

## Memory, Temporality, and Loss: Rachel Whiteread

---

[The numerals in square brackets correspond to the slide numbers.]

Our topic is memory, temporality, and loss as a theme in contemporary art. There are a number of ways to approach it, both as an artist and as an engaged spectator.

Let's start with a photographic image and a question. [2] The photo was taken by the artist Cindy Sherman. At first glance, there seems to be nothing terribly complicated or mysterious about the image. It is a black and white photograph of a woman with an apron and a scarf holding her hair back from her face and neck. She's standing in front of a rather aged and dirty door. Her clothing and environment suggest a rough, working class life. She turns to look up, over our heads, at something outside the picture, invisible to us. Her gaze is intent and stern — her attitude reinforced by the way she stands there, her left hand on her hip, the raised elbow pointing in our direction. The position of the camera establishes our point of view, just below her waist looking up at her. This angle gives her even greater prominence and makes her a large, forceful, and rather imposing figure.

Now a number of obvious questions arise. What's she doing? Who is she? What's she looking at? Has something just happened? From looking at nothing but this photograph, we have no way of answering these questions. Whatever her story may be, it's not revealed to us through this isolated image. Clearly, we need more information.

Here are some more images created by Cindy Sherman around the same time. [3] In this next image we see a young woman, nicely dressed, reaching for a book high up on a shelf and turning to look up and away from the bookshelf. Who is she? What's she looking at? What book is she taking off the shelf? More questions. And still, no answers.

Or what about this dark-haired woman who we see from both front and back, standing in front of a mirror? [4] She's dressed in black satin and lace. It must be evening. Is she there for dinner? Is she a guest in some else's apartment? Is she the host? Is she with anyone?

Finally, here's another photograph of a blonde, on a city street after dark, pulling up the collar of her coat, also looking to the right of our gaze at her. [5] Where is she? Why is she being photographed? Is she in any way related to the other women depicted by Sherman? This raises a more general question. Is there a connection among these representations? Is there a story or a common thread of some sort that links them? All four women seem as if they've been interrupted and turn toward something that has caught their attention. But it's difficult to say much more than that. In each case, we as viewers seem to be coming in during the **middle** of a story, but don't have more than a few clues as to what the story might be. So what's the point?

As most of you probably know, all four women are the same person in "real life". Not only are they the same person, but that person is in fact the artist, Cindy Sherman. She has taken the photographs, using herself as the model, dressed up in different costumes and placed in different settings. There are sixty-nine of these black and white photos in the series. Each photo is assigned a number for purposes of identification. The entire series is called *Untitled Film Stills*. That helps...a bit. It suggests, at the very least, that Cindy Sherman must have intended to place these photographs in relation to film, the history of cinema, and the representation of women.

By doing a little additional research, we learn that all of these photos were taken in the late 1970s, shortly after Sherman completed her bachelor's degree at State University College in Buffalo, New York. Here's how she described her interest in art at the time:

When I was in school I was getting disgusted with the attitude of art being so religious or sacred, so I wanted to make something which people could relate to without having read a book about it first. So that anybody off the street could appreciate it, even if they couldn't fully

understand it; they could still get something out of it. That's the reason why I wanted to imitate something out of the culture, and also make fun of the culture as I was doing it.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of how we come to interpret these images, Sherman's statement makes one thing clear. Her intention was to make art for those who did not have an extensive art education. She was doing it more for a "popular" audience than for art critics and museum curators. Since movies are arguably the most popular, widely disseminated, and recognizable form of art today, it made sense to draw on the movies for her source material. In that way, Sherman thought, everyone would be able to "relate to it" and "get something out of it".

Now here's the first point I want to make. The impulse behind Cindy Sherman's strategy is both **popular** and, in a sense, **democratic** — and by that I mean that Sherman is attempting to make the work accessible to everyone who comes into contact with it. In this way, everyone gets to play a part. The value and meanings associated with her photographs will be determined by everyone, just as the values and interests of citizens in a democratic society contribute to the laws and policies put into place by their representatives. In **principle**, if not always in **fact**, that's the way democracy is supposed to work. But it requires active and engaged participants in a democratic society to **make** the system work. The analogy in the case of art is the construction of meaning — both narrative and expressive content. The possibilities are put into play by the artist, but the viewer must, in some sense, complete the process by creating and contributing that which is missing.

But how does that typically work in practice? Too often, what you already know **before** viewing the photographs determines what you see in them. I might very well just free associate while looking at them, think that one of the women looks like my Aunt Bernice, my brother's girlfriend, or Marilyn Monroe. But there's nothing special about that. I can do that with **lots** of ordinary photographs or images. Until I uncover the hidden **source** of these images in our shared history and memory of movies from the late '50s and '60s and put that in relation to the photographs exhibited on the walls of a contemporary art gallery or museum (which is where one finds Sherman's work), my understanding of the art will be highly subjective and idiosyncratic, at best.

