found in (Bachelard, 1964, p.8)

[3] **Closet** – see text p.

CHAPTER 4 : Monument to Domestic Space/Public Sculpture

In his account of the classical monument in European sculpture, Philipp Fehl informs us that;

> Monuments are made for a variety of purposes, not all equally impressive; they may be tombs, marks of honour, affection, triumph or hatred; signs of a covenant; demonstrations of authority or of the possession of property. (Watney,1995, p.98)

As a result of transfiguring an ordinary home, a common Victorian terraced house, into a life-sized sculpture, Whiteread memorialised the everyday lives of ordinary people. It is a common observation that history is made by the great, and merely lived by the rest of us. This ensures that most monumental statuary serves to glorify key historical figures or events. As Andrew Graham-Dixon points out, House on the other hand, is "stubbornly unheroic and democratic". (Graham-Dixon, 1993, p.25). But, House did not serve to commemorate a public event nor an individual achievement, instead it memorialised a family home, in which, Richard Shone reminds us, "for all we know any kind of unsavoury or banal life may have existed". (Shone, 1993, p.838). Nevertheless, a basic domicile was used, and the humble lived-in space was what constituted the actual work. As we have seen, Whiteread created a monument to domestic space.

What all monuments have in common, according to Fehl, is that they are intended to be permanent, to last through time, and to signify the importance of whatever memory it is their intention to pass on to the future. If House was intended as a monument to domestic space, it certainly brought back memories of childhood; evoked a sense of familiarity and nostalgia; and incited reflection of the value of the home and even on the consequence of its displacement by high-rise apartment blocks. Moreover, according to Bartomeu Marí , House touched on some of the

issues integral to the evolution of a city, and the life within it. These issues include "the accidents of history, of real estate speculation, of gentrification". The work also raised more "polemical issues in contemporary society: the right to have a home, control of property and the demise of areas of free access in the urban context". (Marí, 1996, p.66). It is as a result of the engagement with social issues such as these, that House approaches the monumental. House , indeed, could be seen as a monument to the cultural geography of the nineties.

'Unheimlich'

According to Stuart Morgan, House "was a monument which served to show how few monuments fulfil their true function". (Morgan, 1996, p.26). Morgan claims that House was a parody. Although it was a monument to the home, it was not in any way domestic; it was, in fact, he claims, an "anti-house". Graham-Dixon concurs:

> House is a paradox made concrete since if it is a monument made out of void space, a thing constructed out of the absence of things. Being a dwelling in which it is not possible to dwell, a building you cannot enter, it has the character of a tantatus. It is both a relic and a prompt to the imagination....., as well as a sculpture that is charged with a deep sense of loss. (Graham-Dixon, 1993, p.25).

