

The Hidden and the Exposed: “One-Time Appearance” in Walter Benjamin and Rachel Whiteread’s *Holocaust Memorial* (a reading of Section iv of ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility’, Second Version)

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One of the repeated public responses to Rachel Whiteread’s concrete cast of an East End house was that it was not art; a variation on this theme, which foregrounds process, was published in the *Independent on Sunday*: “Filling a house with concrete is not art, it’s not a work of artistic creativity” (Lingwood 2000: 132). Apart from the statement’s misunderstanding of the technical complexities of using potentially volatile liquids to produce large-scale casts (e.g., the generation of intense heat and sometimes explosions), this interesting negation of “artistic creativity” intersects with two main objections to the casting process: anyone can pour liquids into a cast (therefore it is a *repeatable* process) and the resulting object is *uniquely* ugly and disturbing, a one-off that should be destroyed. Again, from a technical perspective, the destruction of the initial object that is imprinted, in this case an entire house, means that while the casting process can be repeated elsewhere, with another house, number 193 Grove Road, Mile End, London, cannot be cast again. *House*, thus appears to be a unique object in time and space, and in its destruction (the second destruction in the process), it entered the realm of local cultural memory, and concomitantly exists now in the realm of reproducible photography. In Britain, *House* triggered another type of explosion, that of public debate concerning aesthetics, one which went well beyond the discursive parameters of professional art commentators. This debate was one that thrived on controversy and extreme differences of opinion concerning the value of contemporary artistic production. In summary, Whiteread’s *House*, was attacked and critiqued from multiple perspectives (as well as being celebrated and revered), but at the heart of the rejection of the object was this ongoing contradiction: *it was not art* (it was a concrete copy)/*yet it was also unique* (art). From the perspective of this contradiction, Whiteread’s critics appeared to feel that they were too close to the object (they were alienated by it and wanted distance from it), yet also strangely distanced from its role as a work of art in the ‘here-and-now’ (the refusal to register or legitimize the object’s place in the contemporary art scene in Britain, or the more general refusal to accept any value in the contemporary arts *per se*).

Walter Benjamin, in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility’, offers a definition of such a contradictory uniqueness, in his discussion of aura, i.e., precisely that which withers in the era of the copy: “What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (Benjamin 2002: 104-105). The translators of the second version of Benjamin’s essay, Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, add the following footnote to the latter sentence:

‘Einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag.’ At stake in Benjamin’s formulation is an interweaving not just of time and space – *einmalige Erscheinung*, literally ‘one-time appearance’ – but of far and near, *eine Ferne* suggesting both ‘a distance’ in space or time and ‘something remote,’ however near it (the distance, or distant thing, that appears) may be (Benjamin 2002: 123).

The fact that Whiteread’s *House* occupies a “contradictory” site – that of the auratic – yet also appears to be registered or rejected as a repeatable “copy”, should come as no surprise, given that the terminology of sculptural casts, and that of photography, are bound together. Rebecca Comay goes further, registering a shared history:

[...] it is significant that the history of photography is bound up with the history of casting to such an intimate degree that it not only shares the latter’s basic vocabulary (negative/positive, editions, enlargements, etc.) but indeed takes the latter as its exemplary subject. As if reflexively registering what is essential about its own medium, early photography finds in the fossil and the plaster cast [...] a specular object for its own self-investigation (Comay 1997: 74).

The example that Comay refers to is Daguerre’s earliest known print *Still Life* (1837), which “[...] features decapitated plaster cherub heads gazing vacantly into the empty space of the photograph” (Comay 1997: 74). While the daguerreotype brings the cherub closer to the viewer than is often the case in the cherub’s architectural placement, it also creates a distance, with the image’s “imprisonment” or preservation:

So Lampélie’s {= sunlight’s} flight is cut short
By the chemical snare of Daguerre.
The face of a crystal, convex or concave,
Will reduce or enlarge every object it marks.

Its fine, lucid rays, through the depths of the trap,
 Catch the aspect of places in rapid inscription:
 The image imprisoned within the glass plate,
 Preserved from all threatening contact,
 Retains its bright life; and certain reflections
 Break through to the most distant spheres (Benjamin 1999(a): 675 [Y3,1]).

