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To cite this article: Paul Harrison (2022) Strange witness: Rachel Whiteread's art of the immemorial, *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 138:3-4, 321-346, DOI: [10.1080/14702541.2022.2137734](https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2022.2137734)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2022.2137734>



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Published online: 26 Oct 2022.



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Strange witness: Rachel Whiteread's art of the immemorial

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ABSTRACT

The paper offers a reading of the work of the artist Rachel Whiteread. The reception of Whiteread's work has focused on its site-specific, symbolic and memorial nature, the work understood as a series of mediations of and metonymies for hidden social and personal contexts and histories. The paper claims that such accounts overlook what may be a more radical and disquieting aspect of Whiteread's work; that Whiteread's sculptures may be understood as *not* primarily concerned with memory work, but rather with the limitations and failures thereof. Through this other reading, the paper reflects on the nature of the social relation, on the relation of one to the other, and the possibilities for thinking this relation as irreducible to any specific property, attribute, substance, or predicate. Following Whiteread, the paper sets out the ways in which we may understand and know this irreducibility, arguing that, in presenting us with the limits of memory work, Whiteread's sculptures engage us another mode of signification. Specifically, a mode of de-signification. Hence, the paper proposes a 'theory of de-signification'; de-signification describing a naming by not naming and the way in which the irreducibility of the social relation and the other make themselves known as other.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 July 2022
Accepted 15 October 2022

KEYWORDS

Whiteread; relation; memory; alterity; signification; sculpture

1. Introduction

One *must*, certainly, inscribe in words, in images. One cannot escape the necessity of representing ... But it is one thing to do it in view of saving the memory, and quite another to try to preserve the remainder, the unforgettable forgotten. (Lyotard, 1990, p. 26, original emphasis)

I have never said about my sculptures that they 'mean' anything specific – critics like to ascribe specific meanings to things, a process that is exactly the reverse of what I try to do in my work. (Whiteread, quoted in Whiteread & Rose, 1997, p. 31)

The work of British artist Rachel Whiteread has, until recently at least, consisted largely of casts, solidified 'negative spaces', often involving domestic objects or sites. The reception of Whiteread's work, both popular and academic, has focused on its site-specific, symbolic and memorial nature, the work understood as a series of commemorative

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commentaries on hidden social and personal histories. While not doubting the insight of such interpretations, in this paper I want to suggest that such accounts overlook what may be a more radical and disquieting aspect of Whiteread's work. The claim will be that Whiteread's sculptures may be understood as *not* primarily concerned with some form of reparative 'memory work', but rather with the limitations and failures thereof.

While Whiteread's work has and no doubt will continue to be understood in terms of the uncanny return of modernity's missing masses, as the aesthetic recollection of unheroic space-times of everyday life, we should understand that this is only ever a slight return, a feint or phantom return. A return that is not one. Indeed, the 'achievement' of Whiteread's work may well lie in its non-achievement. What may be uncanny about Whiteread's works is not that they remind us of something we had forgotten, some repressed but now revealed content, but rather that *we do not know of what they remind us*. What may be uncanny about the work is how it recalls (us to) the failure or finitude of memory. In its cryptic or enigmatic structure, Whiteread's work provides us with the chance to think again about the relationships between interior and exterior, presence and absence, memory and forgetting, and so about the nature of relation as such. Thus, the claim below will be that Whiteread's work offers a sustained reflection on the nature of signification, on the knowable and the unknowable, on the relation between self and alterity.¹

The paper is made up of four main sections and a brief conclusion. Section two – *Metonymies* – provides an introduction to Whiteread's work and an analysis of the main interpretive logic through which the work has been understood to date. The claim is that Whiteread's work has been understood, for the most part, as so many mediations of and metonyms for the anonymous reservoir of everyday life rather than for the 'great events' of a nation's history. A particular interpretive logic is revealed which is, I suggest, analogous to many contemporary approaches to the social and the social relation; approaches in which the work has no reality outside of being a metonym, outside of the work of memorial mediation. Section three – *Dis-placement* – offers an alternative account of Whiteread's work, arguing that it operates as an un-working of memory as much as a form of memory work. Indeed, the claim will be that what this work recalls – and much will turn on and about the double meaning of this term: to recall as to remember, to bring back, to say again and, *at the same time*, to retract, to draw back, to withdraw from circulation – is the un-recollectable. To demonstrate this analysis, section four – *Archives of the Immemorial* – offers a reading of Whiteread's *Holocaust Memorial* (2000), exploring how the memorial impels and, at the same time, forestalls any memory work, and so disturbs the process of signification. Section five – *Strange Witness* – acts as a conceptual coda for the paper, turning to Maurice Blanchot's discussion of language and art to help us think about the resistance of Whiteread's work to recognition and interpretation, and to articulate what we could call a 'theory of de-signification' within which we may situate its disquieting effects. The paper concludes by returning to the question of the social relation.

Given the above, the key question the paper asks is how the social relation, how a relation to the other as other, makes itself known, how it signifies, without at once falling back into the orders of discourse or the phenomenality of appearance. And thus, the key task for this paper is, with Whiteread as our guide, to outline another mode of signification, one that, while bound up with other modalities, signifies otherwise.

This question and this task bind the paper into a series of concerns and debates that are currently underway within the discipline of human geography each of which, in their own way, runs up against a limit of the knowable and the sayable, of representation and its violences. I will attempt to formalise this situation in a moment, but for now give some examples. We could think of Stephen Legg's (2016) careful account of the figure and claim of the subaltern as at once an empirical figure and a limit. Or, we could read Geraldine Pratt's (2012) remarkable analysis of slow political violence, trauma, and representation. Or, we could turn to Sarah de Leeuw's (2017) call for new modes of writing, thinking, and attending, in response to the violences faced by indigenous peoples. Or, we could look to Chris Philo's (2017) consideration of Adorno's comments on the fates of poetry 'after Auschwitz'. Or, we could read Richard Carter-White and Marcus Doel's (2022) recent paper on the 'signature of the disaster', where they describe how every 'disaster' is both legible and illegible, how each 'de-scribes' itself. Or, and perhaps beginning to draw a thread between these examples, we could reflect on Helen Wilson's (2017) influential enquiry into the encounter and in particular her warning about the often unthought and loaded valuation of the 'meaningful' therein.

It should go without saying that each of these examples is unique, each, in its own way, irreducible, singular. But how so? Because each stages and undertakes an encounter with meaning and its limits. Each approaches and holds close to moments of disorientation, to sites where the easy to-and-fro of comprehension is stalled, to moments which un-work common words and worlds. To begin to formalise, in each of the cases, the work confronts a specific conceptual as well as political and ethical demand, which is how to calculate with the incalculable. Each makes appear an unknown or unknowability which calls for a form of acknowledgment, but which, at the same time, cannot be reduced without betrayal to the terms of such acknowledgment.

In their recent edited collection, *A Place More Void*, Paul Kingsbury and Anna Secor take as their point of departure precisely the question of how to speak about the unspeakable; the task they set themselves and the authors therein, is to 'attempt to locate the edge between speech and silence' (Kingsbury & Secor, 2021, p. 7). Similarly, in the collection *Negative Geographies*, David Bissell, Mitch Rose, and myself ask 'what it means to struggle with limits' (Bissell et al., 2021, p. 3). What perhaps marks out both these volumes, and the work of those cited above, is the refusal to be done with such limits. Their task is not to resolve or overcome them, and so to sublimate or disavow, but rather to sustain the conceptual-ethico-political-aesthetic urgency and demand which such limits mark. Pratt's work is exemplary in this respect; to her insistence on 'the *non-exchangeable singularity* of what has been lost' in situations of harm and neglect, she adds how this 'has implications for how it [harm and loss] can be expressed. In particular, because any representation is a form of substitution, representation is itself suspect' (Pratt, 2012, p. 108, emphasis added).

