ABSTRACT
THE SCULPTURE OF RACHEL WHITEREAD
AND SOCIAL SPACE

Rachel Whiteread’s early sculpture created from the use of domestic architecture and objects brings attention to issues of social space. The solidification of the spaces occupied by ordinary working people brings their lives into focus in elite museums and galleries all over the world.

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THE SCULPTURE OF RACHEL WHITEREAD
AND SOCIAL SPACE

by
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INTRODUCTION

A Brief Look at Closet (1988)

Upon first look, Rachel Whiteread’s block-like and austere sculptural works may appear blank and impersonal; their architectural shape and scale seem vaguely familiar without belonging to any discernable category of object. However, through prolonged viewing, and the gradual revelation of subtle clues left on the artworks’ matte surfaces, the viewer is drawn into the work.

Whiteread’s sculpture is both abstract and representational, rendering into a solid entity of its own the space inside, under, or above a common object. Domestic space, unseen and rarely considered, becomes tangible and subject to discussion. Through consideration of the solid objects Whiteread makes from space, viewers begin to think about the kinds of spaces in which we all dwell. Whiteread’s work draws our attention to the domestic spaces of ordinary working people.

Closet (1988) (Figure 1), Whiteread’s first freestanding sculpture, provides a simple introduction to the artist’s concern with embodying space—and her wish to evoke the lived experience of those who have used and passed their lives within these spaces. To create Closet, she laid a second-hand cabinet on its back, filled it with plaster, closed the doors, and let it dry. The exterior parts of the furniture were broken away from the cured plaster, leaving behind its internal shelves intact and embedded in the plaster, to create a solid rectangular block five feet tall. Between the exposed edges of the original cabinet’s shelving, where we would otherwise see raw white plaster, Whiteread laid down black felt to create a feeling of darkness and quiet. Whiteread created Closet with a desire to “concretize a childhood memory.” She climbed inside her mother’s wardrobe,
Figure 1: Closet (1988), 63” x 34 5/8” x 14 ½”
(Source: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/109704940900109592/)
sitting on one of the boxes of fabric inside, and shut the doors.\textsuperscript{1} The edges of the shelves evident on the surface of Closet delineate the open area in which Whiteread sat. Created in a scale for use by an average sized adult, the wardrobe possessed ample space for a small child to be comfortably housed. Here she enjoyed the closet’s limitations upon her senses, the muffled sounds from the rest of the household, and blackness diminishing her vision. The black felt covering the outside of Closet represents the muffled sounds and darkness she experienced. For Whiteread, Closet is a recalled moment of peaceful reverie in the safe darkness. She is present in the household, yet safely removed to enjoy her own thoughts.

I acknowledge that many would choose to seek an understanding of the childhood narrative expressed in Closet through a psychoanalytical or biographical perspective. I reject this interpretation and locate my analysis of Whiteread’s work in relationship to class embodied in social space. While the Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists used boxes and containers to symbolize the hidden contents of the psyche of a unique individual or a Jungian collective unconscious, I interpret the spaces rendered in Whiteread’s work as containers for the collective life experiences and spaces of ordinary people. My analysis of Whiteread’s work is situated in the concept of social space.

Whiteread’s spaces are not celebrated, historical, or unique. She is drawn to those that may be unnoticed or seen as ordinary. This interest is demonstrated in both the choice she and her partner made for their home as well as in the sites she selects for her casting. To create the early artwork I focus on in this study,

\begin{footnote}{1}{Lisa Tickner, “Mediating Generation: The Mother-Daughter Plot,” \textit{Art History} 25, no. 1, (2002): 48.}
Whiteread chose ordinary domestic objects and architecture. According to Whiteread, she is not from a wealthy background; houses she used are familiar from childhood and the working class neighborhoods where she has lived. Whiteread, her partner, and two sons live in a building they converted from its most recent use in the textile industry to create their home and studio space. Whiteread said, “I was attracted to this building because it was rather ugly and invisible. Because it has no historical importance, no one took any notice of it, and I’m interested in giving a voice to the insignificant.”

Domestic space is that in which we dwell, whether considered home, a domicile, or living quarters, domestic space envelopes and nurtures, sustains, or barely keeps us alive. The domestic spaces rendered by Whiteread housed working people, women for whom these spaces are traditionally associated, but also men and children. Because Whiteread refers to the body in her early work using domestic objects and sites, one may assume Whiteread’s work relies upon a feminist point of view. Although she acknowledges the efforts of the women who came before her, Whiteread does not see herself and her work in that way; she does not think of herself as a female artist nor is her work guided by a “feminist doctrine.”

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At first look, the viewer may perceive *Closet* as a representation of a closet or wardrobe. But with careful looking, clues on its surface challenge this interpretation. A ridge impressed upon the plaster down the center front of *Closet* shows where the edges of its doors once met. The impression of the latching hardware is also visible. Our own knowledge of the construction of closets and cabinets help us to identify the construction of *Closet*. The viewer recalls the bracing wood along the inside corners and edges of familiar storage spaces that correspond to the uneven indentations on *Closet’s* top and sides.

Many people share childhood memories of packing wet sand into Dixie cups at the beach and inverting them to reveal a solid upside down cup, or delighting in the molded fruit and gelatin shapes turned out from a mold. It is the viewer’s intuitive, sensory knowledge of the casting process, as well as of the construction of closets or cabinets and experience with storage spaces that provide the information needed to process the reversal of its familiar characteristics.

Whiteread’s subsequent casts of entire rooms, and even buildings, are more complicated, but still can be understood through sense perception, body memories, and attention to the mundane physical details of daily-lived experience. They offer an increasingly complex comment on the pleasures and pathos of ordinary human lives, specifically the lives of unsung working people whose existence is so often invisible in the art world and beyond.

I assert that Whiteread’s artwork, from small to large, in galleries and neighborhoods, challenges the power relations embedded—yet typically invisible—within the spaces of modern capitalist society. In a chic gallery where rich people buy status objects, she asks us to remember those who can barely pay for necessities. In a newly gentrified neighborhood she insists on drawing
attention to the generations of working poor whose humble homes have been razed from the site.

The power of Whiteread’s critique of capitalism stems in part from the superficial similarity between her sculptures and commodity objects, ranging from cheap furniture to blue-chip abstract art. The longer we look at the artwork, the more we see what gets hidden or devalued by capitalism and its commodities. What initially looked like a consumer object—say a mattress or cupboard or an imposing minimalist sculpture—gradually evokes something more, something alive, something that lives and breathes, suffers, dreams and eventually dies.

Objects gradually evoke bodies, and the spaces in which those bodies have lived. The artwork ultimately calls up the whole realm of social space where the power relations of capitalism are played out and all too often erased. Whiteread’s work counters the old dictum, “out of sight, out of mind.” While Whiteread’s work is most frequently interpreted in terms of absence and loss, I argue, by contrast, that it asserts a presence. It insists on the presence of bodies of folks who worked, produced, lived, and died over the one hundred plus years of advanced capitalism and the presence of the sensing and remembering body of the viewer engaged with the artwork.

We are familiar with the utile spaces inside a cabinet, yet we have little conscious perception of the space inside our own rooms, even though a good part of our lives is spent within four walls. As her casting techniques became more complex, Whiteread’s subsequent work escalated into the exploration of domestic architectural space. Beginning with casts of the interior of ordinary domestic items, and culminating in the casting of an entire house, the exploration
of space Whiteread undertakes in her early work provides the viewer with an introduction to the concept of social space.

In the far-reaching capitalist economic system, the workings of society seem natural and “just the way things are.” The development and construction of buildings, including homes, is one engineered for the benefit of capital. Childrearing and the bourgeois patriarchal family structure themselves are an intrinsic part of capitalism since they reproduce—biologically and socially—class society. The importance of a “home” as a place to experience lives, nurture relationships, raise children and care for one another, is challenged by capital’s grip. Domestic life is regimented by the consumption of products and use of media rendering the moments of our lives as contributions to the wealth of capital. Transactions are valued over experience.

The presence of the body implicated by Whiteread’s work, and the experience of these used and dwelled spaces makes a much needed challenge to the simplification of life to commercial transactions. The narrative of the child in the closet and the engagement of the senses inherent in the experience return the occupation of lived spaces to one attached to the body instead of the consumption of goods and services.

Rachel Whiteread: A Biographical Overview

Childhood and Education

Whiteread’s interest in social space may be traced to her childhood in a socially minded household. Whiteread has lived in London for most of her life; she was born in Ilford, North East London in 1963. At the age of four, she and her family moved to Doddinghurst in semi-rural Essex before returning to make
their home in Muswell Hill, North London three years later. When Whiteread decided as a teenager in the sixth form to pursue art studies, her decision was supported by her parents.

Growing up, Whiteread helped at the meetings her artist mother Pat hosted in their family home, preparing for some of the first feminist art exhibitions in London. Her mother’s lack of economic success as an artist did not deter Whiteread from pursuing the same path. Whiteread’s father Tom was a teacher and administrator at a polytechnic college. A supporter of Britain’s Labour Party that was founded on the trade union movement and the Socialist party, he sometimes brought Rachel with him on neighborhood trips canvassing for support.

In 1983, Whiteread left London to study painting at Brighton Polytechnic. Early on in her studies there, she attended an introductory workshop in simple casting techniques. Although a student in the painting program, Whiteread began to spend more time in the sculpture studio. She made wax casts using driftwood and other beach detritus and described her two-dimensional works as paintings. Perhaps the future sculptor’s developing interest in the exploration of space was better nurtured by a course of study that emphasized painting.

5 Cook, paragraph 8; Charlotte Mullins, Rachel Whiteread, (London: Tate, 2004): 8.
6 Cook, paragraph 9.
9 Mullins, 7.
10 Ibid., 8.
Instead of limiting and focusing her training on the creation of object-oriented sculpture, I believe the study of rendering objects in the context of space provided Whiteread with the tools she would need to facilitate her exploration of spaces and the objects she creates.

In 1987, Whiteread returned to London to attend graduate school at the Slade School of Fine Art, University of London. Now committed to the sculpture program, Whiteread continued and expanded her use of the casting process. She made wax casts of her own body, and began making three-dimensional objects, sourcing domestic items dumped on the street and in second hand stores to make plaster casts.