Indeed, many critics detect an element of hysteria evoked by House. They attribute this to the fact that there are no windows or doors, since they have now been replaced by blank concrete panels of relief. The door-knobs and window-latches are now reversed negatives, and there is no possible means of re-entry into this house. For this reason, many critics link Whiteread's House to notions of the 'uncanny'. Freud describes the 'uncanny' by initially defining its meaning in association with the German term 'unheimlich'. 'Heimlich', in German, means homely, familiar, friendly.
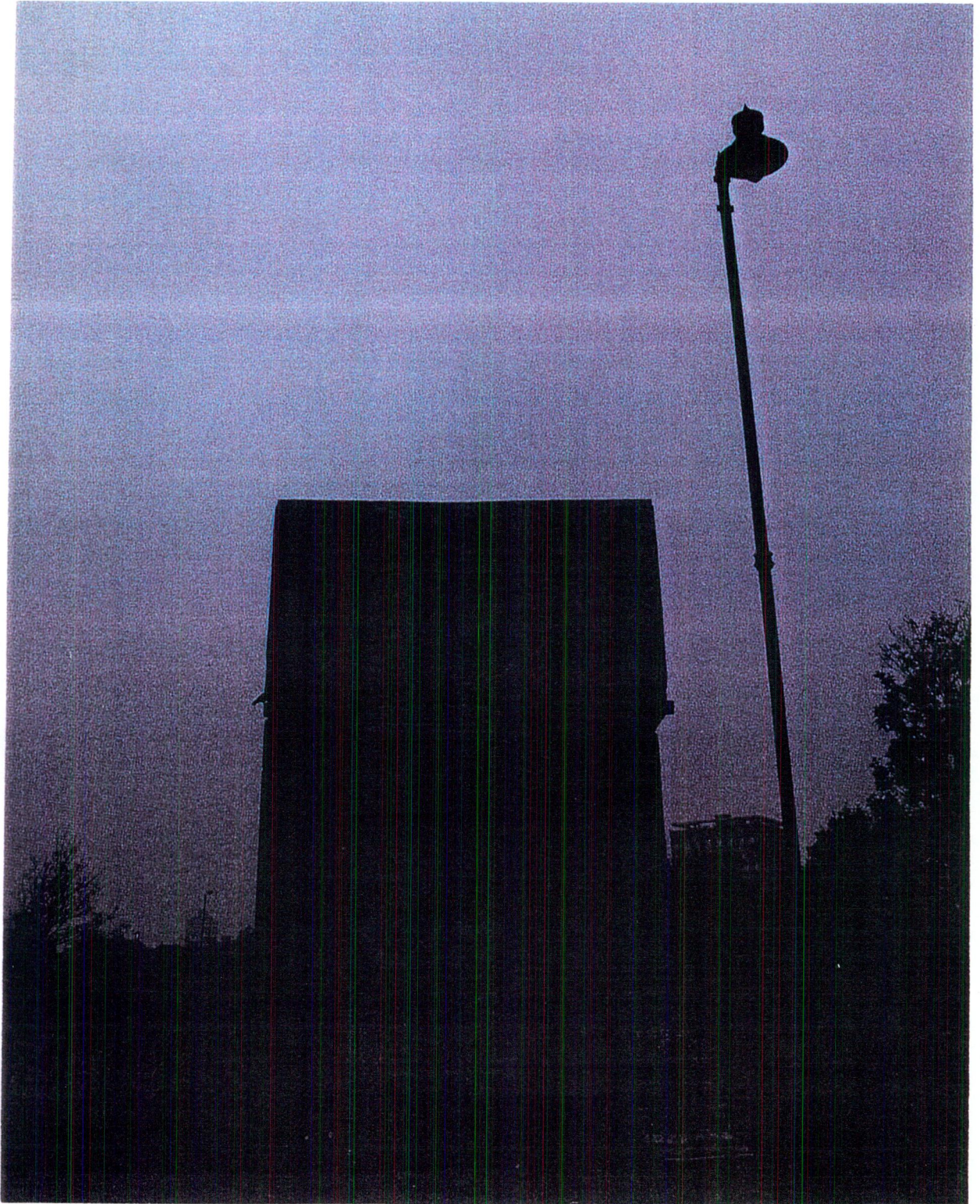
Illustration 11: <u>House</u> (1993/94)

'Unheimlich' is thus the opposite to 'heimlich', and translates directly as 'unhomely'. According to Freud, "the uncanny is that class of frightening, which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar". (Freud, 1919, S.E. Vol.XVII). What is uncanny can often be construed as frightening, although not everything that is new and unfamiliar is frightening. What is novel and unfamiliar, on the other hand, can easily *become* 'uncanny'. "An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality". (Freud, 1919, S.E. Vol. XVII). Whiteread's House is, of course, in this way reminiscent of childhood nightmares, of being unable to enter our own home. It is a horrible dream, presented to us as a reality, and, because of this and an example of Freud's 'uncanny'.

The inside-out quality of Whiteread's work accommodates an eerie relationship with the 'uncanny', and seems to deny any celebration of domestic nostalgia which the work might incite. On the one hand, the idea of preserving our childhood memories is pleasantly considered, and we easily perceive Whiteread's House as ordinary and familiar in how it relates to human domesticity. And yet, simultaneously we are presented with an image of this same ordinariness turned inside-out, in an horrific encounter with the 'uncanny'. The domestic space, in its inside-out state thus rejects human presence. It is threatening; the home which should be there to provide us with shelter is the very thing which imposes the threat (Illustration 11: p.39). In this respect, Whiteread's House seems to act, in the form of a monument, as an omen or warning of sorts, against some impending evil.