Here, following Pratt and those named above, there is, I think, a shift in logic, one which accepts as far as possible the *aporetic* demands of relationality. It is important to emphasise from the outset that the position I am attempting to outline below is not a straightforwardly 'relational' one, or at least not as this term has become generally understood both within Anglophone human geography and the wider social sciences to date. While sympathetic to such work and not doubting much of its insight, the analysis below differs on the crucial point that it attempts to recall a dimension of *alterity* in

the constitution or, rather, the de-constitution of relations. Such an analysis may well seem paradoxical, non-sensical, contradictory, or even hypocritical, for how can one make alterity appear? Surely any attempt to make the other *qua* other, the other in its or their otherness as it were, into an object of reflection is bound to fail from the outset? Is not alterity, by definition, that which cannot appear without contradiction, cannot be represented without betrayal, cannot be comprehended without violence?

However, following the path set by the work cited above and extending work published elsewhere, the task is less to make the other *qua* other appear but rather, each time, in each attempt, to witness and stay with its *dis-apperance*. As Kingsbury and Secor put it, ‘we miss our encounter with the void because of its lack of self-correspondence; each time we reach for it, we find that what we catch *isn’t it*’ (Kingsbury & Secor, 2021, p. 7, original emphasis). Or, as Carter-White and Doel have it, ‘it is through the “failure” to communicate that the disaster as a force of traumatic disorientation “writes” (inscribes and de-scribes) and expresses itself’ (Carter-White & Doel, 2022, p. 458). Or, as Pratt writes, ‘Slowly, we have come to recognize [that] this quest for plenitude – and its failure, perhaps especially its failure – to be at the heart of, and not an impediment to, the research project’ (Pratt, 2012, p. 45).

Thus, the social relation, as discussed below, is not a synchronic, becoming or gathering relation; it is not a relation that brings the previously separated into contact, the previously repressed to presence, or the previously unknown to light. Rather the relation, as I am attempting to recall and phrase it here, is *anterior* to separation or contact, to presence or absence, to knowledge or ignorance, all of which are partitions, domains or economies in and through which the trace of the relation moves. This is, insofar as it is, a relation which only appears insofar as it *fails* to appear. It is, insofar as it is, a relation of non-relation. Hence the claim: ‘When the other announces itself as such, it presents itself as dissimulation of itself’ (Derrida, quoted in Bennington, 2011, p. 93). And so, the social relation is, or, rather, will have always been, an-archival. This is, insofar as it is, the invisible, silent and immemorial ‘event’ of the social. *An event of spacing*. An event that, not having got underway at any particular date and never having set out toward any particular goal, is interminable. Interminable, irreducible and unknowable, as such. It is this anarchy and dissimulation of the social relation – this being without predicate, and so this manner of appearing through not-appearing of the social relation – and the concurrent challenges, demands, and implications which the paper seeks to outline.

A final note before continuing; why ‘de-signification’? An awkward term, no doubt, and one which will be developed as the paper progresses, but a brief introduction is perhaps necessary. As indicated by the hyphen, the aim is that the term signal a double movement, precisely that double movement described in the quote from Lyotard given at the opening of this paper. First, ‘One *must*,’ he writes, ‘inscribe in words, in images’ (Lyotard, 1990, p. 26, original emphasis). What is this imperative, this ‘must’? Is it a demand, a necessity, or a compulsion, or something else entirely? Signification began without us, before us, such that we inherit, more and less knowingly, its patterns, prejudices, and possibilities, to the extent that how we do so defines the very we which ‘we’ are or claim to be. In this sense we cannot avoid inscribing in words and images, we *must* if are to be.² ‘One cannot escape the necessity of representing’ (Lyotard, 1990, p. 26), but Lyotard’s imperative contains another tone, one which, I

think, concerns an ethical as much as a descriptive or logical necessity. Here we move to the second part of the quote; ‘But it is one thing to do it in view of saving the memory, and quite another to try to preserve the remainder, the unforgettable forgotten’ (Lyotard, 1990, p. 26). How we understand inscription matters as how we do so effects the being of the ‘we’ and indeed the ‘I’. It is one thing to inscribe in such a way as try and ‘leap over’ signification, to try to secure and preserve the ‘we’ via reference to some extra-textual origin, some mystical source of authority, be it some conventional attribute or some organic trait, for example (see Derrida, 1974, 1997, 2002). That is, to forget, in this ‘leap’, the absence of an origin. To forget that which cannot be recalled; the immemorial. And so it is quite another thing to inscribe, to represent, in and as the absence of such a claim. This double movement, then, lies in the unavoidable necessity of representing but doing so now as the limitation or failure thereof.³ De-signification, therefore, is another name for placing under erasure. Why do so? Or why pay attention to this double movement? Because it opens any ‘we’ to its other or others, to alterity, and so to the anarchy and irreducibility of the social relation within and upon which any claim is always a limit and is always undone (Figure 1).

2. Metonymies

Whiteread was born in London in 1963 in a Victorian house in Ilford, East London, UK. Her mother was an artist and her father a Geography lecturer and Polytechnic administrator. Both were lifelong socialists and her mother a notable feminist activist. The family moved out of London to Essex when Whiteread was three and then back again when she



Figure 1. Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost*, 1990, Gift of The Glenstone Foundation, Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

was seven, this time to Muswell Hill in the north of the city (Mullins, 2004). From 1982 to 1985 Whiteread studied painting at Brighton Polytechnic, where she was largely preoccupied by landscape. On graduating she chose to study sculpture at the Slade School of Art from 1985 to 1987 after becoming, as she put it in interview in 1997, 'frustrated with the edges of the canvas' (Whiteread, quoted in Whiteread & Rose, 1997, p. 30). Charlotte Mullins (2004) provides the most detailed account available of the development of Whiteread's work over the following years. Of particular note in this context are the on-going influences of Eva Hesse, the American Minimalists Carl Andre, David Smith, Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman and Donald Judd, as well as the earlier generation of 'New British Sculptors'. Whiteread's first solo show was in 1988 at the Carlyle Gallery, London. The exhibition contained four new pieces, *Closet*, *Shallow Breath*, *Mantle* and *Torso*, each made in part or in whole from casting in plaster the spaces inside or underneath an everyday domestic object (respectively, a wardrobe, a single bed, a dressing table and a hot-water bottle). It is for the development and exploration of this technique, and this transformation, that Whiteread has become known. In 1993 she became the first female artist to win the UK's Turner Prize and her work has gone on to receive a number of significant international awards and major international public commissions.⁴

Any summary of an artistic career spanning multiple decades cannot but do some violence to its subject, but an overview is necessary, not least to emphasise the range and diversity of Whiteread's body of work.⁵ Whiteread herself describes her work as moving through cycles, cycles which often loop back to reactivate previous projects, picking up and developing issues left unresolved (Whiteread & Houser, 2001). Equally, the work is often driven by experimentation in terms of method, mass, and materials. For example, since 1988 Whiteread has produced work using, amongst other materials, plaster, polystyrene, fibreglass, resin, rubber, wax, concrete, iron, aluminium, urethane, marble, and ice, and across a range of scales, from the handheld to the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London. There is a similar level of experimentation in the use of colour and translucence: the damaged whites of the early plaster works and the deep monochromes of resin floor pieces such as *Untitled (Floor)* (1994–5); the fleshy rubber of *Untitled (Orange Bath)* (1996) and the pus or semen dyed *Untitled (Double Rubber Plinth)* (1996); the inert impenetrable black which periodically returns after *Closet* (1988) in so many pieces, such as *Untitled (Black Bed)* (1991), *Untitled (Black Bath)* (1996) and *Untitled (Black Books)* (1997); the by turns transparent and opaque *Water Tower* (1998), the slight remains of colour in *Untitled (Sequel V)* (2002), and the abstract almost clinical or arctic white of *Untitled (Pair)* (1999) and *Embankment* (2005–6).

Before considering the reception of Whiteread's work, we should also note the variation in terms of number and series. Drawing on Minimalist traditions, many of the works are clearly modular, multiple, or serial in form, such as *Untitled (One Hundred Spaces)* (1995). Further, as one final axis for this virtual typology, along with the intimate and the domestic as well as, more recently, the transient, much of Whiteread's work demonstrates a persistent interest in the underneath, the subjacent and the horizontal, be it through the modern sculptural trope of reflecting on the nature of the plinth, as in *Monument* (2001), or the slide into recumbence, as in *Untitled (Amber Double Bed)* (1991).