As a student, Whiteread was inspired by the artwork of the generation of British sculptors prior to hers, and the artwork she saw in museums at the time. She describes the work of American artists after 1945 as her biggest influence, especially the work of the Minimalists, admiring the work of Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Richard Serra. Whiteread also felt a special connection to the life and work of German-American artist Eva Hesse (1936-1970) especially her delicate, yet strong space-spanning sculptural works.

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13 Mullins, 8.

14 Ibid., 16; Burton, 156.

Launching a Career

After her studies at Slade, Whiteread made *Closet*, which she considered a breakthrough piece.\(^{16}\) It was one of four cast objects arranged in a small domestic space for her first exhibition in 1988 at the Carlisle Gallery in Islington, London.\(^{17}\) These four pieces were *Closet; Mantle*, cast from a dressing table; *Torso*, cast from a hot water bottle; and *Shallow Breath*, cast from a mattress.\(^{18}\) Based on memories of her childhood, parents and grandparents, the exhibition took place several months after the death of Whiteread’s father.\(^{19}\)

The critical and commercial success of the Carlisle show brought offers of future exhibitions and enabled Whiteread to secure grants needed to fund the execution of *Ghost* (1990), her first monumental sculpture (Figure 3, p. 46).\(^{20}\) A cast of the interior of a Victorian era sitting room, *Ghost* expanded Whiteread’s exploration of domestic space into the social and architectural realm. A hollow white plaster block, *Ghost* stands almost nine feet tall and measures eleven feet eight inches by ten feet five inches. In small gallery spaces, the scale of the cozy sitting room is exalted, while it is rendered inconsequential in capacious settings;\(^{21}\) *Ghost* quietly provides a view of the spaces in which ordinary people spend their lives.

\(^{16}\) Burton, 156.

\(^{17}\) Wroe, paragraph 15.

\(^{18}\) All four artworks dated 1988.

\(^{19}\) Mullins, 12.

\(^{20}\) Made for an exhibition at the Chisenholm Gallery in Bethnal Green, East London.

Three years after completing *Ghost, House* (1993) brought Whiteread’s exploration of domestic space into the realm of the urban community with the casting of an entire three-story terrace house (Figure 4, p. 58). Based on the success of *Ghost*, Whiteread received the support of a non-profit arts organization and two commercial sponsors to create *House*, a temporary, site-specific installation in London’s East End, constructed within an area of redevelopment. Its neighboring houses already razed, it became a controversial symbol for issues of class and racial identity, the displacement of the poor, and gentrification.

In 1994, Whiteread was the first woman to receive Great Britain’s Turner Prize, which she won on the basis of *House*. Her standing in the international art world was further solidified by international commissions, most notably the *Holocaust Memorial* (1996-2000) in Vienna Austria; *Water Tower* (1997), a temporary installation on a roof top in New York’s Soho, and *Monument; The Fourth Plinth* (2001), a temporary installation in London’s Trafalgar Square. She was the first woman to represent England alone at the Venice Biennale in 1997, where she was awarded the Best Young Artist Award. Her work has had prominent exhibitions and is collected by museums and institutions all over the world. She was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 2006.

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23 In 1968, Bridget Riley shared the exhibition with Francis Bacon

Whiteread’s connection to East London permeated her early work. Returning to London from Brighton for graduate school, Whiteread moved to the East End where she lived as a small child, and to which she was initially drawn for its inexpensive studio space. But its diverse population, mixture of architecture, and working class history became a source of inspiration. Guided by her genuine curiosity and non-judgmental gaze, her exploration of space begun in London led her to casting spaces all over the world. Whiteread and her partner, sculptor Marcus Taylor, and their family continue to live in the East End today.25

Critical Responses to Whiteread’s Work

Because it articulates something we ordinarily fail to notice, Whiteread’s stoical artwork may appear abstract and non-representational, defying classification or comparison. Deeply felt, knowable, and redolent of human experience, the work expresses concepts that are difficult to define in a few words, exposing a failure in our language to express the lived experience of occupying a particular space. Because concepts of social spatial theory are blocked or underutilized in our appraisal of the world around us, many writers and critics are challenged to find another way to adequately introduce and describe Whiteread’s artwork to their readers and tend to rely on three main approaches.

The most common critical approach to Whiteread’s work depends on references to the morbid including death and loss and other macabre readings. In this type of critical response, the negative connotations of the work overshadow

25 Cole, 36.
and minimize the positive viewpoint expressed in reference to the lived experience of the body. Another approach repeatedly employed is one that emphasizes the casting and art making *process* in general, hindering the ability to focus on the artwork itself. Lastly, some writers depend on comparisons of her work to that of other artists. A reliance on these three approaches exposes both the critics’ unfamiliarity with the concepts of social space I see represented in Whiteread’s work, as well as their pigeonholing of a woman’s art work into the expected analyses, thus limiting the ability to consider her work in other ways or on its own merits.

The morbid reading of Whiteread’s artwork is the most prevalent approach; its frequent use can be explained in several ways. In her first exhibition, which opened a few months after Tom Whiteread’s death, the titles Whiteread chose for her work invited this response. Her use of a grisly reference to the body (*Torso*), and the end of life (*Shallow Breath*) incited morbid evaluations upon which subsequent responses were built, and which continued with *Ghost*. The relationship between the casting process and death and loss also reinforces the morbid reading; in the lost wax technique the original sculpture is burnt out or *lost* in the creation of the mold. David Batchellor acknowledges the connection made by many critics to Whiteread’s use of the casting method with the death mask.26

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Finally, in the London art scene of the 1990s of which Whiteread was a part, death and morbidity were common themes.  

In spite of Whiteread’s statements to the contrary, however, the morbid interpretation continues to be applied to her work after more than twenty-five years. In an attempt to deflect such narrow and seemingly predetermined readings, in the mid-nineties Whiteread stopped attaching titles to her artworks. From this time forward she has used *Untitled*, followed by a parenthetical description of the cast parent object, to name all her works. In interviews, Whiteread has described her work as realist, not symbolic, and speaks very clearly about her intentions. While I interpret Whiteread’s work to symbolize aspects of capitalist society, I still consider Whiteread’s own characterization of her work as realistic to be accurate. Although we read the American flag as a symbol of American values, Jasper Johns’ flag paintings are representations of the flag, an object. The real spaces portrayed in Whiteread’s work embody these social ideas instead of symbolizing them.

The repeated use of one narrow interpretation prevents other meanings from being utilized in the understanding of Whiteread’s work. Specifically, by emphasizing death and absence instead of a positive presence (of the body and space), the ability to use Whiteread’s work as a tool for understanding intrinsically social urban spaces and architecture is dismissed. While the

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29 David Batchelor wrote, “The focus on the melancholic and the memorial threatens to block off other avenues of expression, to monopolize the production and circulation of meaning around the work.” 838.
presence of the body is inferred by the morbid and macabre reading of Whiteread’s work, it is persistently defined as a body that is supernatural, lost, or mourned.\textsuperscript{30}

In Mignon Nixon’s feminist psychoanalytic approach to Whiteread’s work, the loss of the cast object is explored in terms of infantile anxiety, addressing “the elision of body and environment, inside and outside, through which the infantile world is made.” Nixon sees the interstitial structures in Whiteread’s work as an interpretation of the developing ego’s ability to register both love and hate responses to objects including the mother.\textsuperscript{31} Rosalind Krauss connects Whiteread’s work to death and loss through the grid of signification, on which Whiteread’s terrain is a funerary one. Krauss compares Whiteread’s use of casting to photography, a document of what has been, or a “living image of a dead thing.”\textsuperscript{32} In contrast, I will argue in this thesis that Whiteread’s work, instead of focusing on the loss of the object or body projects a truthful or positive representation of the lives of ordinary people over time beginning in the Victorian age and continuing to the contemporary epoch.

The second main category of response to Whiteread’s work addresses her working process; this is a timeworn approach applied to women artists. A paradigm rooted in the art historical implication that the male genius artist uses

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the intellect while women’s art is relegated to being only a result of the realm of
the art making process and its intrinsic association with the body.\textsuperscript{33} By focusing
on process, interpretation of Whiteread’s artwork itself is ignored, further
constricting its full interpretation and understanding.

A negative judgment can be applied to artwork made by the traditional
process of casting. Plaster casting was used in the past to mechanically create
copies of original artworks, make life or death casts to use as models, or to render
cheap multiples.\textsuperscript{34} The inferred association of Whiteread’s work with utilitarian
processes and artless craft belies an understanding of her artwork as a unique
artistic expression. David Cohen expressed concern that Whiteread relied too
heavily on the casting method and that her work would cease to creatively cover
new ground.\textsuperscript{35} When critics focus on the process through which artworks are
made to the exclusion of interpretation of the finished artwork, the work is
relegated to being the result only of an art process.

Lastly, Whiteread’s work is often described or introduced to readers
through ineffectual comparisons to the work of other artists. The most frequently
compared are artworks that are cast, made of plaster, or that use furniture as
subject matter. These works made by others are not always sculpture but also

\textsuperscript{33} Many authors approach Whiteread’s work through her use of process: Stephanie
Cash, “A Tower is Born,” \textit{Art in America} 87, no. 4, (1999): 107; Cohen, 52; Beatriz Colomina, “I
Dreamt I was a Wall,” in \textit{Rachel Whiteread; Transient Spaces}, (New York: Guggenheim Museum
Publications, 2001); Comay; Benjamin Eastham, “Shaping the Future,” \textit{Apollo: The International
Magazine for Collectors} 177, no. 606, (2013): 58; Jane Harris, “Rachel Whiteread: Sponsored by the
Public Art Fund,” \textit{Sculpture} 18, no. 1, (1999): 65; Axel Lapp “Temporary Monumental Sculpture in
Gone,” \textit{Modern Painters} 10, no. 9, (1997): 34-37; Robert Storr, “The Vienna Holocaust

\textsuperscript{34} John W. Mills, \textit{The Technique of Casting for Sculpture}, (London: BT Batsford LTD, 1990):
35.