In his ‘Little History of Photography’, Benjamin also captures this sense of “imprisonment”, both in relation to the uniqueness of the daguerreotype and the collector’s mode of preserving/displaying them: “Daguerre’s photographs were iodized silver plates exposed in the camera obscura, which had to be turned this way and that until, in the proper light, a pale gray image could be discerned. [...] They were not infrequently kept in a case, like jewelry” (Benjamin 1999b: 508). These precious, and expensive, images are objects that call forth the contradictions of precious jewels: they function best when on display, scattering light rays, yet they are also at their most vulnerable, to theft, to damage, or simple loss. Preservation “from all threatening contact” creates once more a distance, precisely what the new photographic technologies will break away from, coinciding with the desire of the “masses”, to use Benjamin’s terminology:

Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image [*Bild*], or, better, in a facsimile [*Abbild*], a reproduction. And the reproduction [*Reproduktion*], as offered by illustrated magazines and newsreels, differs unmistakably from the image. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely entwined in the latter as are transitoriness and repeatability in the former. The stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose “sense for sameness in the world” has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing significance of statistics. The alignment of reality with the masses and the masses with reality is a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking and perception (Benjamin 2002: 105).

Where does Whiteread cast with a “sense for sameness”? Perhaps nowhere more so than with the books that are the core components of her *Holocaust Memorial*, located in Judenplatz, Vienna. The cast books are themselves designed with “threatening contact” in mind, as Whiteread comments in interview with Craig Houser:

When I was making this piece, I was thinking about how it might be vandalised, how it could be used without being destroyed, and how it should

be able to live with some dignity in the city [...] I knew my piece was going to be a memorial, and I wasn't quite sure if it would be respected. So I made replaceable book pieces that are bolted from the inside, and a series of extra pieces to serve as replacements if necessary, in case there is some terrible graffiti (Mullins 2004: np).

The phrase "some terrible graffiti" is of course a euphemism for anti-Semitic or Holocaust-denying comments that modern-day Neo-Nazis might scrawl upon the monument. Prior to this response from Whiteread in her interview, Houser points out something that some of the art magazines and reviewers that covered the *Holocaust Memorial* controversy had missed: that *Holocaust Memorial* was a positive, not negative, cast. The difference in process can be briefly explained with reference to her work *Untitled (Paperbacks)* (1997), a destructive cast of an entire small library, the books being literally ripped out to reveal their spaces and traces, the spaces above them in turn being given solid form. The outcome of Whiteread's usual casting process is thus in this case incredibly disorienting, the manifestation in solid form of the space above the books appearing to be the bookshelves. A similar disorientation happened with her series of cast stairwells:

[...] the stairs actually announce themselves as fictional places, puzzles with no solution. [...] [B]ecause you see a flight of steps running along the surface of the plaster form, you read it as the original staircase. However, as with the majority of Whiteread's work, what you are actually seeing is the space from the inside, in this case the interior of a stairwell (Mullins 2004: 111).

In *Holocaust Memorial*, the positive casts of a book means that they can be placed or manipulated in a highly unusual fashion: the bindings are all facing "inside", away from the viewer, their potential "titles" hidden or concealed. Unlike *Untitled (Paperbacks)*, where the viewer literally walked inside the library at its installation at the Venice Biennale, with *Holocaust Memorial* the viewer is placed outside of the library. The "systematised" positive casts (a term used by Houser and Whiteread in the interview), created by making fake wooden books, are part of a mass reproduction process; the end result, however, has a distancing effect: no matter how near the visitors to the memorial can come, they are totally distanced from the bindings, the interior of the library, and the event(s) that the monument memorializes. Once again, there is an uncanny intersection of the auratic and the destruction of aura in Whiteread's work.

Does the destruction of the auratic necessarily lead to a degradation of a work's historical witnessing (Lane 2006: 127)? What precisely is interwoven with the work's historical witnessing in the auratic, in the first place? Rodolphe Gasché offers one of the most philosophically astute readings of Benjamin's essay, suggesting that the auratic is the appearance " [...] in a here and now (*Hier und Jetzt*), of something non-phenomenal, something distant that transcends the phenomenal" (Gasché 2000: 184-185). The "unapproachability" of the work of art as a "cult object" paradoxically creates the desire to approach it: it creates an attraction (Gasché 2000: 185).