As indicated, it seems fair to say that Whiteread's sculptural work has and continues to be most often comprehended as a series of commentaries on and memorialisations of specific social and cultural contexts and histories. Predominantly through the critical reception of her large public works, most notably *House* (1993), the meaning of Whiteread's work has been taken to consist in its uncanny crystallisation of previously hidden or unvoiced histories and memories. To give some illustrative quotes: in his examination of post-war sculpture Andrew Causey comments that *House* 'stood like a cenotaph in a newly made green space, drawing into its monumental form the memories and associations of a lost social enclave' (Causey, 1998, p. 238); or, as the lines given to Whiteread in the Henry Moore Institute's survey of twentieth-century British sculpture have it, 'Whiteread's "House" (1993) has come to stand for her inverted retrieval process [...] she retrieves the forgotten and makes it real,' her work 'remind[ing] us not only of a culture of consumption and obsolescence, but also of the neglected owners of the objects and places she use[s]' (Henry Moore Institute, 2003, p. 250). Even those more ambivalent about *House*, such as Doreen Massey (1995), or more critical, such as Grant H. Kester (2004), base their views on the variable success of the work to engage some form of memory work.

Here, then, Whiteread's 'inverted' objects and spaces are cast as anti-monumental monuments, similar in aspiration to Maya Ling Yin's *Vietnam Veterans' Memorial* (1982) in Washington DC, USA, and the broader anti-monumental trend in public sculpture that has emerged over the last thirty years. Whiteread's work understood as part of the

... metamorphosis of the monument from the heroic, self-aggrandizing figurative icons of the late nineteenth century celebrating national ideals and triumphs to the antiheroic, often ironic, and self-effacing conceptual installations that mark the national ambivalence and uncertainty of late twentieth century postmodernism. (Young, 2000, p. 93)

And so Whiteread's work, as so many concrete and plaster madeleines, gets positioned as the return of the repressed in sculptural form; as so many metonyms for the anonymous reservoir of everyday life rather than standing in for the 'great events' of a nation's history.

The tropes of the 'return of the repressed' and Proustian 'involuntary memory' may be found in many commentaries on Whiteread's work, lending a clue to the interpretive logic which sits behind these understandings of the work. Tom Lubbock's (2001) review of Whiteread's 2001 Serpentine Gallery exhibition is exemplary in this respect, taking Whiteread's then recent work to task for being too abstract and not faithful enough to the contact object being cast. For Lubbock, Whiteread's earlier pieces, such as *Ghost* (1990) and the pieces in the Carlyle Gallery show, 'do not forget their casting process. Sometimes it registers in the quickened sense of touch – these objects were the result of meetings, they still bear the mark of contact with something else' (Lubbock, 2001, p. 11). For him, as for those cited in the paragraph above, the efficacy of Whiteread's work rests in its ability to generate a certain form of communication; specifically, a form of pathic communication underwritten by a series of half-seen, half-sensed indexical marks that are lifted directly from the contact object during the casting process. Indeed, the logic here is one of contact, one bound up with a metaphysics of gesture and touch. Whiteread's sculptures are understood to work insofar as they can

generate a spark of ‘profane illumination’ as the mnemonic marks therein engage trans-personal, tacit and sensual memories, hailing our socio-material unconscious and bringing it uncannily into the present (Benjamin, 1979). As Johanna Malt observes, there is, in this understanding, a ‘persistence of the aura, of the trace of a human presence’ which

[...] invests these objects [Whiteread’s sculptures] with a psychic weight of loss and memorialization, and part of what they memorialize or gesture towards is a possibility of real presence, of human relations that are not mediated by the values of exchange, and therefore of domination. (Malt, 2007, p. 57)

The insistence on the mnemonic and indexical qualities of the work accounts for the repetition of the false stories that *Shallow Breath* (1988) was a cast of the underside of the bed in which either Whiteread herself was born or in which her father died.⁶

Richard Shone’s essay *A Cast in Time* further embodies and describes the logic at work here:

All of Rachel Whiteread’s work, even at its most severely formal, touches the nerve of memory. She casts from basic pieces of furniture and domestic goods – from cupboards and tables to mattresses and sinks. [...] The space they occupy or conceal is measured by the universal requirements of the human body. Its imprint is everywhere – from the indented, nipples mattress to the rusted bathtub. Sounds and gestures are evoked throughout her work – the splash of water through the sink, a body turning on a bed – with an eloquence entirely dependent on the physical properties of the object. (Shone, 1995, p. 55)

Reading this passage we should note the emphasis on the human scale, the wariness expressed towards abstraction – ‘even at its most severely formal’ – the invocation of contact, gesture and touch, of the pathic – ‘Touches the nerve ... Sounds and gestures ... splash ... turning’ – and, underlying all, the index – ‘Its *imprint* is everywhere’. At root this is a phenomenological understanding of expression and communication, one in which the presence of the living human body is understood as ‘the system of systems,’ its motile existence describing the ‘genesis of meaning’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, pp. 67–69), the impressions of which are being recalled here. Tied to such a logic, it is no surprise that for Lubbock Whiteread’s work after 1993 starts to lose its metonymic force, for, as he sees it, when ‘casting’ increasingly gives way to ‘sculpture’ so the marks of life go astray until we are left with, as he puts it, ‘semi-abstract object-evoking sculptures’ (Lubbock, 2001, p. 11).

There is no doubt that insights that may be gained following this way of framing, understanding and analysing, however I do not think it exhausts Whiteread’s work. Indeed, a preoccupation with recall as return, as the bringing into presence of the previously forgotten, however well hidden, can have the effect of covering over what is, to my mind, a more radical and uncanny dimension of Whiteread’s sculpture. In this context Lubbock’s somewhat forlorn conclusion betrays less a failing in Whiteread’s ‘aesthetic practice’ and more the limits of understanding the work as primarily about ‘memory work’. Hence what is at stake here, and what makes Whiteread’s work potentially more disquieting, is a series of interpretive and analytic tropes. Specifically, what is at stake is a whole interpretive and analytic logic, one which *assumes* the links between an index and the contact object, between a mark and its origin, between a sign and its meaning, and assumes that these links are recoverable and reconstructable; that they are, in short, recollectable.

And herein lies the further assumption that nothing is ever truly lost, *that nothing is immemorial*, that nothing is outside the power of memory and so of the ability to bring to mind, to know, and to represent. As if all analysis and interpretation were memory work and forgetting simply ‘the power that archives memories, conserves them, protects them, preserves them’ (Chrétien, 2002, p. 55). Such assumptions are as common to hermeneutics as they are to deterministic approaches in that both undertake the analysis of symptoms, signs, and marks via what I have described elsewhere as ‘topological’ and ‘reparative’ analysis; an analysis always working backwards towards a hidden, misplaced or displaced origin or cause (Harrison, 2010). Or, after Derrida, an analysis which thinks the past only as a past present and does not think the interval separating the present from itself, the differing and deferring displacement which is, insofar as it is, the excessive ‘condition’ of any coming to presence, any appearance or any apparent synthesis of marks (Derrida, 1981, p. 109, *passim*, 1982, p. 13, *passim*, 1995b).

We have seen how the majority of readings of Whiteread’s work focus on its figurative aspects, apprehending the pieces within narratives of the return of the repressed and the communication of sensuous memories. Further, we have seen how such accounts are themselves underwritten by a series of interpretative moves and analytic tropes; a series of moves and tropes that locate the meaning of the work in the expressive, indexical marks left by the human body in its social context. Equipped with such an understanding, one may measure the worth of the work by its capacity to recall lost, repressed or emergent senses of community and being-in-the-world (Kester, 2004; Massey, 1995). There is, no doubt, validity in this approach to Whiteread’s work, and she herself has repeatedly expressed an interest in the details of various changing social and material landscapes, those of London in particular (see Whiteread & Houser, 2001; Whiteread & Rose, 1997).