\textsuperscript{35} Cohen, 53.
include paintings, photography, drawings, etchings and prints. This avenue to the understanding of Whiteread’s work minimizes the importance of Whiteread’s intent by sharing its focus with that of other artists whose aims may be very different.

Doris von Drathen’s comparisons to artists of different centuries: Hilla and Bernd Becher who have made photographs of industrial buildings and objects including water towers and also James Ensor’s etchings of haunted furniture, respond in a general way to Whiteread’s perceived themes, but not her actual work. Cooke mentioned Allan McCollum who created a cast of a dog from Pompeii, a comparison that references the casting method and the funerary themes so often applied to Whiteread’s work.

Whiteread’s work is also compared to the artists who have inspired her over the years, that of Eva Hesse, Louise Bougeois, Richard Serra, and Carl Andre. She is also frequently compared to Bruce Nauman to whom she has acknowledged a debt for his influential The Space Under My Chair (1965-1968), although the two artists pursue different intents.

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37 Cooke, 274.


39 Cooke, 274; Burton, 155.

40 Farley, 10; Mullins, 8, 101; Tickner, 34; Usherwood, 12.

41 Dennison, 31; Farley, 11; Krauss, 89; Mullins, 72; Tickner, 29; Usherwood, 12.
Because the expectation of a representational and recognizable cast object is left unfulfilled, critics are brought up short. The over-dependence of writers and critics on these limited, even stereotyped approaches to Whiteread’s work demonstrates its category-defying nature, but more importantly, an inability to acknowledge and recognize the importance of picturing social space. As much as others see absence, I interpret Whiteread’s work as embodiments of something we intimately experience yet have never seen, the rendered social space of ordinary working people.

My Interpretation of Whiteread’s Work

I see Whiteread’s art as an assertion of presence, a way of insisting that viewers contemplate lives that are usually banished from public consideration. Whiteread’s interest in social issues is manifested by her desire to bring attention to the ordinary and those uncelebrated by social forces. Her use of domestic architecture and personal items makes present the lived experience of the body and the domestic spaces in which ordinary people pass their lives. The knowledge embodied in Whiteread’s work through her abiding connection to her familiar London neighborhoods grounds her artwork in meaning that transcends its specificity.

A connection to place results from the knowledge gathered by the bodily senses, an experience as unique as each individual. Whiteread’s knowledge of place was developed through experiences built over time in her native, as well as chosen, London neighborhoods. Although Whiteread has gathered the information she uses to create her work through her own sensory experience, it has the ability to speak to those who share her connection to the history of industry and the lives of ordinary working people.
With its inherent connection to the body, Whiteread’s work challenges the separation of value from labor, from the sensory and psychological experience of the individuals whose largely anonymous work creates capital. It contests the limitation of capitalism’s commodity exchange to a relationship only between objects. By making tangible the class and gender-identified domestic spaces of working people and their symbolic representation of capitalist functions, Whiteread’s work exposes that which capital hides and suppresses enabling its natural seeming unfair share of the profits.

In addition, Whiteread, who was trained as a painter, continues the examination of space progressing from Greenbergian flatness, to her rendering sculpturally of the space inside objects. Through the solidification of space, Whiteread’s representational objects embody space. But because space is perceived as negative, or nothing (i.e. negative space), Whiteread’s artworks can also be interpreted as non-representational art objects that challenge the commercialization of the art world as did the dematerialized work of artists in the 1960s and 1970s. With the high concentration of wealth in the top percentages of the population reflected in the commercial art world, this challenge is even more important today.

**My Thesis**

In the following pages, I will explain three ways in which Rachel Whiteread’s exploration of spaces familiar to her has valorized the lives of ordinary working people while it challenges the capitalist worldview:

1. The double presence of the body in Whiteread’s artwork, created through the sensory knowledge of the body using objects that also refer to the physical presence of the body counters the separation of
labor from value. The dehumanized relationship between objects is challenged through the presence of the sensory body in Whiteread’s *Closet* and *Untitled (Amber Double Bed)* (Figure 2, p. 29) and other early work made from furniture and domestic objects. By using these spaces associated with, made by and for use of the human body, the separation of labor from the value of commodified objects is challenged.

2. While capital benefits from keeping the domestic spaces of ordinary working people out of view, *Ghost* provides an avenue to the discussion of this urban social space. Whiteread’s solidification of these domestic spaces creates a representation of the very sites that are responsible for the reproduction of advanced capitalism. The dwelling places of ordinary people Whiteread renders bring attention to the labor of both women and men whose labor both inside and outside the home, and sustaining of family inside the home contributes to capitalism’s reproduction.

3. Although the labor force associated with London’s East End directly contributed to its nation’s economic success, it was not acknowledged or properly compensated. Instead many poor and working people are displaced from both the work force and their homes. *House*, in its commentary on urban redevelopment, symbolizes the outmoded labor force that has been displaced by new high profit urban projects.
My Method/Evidence

Artworks Examined

While some of Whiteread’s other works will figure in my argument, I have focused my study on three main artworks, Closet (1988), Ghost (1990), and House (1993). These works completed over five years at the beginning of Whiteread’s career represent the development of Whiteread’s working vocabulary and demonstrate a progression in technique and scope. They also represent the period of capitalist history beginning in the Victorian age through the present day.

Whiteread’s use of technique develops in complexity in the execution of Closet, Ghost, and House. Working alone, Whiteread used a simple casting method to create Closet, which she expanded upon to create the more complicated architecturally scaled Ghost. Whiteread’s elemental use of casting escalated in complexity of technique with the creation of the monumental scale House, requiring the help of assistants, technicians, and specialists. In addition to a progression in technique, these works demonstrate the expanding scope of Whiteread’s developing interest in space. While Closet addresses the body at a personal scale, Ghost brings attention to the body in a social and architectural milieu expanded by House to the broader community context of the neighborhood.

These three works also address a span of history that begins in the Victorian era, when the architecture used to create Ghost and House was constructed. The second significant economic era addressed is the mid-twentieth century when the domestic objects and furniture used to make Closet and Whiteread’s other early work was manufactured. Whiteread created these works
in the late twentieth century, and finally I write my analysis of Whiteread’s work in 2015 considering the political and economic context of each of these periods.

Today, as we experience the greatest concentration of wealth accompanied by the deepest wage inequality experienced in the history of capitalism, the Marxist critique seemingly reflected in Whiteread’s artwork is needed to challenge the reality of global economics threatening the lives and well-being of the vast majority of the population.

**Theoretical Sources**

I approach Whiteread’s work through a Marxist perspective that is used to analyze cultural products in the context of the social world in which they were created. Although this type of critique has almost as many variations as practitioners, there are several characteristics Marxist cultural critiques share across the board. Among these are the understanding that our culture benefits when art is comprehended in the context of “the social, cultural and historical conditions in which it was produced” and that “the categories by which art objects are measured are themselves constructions that need to be evaluated from social, cultural, and historical conditions that gave rise to them.” In the Marxist cultural critique, art can be a site in which a symbolic form of class struggle is played out.

I have crafted my argument using the work of Karl Marx as well as the following scholars whose theories expand on his writings. British literary theorist

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Terry Eagleton’s broad commentary on the value of the Marxist critique in today’s world shows the continued relevance of Marx’s works more than a century after they were written. Australian economist David Eden writes about the ability of capitalism to naturalize aspects of its systems, making us unable to even consider alternatives.

I choose to employ a Marxist critique in order to challenge exploitive aspects of capitalism, not to advocate for revolution. Although Clement Greenberg was a Marxist critic who wrote in the 1940s expressing his confidence that revolution would come, my use of a Marxist critique is not built upon the pretext that this work will lead to revolution, but to bring attention to capitalism’s inherently exploitive nature. I believe, now more than ever as corporations are treated like individuals and governments are beholden to their interests, that this critique is the only one able to expose capitalism’s greed and excess.

As Marx pointed out, nature should be an ally. The capitalist system will not of its own volition diminish its profits to provide for the wellbeing of our planet, its people, plants, animals and natural resources. Without the intervention of government to regulate capital, there will be no stewardship of the planet or advocacy for the health and welfare of its global residents.


Government policy is necessary to provide the taxation of profits to build and maintain infrastructure, provide affordable education and health care and other social systems, as well as legislation to protect our resources. By making visible aspects of life that advanced capitalism benefits from keeping hidden, Whiteread’s work deigns to open a discussion that we have been prevented from initiating.

Because I interpret the renderings of space in Whiteread’s artwork as a physical representation of social ideas and concepts, Marxist analyses of space have been critically important to the formulation of my arguments. American social geographer Edward J. Soja’s work builds on the thinking of French sociologist and philosopher Jacques Lefebvre, who wrote extensively on the theory of everyday life. Soja’s work foregrounds the realm of space, seeing it as always social and political, and creating a dialectic that sees space with importance equal to the temporal and the social. Soja argues that “the human geographies in which we live [have] the same scope and critical significance as the social and historical dimensions of our lives.” Adding two dialectics—the socio-spatial and the spatio-temporal—to Western thought’s traditional focus on the dialectic between history and society is important to the creation of more effective urban theory and practice.

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49 Borch, 113.

50 Soja, “Spatializing” 629.
According to Lefebvre, space is traditionally delineated as “things in space” or perceived space, and “thoughts about space” or conceived space. Lefebvre concluded that neither spatial realm was sufficient to understand the “simultaneously real and imagined” space in which we live. This third space or lived space creates a balanced triple dialectic Soja calls a Thirdspace perspective.51

French economist Thomas Piketty’s book *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* although not a theoretical work, provides broad reaching statistical economic data for the time span bridged by Whiteread’s work. The data gathered by Piketty covers more than two hundred years and documents the myriad of changes in the world economy including the redistribution of wealth, shifting of manufacturing profits and the change in global markets.