Examining the cult object more closely, Gasché notes that "Objects as defined in this context are the unique material appearances of a distance that, like a power, holds sway in them" (Gasché 2000: 186). Gasché argues that Benjamin's footnote on Hegel, and the polarity cult value/exhibition value, provides a "hint" concerning such power: "...in a footnote in which Benjamin credits German Idealism, Hegel in particular, for having anticipated, however confusingly, the distinction between the cult and exhibition value, as well as this link between object and the appearing in it of something noumenal, he gives us a hint when quoting the following passage from Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art*: "Worshipping... is concerned with the work as an object [*Ding*], for it is but a spiritless stupor of the soul..." [...] What comes into appearance as a thing or object can therefore also only be of the order of the spiritless, dazzling, stupefying power [...]" (Gasché 2000: 186). There are, of course, alternative ways of interpreting this footnote concerning Hegel, which lead to different readings of the auratic and its binding with cult value. First, Benjamin notes that the polarity "announces itself as clearly as possible within the *limits* of Idealism" (Gasché 2000: 124; emphasis added), that is to say, German Idealism cannot fully account for, or encompass, the polarity, even if it is announced in Hegel's lectures, and even if it is indicative of a momentous transition within modernity. Second, while Benjamin foregrounds Hegel's notion of *religious* worship as "being no more than a spiritless torpor of the soul", that is not necessarily to say that the auratic is the manifestation of (or 'of the order of'), a spiritless power. In other words, within a Hegelian understanding of history and aesthetics, the polarity is merely an instance of stages on the way to absolute spirit or absolute knowledge; Benjamin, it goes without saying, does not interpret the shift into mass culture, or, the realm of the copy, via the

Hegelian dialectic – rather, he theorizes a dialectic at a standstill. Gasché sums up his reading in the following way, incorporating the footnote to Hegel in his definition:

[...] the auratic is the attribute of the thing, or object-like appearing, of something beyond appearances that thus becomes effective, actual, real. As such a materialization of a distance become power, the auratic object whether belonging to cult or to art is authentic, and has authority. It has authority in that in it powers hold sway. It is always unique and singular because in it a distance has taken on a concrete appearance. It is thus not surprising that Benjamin would reject along with the auratic work ‘values’ such as singularity, uniqueness, authenticity, since in essence they are nothing but the result of the appearing as thing or object of a spiritless substratum that thus acquires a power to hold sway (Gasché 2000: 187).

Gasché’s conjoining of the Hegel footnote with Benjamin’s reading of Goethe, can be replaced with another perhaps more subterranean connection: that of Benjamin and Rosenzweig. Rosenzweig’s comments on architecture, in *The Star of Redemption*, illuminate the cultic or auratic object, which he perceives as a living thing: “Only cultic objects, once formed, resist every change in their form. They are just not objects any more like other objects; they have become living things, as daring as this expression may sound” (Rosenzweig 1985: 357). Unlike the “alignment of reality with the masses” in the production of the hyperreal copy, for Rosenzweig, the cultic or auratic object in effect aligns those subjects who adopt it with a real space where “Everything corporeal comes alive” (Rosenzweig 1985: 357). How does this connect with Benjamin? I suggest that the power that holds sway in the auratic is a weak messianic power, as theorized in Benjamin’s ‘On The Concept of History’, and as cited by Benjamin, without marks, from Saint Paul. Thus the *Handexemplar* of the ‘Theses’ as Agamben points out reads: “*Dann ist uns wie jedem Geschlecht, das vor uns war, eine schwache messianische Kraft mitgegeben*” or “Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power” (Agamben 2005: 139); and thus the embedded, virtually hidden, citation: “*hē gar dynamis en astheneia teleitai*” or “power fulfils itself in weakness” (Agamben 2005: 140, citing 2 Corinthians 12:9). What conjoins Benjamin and Rosenzweig here is the “yet to come” (Rosenzweig 1985: 357), the weak messianic power. How does Whiteread’s *Holocaust Memorial* function, then, according to this alternative reading of the auratic, one which acknowledges the Benjamin-Rosenzweig connection, or addition, to a more complex constellation?