Tomb

House has also been likened to a giant mausoleum. Ghost bore definite resemblance to a crypt or tomb of some sort, and Whiteread is aware of these obvious comparisons (Illustration 2: p.9 and Illustration 12: p.41).
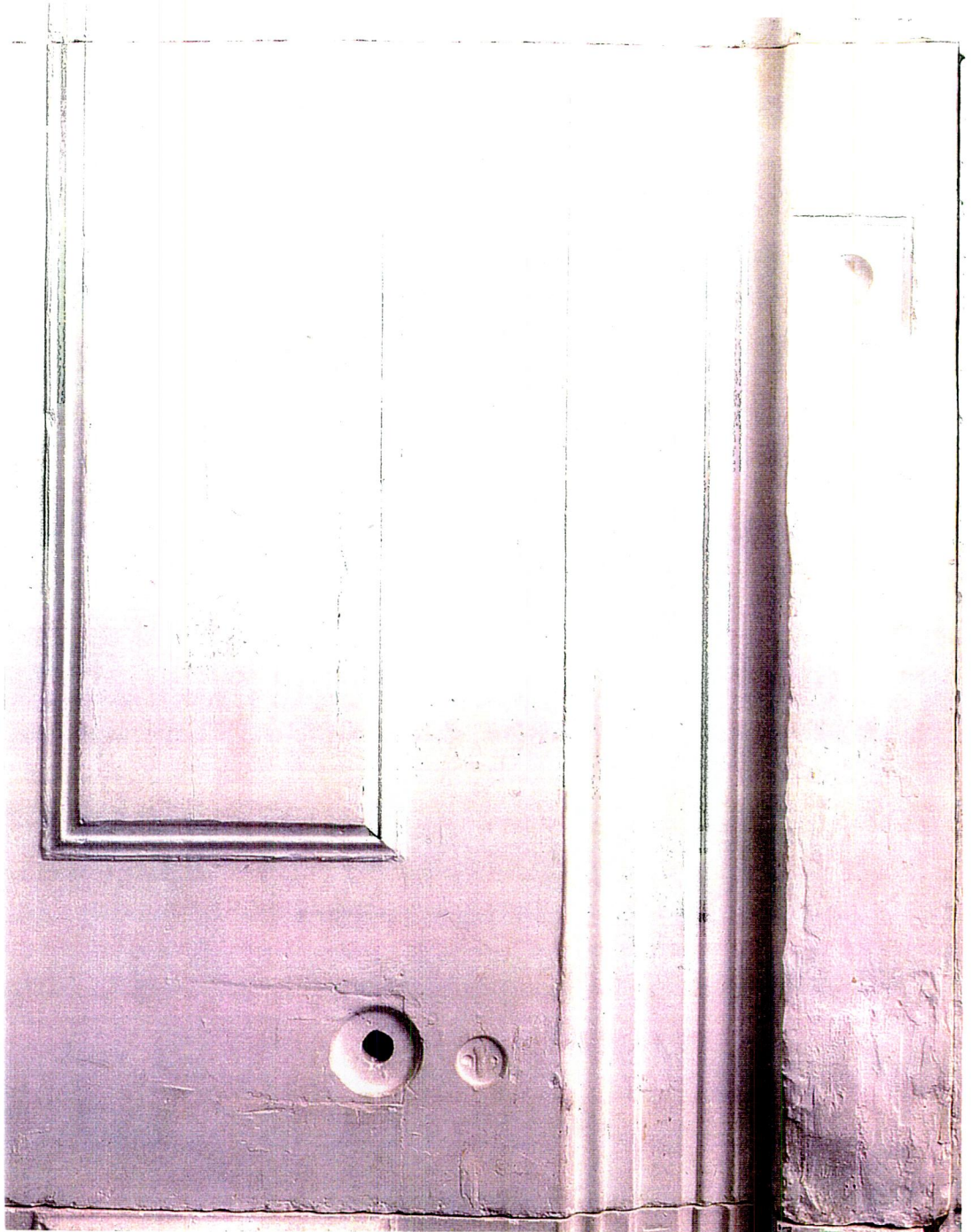
Illustration 12: Ghost (1990)

Some years ago she took a part-time job at Highgate Cemetery in North London, there she swept pathways and carried out general maintenance – like replacing 'lids' on tombs or re-closing crypts. In an interview with Iwona Blazwick, Whiteread discusses this along with the very strong relationship between casting and death masks. This whole association with death and tombs adds a further consideration to the envisaging of House as a piece of monumental sculpture. It is likely that the obvious visual similarities between House and burial chambers, is what introduced a sense of foreboding to the work.

House as a public sculpture

When a work of art is placed within a social context it automatically opens itself to a volley of interpretations, meanings and understandings. As already discussed, House related to other forms of public monumental statuary, such as, religious monuments or iconography . As a result, the work often comes to represent varying issues for diverse groups and individuals within society. It is virtually impossible for public sculpture not to be political. As previously acknowledged, Whiteread's sculpture House stirred up a sense of nostalgia, and this too is something which often gives rise to a political response. The following is a statement made up by Whiteread in conversation with John McEwen of the Sunday Telegraph:

> Here I am making a monument to a house, to a home,
> but it's much more generalised; more to do with the
> state of housing in England; the ludicrous policy of
> knocking down homes like this and building badly
> designed tower blocks, which, themselves, have to be
> knocked down after 20 years. (McEwen, 1993, p.6).