My arguments on the implied presence of the body in Whiteread’s work as well as the importance of the sensory body in the knowledge of place are informed by the work of American art historian Lucy R. Lippard, and visual theorist Irit Rogoff, a professor at Goldsmith’s College, University of London. My discussions of the development of a connection to place through the body are dependent upon Rogoff’s concept of the “curious eye,” and Lippard’s writings about the power of connection to place.52 The perspectives put forward by Rogoff and Lippard work to counter capitalist views with the presence of the body and employment of the bodily senses. Rogoff counters the emphasis of our culture on monetary value over exploration and the understanding of the world through employment of the bodily senses. Lippard locates the local and a sense

51 Borch, 113.

of place as instrumental in maintaining a sense of identity in a commercially globalized world.

Lastly, the thought given by American art historian Rosalyn Deutsche to urban redevelopment has helped me to place Whiteread’s work in a context of resistance.53

**Introduction to Main Sections**

I argue that Whiteread’s attention to the embodied experience of particular human individuals in their specific social spaces acts as a counterpoint to capitalism’s insidious dehumanization of ordinary working people, and its tendency to reduce human lives to mere statistics and profits. It is through the bodily senses that Whiteread initially developed a connection to the London neighborhoods and domestic spaces she represents in her art. In the following section, through a close reading of Closet and other early works, I argue that the double presence of the body in her work challenges capitalism’s impersonal commodity exchange and the separation of labor from value. This early work acknowledges the body in two ways, by representing the spaces created for personal use in a scale to the human body, and its intimate relationship to the objects, and through a similarity in appearance to the body.

The knowledge developed by the sensory body creates a connection to the world that counters the simplification inherent to commodity exchange which excludes human contributions or relationships. The view of the world used by Whiteread to create her work is one of exploration without regard to connoisseurship or monetary value, reflecting instead a quest for knowledge and

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understanding. By purposefully endeavoring to render the spaces inside, under, or on top of domestic objects and spaces, Whiteread’s work explores these spaces and their inherent relationships to the body. The presence of the body in Whiteread’s work challenges the devaluation of labor and the body in commodification.

Whiteread’s sculptural solidification of social space results in objects that can be perceived as abstract and representational at the same time. Next, I analyze Ghost to demonstrate the way Whiteread’s work further challenges capitalism by symbolically representing socialized urban space, which Henri Lefebvre calls the site of reproduction for advanced capitalism. In addition, the sphere of Whiteread’s work revisits the social space of labor first rendered by nineteenth century painters in the early modern period.

Despite the enormous contributions of laborers to make Great Britain the global economic leader in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the neighborhoods in which working class people lived and continue to live are subject to destruction and redevelopment. In my final section, I will argue that the solidified space of House brings our attention to the dwellings razed in the name of revitalization or urban renewal, displacing its residents. Whiteread’s intimate knowledge of and connection to her East London neighborhood allows her work to tell a story about generations of ordinary working people.
WITH THE PRESENCE OF THE BODY, WHITEREAD’S CLOSET COUNTERS COMMODIFICATION’S DEHUMANIZING EFFECTS

To bring attention to the lives of ordinary people, Whiteread used cast off post-war objects reminiscent of her childhood, her parents, and her grandparents to create her early artwork. She made casts from mattresses, hot water bottles, and bedroom furniture that reference the body in their scale. In addition, these objects contain the personal charge left behind by the generations of London residents who used them, as well as those who manufactured them.

The layers of human experience over time evoked by these works cannot be described in a few words; in fact, our language in general struggles to express the kinds of concepts about social space to which Whiteread’s work so eloquently draws our attention. These intimate domestic spaces Whiteread renders solid once formed the storage space inside a closet, (the site of a childhood memory) or the space on top of or under a bed or mattress. Closet represents a storage space housing the clothing worn on our bodies, Untitled (Amber Double Bed) (1991) is cast from the top of a mattress, the space of sleep, sexual intimacy, illness, and death (Figure 2).

These intimate spaces represent the comfort and satisfaction of family and domestic life, but also the struggle, sacrifice and pain of the people who have used the items over time. By making a solid presence of these ordinary and unacknowledged spaces, Whiteread’s work brings into view the lives of working people whose contributions are suppressed by the far-reaching effects of the capitalist system.

Through the presence of the body in these spaces, Whiteread brings the sensory experience of family life and the richness of human relationships to the
Figure 2: *Untitled (Amber Double Bed)* (1991) 44” x 36 ½” x 43”
foreground. These simple and elemental aspects of life are ennobled, countering capital’s desire to squelch or ignore the experiences of ordinary lives.

The post-war domestic furniture and personal items selected by Whiteread to create her work were cheaply and readily available in the East End second-hand shops Whiteread scavenged.¹ Originally chosen because of their association with her childhood, these objects also acknowledge the ordinary people of her grandparents’ and parents’ time who were consumers of and contributors of labor to these items.

By solidifying the inner spaces of ordinary objects associated with a particular time and place, Whiteread’s work brings attention to the simple lives of ordinary people and by extension the value of labor. These items were constructed during an economic boom in the mid-twentieth century following World War II. The resultant burgeoning of manufacturing and the effects of collective bargaining to negotiate living wages bettered the lives of working people.² Whiteread’s work tells the stories suppressed by capital to hide its responsibility for labor’s low place within its economic system. The monetary value of an object is based on the contribution of labor, but through the exchange process this contribution disappears as the commodity’s value is established in relationship to other commodities.³ Capital, which refers to the money used to create products or to the holders of this wealth, benefits from hiding the


contribution of labor to production, thus making the unequal division of profits seem natural.

Through Closet’s solidification of a childhood memory, the vitality of the presence of the body in domestic spaces is brought to focus. Although Closet has been characterized as the representation of a negative or frightening experience, Whiteread’s stated aim was to make a childhood memory concrete; her recollection is one of reverie and her sensory experience of the closet. With her ears she tried to make out the sounds of the rest of the house, muffled by the clothing and textiles stored there. Her eyes, dilated by the darkness, were dazzled by rays of light shining through chinks in the doors, while her olfactory senses took in her mother’s scent infused in the fabrics stored there. By following her desire to capture a childhood memory, Whiteread communicates through Closet the experience of the inside of an ordinary wardrobe through the senses of a child.

But while many will linger on the import of a biographical or psychoanalytical interpretation of this event, I aver this presence of the sensory body brings forward an issue of class. The body present in Whiteread’s artwork rendered from ordinary domestic furniture is one of working people. This is inexpensive furniture that in spite of its age had no place in an antique store, and was instead purchased with a struggling artist’s pocketbook from a second hand store in a working class neighborhood. The body this item references is that of

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the worker in the factory that assembled the furniture, and the bodies of those who carried it up several flights of stairs to be housed in a tiny Victorian era bedroom, the body of the woman who used its storage for her family’s clothing, and the average sized body in whose scale it was engineered, as well as the body of the child whose family used the closet and did their best to keep a roof over her head.

The desire to bring attention to the importance of sensory knowledge led visual scholar Irit Rogoff to seek out a counter position to the concept of the so-called “good eye” traditionally associated with artistic connoisseurship. Rogoff’s concept of the “curious eye” is centered in the gathering of knowledge through the bodily senses, in contrast with a discernment of quality linked with monetary value. Associated with a desire for knowledge or comprehension of that not yet understood or articulated, the knowledge gathered through use of the curious eye comes from the viewpoint of one person. Rogoff writes: “Curiosity implies a certain unsettling, a notion of things outside the realm of the known, of things not yet quite understood or articulated, the pleasures of the forbidden or the hidden or the unthought-of, the optimism of finding out something one had not known or been able to conceive of before.”

To my mind, Whiteread’s work is guided by the kind of curiosity about which Rogoff writes, a desire to figure out and understand the unseen spaces inside, under, and on top of the objects she chooses. Because of the complexity of understanding in the making solid of interior spaces, Whiteread finds that even though the execution of the artwork is carefully planned, how it looks when

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completed is still often a surprise. I see Whiteread’s artistic pursuit as one undertaken with a desire to gain an understanding of space rather than to achieve a particular result. Her goal is not necessarily to create work that is beautiful, but for the finished work to answer the questions she posed in its exploration. Her focus on the successful rendering of the spaces betrays her desire to expose them and tell the stories of those using them rather than to create a precious art object. Through the attention Whiteread pays to ordinary, unnoticed, and unremarkable domestic items, the lives of those who use them are brought into view. Through the use of ordinary items as parent objects, Whiteread’s artwork intimates the importance of the lives of all people, not only those celebrated and wealthy.

The response Whiteread’s work makes to the world around her is a purposeful one that values the knowledge of the senses as much as rational thought. In interviews, Whiteread makes known the importance of the body and sensory information in her artwork. Whiteread’s frequent use of the term physiological in the discussion of her artwork acknowledges her sense of the bodily presence. While some critics pursue the work from a psychological perspective, I find the body a countering presence to the dehumanization of capitalist commodification.


9 Ibid.


Whiteread’s choice of language while talking about taking on a project or choosing a site confirms the importance she places on her senses or intuitive responses when saying, “it just felt (or didn’t feel) right.” While the use of this kind of language could be understood as simple idioms of speech, it seems more likely Whiteread’s usage of these terms demonstrates the importance she places on the presence of the body and its guiding sensory knowledge. While the senses are the information gatherers for the intellect, there are other ways to gather information outside of bodily experience. Whiteread values an experience of the world through the senses, rather than through information gathered and disseminated by others, as well as their assignment of value and importance, choosing to use her own instead.

Whiteread appreciates the unrecognized, unrepresented, and ordinary in the objects and spaces she uses. Through sensory knowledge she has developed a relationship with the London neighborhoods where she has lived and worked, especially the East End. Whiteread does not conflate ordinary and unimportant. Through the use of the curious eye, Whiteread’s assessment of place is made in pursuit of a truthful understanding of the everyday places she encounters in opposition to the influence of the wealth based social and political forces that indoctrinate thinking.

The knowledge of a particular place is gathered over time through experience and reliance on the bodily senses for the collection of information. True sensory awareness of a particular place cannot be gained through research,

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13 Kent, 59.
14 Lippard, Lure, 34.
reading or even watching a film. Only one’s own immersion and observance of place can provide its true understanding, each one different from another. The knowledge gathered through the senses creates a basis of expression for artists, used to create works that can be related to and understood by its audience.