Creating a Holocaust memorial with a cast remnant of a library – one single room – appears to irrevocably bind the Jewish people and their memory, to a remnant, that of the book only. While critics and commentators argued about this architectonic synecdoche, the projected process of construction changed. Instead of casting the spaces between books, “representing” perhaps, the absence or void created by the Holocaust, Whiteread turned to positive casts of books as noted above. Robert Storr argues that “The books in Whiteread’s ghostly library stand as the silent testimony of anonymous victims of Hitler’s persecution” and that they also “ [...] evoke other books in which the story of Austrian Jewry and its fate at the hands of Nazi tyranny and popular complicity is told in all its horrendous detail” (Storr 1997: 127). The controversy over the memorial thus includes a controversy of the book, of memory, of history: “As such, Whiteread’s sculpture comes off less as a cenotaph than a historical magnet, drawing people near terrible truths that, once discovered, they must investigate and reflect on themselves” (Storr 1997: 127). *Holocaust Memorial* thus became not just part of an argument, but eventually part of an ensemble which includes an archaeological site (of a synagogue burnt in the pogrom of 1421) and a museum; it is in the *experience* of the ensemble that the visitor undergoes the more complex process of reflection and investigation, especially in the excavation site room, the boundaries of which extend “[...] into the furthest corner of the memory of those who can still remember, of those who it is intended should still remember, and with the help of buildings like this, of those generations who will no longer be told about this phase of history by those who experienced it at first hand” (Hollein 2001: 84). *Holocaust Memorial* appears *not* to memorialize a “phase” of history that has passed: rather, in its hybrid and potentially transgressive occupation of the realm of the auratic and the copy, it refuses to acknowledge a sense of progress away from, or beyond, the Shoah, while at the same time registering an acute sense of sacred space introjected into the present, secular age. In other words, the cultic status of *Holocaust Memorial* is part of its living objectness, registered in Whiteread’s surprise at the way in which visitors to Judenplatz have reacted to the memorial:

I had expected graffiti, but people have been leaving candles, stones and flowers on the memorial. I think it’s already become a ‘place of pilgrimage’. People come into the city and go to Judenplatz specifically to see the

memorial, the museum in Misrachi Haus, and the excavations of the medieval synagogue underneath the square (in Mullins 2004: 93).

Put more simply, Whiteread's site of memorialization, as part of a more complex ensemble, is also a site of ongoing mourning: the silent mourning of (a) tragedy.

The "one-time appearance" of the auratic is received as a silence, in silence, at *Holocaust Memorial*. Whiteread describes her "research" for this work:

When I visited concentration camps, I was more interested in how people responded to the camps than in the actual places. I spent a lot of time just watching people. I watched kids picnicking on the ovens, and other people stricken with grief. I saw grandparents with their grandchildren, having the most appalling experiences, trying to somehow tell this younger generation about the past (in Mullins 2004: 93).

Functioning as one in a series of contemporary memorials, however, there is a marked shift in Whiteread's, and others', work, whereby the traditional memorial has given way to a new public perception of the past, thus a process that Benjamin sketches, of the "alignment" of reality and "the masses" (Benjamin 2002: 105). Whiteread's translucent *Monument*, occupying temporarily the vacant plinth in London's Trafalgar Square, intended for William IV (and in fact, being an upside-down "reproduction" of that plinth in a different material), is not only a critique of "neo-classical, nineteenth century sculpture" conforming to "[...] ideas of rationality and transcendence" (Townsend 2004: 187), but also "a scaling up of concerns previously undertaken with smaller forms" (Townsend 2004: 181). Various "concerns" were scaled up to approach *Holocaust Memorial*: not just *House*, or the claustrophobic *Untitled (Paperbacks)*, but also the haunted, uncanny, *Ghost*, another disorienting cast which is "the negative of the exterior of an interior room of a house" (Ferris 2003: 52). *Ghost* was less destructive than many of Whiteread's other casts, partly because the room around it could not be destroyed; instead, *Ghost* left the room in pieces and was then reconstructed. Alison Ferris argues that "*Ghost* can be understood as a sophisticated relative of spirit photography" (Ferris 2003: 52), where, following Tom Gunning's analysis, such photography "...disrupts the notion of the photograph as strictly an index" (Ferris 2003: 50). Thus:

