

A House Divided

Rachel Whiteread's *House* was never intended to last. A concrete cast of the inside of a Victorian terraced house, it was built in 1993 in the east end of London as a temporary project, one that was due to exist for only three months. Its transient nature neatly complemented the work's emotive theme – the passing of the memories and experiences that are associated with, and sometimes physically embedded in, the fabric of our homes. But over the course of its brief existence *House* became highly contested, with prominent figures campaigning for the work to be given a stay of execution, at least for a time, and others refusing to be swayed. For a while all the arguments that could ever be applied to a public work of art were focused on *House*. Was it art? Was it any good? Could it be a permanent piece? Did it give aesthetic pleasure, or in any way change the lives of those who saw it? Did local people want it? Who would decide its fate?

Rachel Whiteread was still a young and relatively little known artist. She had come to prominence in 1990, only a few years after graduating from art school, when she exhibited *Ghost* at the Chisenhale Gallery in east London. This was a large white plaster cast of the space inside a room in an old Victorian house. Showing the reversed imprints of the fireplace, window and architectural mouldings of this traditional and familiar type of interior, the work established Whiteread as an important younger British artist, one who alluded to the simple shapes and stripped-down ethos of minimalism and who, through the casting of domestic spaces, had found a new way of evoking the pathos of traces of human presence and experience.

Having cast a room, Whiteread began to think about how it might be possible to cast a whole house. Working with Artangel, a commissioning and producing organisation that supported challenging temporary art projects, Whiteread spent two years attempting to secure a short-term lease on a suitable house already earmarked for demolition. For her it was important for the building to be free standing so that the finished artwork should be visible from all angles. It was also crucial that it should be an example of the relatively humble, turn-of-century construction that had long been a familiar feature of the London cityscape. Such houses had a commonly understood history: they had not only been homes to several generations but, surviving the Second World War and successive waves of modernisation, they had also witnessed major transformations in the ways people lived and worked over the course of the twentieth century.

Whiteread's vision for *House* encompassed what she saw as a need to respond to the threat posed to such old houses by still ongoing campaigns of modernisation. When interviewed about the project, she acknowledged that it had a socio-political dimension

and talked about the ‘ludicrous policy of knocking down homes like this and building badly designed tower blocks which themselves have to be knocked down after 20 years’. *House* was situated next to a Roman road that still dictated the ground plan of the area after two thousand years, and within sight of churches of different faiths, some 1880s terraced housing, 1960s tower blocks and 1980s high rises. In the distance were the dominating new skyscrapers of Canary Wharf, London’s second financial centre after the City itself. *House* accordingly drew attention to the history of redevelopment within the east end. Its location just a few feet from where the first V2 rocket had landed in the Second World War gave added poignancy to the building’s final fate.

The site chosen was in Grove Road in Bow, a relatively deprived area of east London. The local council had decided to pull down the entire street to create a park as part of an ambitious plan to produce a green corridor through the borough. In early 1993 the opposition of one resident – Sid Gale, an ex-docker and war veteran who had lived in the house all his life – had held up the demolition, and as a result 193 Grove Road, and the two buildings either side of it, had temporarily escaped the council’s bulldozers. Understanding that Mr Gale would move out shortly, the council voted by a narrow margin to allow Artangel to lease the structure for a peppercorn rent for a few months. It was agreed that the project would finish by 31 October 1993, and that the site would be made into parkland by the end of November (the costs of removing the last three houses thus fell to the project rather than the council). As things turned out, Mr Gale moved out two months later than planned, and the project was behind from the beginning.

Whiteread’s video diary shows how the inside of the building was transformed during the project. New foundations for the house-within-a-house were laid; windows were boarded up and extraneous sinks and cupboards were removed; cracks were filled and the walls coated in a debonding agent to create a new continuous surface. Then locrete – a special material applied to the cliffs of Dover to protect the chalk, but here coloured with pigment added by Whiteread to achieve a particular shade of pale grey – was sprayed onto all the walls to a depth of about five centimetres to create the outer shell of *House*. This was followed over the course of several weeks by a second thicker application of concrete onto a steel mesh, to a depth of about twenty-five centimetres. The distinguishing features of the different periods of the house’s existence – its original staircase with wooden stair rail, its pre-war electrical systems, its colourful wallpapers of different vintages – were obliterated as the interior became a featureless grey mausoleum.

This technically difficult phase of work complete, the builders exited through the roof and sealed the hollow structure. The final task was to pull away the Victorian structure to reveal *House*, a highly modified version of the interior space of a real house (without an attic or roof) but one that powerfully evoked the reality of a home now destroyed forever.