A sense of an urban place is gathered through the sensory body relying on visual information as well as the unique sounds, the feel of walking on its surfaces, smells from food, autos, industry, and the presence of animals and plants. Awareness of the quality of light in a place, the stillness or breeziness of the air, and the amount of moisture in it likewise relies upon the bodily senses. While an understanding of the value or importance of a place can be shared by others, even those who have never been there, this is not sensory experience. By sharing the specific knowledge and information gained in this sensory way, others can create an intellectual understanding of the place they can in turn relate to their own sensory experiences. By maintaining this sensory awareness, the human body remains present, even as capitalism does its best to make it invisible and unimportant.

Sourced in the East End, the domestic furniture and personal items Whiteread used to create the artwork in her first exhibition are tied to the London neighborhoods where she grew up. When perceived as a truthful representation of space associated with the lives of ordinary people, Whiteread’s artwork counters our culture’s excessive attention to the wealthy and celebrated. In the creation of Whiteread’s artwork, the straightforward use of ordinary and unacknowledged spaces familiar to her viewers provides acceptance through an agreement with known facts and experience we call the authentic in the sense of
being “able to be relied on; truthful accurate, having the quality of verisimilitude, true to life.”

The installation work of California-based Latina artist Amalia Mesa-Bains similarly draws viewers in through her use of highly personal items and experiences. For example, Mesa-Bains’ installation piece, *The Curandera’s Botanica*, displays aspects of the separate but intersecting worlds of Western medicine and the indigenous Mexican/North American healing arts. A stainless steel lab table is covered with laboratory equipment and medical supplies, juxtaposed by a shelf filled with the plant and animal items, as well as religious accouterments and family photographs associated with the practice of the Mexican curandera. A photograph of Mesa-Bains’ grandmother, who was skilled in the natural and ritual healing of this tradition, watches over the scene, the floor is covered in fragrant stems of therapeutic lavender.

Mesa-Bains tells a very personal and specific story through the presence of family photographs, and items associated with healing, including the catheter she herself used during a hospitalization after a car accident. Even without personal experience of a family healing practitioner, viewers can compare and contrast recollections of their own medical treatment to connect with Mesa-Bains work. While the objects Whiteread uses are not items she has personally used, they are mass produced items similar to those to which she and her family have made a connection. Many viewers who do not share the experience can understand the specific human truths shared by Whiteread and Mesa-Bains artwork gathered through the senses.

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Whiteread’s artworks cast from discarded mattresses and beds are imbued with a profound presence of the human body, both the bodies that once used the mattress, dwelling within the cast space, as well as similarity or resemblance to the body. *Untitled (Amber Double Bed)* (1991) is an orange rubber cast of the top of a mattress. With one end resting against the gallery wall, it slumps onto the floor bending in the middle; its dimpled, and wrinkled flesh-like surfaces call the body to mind. Whiteread has remarked that because they are the sites of intimate daily activities, mattresses are highly personal items; she compares the frequent dumping of mattresses in her neighborhood to “leaving one’s dirty underwear in the street.”

Made from rubber and high-density foam, *Untitled (Amber Double Bed)* is dimpled in a soft grid that has been picked up by casting the sagging surface of the mattress padding under the fabric covering of the original bed. Small pointed projections poke out from the surface of the artwork in a dozen alternating rows of three and four, created by the buttons that pulled together the layers of padding and the fabric cover of the original mattress. A raised lip along the edge of the front of *Untitled (Amber Double Bed)* mirrors in reverse the indentation along the inside of the binding along the edge of the mattress.

While the top of the artwork communicates the textured surface of the mattress in reverse, the smooth side edges of *Untitled (Amber Double Bed)* do not contribute any information about its parent object. Whiteread used a dam to contain the rubber for casting making the smooth side edge of the artwork. Pieces like this one flop on the floor, or sag against the wall and floor; the surface

16 Mullins, 9.
17 Burton, 156.
of its bending place resembles the bunching of flesh at the waist of a bending human body.

Made from urban detritus and glowing with color, pieces like *Untitled (Amber Double Bed)* are beautiful while they also confront viewers with disquieting issues. Whiteread’s rubber casts from beds and mattresses communicate the body in two ways, visually through its dimpling flesh and slumping repose, and conceptually because they solidify the space where the body once dwelled. Through its intimate personal use of the mattresses and resemblance to the nude body, these works take us out of our comfort zone, like seeing homeless people sleeping out in the cold, or making eye contact with a panhandler.

These pieces tap into the discomfort many people feel in our society when confronted with those less fortunate, less privileged, or temporarily suffering hard times. There may be many causes for this discomfort: guilt or shame for not providing assistance to those who are struggling; a feeling of responsibility; ‘there but by the grace of God go I,’ though our current circumstances reliant upon the grace of God are currently keeping us from this fate, it could change at any time; or a superiority resulting in disgust and blame for the condition, or disdain for those who won’t improve their lives. By acknowledging this discomfort, we can begin to question the forces of capitalism that implicitly blame the poor for their own failure to succeed.

By making the ordinary spaces of everyday life into objects that draw our attention, our society’s focus on the wealthy and their implied superiority is countered. Recognition of the importance of the lives of ordinary people is a concept that has the ability to erode the power of the wealthy few who rig the system in their favor. Through their influence on the passage of legislation and
the implementation of government policy, wealthy individuals and corporate entities increase their wealth while they also dismantle protective social systems and increase the burden on all working people. The viewer’s consideration of the ordinary lives manifest in Whiteread’s work can lead to change that can begin to address this great imbalance of wealth.

During the Great Depression, the photographic images captured by Dorothea Lange of homeless migrant families in the United States helped to educate the public on the economic effects of the Depression.\(^\text{18}\) The work of Lange and other artists brought attention to the plight of these families,\(^\text{19}\) helping to enact Roosevelt’s New Deal legislation such as the Social Security Act, along with The Works Progress Act and the Civilian Conservation Core, was enacted in 1933 to protect the most needy and to provide much needed jobs.\(^\text{20}\)

While Whiteread’s work does not render a portrait of specific people like the photographic work of Lange, both artists draw attention to the lives of ordinary people. Working and poor people struggling to get by in a world where their earnings have the capacity to buy less and less as wages stay stagnant and the cost of living increases.

I have explained the intimate presence of the body in Whiteread’s early artworks through their domestic usage; they bear a second bodily presence, one of labor. The furniture and domestic items Whiteread used to make these pieces were manufactured in the post war years, and purchased by families like her


\(^{19}\) Lippard, *Lure* 85.

own. The presence of the body of labor becomes separated from the commodity object as a tool of capital to diminish labor’s share of the profits. By creating artwork from these manufactured items, Whiteread returns the presence of the body removed by capital.

The economic system of capitalism hinges upon the commodity; it is the single elementary form of capitalist wealth. In commodity theory, the labor contributed to the making of a commodity loses its individual nature and becomes a “congealed mass of undifferentiated labor”. The abstraction of labor is the abstraction of the laborer from their sensuous capacities, the split between the labor-power on one side and capital on the other. According to Marx, the commodity fetish is a magical creation of the human imagination that becomes a natural-seeming quality of the thing that has become a commodity. Marx uses the example of a table, which changes from a wooden object into a thing transcending its own sensuousness once it emerges as a commodity.

The commodity loses its sensuous qualities when it becomes an object of trade. Transformed into a dress, the cotton plant’s staple fibers spun and woven into fabric no longer exist, and the labor that contributed to its creation also disappears into the dress; we see only “dress,” a commercial product, not something made of fabric or the labor needed to make it. By making labor invisible, capitalism succeeds in excluding its contributors from an equitable distribution of profit. The magnitude of labor necessary to create a commercially


sold dress includes that of many more workers than those in the retail clothing business. The contribution of labor includes that of the farmer and farmhands who tended, grew, and harvested the fibers, as well as those who produced the pesticides and farm equipment used in the farming process.

The labor of the truck drivers who transported the fiber to the mill, the fabric to the factory, and the dress to be distributed has become invisible. Also unseen is the labor of those who processed the fiber, spinning the thread, weaving and dyeing the fabric designed by a textile designer. Nor do we see the labor of those who worked with the fabric that was selected by a clothing designer who designed the dress, a patternmaker who crafted the pattern, a cutter who cut out the pattern pieces, and a stitcher who sewed them together.

Many more workers, in addition to those I have already enumerated, have contributed labor to create the finished dress. In Marx’s theory of the commodity, these contributors become detached from the value of the dress. The individual nature of their contributions becomes a congealed mass of undifferentiated labor as the human labor needed to create a commodity becomes abstracted.24

Capitalism by its nature does not value people; neither the relationships of those involved in the exchange of commodities, nor those contributing labor. Commodity value is calculated in its relationship to other commodities, such as $1x = 3y$, or one table = 3 dresses.25 Compounding the exclusivity of an object-based value system is the disappearance of the contribution of human labor to the value of commodity. This object-based exchange guiding our economy’s system of value eliminates the importance of human lives. By making present the

24 Marx, “Phenomenology,” 93.

bodies of ordinary people, Closet counters capital’s suppression of both the body of labor and its consumers. The body in Whiteread’s work counters the dehumanizing system that values profit over human lives as well as natural resources and the environment.

The anonymous yet very specific stories told by Whiteread’s work are the product of her sensory knowledge of London’s neighborhoods. Closet represents not only Whiteread’s childhood memory, but also the stories of those who have manufactured and used furniture like its twentieth century post-war parent object. During the years after World War II, manufacturing was at its highest level of production since the beginning of the industrial age.26 The inundation of products that entered the consumer market were purchased by the workers who contributed to this boom. For the first time in the history of capitalism, wealth was loosened from its concentration with the few to be shared with the many.27

The wardrobe Whiteread used to make Closet was selected for its ordinary qualities; it was not a finely crafted piece of furniture made from precious materials. Because new housing in the mid-twentieth century was made with built-in closets, freestanding wardrobes continued to be used in older, urban if not inner city homes like those in which Whiteread grew up. Because it stands on its own, Whiteread considered Closet her first successful sculpture. It calls to mind the body in its vertical thrust, occupying space in the same orientation as traditional figurative sculpture.