Yet, while expressing interest in the histories of specific objects, buildings and areas, sometimes in autobiographical terms and sometimes not, Whiteread also constantly indicates the limiting of memory and the desire to ‘remove Granny’s finger prints’ (Whiteread, quoted in Whiteread & Rose, 1997, p. 62). As Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (2006, p. 60) point out, it is telling that *House* (1993) is called ‘House’ rather than ‘Home’. Indeed, discussing *House*, Whiteread explicitly denies any interest in the particular personal histories attached to the building (see Whiteread & Rose, 1997, p. 54). Further, as Margret Iversen observes, ‘the simplification of forms’ in *House*

[...] borders on abstraction. Whiteread took pains to remove architectural details, including the whole interior staircase, so that it would not be too articulated, too intimate. The roof void was not filled, so it had a flat, ‘Minimalist’ top. The windows were ‘blind’. (Iversen, 1998, p. 427)

And so it seems to me that a focus solely on the memorial nature of Whiteread’s work tells only half the story and does so at the cost of what I take to be the more disquieting aspects of what she offers. It is to these aspects, the abstract, non-figurative and non-representational aspects of Whiteread’s work, that I now turn.

3. Dis-placement

In this section I want to problematise the analysis outlined above, in terms of both form and content. To explain; the tropes of involuntary memory, profane illumination, and the

return of the repressed all presume and invite the restoration of meaning.⁷ With these tropes and their associated analytic and conceptual logics, any ‘secret’ contained by the works remains fully analysable, fully amenable to comprehension and representation.⁸ It follows that the hermeneutic task would simply be to un-half the marks; to recall Granny to her finger prints and thus recall them to their rightful place in the order of things, while tracing the lines of force which severed the content from form in the first place.

This mode of analysis presumes the original identity of things; that the semantic, social, or psychic topography is not only originally continuous, but that analysis and understanding, the work of interpretation as such, consists in recalling and repairing this continuity. Things may be forgotten, displaced, or otherwise hidden, but they are always still there, waiting to be recovered. A direct relationship waiting to be recalled, between a symptom and its cause, an index and its gesture, a sign and its meaning. Thus, through these tropes of return and recovery, such interpretive logics attempt to recall a prior unity, a unity within which the recollection and reconstitution ‘of the symbolic pact’ of the sign and its meaning is also and always an attempt ‘to constantly reappropriate, retribute, or reconstitute the social bond’ (Derrida, 1995a, p. 35?). To reconstitute the social relation requires that the social is, in this analeptic logic, imagined on the basis of – and constantly in need of – unity, thus determined on the basis of a certain unifying predicate or attribute, such as culture, class or territory, which is to be recalled. However, as suggested above and as will be argued in more detail below, such a reconstitution or reappropriation takes place as the limitation and elimination of the social’s difference from itself; of its an-archival ‘nonidentity’, of the otherness of the other, of spacing, of its dis-placement.

Hence, for all its strengths, such analyses cannot but overlook or disavow the non-figurative or *abstract* nature of the work. A reading orientated to and by the memorial or the figurative must presume, anticipate, and seek to preserve the unity of reference and meaning and, as such, cannot but treat as contingent and supplementary those elements of a work that resist or fall outside of metonymic reappropriation, substitution, and sublation. Those elements that, I would suggest, make the work remain *apart* as a work – as *this* work and no other. For these reasons I am in complete agreement with Briony Fer when she suggests that:

It would be wrong to see the Minimal ‘look’ of Whiteread’s sculpture as something like a veneer, as if only somehow beneath the apparent abstractness could their real meaning be found – in the domestic objects and surfaces she uses as her moulds, (Fer, 1997, pp. 167–168)

This clarifies my comment in the introduction that the achievement of Whiteread’s work may well lie in its *non*-achievement, as it is, I believe, precisely in the work’s *failure* to be a series of mnemonic devices that its success, if we may call it that, lies. It is, I believe, in the way the work *does not* close the circuit of signification, while *at the same time* not simply absenting itself from that circuit via a move to pure abstract formalism, that its prime force is to be found. Indeed, where in 2001 Lubbock takes the increasingly abstract nature of Whiteread’s sculpture as an avoidable error, I take to be a necessary refinement of the core problematic of her casting work; namely, how to negotiate the interval between the figurative and the non-figurative

while, in so doing, not betraying the latter in the former. The task becomes how to represent the non-representational without, in that very act, the latter becoming absorbed and so nullified in the former; or how to operate or understand the work's 'detachment from its form in the midst of its production of form' (Levinas, 1996, p. 53). It is in this enigmatic or cryptic de-structuring that Whiteread's work enacts, perhaps, a relation with alterity, a relation with an alterity or an outside that is irreducible to any given content or context and thereby, perhaps, a relation which interrupts and transcends the horizons of the, of any, world.

The question here, which, as noted above, is the key question of the paper, is how, exactly, the nonidentical, this 'non-manifestation', makes itself known. That is, how does alterity – as that which is, insofar as it is, otherwise than and irreducible to any predicate, form or content – signify, without at once being reducible to the phenomenality of appearance and the orders of discourse? The issue here, I would suggest, is one of how far we are capable of, and willing to contemplate, thinking via another mode of signification or, better, of 'signifyingness'; a mode irreducible to referential (semantic), differential (semiotic), or sensible (phenomenological) theories of meaning. Such would be a mode not tied to deterministic or hermeneutic analytic gestures of recovery and restitution, the game of *fort* and *da*, which describes the limited economy of almost all interpretation and explanation in its attempts to master the non-arrival of meaning. What, then, if there were a resistance to conceptualisation, analysis and representation more radical than repressing, forgetting or misplacing? The resistance of the 'nonidentical'; the resistance of an 'inexchangeable heterogeneity ... an irreducible kernel of resistance to any kind of transposition, of substitution' (Hollier, 1992, p. 11). It is only in recalling such a dimension, that is to say by recalling the impossibility of recalling, that we can begin to trace the anarchic nature of the social relation and so the irreducibility of 'being-with'.⁹ To develop this claim, the remainder of the section gives an alternative 'reading' of Whiteread's work, a reading which, in turn, opens the way for a 'theory of de-signification' to be formalised in the following section.

Whiteread's work clearly shares with the preceding generation of Minimalists a series of concerns about and interests in the sculptural object. The abstraction, reduction, and subtraction typifying Minimalist sculpture is recognisable across her work, and the inheritance is explicitly acknowledged in works such as *Untitled (One Hundred Spaces)* (1995) and *Untitled (Cast Iron Floor)* (2001). However, where Minimalist work 'tended to signify the precision of machine production' (Bird, 1995, p. 123), aiming at formal self-sufficient 'wholeness' as a way of escaping the trappings of the canvas and the perceived residual figuration of Abstract Expressionism, Whiteread's sculptures appear unfinished, their surfaces apparently carrying marks of vanished objects and environments. For example, at first sight Whiteread's *Untitled (Cast Iron Floor)* appears to directly imitate Andre's metal floor pieces, such as *Steel Zinc Plain* (1969), but

[...] while his [Andre's] smooth tessellations of bronze and copper speak physically about form and weight and the charged air above them, Whiteread's floors are imprinted with their past life. With each footstep that falls on them they continue to develop. (Mullins, 2004, p. 101).

It is precisely this aspect of Whiteread's work that gives it metonymic potential. *However*, crucially, while her work does not abandon the figurative, neither is it exhausted by it. Rather, Whiteread's work arguably *stages a de-structuring tension between the figurative and the non-figurative*.

In her essay 'Space-Time and the Politics of Location', Massey suggests that, through its 'reversals', Whiteread's *House* reveals the meaning of 'home' and 'household' as always contestable, with the artistic process of inversion via casting simulating a parallel inversion of structuring socio-symbolic dualities and so, potentially, a critical return of the repressed. As she writes, 'It is not merely the physical space which it [*House*] turns inside out but the whole burden of meaning and metaphor which this space has to carry' (Massey, 1995, p. 46 [CHECK]). Thus, for Massey, the work of the work lies in its capacity to manipulate grids of signification. While she notes the disquieting 'muteness' of *House*, her analysis moves quickly to return to, and to remain firmly anchored within, the realm of meaning; in effect, it demands the mute to speak. In distinction, Fer, in her reading of Whiteread's floor-pieces – such as *Untitled Floor* (1992), *Untitled (Amber Floor)* (1993) and *Untitled Floor* (1994-5) – draws out what she refers to as a 'collapsing movement' to be found in the work; 'the way they fail to meet expectations that sculpture should "stand up",' with the pieces 'slumped low against the walls of the room, or propped up against them with no support' (Fer, 1997, p. 164). As I imagine it, this 'collapsing movement', this subsidence or cave-in, is a movement taking-place *within* the phenomenal field, but one operating to disarticulate it. A work of un-working. Infilling all the spaces, the works work by 'sucking out all the intervals' and collapsing the 'grid of oppositional differences necessary to the production of meaning' (Krauss, 1996, p. 75).