Whether intrigued by its inside-outness or moved by its embodiment of lost history, people were curious about *House*. Over its eleven-week existence many thousands came

to see it (creating traffic jams to the annoyance of local residents). Numerous art critics acclaimed it as a powerful work. 'I do not recall seeing a more ambitious piece of public sculpture in London than Rachel Whiteread's House', wrote the *Sunday Times* art critic. *House* 'stands monumental and poignant like a great white mausoleum for the collective memory of a dying way of life', according to a writer in the *New Statesman*. For Andrew Graham-Dixon writing in the *Independent*, it was the most extraordinary public sculpture to have been created by an English artist in the twentieth century and was all the more powerful in using the familiar and humble form of an ordinary home:

Looking at House is temporally as well as spatially distorting. It is like looking at an object from the present that has suddenly been pitched far into the future or far into the past. An English terraced house has been remade as an archaeological find, and what an oddly simple thing it turns out to be. Just a squat arrangement of spaces to inhabit, a stack of caves honeycombed together. House contains the traces of late 20th-century living habits and technology, which survive in odd details like the impressed patterns of a fossil caught in its surface: the zigzags of a wooden staircase running up one of its walls, the indented relics of plug sockets ... House is a sculpture that memorialises, in its transfiguration of an ordinary person's home, the ordinary lives of ordinary people (ordinariness, it suggests, is one thing we all have in common) ... It is both a relic and a prompt to the imagination (Who lived here? What did they do? What did they feel?) as well as a sculpture that is charged with a deep sense of loss ... House is about the past and it is also about the unrecoverability of the past.

For television news and the tabloid press *House* offered a field day, with added spice coming from the local council's reaffirmed decision to pull the monumental sculpture down in the face of Whiteread's nomination for the prestigious Turner Prize for her recent work. The views of local residents, both pro- and anti-, were reported gleefully. Sid Gale, the former occupant and pithy critic of the open-air sculpture, became a local celebrity. For some, *House* was a waste of money, pointless, unwanted and ugly. For the Chair of the Council, who had been absent when the council had first agreed to the project, the concrete megalith was not a work of art but a 'monstrosity' that needed to be got rid of as soon as possible, whatever the art world might think: 'We have enough concrete in Bow already, and what we need is not more of it, but trees and grass. These we will have.'

The desire to preserve art has always been powerful, however, and those in favour of the piece found it difficult to countenance demolishing a work that seemed so significant artistically and which had touched the imaginations of so many. On utilitarian grounds, some urged in leader columns and letters to the press that the council should rethink its plans, given the unexpected fame and cultural capital that *House* had brought the borough. Some pointed out that the Eiffel Tower had originally been intended to be temporary and argued that allowing it to remain had not done Paris any harm. A petition calling for *House* to stay collected over 3,500 signatures on the site in twelve hours (a rival petition urging its demolition collected 800 signatures over a number of weeks). In late November a formal motion was submitted to the council claiming that 'it would be an act of intolerance and philistinism to destroy [the]

sculpture in Grove Road, Bow, before more people have had the opportunity to see it', and calling upon the council 'to consult local people about whether or not it should be destroyed'.

All to no avail. On the same day that Whiteread was presented with the Turner Prize at the Tate Gallery, she learned that the Bow Neighbourhood Committee had rejected the request to extend the life of *House*, even temporarily. Despite continued pressure from various quarters, the sculpture was pulled down on 11 January 1994, and the site grassed over.

Reflecting later on the unprecedented media controversy that had engulfed the work, James Lingwood, co-director of Artangel, noted that what was so unusual (and difficult to deal with) was the fact that there was no consensus among any of the groups involved.

Local against national, the art world against the real world, grass roots realities against disconnected dilettantes ... Such binary oppositions could neither explain nor contain the multiple shades of opinion and sentiment which House engendered.

There were passionately the differences of opinion, of course. But the differences of opinion were always located within any identifiable community or constituency, and not between them. There was no consensus amongst the inhabitants of the block of houses opposite, on the street or in the neighbourhood, nor in the letter pages of local and national newspapers. There was no consensus among the local councillors. Even the fateful decision not to grant an extension to House was taken only on the casting vote of the Chairman after the councillors were equally divided. There was no consensus even within the Gale family whom the Council had moved out of the home which eventually became House. House did not seek to manufacture some confectionary consensus, as many public works of art are compelled to do. Indeed it laid bare the limits of language and expectation which afflict the contentious arena of public art.

The status of 'art' does not guarantee a work's survival but who or what should decide on its destruction, and on what grounds, remain for some, as the case of *House* shows, complex and unresolved questions.

Text—

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