Art, if it's anything at all, is far from a commonplace, subjective experience. It gives us the opportunity to go **beyond** the everyday by stimulating our poetic **imagination** and enabling us to engage with others as we **reflect** on what we're perceiving and imagining. We should be **moved** in some way and confronted by **questions**; pushed and pushing ourselves to feel and see things in unfamiliar ways.

Art is an event; an encounter with the **real** in the fictional realm of the **unreal**. But we have to prepare ourselves to take full advantage of it. The more you know, the more you get out of the experience of looking at works of art. It's no accident that the places we have created for viewing art — the museum, the art gallery, the movie theater, etc. — are spaces that have been designed to promote a direct and undisturbed engagement with the work of art. They're places that encourage **absorption**, **reflection**, and **contemplation**, and should not preclude active **involvement**, **discussion**, and **shared understandings**.

But the rarefied spaces of museums and galleries are not the only places where art provokes its viewers. [*House* - 6] This is a work by the British sculptor Rachel Whiteread. It's the sort of thing you might have easily walked right by if you hadn't been told it was both a controversial and prize-winning work of art. The title of the work is *House*. It was created in 1993 by casting in concrete the **interior** of the last remaining Victorian terrace house in the East End of London just prior to its demolition. The house was, in fact, the mold for the sculpture. What you see here is what was left when the mold was broken. Here are some more views of the work. [7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13]

---

<sup>1</sup> Laura Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman", *New Left Review*, 188 (July-August 1991), 137.

*House* was described by the artist as looking "monumental" when you stand next to it, [14] and kind of "pathetic" from a distance.<sup>2</sup> [15]

[16] Writing in the *New Statesman* in 1996, Sarah Whitfield described it as "an imposing, ghostly and wholly unexpected public monument. As a piece of construction, *House* was an immense technical feat and although it is relatively easy to understand how it was made — liquid concrete poured into the shell of a house — understanding doesn't take away from the mystery inherent in casting an empty space".<sup>3</sup> And that's precisely what Rachel Whiteread has done. She has created a physical — concrete — embodiment of the **interior space** of the house. By linking her monument to that space, one is able to recall, remember, reflect on what was once a shelter, a home, a place of comfort for the family that lived within it. Here is how it was described by the group that funded the project.

Like many public sculptures and memorials, "House" is a cast. But unlike the bronzes which commemorate triumphs and tragedies, great men and heroic deeds, this new work commemorates memory itself through the commonplace of home. Whiteread's *in situ* work transforms the space of the private and domestic into the public — a mute memorial to the spaces we have lived in, to everyday existence and the importance of home.<sup>4</sup>

Not all the responses to *House* were positive, however. The Liberal Democratic Councillor Eric Flounders, claiming to speak on behalf of the local residents, referred to it as "utter rubbish" and "a monstrosity".<sup>5</sup> The owner of the house, who the city forced out so the building could be demolished, described the sculpture as "adding insult to injury".<sup>6</sup> In spite of the controversy and condemnation which filled the British press for months, Whiteread was awarded £20,000 and the prestigious Turner Prize in 1993 as the best British artist of the year, largely on the merits of *House*. The K Foundation, on the other hand, gave her £40,000 and named her the **worst** artist of the year. *House* was destroyed in 1994, three months after it was created.

*House* was a logical extension of the work Whiteread had been doing after being graduated from the Slade School of Art in the late Eighties. [17] Her early work, typically small and modest, involved casting the spaces outside, underneath, and inside of ordinary objects such as chairs, bathtubs, and hot-water bottles. This is a piece called *Ether* from 1990. It's a plaster cast of the space underneath a bathtub. [18] And this is an installation view of *Untitled (100 Spaces)* completed in 1995. Here Whiteread has cast in resin the space underneath different tables and chairs and has arranged them in a rectangular grid. [19] Some of you may have seen this piece in the infamous *Sensation* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum a few years ago.

Looking at these early works, I think you see that *House* took Whiteread's work to an entirely new scale. [20] The vision and coordination required to cast an entire house was made possible by the support of Artangel, a non-gallery based organization which was created to support public art projects that would "engage with the public in a new way, to subvert the traditional notion of public art".<sup>7</sup> The organizers described their approach in the following way:

We wanted spaces which were already meaningful, already alive with the associations of history (cultural, industrial and political) and memory, but also places whose stature or symbolic status, whose very lack of neutrality, may have discouraged the idea that they were available for art. We categorically did not want or need the urban plaza or the sculpture park.<sup>8</sup>

---

2 Interview with Craig Houser, Guggenheim Museum, [http://www.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/past\\_exhibitions/whiteread/interview.html](http://www.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/past_exhibitions/whiteread/interview.html) (14 Feb 04).