[...] what is haunting about the apparitions in spirit photography is their very lack of tangible reference, and the uncanny characteristic of *Ghost* can be explained in much the same way. [...] The direct link between the object and the representation of the object is disrupted and obscured, and each is made to operate instead through the fuzzier and inexact lens of “recognition.” In *Ghost* and spirit photography, recognition takes place where the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present overlap and are momentarily integrated. In this sense, Whiteread offers *Ghost* as a token of recognition, at once specific and abstract, solid and fantastic, to be passed like the spirit photograph between the viewer and the lost, commemorated past, the living and the dead (Ferris 2003: 52).

The word “uncanny” in contemporary theory often points directly to Freud’s infamous essay; in the context of *Ghost*, and the similarly reconstructed cast *Holocaust Memorial*, I suggest that the link is with Rosenzweig, where “uncanniness” links his theories of Judaism and aesthetics (Batnitzky 1999: 98). In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig uses a similar formulation to Benjamin for the auratic work of art, suggesting that is “unique” but also “truly uncanny” (Rosenzweig 1985: 243). For Rosenzweig, the auratic work of art is unsheltered, un-homely and not-at-home; it can only be sheltered once it is connected with the spectator. Without the spectator, Rosenzweig suggests, “the work is mute” (Rosenzweig 1985: 243). Yet once the spectator(s) – the masses – are brought into the equation, what then? Art has then entered the public sphere, working upon the public, but only given a voice because of the public. This is already to secularize Rosenzweig’s approach, because what (or more accurately, *who*) is also “uncanny” or “without a home” for Rosenzweig is the diasporic Jewish person, and this uncanniness is registered and abused by the anti-Semite in response; it is this response that *Holocaust Memorial* warns against. As Batnitzky suggests: “Rosenzweig maintains that blessings and curses flow equally from Judaism for the same reason: due to its uncanny quality, its *Unheimlichkeit*, Judaism invites a response from its neighbours. Judaism is of this world and not of this world. Judaism is at one and the same time a sign of mystery beyond this world and the very disturbance to the gentile *Heim* of this world” (Batnitzky 1999: 100). The presencing of a distance at the heart of the auratic in Benjamin’s essay may in fact be the presencing of Judaism’s difference, the cipher buried deep in Benjamin’s texts; Batnitzky summarizes Rosenzweig’s perspective, where this presencing is the notion “...that Jews represent God’s presence, a presence that seems like it ought to be absent from human life. Jews are uncanny for this very reason” (Batnitzky 1999:

101). Is this the full revelation of the cipher and its connection to Benjamin? I suggest that the concept of the dialectical shock in Benjamin also relates to Rosenzweig's notion of the uncanny and the role of the Jewish people: "Against idealist aesthetics, Rosenzweig maintains that artworks have the capacity to draw shocked attention from their audiences" (Batnitzky 1999: 104). Obviously *Holocaust Memorial* is shocking, and responses here vary enormously. However, a repeated spectator reaction to the actual form of the memorial concerns the fact that the book bindings are buried deep within the memorial, and the "pages" of the books are exposed as such; why should these buried bindings be so shocking? The answer may once again be explained by the crossing of the auratic and the copy in Whiteread's piece: in this instance, it is the bindings that are the distinguishing marks of an otherwise copy-able medium: printing; it is the bindings that would reveal a type of temporary difference, while the series of reversed books foregrounds the "systematised" nature of the positive casts, memorializing at the same time the systematic murder of the Jewish peoples. Ultimately, the auratic, the one-time appearance, does not encompass the function of *Holocaust Memorial*, rather, it is the crossing into the realm of the copy that triggers another wave of uncanniness: the memorial in this latter sense suggests that this unique occurrence did happen multiple times, in multiple places, and may thus occur again.

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