Wardrobes were made for personal use and sized for the average person; the height and depth were calculated based on the average arm’s reach and the

26 Piketty, 59.
27 Ibid., 107.
size of its interior storage spaces accommodated average-sized clothing. The edges of the wooden shelves embedded in the plaster and uncovered by felt on the right side of Closet make apparent the presence of shelves used to store folded items, while garments could hang from a bar at the top of the main section.

The presence of the wooden shelves provides a view of the inside of a wardrobe, what one would find when opening the doors; but the front surface of Closet also has information about the wardrobe’s doors. Four raised rectangles are present on the surface, two smaller ones above and larger ones below were formed by the raised bracing along the edges of the cabinet doors, and across horizontally where the doors latched. Because Closet represents the interior space of the closet, we have no idea how the external surfaces of the actual doors looked, whether they were flat and smooth or with some decorative or structural additions.

For the viewer, the reception of Closet shifts between the wardrobe’s interior space and wardrobe’s doors as the viewpoint alternates between facing the closet’s interior, and facing the inside of the doors. The shift in perspective is characteristic of Whiteread’s work and provides the ability to shift into an understanding and acknowledgement of space that forms the basis of my interpretation of her work. This shift in perspective can be disorienting as we consider the notion that space is everywhere, and your own presence is occupying it right now.

In Whiteread’s work, the knowledge of space that is gathered through the presence of the body as well as the solidification of spaces associated with the body challenges the simplification of the commodity exchange to a dehumanized one with its value based on objects. Further, the presence of the body and its
inherent sensuality expressed in the spaces of Whiteread’s work counters the elimination of the sensual nature of commodity objects. By challenging the simplification of value that makes invisible the contribution of labor, Whiteread’s work makes present the spaces occupied and used by London’s workers.

In much the same way that the wardrobes and mattresses found their way to dumpster bins and second hand stores, the presence of labor has been cast off from commodity objects. Whiteread’s early work communicates the presence of the lives of ordinary people, and by calling attention to them asserts their importance. In spite of capital’s desire to make these lives invisible, Whiteread’s work expresses the importance of the human experience inherent in these ordinary objects.
THE URBAN SOCIAL SPACE OF GHOST AND THE REPRODUCTION OF CAPITALIST SOCIETY

Ghost (1990) expands the complexity and technical acumen of Whiteread’s early exploration of space (Figure 3). While Closet and Untitled (Amber Double Bed) focused attention on the presence of the body through their scale and the personal usage of their parent objects, Ghost references the body in the context of an entire room. By making solid a Victorian era sitting room, Ghost brings its viewers’ attention to the social and architectural scale. Ghost’s representation of the interior of a room transforms space into a tangible physical object. I interpret it as a representation of the urbanized social space Lefebvre calls the site of reproduction of the capitalist mode of production.

Cast from the living room of a modest Victorian terrace house, Ghost was created for an exhibition at the Chisenholm Gallery in Bethnal Green, East London, for which the gallery did no provide funding. Because of the success she enjoyed from her first exhibition, Whiteread applied for and was awarded two grants that allowed her to complete the construction of the project.¹

In spite of its ghoulish title, Ghost is a straightforward recreation of domestic interior space, a hollow cast in cool matte plaster, made of the sitting room in a Victorian era terrace house.² Visible cracks between the cast sections create a grid on the surfaces, beckoning some viewers to try to peer between the


² Narrow but tall, terrace houses are two to three stories tall with small rooms on each floor, plus a basement and attic. Built on small lots, the houses share common walls between them with windows only on the front and back. Yaffa Claire Draznin, Victorian London’s Middle-Class Housewife: What She Did All Day, (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2000): 27.
Figure 3: *Ghost* (1990) 106” x 140” x 125”
(Source: https://theartstack.com/artist/rachel-whiteread/ghost-1990?product_referrer_user_id=429921853)
sections. The location of the house in North London, not far from and sharing the same scale as her childhood home in Muswell Hill, was an important consideration in the selection of the casting site. Whiteread describes herself as not coming from a wealthy family; her selection of buildings with a feeling of familiarity promises that her work does not tell a story of privilege.

Observing Ghost, viewers undergo a process of disorientation and reorientation before registering the comprehension that the space inside a room has become an object. While the four walls of Ghost are impressed with the details of the room: light switches, baseboards, cornices, moldings, fireplace, doorways, and window frames, they are all reversed. The artwork bears the signs of wear including the nicks and scarring withstood by the room over time as well as the traces of dirt, bits of wallpaper, and fireplace smoke picked up during the casting process and embedded in the artwork’s surfaces.

In order to cast such a large space, Whiteread built a containing structure that divided the space into sections which she could cast individually. Using the fireplace as a starting point, Whiteread decided where the divisions should be made by referring to the proportions of the golden mean used in the paintings of Piero della Francesco. Working alone, Whiteread spread the plaster in each section of the structure, and when each piece of the cast was dry she carried them one by one back to her studio. In this manner, Whiteread cast all of the vertical

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3 Mullins, 24.

4 486 Archway Road, North London.

5 Mullins, 23.

surfaces of the room, which were then assembled on a metal frame with small cracks between them. The ceiling and floor were not cast.\(^7\)

The viewer’s initial difficulty in placing the turned around surface of *Ghost* in context reflects our inability to think about space. This difficulty is often expressed by those who write about Whiteread’s work in terms of the loss of the parent object. While we might be comfortable with the concept of the space solidified in *Closet* because of our experience with the use of the storage space inside closets and cupboards, we are challenged in our ability to fathom the types of spaces in which we live.

Because scholars have favored the social and historical points of view over the geographical or spatial, there is a deficit in our ability to understand and express these ideas. An unbalanced view of life is created by placing more importance on its social and historical aspects over the spatial, instead of valuing them equally.\(^8\) But the lack of attention to spatial concerns is not an accident of the academy: capital benefits from making the spaces of ordinary people invisible. *Ghost’s* solidified space represents the truths about our economic system that capital would like to remain hidden. For one hundred fifty years, writes social geographer Edward J. Soja, the reproduction of capitalist society has not taken into consideration the spatiality of life.\(^9\) Soja argues that “the human geographies in which we live [have] the same scope and critical significance as the social and historical dimensions of our lives.”\(^10\) Adding two dialectics—the

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\(^7\) Mullins, 23.


\(^10\) Borch, 113.
socio-spatial and the spatio-temporal, to Western thought’s traditional focus on the dialectic between history and society is important to the creation of more effective urban theory and practice.\(^\text{11}\)

Soja points out our cultural inability to see how the consideration of space is connected to human action and motivation. While we freely link the social, political, economic and historical aspects of life as being guided or changed by human action, the spatial is perceived as external to social context and action. He writes: “Spatial evokes the image of something physical and external to the social context and to social action, a part of the environment, a context \textit{for} society—its container—rather than a structure created by society.”\(^\text{12}\)

An inability to understand the concept of space has made Whiteread’s work confounding to some who have written about it. Viewers provided with the knowledge \textit{Ghost} was cast from a sitting room seek something familiar and are instead confronted by a mysterious presence and a feeling of loss for the original object. Because \textit{Ghost} represents domestic space that is always unseen and mostly unfathomed, it can be seen as either abstract and non-representational or representational object. While I understand \textit{Ghost} as a representational work—a solidification of the dwelling space inside an urban house, others cannot comprehend space as a tangible entity and see it as an abstract art object.

These viewers may interpret \textit{Ghost} as an abstract sculpture like those of the American minimalist artists Whiteread admired as a student. But in contrast, a different understanding can be gained through careful looking. Once the

\(^{11}\) Soja “Spatializing,” 629.

viewer’s perspective shifts to the understanding of this hollow block of plaster as a representation of the once inhabited space of a room in a home, the mind shifts through time and generations beginning with the house’s first resident in what was then a London suburb, and on through the decades. This shift in perspective brings with it the view of Ghost as a positive incarnation associated with ordinary people instead of “negative” space.

The domestic architecture from which Ghost was cast was built during the Victorian era.\textsuperscript{13} This era marked a historic turning point in the development of capitalism. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the United Kingdom was the global economic leader. While profits soared, wage inequality was high; workers endured the squalid living conditions that inspired Marx, then exiled in London, to write about the excesses of capitalism. Despite a boom of wage equality in the post-war years, by the late twentieth century when Whiteread began her career as an artist, the rate of wage inequality exceeded that which caused nineteenth century squalor.\textsuperscript{14}

In the same era, artists in France used their work to critique the effects of growing industrialization on working people. With their realistic paintings, nineteenth-century painters challenged the exploitation of working people as the industrial age loomed. Gustave Courbet’s \textit{The Stonebreakers} (1849), for example, documents the hard labor of road workers away from home. \textit{The Gleaners} (1857), by Jean-Francois Millet illustrates the hardscrabble desperation of women on

\textsuperscript{13} Queen Victoria reigned June 20, 1837- January 22 1901

their hands and knees gleaning for their own use the wheat left behind from the harvest.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Ghost} addresses the unequal power relations between workers and capitalists from the nineteenth century to the present. By bringing attention to urban domestic space, \textit{Ghost} similarly comments on the lives of generations of working people like the residents of the house Whiteread used from the time it was constructed in Victorian London, until it was razed to make room for another Esso station. A straightforward cast reproduction of the sitting room; Whiteread makes solid and tangible this important yet unvalued urban domestic space.

Instead of understanding space as either a geographical place that can be mapped, or a space that can be thought about or imagined, by adding the third viewpoint, this space can be considered both real lived space and imagined space. The imagined qualities of these spaces are an important part of the dominant relations of advanced capitalism.

According to Lefebvre, the reproduction of capitalism takes place in concretized and produced urbanized space, not in society as a whole.\textsuperscript{16} Writes Soja, “through bureaucratically controlled consumption, the differentiation of centers and peripheries, and the penetration of the state into daily life, the distinctive occupation and production of space is the site of capitalism’s


\textsuperscript{16} Soja “Socio-Spatial,” 214.
survival.” I submit my argument that the tiny living room preserved in Ghost, a space that housed generations of working Londoners over a hundred years, symbolizes the urban social space responsible for reproducing the economic system of capitalism.