3 "The Private Life of Hot-Water Bottles: Rachel Whiteread at the Tate", Sarah Whitfield, *New Statesman*, (20 Sep 1996, Vol. 125, Issue 4301), 41.

4 From Rachel Whiteread - *House*, a promotional leaflet by Artangel, 1993. Cited in *House*, [artistsineastlondon.org](http://www.artistsineastlondon.org/08_house/04text.htm), [http://www.artistsineastlondon.org/08\\_house/04text.htm](http://www.artistsineastlondon.org/08_house/04text.htm) (14 Feb 04).

5 *Ibid.*

6 "It's Rice, But Is It Art?", Reuters, Washington Post, Washington, D.C.: Nov 23, 1993, B.02.

7 *Op. Cit.*, [http://www.artistsineastlondon.org/08\\_house/03text.htm](http://www.artistsineastlondon.org/08_house/03text.htm) (14 Feb 04).

8 *Ibid.*

A casual visitor to 193 Grove Road in East London in December of 1993 would not have understood Whiteread's sculpture without a good deal of background information. Its meaning was not obvious. The photographs of *House* you're likely to see today take it out of context and present it simply as a sculpture done by a British artist in 1993, making the meaning of the work even more obscure than it would be in its original context.

My point, again, is that good art **challenges** the observer to meet it halfway. It often provokes and puzzles the curious viewer who must then do something to more fully come to terms with the work. This may involve gathering additional information, thinking through the implications of what you see, and allowing your feelings and imagination to take you somewhere unexpected. That's what it **means** to take the work seriously. Sometimes there are clear indicators of the intentions behind the work and numerous clues left for the viewer.

This is another image of a public sculpture. [21] What do you think it is? What does it mean? Actually, what you're looking at are **two** public sculptures. The one I'm interested in is the one in the background, just in front of the brown stone building. Here's another shot which reveals a bit more detail. [22] Look familiar? Now that you know something about Rachel Whiteread's work, you may have guessed correctly that this is another work by the British sculptor. It looks like the cast of another building, doesn't it? You can see the double doors in the center and the serrated walls around the periphery. But it's not at all clear what **kind** of building it is or what **purpose** it might serve.

[23] Here's a closer look at those walls. [24] In this next image you see some red objects on the ground around the sculpture. [25] And in the next image you can make out some of the inscriptions on the ground in front of the monument. There's a six-pointed star — the Star of David typically associated with Judaism. There are also some things engraved in the pavement. It's also worth mentioning that this work is located in the Judenplatz — a square in Vienna, Austria. Moving closer [26] we can read the text inscribed in English: "In commemoration of more than 65,000 Austrian Jews who were killed by the Nazis between 1938 and 1945." And finally, in the last shot [27] we see the names of some of the internment camps where Jews were held captive and executed by the Nazis.

As soon as the Nazi party came to power in Germany, they took great pains to destroy cultural objects that were at odds with their own ideology and way of thinking. [28] They favored propaganda that presented an idealized image of strong, blond, Aryan men and women depicted in a traditional academic manner. They were opposed to innovations in art that challenged their own way of thinking and referred to modern art as "degenerate". These paintings by Chagall [29], Kirchner [30], Mondrian [31], and El Lissitzky [32] were just some of the works that were censored by the Nazi party. [33] They also held book burnings of works by Franz Kafka, Bertold Brecht, and others whose works were considered "un-German". [34, 35, 36] To be a Jewish artist or writer was to be automatically placed in such categories.

Now let's go back to the exterior walls of the monument. [37] No doubt, by now you've realized that the walls are casts from the outer edges of books. The bindings are turned in toward the center of the building; the closed pages face out toward the viewer. Knowing what we do about the book burnings and the reactionary culture of the Nazis, we can appreciate the quiet poignancy of Whiteread's sculpture. [38]

Rachel Whiteread's work is about **more** than the spaces inside, underneath, and around everyday objects and structures. It invokes the **memory** of poetic spaces and the things that have occurred in and around them. Unlike many other works of art, what's **lost**, **missing**, or **hidden** is as much, if not more, a part of the work than what is tangibly present. But conjuring up the presence of those absences requires an active imagination on the part of the viewer, and a willingness to admit that to take seriously the most compelling and meaningful works of art today requires the patience and time necessary to understand them in our own terms and in relation to the needs and interests of others.

Timothy Quigley, 2010