Understood in this way, the reversal or inversion of symbolic and discursive orders that Massey finds in Whiteread's work would be a preliminary moment within a wider and more troubling *negation* of signification as such. Here the figurative elements in Whiteread's work are less indexes but *ciphers* or *traces* which, while having recognisable shapes and being caught in chains of signification and association, are irreducible to such shapes and chains. They have become enigmatic signifiers, which, if they signal at all, it is '*in obliquo* or *in excess*' (de Vries, 2005, p. 515, original emphasis). What Massey senses in the ambivalent and disquieting muteness of *House* is, I think, this movement of designification conducted under cover of signification, a movement which is itself an opening onto an other mode of signification. To help develop these points further it is useful to compare *Ghost* (1990) and *House* (1993) to their less well-known contemporary, *Untitled (Room)* (1993) (Figure 2).

While a companion to *Ghost*, being comparable in size and apparent subject, *Untitled (Room)* is distinct in a number of important respects. Most notably, *Untitled (Room)* is not a cast of a pre-existing 'found' object or space but one from a plywood frame constructed for the purpose. There are, therefore, no marks of previous human occupation to 'lift' from a contact object. Further, there is no fireplace, no light switches, no ornamentation of any kind. Here the figurative elements, a window and frame, a simple skirting board and an unpanelled door, are not indexes or mnemonic marks but disjointed half-signs, outlines of things that were never there. The frame for a door which is not one, a door for a room which is not one, each floating uneasily on the gridded surface of a white cube. Certainly it is possible, as in part Mullins does, to understand *Untitled (Room)* as Whiteread's 'riposte' to Continental Modernist architecture, (as opposed to

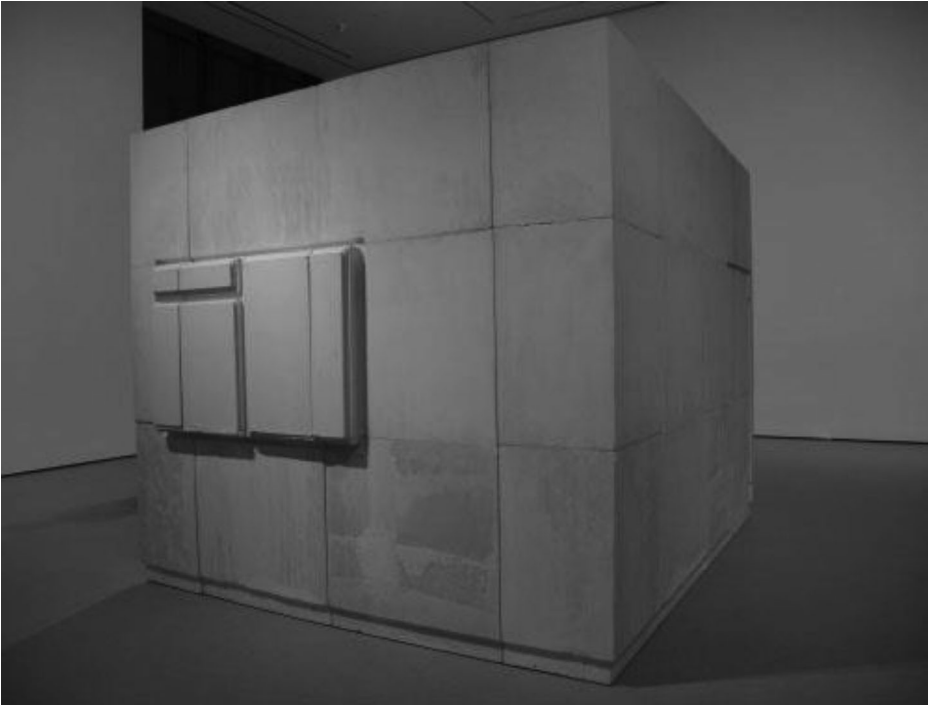


Figure 2. Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (Room)*, 1993, Image courtesy of the Gagosian Gallery © 2011 Rachel Whiteread.

the British terraces of *Ghost* and *House*), but her observation that *Untitled (Room)* is an exercise in being ‘free of memories and emotion’ (Mullins, 2004, p. 48) strikes me as more telling. Overtly without origin and almost aggressively abstract, *Untitled (Room)* is irreconcilable with a memorial or figurative reading. It is, I think, for these reasons that while exhibited at the Tate Gallery’s Turner show in 1993 alongside *Ghost* and images of *House*, *Untitled (Room)* is all but absent from subsequent commentaries on *House* and *Ghost*. My point here is not simply to oppose these pieces, however, but rather to illustrate how a memorial or figurative reading of Whiteread’s work was *always* only half the story; *Untitled (Room)* representing less a radical break with previous apparently autobiographical or socio-historically inspired work, than the drawing out of the core dynamic tension and problematic already latent in that work. For what gets covered over and displaced in the interpretive and analytic moves that sustain memorial and figurative readings is precisely the *absence* of any ‘direct relationship’ between a contact object and memory. That is to say, what gets displaced is displacement itself. As Malt comments, ‘The imprint or trace is created by proximity but non-identity of one surface with another: a distance, however infinitesimally small, is always implied’ (Malt, 2007, p. 66; see also Derrida, 2005a). And so, a displacement that was and is always already there, already at work in the work, un-working all mediating, metonymic chains; a displacement, an interval or spacing, intrinsic to any link, to any relation, be it the *meta* of metonymy or the *com* of community (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Rachel Whiteread, *Holocaust Memorial*, 2000, Installation view Judenplatz, Vienna, 2000. Photo: Werner Kaligofsky/ Courtesy of the Gagosian Gallery © 2011 Rachel Whiteread.

4. Archives of the immemorial

Whiteread's *Holocaust Memorial* was commissioned in January 1996 and completed in October 2000. It is Vienna's official Holocaust memorial and is located in the Judenplatz, the historic centre of the Jewish community in Vienna for over five hundred years. The memorial is, or so it seems, a concrete cast of an anonymous, windowless library, the interior turned inside out. The books themselves are equally anonymous, the spines facing inwards, only the fore-edges visible. In distinction to the positive rendering of the books, the doors are negative casts, as is the ceiling rose on the top of the memorial. The doors have no handles; instead, there is a spherical hole in the concrete where the handles should be. The dimensions of the memorial are based on those of rooms in the buildings surrounding the square, although not on any one room in particular, while the style of the doors and ceiling rose echo the period ornamentation found in such rooms. All the elements of the memorial, the ceiling rose, the doors, and the books, were manufactured by Whiteread and her team, and no historical artifacts were cast. Around the base, as stipulated by the competition brief, are the names of the forty-one Nazi camps, in English, German and Hebrew, where Austrian Jews were killed and, below each name, the number of Austrian Jews killed in that camp by the Nazis between 1938 and 1945.

In 1994 Simon Wiesenthal had initiated discussions about a 'suitable' Holocaust memorial in Vienna, apparently convincing the city's mayor of the need (Gillman, 2004). Wiesenthal had been an outspoken critic of Alfred Hrdlicka's figurative monument *Mahnmal*

gegen Krieg und Faschismus ('Memorial against War and Fascism') located in Vienna's Albertinaplatz. He had described the work as 'Anti-Jewish' (quoted in Kimmelman, 1996, no pagination) and stated in reference to it that 'one cannot represent the Holocaust by means of a figure' (quoted in Gillman, 2004, p. 165). Hrdlicka's work incorporates a number of figures carved into granite and limestone 'gates', intended to represent the violence of totalitarianism, human torment, and, possibly, the transcendent power of art and memory. That said, the work is perhaps best known for the bronze figure of a crouched Jewish man washing the street, a direct reference to the Nazi practice of forcing Jews to scrub the streets clean as acts of public humiliation and degradation. Wiesenthal suggested instead a stone wall inscribed with the names of the Jewish victims of National Socialism (Kuttenberg, 2007). His plan was not adopted; however, an international jury was composed and nine artists were invited to submit designs for a memorial specifically for Austrian Jewish victims of the Holocaust. In January 1996 Whiteread's design was unanimously chosen by the jury and scheduled for completion in November the same year, although controversy over the site of the monument led to a two-year delay, with construction only getting underway in 1998.¹⁰ The monument was officially unveiled in October 2000.