When artists dare to shine a light on the injustices that capitalism tries to deny, their artwork may be rejected or censored. In 1971, German-American artist Hans Haacke’s exhibition at New York’s Guggenheim Museum was canceled six weeks before its opening, and its curator dismissed. By sharing Haacke’s careful documentation and photographs, Shapolsky et al; Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real-Time Social System (1971) exposed the exploitive and discriminatory dealings of absentee landlords in New York City without comment. Lippard has noted that “…the Guggenheim apparently shared an intense class-identification” with Mr. Shapolsky and the other absentee landlords identified in Haacke’s work. In its future exhibitions, Haacke’s work made a powerful statement not only on the real estate business but museum censorship as well.

While Haacke’s work was censored, Ghost, part of the collection of the Hirschhorn Gallery in Washington DC succeeds in making its critique. Capital seeks to deny the existence of class and difference; Ghost brings to the foreground

17 Ibid., 215.


the invisible lives of working people separated from the profit-creating product of their labor. While Haacke’s *Shapolsky et al…* was censored for its disclosure of well-connected and wealthy perpetrators of capitalist greed, *Ghost* exposes the exploitive qualities of capitalism itself. This system that has become so entrenched we cannot see it has made its exploitive characteristics seem so natural, we are unable to acknowledge alternatives.20 Because advanced capitalism is reproduced in urbanized space instead of in society as a whole, *Ghost* provides a symbolic representation of this function in maintaining an economic system dependent on upon these urban sites and the people who dwell there.

Whiteread’s sculptural works continue a progression in modern *painting’s* depiction of social space by creating a realistic representation of space associated with the lives of working people. During the twentieth century avant-garde painting was less and less interested in depicting the spaces that define class as artists homed in on their subjects. Social spaces tightened as the illusion of three-dimensional space also diminished; painters became obsessed with medium and the surface of the picture plane. For example, cubist artists focused on the application of paint and other materials, flattening and abstracting their subject matter, while in the postwar years, Abstract Expressionists maintained a depiction of shallow space beyond the surface of the canvas. Social space had disappeared entirely, as if the painter’s viewfinder lens were placed directly on the object itself.

Whiteread’s three-dimensional rendering of space made solid continues modernism’s progression of flatness in painting by rendering the space inside the object. Whiteread, trained as a painter, places her viewfinder on the imagined surface of the room’s interior space at its intersection with the wall, and then penetrates its surface. Instead of painting an illusion of three dimensions, Whiteread transforms this space of ordinary people into an object. Like that of Courbet and Millet, Whiteread’s work returns to a depiction of social space. Ghost bears the architectural details of the room that once contained this solidified space, but also traces of the lives spent here. The aforementioned bits of dirt, grime, and smoke clinging to its surface are evidence of the lives spent within these four walls. Encapsulating its own history of moments experienced over time, from the Victorian period to the present, Whiteread creates an avenue into the examination and understanding of social space.

These old and antiquated spaces continue to be defined by gender, as women are still identified with the domestic realm. Even married women whose husbands provided them with a comfortable home were invisible within these spaces, spending lives with little historical documentation in rooms like the one where Ghost was made. Caring for a family in the vertically oriented terrace houses typical of the Victorian era was very physically laborious with a lot of stair climbing. When these homes were built, cold water only was piped in to the basement floor, requiring heating and carrying upstairs.21

Many women did not have the stability of a regular breadwinner to provide them with access to this unpaid domestic labor. Because many of the

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men on whom they were dependent worked seasonally on the docks and in other industries, it could be difficult for many women to keep a roof over their heads. Men employed in manual labor often had short working lives, barely working into their fifties, when their women often had to become the main provider of income.\textsuperscript{22}

The lives of working people are made invisible to facilitate capital’s claim of an unfair share of profits, but women are more invisible because they often did not have public interactions leaving behind records. Omitted historically, women also bear the brunt of wage inequality compared to men because they continue to have less earning power. Whiteread’s artwork seeks to counter the diminished importance or value conferred by our society upon those living in the domestic spaces like the one rendered into artwork in \textit{Ghost}.

This ungainly cube bearing the details of an outmoded style of architecture is plunked down within the minimalist architectural space in a gallery of contemporary art. \textit{Ghost} places on view an object never before seen in this milieu. Representative of something each of us know, yet have never seen, \textit{Ghost} beckons an association with minimalist artwork. Dwarfed in this setting, viewers contemplate the size of the spaces in which we dwell; our imagined perception of the interior of our own four walls as home is confronted by the reality of this kind of space.

With his assertion that the spatial should be given priority equal to the social and temporal, Soja argues that geography shaped class as much as class shaped geography.\textsuperscript{23} The urban spaces Whiteread’s work calls to mind were


\textsuperscript{23} Borch, 113, 116.
engineered by the politically and economically dominant. The imbalance between the size and grandeur of the homes of the wealthy, and the tiny, inadequate, and aging domiciles of the poor is not an accident, but the result of zoning, legislation and other decisions that have limited the ability of the poor to change their circumstances. Although the concepts elicited by Whiteread’s work challenge the economic domination of those upon whom galleries and museums rely, her work is still displayed within this system and lauded by every type of institutional honor to be bestowed.

Whiteread’s work is not taken as an attack because of the deep denial entrenched in our way of thinking. The status quo is perceived as natural, the presence of the tiny and antiquated domestic space in the museum is not taken as a challenge to the machinations of capitalism. *Ghost*’s symbolic representation of the location of capitalism’s reproduction, can be understood by those few who choose to entertain a socialist point of view. Although the Marxist critique is a productive way to challenge the abuses of the capitalist system, many shy from making the association. The entrenched values of art institutions override the subtle reference made by Whiteread’s work, only to be taken in when working people begin to advocate for the change that benefits their lives.
House (1993) (Figure 4) extends Whiteread’s exploration of architectural social space to the context of the street and neighborhood. Closet explored social space and its relationship to the body in relation to personal domestic space, which then expanded into urbanized space with Ghost. House solidifies the interior space of an entire terrace house in what had been a long time working class East End neighborhood, threatened by demolition in the name of “urban renewal.” The solidified space inside this demolished house evokes the bodily experience of generations of inhabitants, exposing to view what was once private. No longer enclosed by its protective exterior walls, a tale of uncelebrated working people is revealed along with their unrecognized contributions to the economic success of a nation, and their unceremonious displacement.

House was a temporary, site-specific work located in an area of redevelopment in Bow, Hackney East London, one of the oldest parts of London. Cast from a terrace house, tall but narrow, its side view reveals that the house had several small rooms on each floor, many of them with their own tiny fireplaces. From the front, the size and shape of House and its orientation facing the sidewalk and street invite its identification as a residence. A front door and windows further reinforce the idea until, upon closer look, the viewer must confront a perplexity: this is not a sculpture representing a house’s exterior – what should be concave is convex and vice versa.

Details are missing from the house’s exterior; those familiar with the original structure must have been shocked by the difference in appearance House presented from its parent object. The brick texture was replaced by the smooth walls of the interior; the brick cornices on the top of the windows, the archway
Figure 4: *House* (1993)
(Source: http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/1993/house/installation/the_installation_image_)
sheltering the front door, and hand railing beside the stairs leading to the front
door are all missing. Because the attic wasn’t cast, the roof and its chimneys are
also gone, the upper edge is at the top of the windows. Keeping the tall but
narrow proportion intact, soil was moved away from partially covering the
bottom floor of the building, compensating for the height lost at the top. House
was created in a months-long process, funded by an arts organization and
sponsors. After working alone on Closet and Ghost, assistants and volunteers
joined Whiteread in the working process and suppliers and experts contributed
to her technical decision-making. House was completed on October 25, 1993,
several months later than planned, and was demolished on January 11, 1994.1

Whiteread familiarized herself with the idiosyncrasies of the house’s
interior through its documentation by photographing the interior and having
videographers do the same. Each room had different wallpaper, some more than
one. The antiquated technology of the house was apparent; some of the fireplaces
were blocked off and no longer functioning. Each room had its own combination
of wallpaper and floor coverings. The view unique to the vantage point from a
window at the back of the house—soon to be blocked by concrete—was
recorded, the open space of the grassy park, clothes blowing on an abandoned
clothes line. Whiteread’s knowledge of the house’s interior contributes to House’s
power to communicate the story of its residents since the Victorian era.2

A lattice of steel rods covered the floors and extended up the walls several
feet before concrete was poured, creating a foundation for the new structure.
More of these grids were placed on the walls and reinforced concrete was

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sprayed on the interior side of all of the house’s exterior walls. Left embedded in the concrete like the shelves left inside Closet were the stairways, floors, ceilings, and the interior walls of the home. After the concrete cured and dried, the exterior of the house was carefully torn away, revealing its once private interior spaces now solidified.

As with Ghost, the selection of a site with which she was very familiar was an important consideration; for a period of time, Whiteread had cycled daily past the house on Grove Road on her way to work in her studio. Through the use of familiar sites, Whiteread has knowledge of the story the finished work will tell. House, like the earlier Ghost, evokes both the past and present of working London families without privilege, like her own. The fact that Whiteread has not cast domestic spaces outside of London demonstrates the importance of this personal knowledge of the space. During her eighteen-month residency in Berlin, the only sculpture Whiteread produced was Untitled (Room) (1993) not from an existing structure like Ghost, but from a room-like mold she created.

Through her exploration of familiar spaces and cultivation of a sense of place, Whiteread has developed the social and cultural tools Lucy R. Lippard finds invaluable in the ability to connect and respond critically to social conditions that may appear natural (and thus invisible) in our own culture. For Lippard, a sense of immersion in place is rare today, requiring historical

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4 Mullins, 150.
5 Ibid., 52.
6 Mullins, 48.
research, contact with oral tradition, and knowledge of local culture. The personal view of a place known over the years resonates with stories and connections. Whiteread’s longtime connection to and interest in the people and architecture of the East End display the kind of knowledge and experience Lippard describes.

East London, where Whiteread lives and works, has a history of industry and working people, going back to the Roman Empire. In the early seventh century, the invading Saxons rejected the structures of the Romano-Britons they conquered and built outside the walls to the west of the old waterfront city. As the city grew to the west, the old East End continued to house the so-called “dirty trades”: butchers, slaughterhouses, and tanneries, along with the city’s poorest inhabitants. The nearby docks provided seasonal and fluctuating employment, and the garment or “rag trade” was also centered here.

