

Gill Perry - Rachel Whiteread, House

GILL PERRY: I'm Gill Perry, and I'm Professor of Art History at The Open University. One of my interests is contemporary installation art. And today, we're going to be looking at the work of a British sculptor, Rachel Whiteread, that was made in 1993. It's called House. And it was commissioned by the arts charity Artangel. At first sight, it looks like a life-sized sculpture of a house with the roof chopped off. But in fact it's not. It's a negative, or inverted, cast of the inside of the house. So how did they make this work?

Whiteread and her assistants used poured concrete and a metal armature. And they built a cast of the inside spaces, the interior walls of the house. They then removed the interior, sealed it off to create this strange inverted cast, in which the frames of the windows and the doors seem to protrude outwards rather than inwards. And Whiteread and her assistants spent up to six weeks filling in the cracks of the interiors so that the cast would look as smooth and as detailed as possible.

Whiteread selected a house that was the remaining house in a line that had just been demolished on Grove Road in Bow, in East London. The last occupant of the house was Sidney Gale, a retired dock worker. His family had occupied the house for generations, and his was the last house to be demolished in that row, which is why Whiteread chose to cast her work around it. He took a very strong personal interest in the project, and was constantly offering the tabloid soundbites, some of them mischievous. One of his most famous was, 'If that's art, then I'm Leonardo da Vinci'.

The work stood for 2 and 1/2 months on Grove Road. But it was always intended to be temporary. It was produced at a time when there were a lot of debates and controversies about local housing, issues of immigration, and homelessness in East London. And it seemed to some to be spending too much money on the production of art at a time when the local authorities should have been thinking about creating new homes and landscaping the area to create a better environment for local inhabitants.

Some of the fiercest debates were on Bow Council. And on the 23rd of November, they decided that the work could not be given an extended life. Many people in the art world had actually argued that it should be extended. But on the same day, Rachel Whiteread was actually awarded the Turner Prize, partly in recognition of works such as House that she created during that previous year. Eventually, the local council voted to give the work an extension, and it was finally scheduled for demolition on the 12th of January. Bulldozers entered the area and demolished it on the 11th of January, 1994.

The extraordinary thing about those concrete walls is that they were imprinted with over 100 years of domestic life, with the traces of the everyday. You probably wondered why the work was called House as opposed to Home. Well the two words carry some very different meanings, we usually use the term 'house' to describe the material structure of the home, the shelter, the building, the walls around the home.

The idea of 'home' is a much more abstract concept. It can describe a spatial or a social imaginary. It's an inhabited house. It's a house that is full of the traces of lives lived. And a home is actually imprinted with the traces of gendered and social lives. Traditionally, we often talk about women's place being somehow in the home. And the spaces of the home have historically often been associated with what women do. Now those sort of gendered notions are increasingly, of course, being challenged within modern culture.

But this house is mysterious. It doesn't carry any of those signs of home or homeliness. It was sealed off. It was strange, it was inverted. And it caused many critics to talk about it, as if it provoked or evoked the uncanny. The idea of a house that caused anxiety, that wasn't comforting, that didn't offer those traditional associations of home. Nothing remains on that site of House today. It's now a stretch of green grass, a local park. But not every trace of this extraordinary work has disappeared.

When the building was being demolished, Whiteread actually salvaged various objects, like doorknobs and light switches, and some of them she cast in different form, in aluminium, or in rubber, creating these strange, contingent objects that somehow related to the house, but weren't quite part of it. So House now survives as an archive. It's a photographic archive. It's also an archive of stories, and tales, and myths. There were stories that spoof advertisements had been put in estate agent shops, and that milk bottles, empty milk bottles and full milk bottles, had been put on the doorsteps of Whiteread's cast.

And I have a little bit of House, or something that might belong in the archive. I was lucky enough to be present at the opening event for House. This was sponsored by Beck's beer. And for the event, they produced a specially branded and labelled bottle of beer, called 'Rachel Whiteread's House'. With the bottle, as you can see, labelled with the house, and the name of the project on the front of the bottle. For me, that bottle is part of the ongoing archive that now circles around House. Of course, that lager was made in 1993. I haven't opened the bottle yet, and I'm pretty sure that I never will.