As noted above, Whiteread's public works may be seen as part of a wider shift in the aesthetics of public monumental art and, in particular, of public memorials, typified by a move away from symbolism and narrative towards non-figurative abstraction (Godfrey, 2007; Young, 2000). Yet, despite the work's minimalist form and concrete construction, *Holocaust Memorial* seems, at first sight at least, a remarkably accessible, straightforward, even literal work. It does not, for example, seek to confront the viewer with an event of violence or loss, as in the work of Horst Hoheisel or Jochen Gerz, nor does it attempt to act affectively on the body, as, at least in part, do the buildings and spaces designed by architect Daniel Libeskind.¹¹ Further, as Abigail Gillman (2004, p. 165) notes, it is arguably the case that Whiteread's design was the *most* figurative of all the designs submitted, despite the competition guidelines stating that designs should be non-figurative.

Indeed, the reception of the work has largely focused on the work as a memorial to 'the people of the book'. For example, James E. Young comments that:

Rather than monumentalizing only the moment of destruction itself, Whiteread's design would recall that which made the 'people of the book' a people: their shared relationship to a remembered past through the book that bound Jews together, and it was the book that provided that relationship. (Young, 2000, p. 166)

Similarly, in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* Jenny Edkins writes that *Holocaust Memorial* recalls 'the Yizker Bikhör or memorial books' (Edkins, 2003, p. 117); *Yizker* is the Yiddish form of the Hebrew *Yizkor*, which literally means 'remember'. *Yizker Bikhör* were composed in the wake of the Second World War by survivors to remember both the individual dead as well as the wider life of pre-Holocaust Jewish communities across Eastern Europe (Waxman, 2006). While the post-Second World War *Yizker Bikhör* followed a practice established after the pogroms of the First World War, going back to wider communal practices around remembering and recalling the dead, after the Holocaust they came to act as 'substitute graves' (Edkins, 2003, p. 117). In the wake of the almost total destruction of communities and generations, the books

served new roles as surrogate memorial and commemorative sites, offering, where possible, a written reconstruction of the community in question and thereby establishing an otherwise lost link. Hence, for Edkins, Whiteread's memorial 'uses books cast in stone to evoke lost lives, bringing this symbolism full circle' (Edkins, 2003, p. 117).

Such readings of *Holocaust Memorial* are, or so it seems to me now, too quick in locating the meaning of this work. As Gillman incisively observes, 'The view that the books [of *Holocaust Memorial*] contain memory in an immanent way [...] must contend with the reality that they cannot be opened' (Gillman, 2004, p. 165). Interpretations which seek in the work a meaning to be recalled and made manifest must either ignore the absence of the necessary mediation for such a memory, the books themselves, or reflect on the fact that such a meaning is present only insofar as it is *not* available for recall by the viewer. In giving us a library without decipherable books, Whiteread's memorial both initiates and, *at the same time*, interrupts any act of memorialisation. Far from being an archive, we are in fact presented with the absence of any such repository of memory. As noted above, forgetfulness is normally understood as the context and condition of memory and memory as immanent to forgetfulness. As Blanchot writes, 'We assume that forgetfulness works in the manner of the negative to restore itself to memory – in a living, revived memory' (Blanchot, 1995a, p. 85), but here, at this site on the Judenplatz in Vienna, we are presented with an 'inoperative forgetfulness'; *a forgetfulness separated from the powers of memory*. Every attempt to close an interpretive circle around this work will have to contend with this perpetual 'un-storying', with that 'which escapes quotation and which memory does not recall' (Blanchot, 1995a, p. 28). What we encounter here, insofar as we can encounter it, is an unreadable or indecipherable archive; an archive without memory (Derrida, 2005b, p. 68, *passim*); an archive of the immemorial. And so, while not doubting for a moment that the work recalls much, that it incites us to recall, to remember, to recount and record, at the same time the work recalls memory to its limits, to the limits of such archiving, recording, and recounting; it recalls (us to) the annihilation of memory.

It is, therefore, or so it seems to me now, no longer a case of having to locate or interpret the meaning of these works; no longer a case of having to locate and recall a hidden, misplaced, repressed, or forgotten meaning. Indeed, such interpretations, insofar as they 'hold' or 'succeed', tend to efface the very displacement which marks out the works discussed here as this or that specific work. A displacement which has already foiled any 'unity of reference and thus of reading, and thus of bearing witness' (Derrida, 2005b, p. 95). And so, it is no longer a case of having to interpret the meaning of these works because, to paraphrase Whiteread, they are, specifically, *without* specific meaning; the 'work' of the works as, perhaps, specifically, the *with-out of* meaning. We face these works, therefore, as a strange kind of witness, as a witness 'who doesn't know what they are witnessing': 'We are witnesses of a secret, we are witness to something we cannot testify to, we attend the catastrophe of memory' (Blanchot, 1995b, p. 392) (Figure 4).¹²

5. Strange witness

We have seen how Whiteread's work, in the period covered by this paper, is neither purely abstract nor solely figurative. Her work remains in an unsettled and unsettling



Figure 4. Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993. Photo by Sue Omerod/Courtesy of the Gagosian Gallery, © 2011 Rachel Whiteread.

interval in-between a series of registers; be they symbolic and discursive orders, phenomenological and affectual choreographies, or historical and contemporary socio-economic contexts. As Malt (2007) describes, the sculptures ‘oscillate’ between registers, modes, and dimensions. Malt’s favoured examples are Whiteread’s transparent or semi-transparent resin casts, such as *Monument* (2001), *Water Tower* (1998) or *Untitled (Floor)* (1994–5); works which, as the light changes and as one moves around them, shift suddenly from translucent, haloed and almost weightless forms into squat, opaque and obdurate masses, sucking the light out of the surrounding air.

Similarly, I would suggest that the on-going fascination with *House* (1993) is in large part due to the work’s precise balancing between the inside and out, the public and

private, the domestic and worldly. Looking at (today, the photographs) of its surfaces, it is again worth pausing before being too literal in our comments. While we may say that the inside has been made out and the private made public, as with all Whiteread's works *House* is not the outcome of a simple inversion. Indeed, akin to *Holocaust Memorial*, if this is an unveiling then it is a distinctly strange one, for what is given is not the insides of a house laid bare but rather a series of *infilled* spaces; a series of 'solid cavities', to use Fer's (1997, p. 168) term. *House* has not and does not free our gaze to look inside. The previously absent has not been disclosed and made available to us. If anything, *House* makes a show of not showing; it is a very public exercise of non-disclosure. It is a recalcitrant work, encrypting in clear daylight. To help think about this resistance, I turn now to Blanchot's discussion of language and art, my aim being to outline more formally that 'other mode of signification' or 'signifyingness' – a mode which takes place in, as and through *de-signification*.

Midway through his essay 'Literature and the Right to Death', Blanchot speaks of his 'hope' of 'attaining the thing' (Blanchot, 1995b, p. 327). By this, he means his hope of finding a method to name and know things as such, as they are, as this or that 'thing'. Such talk of hope actually comes as a something of a surprise for Blanchot has spent much of the essay up to this point describing the inevitable negation inherent in all language and its use. As he states, to name something or someone is to negate it or them in actuality:

For me to be able to say 'This women,' I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood-reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives me to it deprived of being. (Blanchot, 1995a, p. 332)

Or, as he puts it elsewhere, 'speech has a function that is not only representative but also destructive. It causes to vanish, it renders the object absent, it annihilates it' (Blanchot, 1995c, p. 30). For Blanchot, naming and communication work by effacing the particularity of the thing in question for the sake of the idea of the thing. As Gerald L. Bruns notes, this is language understood 'in its strong foundational sense of conceptual mediation or, in Hegelian terms, as the dialectic of negation and signification that organizes everything into a totality' (Bruns, 1997, p. 5). Thus Blanchot describes how the efficacy of communication and understanding lie in the negation of the thing for the sake of the substitutability, comparability, and comprehension of the idea. Given this context, what hope could there be of ever 'achieving the thing', as language would seem to push any and every single thing away with each syllable?