The story told by House is tied to the history of its East London neighborhood. The East End provided the industry and labor largely responsible for the United Kingdom’s economic success in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Great Britain was the world’s biggest economy and the labor and technology of its cities provided this success. In spite of the high profits creating this booming economy, wage inequality was high as profits generated by labor were held in the top ten percent of the population. Many workers lived in squalor, cut out of an equitable share of the profits generated by their labor.

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9 Ibid., 77, 84.

Whiteread’s interest in this area and desire to make it her home demonstrates her alignment with the travails of working people, Whiteread told Craig Houser, “The neighborhoods around here – Hackney and Tower Hamlets – may feel a bit derelict and alien to some, but for me they are my sketchbook. What makes the area wonderful is that it reflects a great cross section of London – a big bowl of world soup. There’s a large Asian community, a Jewish community, an Afro-Caribbean community and something of a Turkish and Serbian community. I find it a rich and vital place that’s really full of history.”

The East End has been home to many waves of immigrants; the Irish were historically the largest group, maintaining for centuries a continual migration to London looking for work. Religious wars in the late sixteenth-century had brought French Huguenots, who were completely assimilated by the time Jews from Russia and Poland (the second largest group) began to arrive in the nineteenth-century. Immigrants from Germany and the Netherlands as well as from Eastern Europe, China, Italy, Portugal, Africa and India joined them. In spite of London’s high cost of living, a steady stream of immigration continues today as young people arrive from across the economically strapped European continent looking for any kind of work.

Immigrants joined an established community of London born “Cockneys” in the East End. A traditional construction coming from outside the East End


12 Gray, 68, 72, 83.


14 Gray, 85.
defines Cockneys as amiable and patriotic, with a fondness for drink and music halls as well as a mistrust of authority.\textsuperscript{15} It is interesting to note that this long-standing description of Cockney people, dating back to the nineteenth-century is the same used to describe many providers of labor oppressed by a dominant Western culture.

The East End’s neighborhoods, continually changing through immigration and assimilation provided the adaptability necessary for economic growth. British economist Jane Jacobs determined which characteristics are needed by cities to generate commercial success in her study of two English cities. Jacobs compared Birmingham and Manchester, both thriving cities at the beginning of the industrial age. The ability to prosper relied on the ability of businesses to quickly adapt to changes in the market, responding to failing industries with a turnover of new businesses able to serve changing needs.\textsuperscript{16} Birmingham possessed the chaotic growth and ability to change that fostered its continued economic growth, while Manchester’s economy floundered. Like Birmingham, London’s East End was able to adapt to changing industrial needs, never static with the arrival of ever changing immigrants eager to find work.

Through consumption and the provision of labor power, cities reproduce capitalism.\textsuperscript{17} Rather than being a product of a successful national economy as is often believed, a prospering city is actually \textit{the source} of a nation’s economic success.\textsuperscript{18} With a share of global output two to three times greater than its share

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15}Gray, 85.
\item \textsuperscript{18}Jacobs, 89.
\end{itemize}
of the population,\textsuperscript{19} London was the fastest growing urban economy in England in the second half of the nineteenth century, becoming the world’s largest city in 1875.\textsuperscript{20} The economic dominance of Great Britain continued well into the twentieth century.

While it built the economy of the entire nation, the East End’s frenzied growth and change profoundly affected its residents. Some workers attained the economic mobility allowing them to move out to London’s suburbs that expanded outward from the city center in a series of waves. Those who could moved into better housing with improved provision of illumination, water and heat responding to rapidly changing technology; the frequent turnover of tenants facilitated by the fact that most housing was leased to, not purchased by its occupants.\textsuperscript{21}

Although some workers were able to adapt and prosper in the changing labor market, many members of the working class were unable to get ahead. In spite of the establishment of trade unions challenging low wages and poor working conditions,\textsuperscript{22} some East End workers were characterized as “passive victims of the dynamic progress of the Victorian age—they were left behind to become a burden to the rest of society.”\textsuperscript{23}

The relentless growth and consumption of capitalism continued through most of the twentieth century. From 1900-1980, Europe and the United States

\textsuperscript{19} Piketty, 61.
\textsuperscript{20} Draznin, 15.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 28, 29.
\textsuperscript{22} Gray, 63.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 88.
dominated the rest of the world with a concentration of seventy to eighty percent of the global production of goods and services. By the time *House* was made in 1993, Great Britain was adjusting as its capital shifted to a consumer and service-based economy, with manufacturing sourced outside of the wealthier countries. By 2010, the European/American share of global production declined to about fifty percent, about the same level as before industrialization.  

When their role as a provider of labor power to capital is no longer needed, the function of urban neighborhoods shifts, becoming a site of commodification. For a couple of hundred years, the annual return from real estate investments in developed Western countries has remained steady at four to five percent. By increasing the value of real estate property through redevelopment, annual profits are increased handily. *House* emblemizes that which is lost in this profit seeking process. By whatever name: gentrification, urban development/revitalization destroys neighborhoods and extant housing to create new high profit yielding developments. Art historian Rosalyn Deutsche has written about the effects of urban renewal on neighborhoods in 1980s New York City. According to Deutsche, the existence of the displaced residents of targeted neighborhoods is concealed in these projects which claim to improve the city. These neighborhoods are typically home to poor and working people including students and the elderly; women are disproportionately affected.

Standing alone in what had once been a vital block of homes, *House* exposes a just a tiny sliver of the domestic spaces that have been destroyed for

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24 Piketty, 59.


26 Piketty, 53.
the benefit of capital. The process of replacing old neighborhoods with new developments is a tool to reshape the nation’s workforce. “Coupled with the loss of blue-collar jobs and cuts in basic services, [gentrification] has helped impoverish and disperse the traditional, now largely redundant workforce, and has allocated urban resources to fulfill the needs of the city’s corporate workers.”

*House* represents the homes, their residents, and neighborhoods lost through gentrification. Part of a large redevelopment project that included the aquatic center for the 2012 Olympics, the homes on Grove Road were razed to increase the area’s green space with an extension of Mile End Park, ostensibly to improve its residents’ quality of life. Though the redevelopment process is promoted as a “heroic act,” as Deutsche writes, “revitalization” denies the vitality of existing neighborhoods and the lives of its residents.

But by promising to create better and safer neighborhoods, and the amelioration of urban blight, the true social origins of the urban redevelopment process are repressed. Urban renewal benefits politicians, corporations, real estate developers, landlords and the upper middle class. No attempt is made to solve problems of drug use, crime and homelessness, which are only relocated to nearby areas. In addition, the displacement of long-term residents contributes to the homeless population in the long term.

While Whiteread found inspiration in the East End’s history of working people, and its diverse racial, ethnic, and economic make up, she was

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27 Deutsche, 16.
28 Ibid., 13.
29 Ibid., 20.
unprepared for the conflicted response of the popular press to *House*. While *House* was well received by critics and members of the art world, because it drew attention to the legal fight waged by the house’s former owner, it fomented conflict between long-term neighborhood residents and recent immigrants. Tower Hamlets had long been known as a white enclave, and racial based conflicts between the white “native born” and recent and long-standing immigrants were exacerbated. The local government purported to defend the desires of the working class community (some of whom felt this work of modern art had been thrust upon them) by refusing to make an extension of its presence beyond its originally agreed upon date, but the brief existence of *House* had already made its statement.

Concealing the lives of its displaced residents, capital commodifies neighborhoods no longer needed to provide labor power, steamrolling them to make way for new more profitable developments. By making visible the space inside an East London house destroyed to make way for more profitable new developments, *House* draws attention to the housing lost through the redevelopment of our cities. In spite of the long history of the contribution of East End labor to the success of its nation, those who through no fault of their own are no longer an essential part of capitalism’s machine are made invisible and displaced. Whiteread in her earnest way refuses to be a party to limiting our view of the world to that of the powerful and its class-motivated process of erasure.

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CONCLUSION

My first exposure to Whiteread’s work, a video about House, resulted in a new comprehension of the spaces I myself occupy. I felt compelled to talk with others about the shift in orientation I experienced looking at her work, which led to a new appreciation of spatial concepts. Because Whiteread’s work so clearly expresses to me a rendering of space, I was surprised by the inability (or refusal) of writers to make this leap of understanding. These aren’t just blocky, chalky abstract cubes; they are unmistakably representative of the spaces associated with their parent objects or architecture and their users and occupants.

The importance Whiteread has placed on the use of familiar domestic architectural sites is an important clue to understanding the meaning of her artwork. Although Whiteread prefers to limit the information she provides about her work, allowing viewers to make their own interpretation, it is clear that social issues are a part of her exploration of space. She knows that the space she chooses to cast will impart a story in her finished artwork, and it is important that she knows what the story is. During the time she lived in Berlin shortly after Ghost was completed, Whiteread did not cast personalized domestic sites. Instead, Untitled (Room) (1993) was cast from a mold of a generic room she created. This truly stoic room, lacking the characteristics that define an interior space in relation to a specific time and place; it was a generic, lifeless room.

Whiteread has spoken little about the meaning of her works; it is my understanding that she prefers to let the viewer be open to consider their own interpretations. I felt my interpretation of Whiteread’s work, as a rendering of social space and way to expose capitalism’s continued exploitation of working people, was my own. While writing these pages, it has become clear that Whiteread is very aware of the content of her work. Through her selection of
sites, residence in the East End and egalitarian comments in interviews, her social awareness is clear.

As Soja points out, the historical and social are prioritized over the spatial in the study of economics, politics and other systems. The exclusion of space is consistent with the way capital hides that which challenges its stronghold on economics and indeed all of Western culture. Because Whiteread’s work solidifies space, she has continually provided the opportunity to view these repressed aspects of capitalism. The body of labor that disappears from the commodity, the homes and lives of those displaced by urban redevelopment, and the very seat of capitalist reproduction situated in the spaces of those it exploits are the topics that interest Whiteread.
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