In reaction to this statement, McEwen understandably inquired – "so it's a political statement?". To this Whiteread responded – 'yes'. Whiteread's flirtation with politics was also commented on critically by Paul Usherwood, who felt, as a result of the inherent comment on the politics of place, that, "the artist herself began to seem political, albeit, in an unchallenging way". (Usherwood, 1996, p.13).

House carried considerably more weight as a sculpture, a piece of Fine Art, than it did as a political statement. The reason for this was, in part, that it is difficult to convince oneself that Whiteread intended House as a political statement to begin with, she now appears to be somewhat unsure about the project's original intention. There had been no inclination shown towards political issue–based work in the past, no previous impression given, that the work was intended as a comment on British housing policies. Public Sculpture ,as was pointed out, can not always be responsible for absolutely everything which it may *seem* to refer to ,or comment on. The original intention of the Artist must be clear, in order to estimate the project in its' value as a piece of Fine Art. A piece of art which comments on homelessness is not of any lesser value than a work about preserving the domestic space, what *is* important, however, is that the work achieves effectively what it originally set out to achieve. Its' aim should be identifiable.

As Cohen points out, "Whiteread did herself a disservice,... in allowing one interviewer to egg her on to claim that House is a political protest against housing policy". (Cohen, 1994, p.53). In an interview with Iwona Blazwick, previously referred to, Whiteread herself said: "I'm a sculptor, not a politician. I am involved in the making of sculpture, of exploring formal questions about how a work sits on the floor, or about the space surrounding it". (Blazwick, 1992, p.15). From the various statements which Whiteread herself made about the work, it is quite difficult to ascertain whether House was consciously intended as a 'political statement' or not, or whether indeed, it was intended as a monument to domestic space. The idea of House as a monument to domestic space is more convincing than its stance as a monumental statement against homelessness. This is mainly because there are numerous other ways imaginable to comment on such a political issue, which would

not irk so many. Rendering a house uninhabitable, spending over £50,000 in doing so, in an area where there is a large amount of homelessness and poverty, appeared to many, quite understandably, as a contradiction and a gross misplacement of funds. Locals *did* react strongly , this is evident in the many articles and letters which were sent to newspapers at the time, and in the demands made by locals for the demolition of <u>House</u> .

Conclusion

As artists learn to integrate their own needs and talents with the needs of others, the environment and the community, a new foundation for a non–self–conscious individualism may emerge, and we will have, not necessarily better art, perhaps, but better values, aims and beliefs'. (Gablik, 1991, p.143).

Rachel Whiteread had an idea of preserving the domestic space in time, taken, in the context of all that houses may signify, House served to rekindle, nostalgically, old memories of childhood and of a domestic past, of security, comfort and safety. However, by filling the lived–in space with concrete she deemed the domestic space inaccessible, producing, on the other hand, a threatening image of frustration, which engaged the viewer with powerful emotions of exclusion and entrapment.

In Chapter 2 an attempt was made to indicate how, through the process of casting, Whiteread took an old house, something loaded with symbolism, memories and associations, and turned it into something new. She created a monument to domestic space which related to collective memory, through its reference to the collective unconscious. Whilst retaining its past associations, it gained also, a sense of the 'unheimlich': it was a house but could not be entered, an anti–house of sorts. The idea was a little quirky and quite catchy. In addition, House commanded visual interest because of its' aesthetic and skilfully executed finish. It was an interesting piece of sculpture, which was apparently worthy of winning the prestigious Turner–Prize, and also, albeit ironically, the (unacclaimed) K Foundation Award. However, in addition to all of this, House was a *public* sculpture, and it was supposedly site–specific.

Located on Grove Road in the Bow district of London's East End, House was situated within an extremely diverse and quickly changing urban society. The area is made up of developing industries, and a growth of rising tower-blocks, intermingled with a large amount of poverty and homelessness. According to David Cohen:

> Underlying this whole affair was an unsavoury element of class conflict. The mood was of a challenging, arcane piece of conceptual art being foisted on a poor community by an art establishment whose noises about the work's accessibility were unconvincing. (Cohen, 1994, p.52).

House was indeed a spectacular example of the difficulty of placing sculpture in public places, (Illustration 6: p.17). Whiteread's claim that House was more of a political statement about housing policies than a monument to domestic space, didn't take from that difficulty, in fact, if anything it added to it. In making a statement against homelessness, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to spend such a large amount of money filling a home up with concrete. Whilst the local reaction and the demand to have House abolished all gained publicity for Whiteread and her work, they also highlight House's inadequacies as a piece of (site-specific) public art. One feels that perhaps like Whiteread's other casts to date, it really is an idea which would have been more at home in the contextual space of the art gallery.

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