'My hope,' Blanchot writes,

[...] lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things too [...] Just now the reality of words was an obstacle. Now it is my only chance. A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. (Blanchot, 1995b, p. 327)

It is as if language has two sides or 'two slopes', as Blanchot (1995b, p. 330) puts it a few pages later. On the one hand, that of the 'day', is the side of clarity, communication, and comprehension. On this slope particularity is negated for the sake of the disclosure of the whole, as things and people come to take their place in a meaningful totality of recognizable and comparable entities. And, on the other hand, that of the 'night', is where words

collapse back into their substance in a ‘protest against revelation’ (Blanchot, 1995a, p. 330). On this slope, language sides with things and ‘seems to perpetuate the refusal to come into the world’ (Blanchot, 1995a, p. 330); that is to say, it sides with the specificity or particularity of a thing outside its recognisably, in its irreducibility or nonidentity. Blanchot’s ‘hope’ lies, for the most part, on this slope; in a movement through which language shifts from transparency to opacity, ‘turning itself into an inability to reveal anything’ and so ‘attempting to become the revelation of what revelation destroys’ (Blanchot, 1995a, p. 328).

What Blanchot outlines for us, in the context of this paper, is a way to think about Whiteread’s work otherwise than as a work of mediation and so beyond the tropes and economies of figurative or memorial readings of the work. For Blanchot, the work of art presents us with an impossible experience, or, better, an experience of the impossible. For him, the work of the work of art is not to embody and communicate a set of meanings or values, (however suppressed or repressed). As he comments of literature, ‘writing never consists in perfecting the language in use, rendering it purer. Writing begins only when it is the approach to that point where nothing reveals itself’ (Blanchot, 1982, p. 48). Rather than the work of art opening ‘another world,’ Blanchot suggests that it opens, insofar as it opens at all, onto ‘that which is always other than the world’ (Blanchot, 1982, p. 228). Where memorial or figurative readings seek to replace the work, conceptually, via an explanatory outbidding in which the interpretation of the work supplants the work, and, simultaneously, analytically, as the putative meaning of the work is located from within a set of pre-existing meanings, structures, and contexts, Blanchot would have us recall the work in its ‘excess of poverty,’ in its irreducibility to and withdrawal from all economies of meaning; the work in its ‘superabundance of refusal’ (Blanchot, 1982, p. 228) of and to meaning. Blanchot does not find any hope in saying better, in perfecting the work of mediation, and in chasing the positivity of a concept, idea and system thereof. Instead, he outlines the uselessness of the work, its ‘worklessness’ (*désœuvrement*). However, in its uselessness art is, paradoxically, all the more necessary. But necessary for what? And why this imperative? For the sake of the thing itself, it is necessary to re-call the thing.

Blanchot’s essay is both an insistence on the negative and a commentary on insistent, or non-dialectical, negativity. As Ann Smock writes in her introduction to Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature*, for Blanchot ‘Truth and its satisfactions,’ inferring the concept, the idea, the assignation, and knowledge of meaning and values, ‘cannot finish off the power of negativity’ (Smock, 1982, p. 6). Turning back to Whiteread, there is no doubt that her works are ‘caught at the heel by the index’ and ‘self-evidently’ attach themselves ‘to a whole array of endemically produced forms’ (Krauss, 1996, p. 76). Yet, as we have seen, a dis-placement is always at work in the works, un-working any reference or referral from the outset, making each work insistently withdraw from any simple or transparent mediation of, or direct relationship to, the contact object or space being cast.

Hence the claim that the achievement of Whiteread’s work lies not with the efficacy with which they re-mark and communicate a previously forgotten or overlooked past, but rather, and precisely, in their failure to do this, in their failure to communicate, in their non-achievement. If they are memorials, they are memorials to the immemorial. That is to say, *they are not memorials to any thing in particular but to the particularity of the thing*. To the remainder, the nonidentical – this is what they recall us to: ‘that

only forgetting keeps faith with it and estrangement is its unique intimacy' (Smock, 1982, p. 8). And this is why they signify only '*in obliquo* or *in excess*,' by de-signification, because particularity, singularity, alterity, can only appear insofar as signification disappears, 'can only appear in the world as an enigma or trace' (de Vries, 2005, p. 512). That is say, the works can only 'signify' in the movement of displacement and withdrawal, in the dissimulation and dissemination of marks, as a movement of de-signification.

And so, the particularity of the thing – of you, perhaps – in your withdrawal from or declining of traits. Of the thing – of you, perhaps – in your negativity. And thus the claim is that what the work asks us to recall – that is, to remember, to bring back, to say again and, *at the same time*, to retract, to disavow, to withdraw from any form of circulation – is the un-re-collectable. Not an event in the world, but one always other than the world.

One always other than and so otherwise.

You, perhaps.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, I want to turn back to the question of the social and the social relation. Throughout the paper I have tried to discuss this issue through thinking about the relation between memory and signification, reflecting on what happens, or what could happen, if we cast this relation otherwise. To give a brief review: The paper has attempted to, on the one hand, set out a certain analytic logic and associated 'logic', exemplified through the memorial or figurative reading of Whiteread's work. The argument has been that this logic casts the past as a past present. Interpretation, therefore, becomes a matter of recovery, of bringing back, of 'un-halving signs,' in order to reconstitute the original or primary meaning of the thing, event or text in question.¹³ The dream here, the dream to which this logic is bound, is that the '*the origin [...] speaks by itself*' (Derrida, 1995c, p. 92, original emphasis). Yet, as we have seen, making things 'speak' in this manner leads to their very effacement. Thus, when Whiteread's works are comprehended as, in essence, mediums of and for memory work, interpretation can only result in rendering them *inessential*, as 'merely' representations for example, and so secondary to a predefined meaningful intention or context, the marks of which they apparently bear. It is as if the work of the work of art and, indeed, of signification and sociality more broadly, were simply to mediate a set of, we might say, cultural, political, or ideological positions in a series of unending agonistic plays of power.

Contrariwise, I have attempted to outline another way of reading Whiteread's work. On this reading it is understood to forestall memory work at the same time as it impels such work. The argument is that, rather than seeking to memorialise by preserving the meaning or meanings of a past present, Whiteread's works are memorials to the immemorial; they preserve by *not* preserving, by failing to signify, all the while remaining in the midst of signification (or figuration). Thus, the works 'succeed' only insofar as they 'fail', for what they seek to preserve is the nonidentity of the thing, the alterity of the other, irreducible singularity. Not an event in the world, but one always other than the world, beyond the compass of any horizon. Hence, the key question of the paper; how, exactly, does such 'nonmanifestation' make itself known, or how does alterity signify without at once being reducible to the phenomenality of appearance and the orders of discourse? In response to this question, I suggested that such an

event occurs, insofar as it occurs, via processes of *de-signification*. It is not the claim of this paper that this is the only mode of signification, for such a claim would be absurd; rather, the claim is that this mode or dimension is interleaved with others. However, perhaps unlike others, this mode, insofar as it is one, is not governed by the telos of recognition or revelation. Rather, it constantly recalls us – an imagined ‘we’ – to and in our not-knowing, constantly recalls *an* us which is exposed outside the securities offered by any context, horizon, pact, or predicate, recalls *an* us which is constantly traversed by an interval of difference; by a ‘spacing which brings us into relation with others in a common non-belonging’ (Esposito, 2009, p. 139).

To close, I want to recall a passage from Edmund Husserl’s (1999 §42–62) celebrated analysis of the encounter with the other in the fifth of his *Cartesian Mediations*. It is an encounter which, on one reading at least, serves to illuminate a certain blindness within his intentional analysis, a certain moment of unknowing or indecision within the archives of intentionality: ‘a primordially unfulfillable experience – an experience that does not give something itself originally but that constantly verifies something indicated – is “other”’ (Husserl, 1999, pp. 114–115). Or again, ‘The character of the existent “other” has its basis in this kind of verifiable accessibility of what is not originally accessible’ (Husserl, 1999, p. 114), like a sealed room or an unreadable archive. It is always possible, indeed it is both necessary and unavoidable, that we speculate and economise on this not-knowing; indeed, ‘speculation begins there – and belief’ (Derrida, 1995c, p. 100). Moreover, sociality, the social relation, considered at its minimal, at its most abstract but also therefore at its most insistent and perhaps universal, consists in nothing more and nothing less than our exposure to such blindness and such not-knowing. In recalling the unforgettable forgotten. In recalling you.

Notes

1. As is hopefully becoming clear already, the approach being adopted here is different from that adopted by, for example, Rycroft (2005) in his analysis of Bridget Riley and ‘nonrepresentation’. Rycroft’s paper is a significant and fascinating work of cultural history of Op Art and the reception and development of Riley’s art, offering a careful analysis and deployment of elements of so-called ‘non-representational theory’ in relation thereto. Rycroft’s is a largely phenomenological or post-phenomenological account, one concerned with ‘pre-cognitive’ sensations and affects, drawing inspiration in part from Thrift’s (2007) later work on the ‘non-representational’. The distinction here is, I think, that the account of Whiteread’s work above does not follow this path, following instead a different understanding of the ‘non-’ of ‘non-representational’ via, though not exclusively, the work of Derrida (see Harrison, 2015, 2021: for more on this difference, see also Bissell et al., 2021; Wylie, 2010). It is for these reasons, amongst others, that I am unsure, while being concerned with works of art, if this paper can or should be considered as part of the ‘creative turn’, so innovatively and expansively mapped by Hawkins (2020). On the one hand, the answer to this question is clearly ‘no’, the paper does not engage in any overtly ‘creative practice’ other than that which accompanies all such scholarly work. On the other, there is a possible ‘yes’ insofar as the paper attempts, be it successfully or unsuccessfully, to follow and learn from Whiteread’s work and not simply to cast it as an object to be interpreted. I leave this question as one for others to decide.
2. For an important and innovative discussion in Geography, but with implications well beyond, of ‘culture’ precisely as consisting of and in such acts of claiming, a discussion which is in many ways close to the concerns of this paper, see Rose (2012, 2018, 2021).

3. I have kept the term ‘representing’ here to maintain the continuity with passage from Lyotard, however quite what this term means or could mean as it undergoes the operation described, of operating out of ‘failure’ rather than any ‘success’, even if or perhaps more so if such ‘success’ is only ever aspired to, (that is, desired, instituted, dreamed of), is less clear. It seems to me that as this aspiration, this *telos*, is placed in question, as we start to ‘wrench the concept [...] from its classical scheme’ (Derrida, 1974, p. 61), ‘representation’ begins to become something else, as its economies and motivations are, via the negative as it were, exposed. Something else, a trace perhaps (see *ibid. passim*).
4. To give an indicative list; along with 1997’s Turner Prize; 1992–1993 DAAD Scholarship, Berlin; 1997, Award for Best Young Artist, Venice Biennale; 2003, The NORD/LB Art Award, Bremen; 2004, McBean Distinguished Lectureship and Residency, San Francisco Art Institute; 2007, August Seeling Sculpture Prize, Foundation Wilhelm Lehmbrock Museum, Germany, the 2017 Ada Louise Huxtable Prize, the Art Icon award in 2019. In 2019 Whitread was awarded a damehood in Queen Elizabeth II’s 2019 birthday honours list. In terms of public commissions, some of the most notable include *Water Tower* (1998) in New York, *Monument* (2001) in London, and *Holocaust Memorial* (1995/2000) in Vienna, and *The Tree of Life* (2012), commissioned as part of the 2012 London Festival, *US Embassy (Flat pack house)* (2013–15) unveiled in 2018 at the United States Embassy, London.
5. For the sake of brevity this summary focuses exclusively on Whitread’s sculptural work, and focuses on a selection thereof produced between 1998 and 2010, passing over the significant photographic and drawn elements of her output over the years. On the latter see Presenti (2009).
6. See for example Burn (2009), Mullins (2004) Malt (2007), for corrections see Whitread and Houser (2001).
7. It is important to note here that discussing the ‘return of the repressed’ in this manner I do *not* wish to suggest that such ‘returns’ do not happen, it is rather a question of *what* returns and the presupposition thereof. To explain, in the memorial reading of Whitread being outlined above what returns is a past present, one with meaning but the meaning of which has been somehow occluded. The return that I am concerned with, which will be outlined in more detail in the following sections, is a return without meaning, or the return of the without meaning (see Derrida, 1987; Caruth, 1996; Harrison, 2010, 2021). Here, one may gain a further sense of what is suggested by the term ‘de-signification’.
8. Within a memorial or reparative analytic mode even the initial resistance to conceptual illumination offered by a work, a situation, or an individual, can itself be re-enrolled within the terms of the analysis, the resistance becoming understood as an effect of a further mediation; an effect of oppression, repression or forgetting, for example. Thus, resistance to signification can itself be taken as a theme, (it, in its turn, being understood an effect of, for example, ideological obfuscation, strategic elision, moral failing, traumatic repression, or situational blindness), and therefore capable of being analysed and comprehended in its turn. See Derrida (1995a) and, in a more geographical context, Harrison (2010, 2012), for further discussion on this topic. None of this should suggest that resistance and repression do not happen, are not at stake, but rather that the meaning thereof, if there is one, is not of the order of the hidden fact or furtive detail, waiting there patiently for the analyst to bring it into the light and so restore it to its ‘proper’ place.
9. With the term ‘being-with’ I wish to indicate here not only a debt to Heidegger’s (1962) term *mitsein*, but also, and perhaps more directly, a series of interventions and debates by Nancy (1991, 2000), Blanchot (1988), and Derrida (1997, 2013, 2020) which, in various ways, reflect on, criticise, and develop this term. Without being able to summarise these works here, I will simply note that each, in its own way, takes off from the aporetic problematic of or posed by *mitsein*. As Derrida (2013, p. 21 *passim*) puts it in a late talk when speaking of ‘being-together’; while the term ‘together’ (or ‘with’) invokes an immanence which is or would be more than the sum of its parts, a whole or an ensemble, a community, ‘being-together’ (or ‘being-with’), *yet in its irreducibility to any given form*, having no ‘proper’ or ‘destined’ form, any ‘being-together’ (or ‘being-with’) is *also* the ‘first protest

against' and 'separation' from any such gathering. Which is to say that the 'with' of 'being-with' is always not simply or not only a description but always and interminably a question. Always a question posed to any ensemble, no matter how apparently natural, conventional, or well-justified, to any discourse, no matter how profound, which would seek to define and so limit sociality to a given unifying trait, predicate or content.

10. The process of commissioning and the controversy which surrounded Whiteread's *Holocaust Memorial* has been well documented and as far as possible I do not wish to rehearse these discussions here. Gillman (2004), provides the most insightful and detailed account of these events that I have been able to find, see also Kuttner (2007), Mullins (2004), and Whiteread and Rose (1997).
11. For more on the work of Hoheisel, Gerz, and Libeskind, see Young (2000). Despite my slight disagreement with Young's general account of Whiteread's *Holocaust Memorial*, Young remains, to my mind, one of the most consistently insightful commentators on works and issues surrounding, for want of a better phrase, Holocaust memorialisation, amongst other topics.
12. It is worth noting that it is precisely the being of the 'We' that is being recalled here and which is, in this act, being put in question. A point we will return to shortly. To reiterate the themes set out in the Introduction above; what is or what could a 'we' be which is not determined and unified through a predicate, attribute, substance, or collection thereof? I have written about the logic of the witness elsewhere, the analysis of which informs these comments, see Harrison (2007, 2010), see also all those cited in the Introduction, all of whom are, explicitly or not, articulating the question and logic of witnessing.
13. To 'un-half signs'; to return and so repair the errant or severed signifier, severed for whatever reason, to its 'proper' signified, to its origin, its homeland, to its father. Is this not the (onto-theological) gesture of so much (social) analysis?

Acknowledgements

This paper has a *long* history and, as such, there are many people to thank for their input along the way, my apologies for not being able to thank you all. Of course, all responsibility comes back to my name. So, thanks to Adam Holden, Ben Anderson, John Wylie, Felicity Callard, Jess Dubow, and David Bissell. Special thanks to Mitch Rose for repeatedly telling me to bring the paper back from the dead and to Chris Philo for giving it that opportunity, and for such a sure and generous editorial hand and eye. Finally, thank you to the anonymous reviewers for their careful and insightful comments. No funding was received for the research presented in, or for the preparation of, this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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