

The Uncanny Memories of Architecture: Architectural Works by Rebecca Horn and Rachel Whiteread

Alla Myzelev

Rebecca Horn and Rachel Whiteread are two contemporary artists whose architectural installations address such important issues as collective and individual memory, social oblivion, and the place of public sculpture in contemporary society. They attempt to challenge the traditional vision of the relations between architecture and sculpture, private and public, old and new, as well as notions of nostalgia and the uncanny. Horn's *Concert in Reverse*, 1987 (Figure 1), and Whiteread's *House*, 1993 (Figure 2), question the concept of the public memorial as a commissioned work that represents those events the audience wishes to remember forever. They dismantle this conception and demonstrate that a public monument can also challenge the collective memory by bringing to life specters of a half-forgotten past. Both monuments no longer exist in their original form: *House* (Figure 3) was destroyed because of a decision made by a local governmental body. *Concert in Reverse* was a part of sculptural project in 1987 in Münster, Germany, then it was taken down and later reinstalled in the renovated tower in 1997. Although *Concert in Reverse* is now a permanent installation in Münster, it lost its immediate connection to the past and, therefore, partly ceased to question and challenge our perception.

Both pieces could be defined as architectural installations and motifs of the home that are familiar and domestic. *Concert in Reverse* and *House*, albeit in different ways, take familiar structures such as a tower or house, and bring forth from them previously neglected qualities such as secrecy, isolation, and oblivion. By doing so, Horn and Whiteread radically separate the universally familiar sense of domesticity from the viewer. This process of bringing up strange, unfamiliar, and, at times, ghostly qualities of known buildings makes reference to Freud's and Heidegger's discourses on the uncanny.

Both Freud and Heidegger agree that in order to experience an uncanny feeling one has to be surrounded by a familiar realm within which something becomes radically estranged.

Freud explains this feeling through the death-drive principle.¹ In his 1920 article "Beyond Pleasure Principles," he states that the repressed death drive can be seen through a repetition-compulsion mechanism. Since repetition-compulsion can be defined as a constant return to the traumatic situation long after the event itself, the uncanny can be seen as a part of this process. The uncanny, an unsettling feeling that one experiences in a familiar surrounding, is an attempt to relive previous trauma, which signifies the death-drive.² Unlike Freud's definition, Heidegger sees the uncanny as a manifestation of real "being toward death." Living in an everyday world or, in Heideggerian terms, in an unauthentic condition, a human being is reminded of the existence of the authentic world through an uncanny feeling.³ In both cases, the definition of the uncanny is connected to the connotation of death. Moreover, the reminder of death occurs in the familiar realm such as the home, be it native home or house. However, according to Mark Wigley neither Freud nor Heidegger destroy the familiar status of the house. They only define unfamiliar scenes within it. "The house becomes the site of a violence of which it is innocent."⁴ *House* and *Concert in Reverse* are based on revealing hidden characteristics and memories within familiar surroundings. Moreover, *House* and *Concert in Reverse* demonstrate that the house itself—its walls and edifice—is no longer secure. It conceals violence and the fundamental insecurity of humanity.

Concert in Reverse, which is part of a project that took place in the German City of Münster, is executed in a medieval tower which was erected between 1528 and 1536 to defend the city, that is now located in a public park. In the eighteenth century, Conrad Schläu renovated it, transforming it into a prison with three floors of cells, some with windows, many without. Later, it was used as a shelter in World War I, and in 1938, it was allocated to the Hitler Youth. Then, from 1939 until the fall of the Nazis, the tower was used by the

I wish to thank Dr. Brian Grosskurth for his suggestions and comments and Sharona Adamowicz for her suggestions and encouragement.

¹ In his article "The Uncanny" of 1919, Freud concludes that a primary source of uncanny feeling is the fear of being castrated. Considering the ambiguity of such a conclusion in my analysis I will rely on a less problematic discussion of the uncanny as a manifestation of the death drive taken from "Beyond Pleasure Principles." Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 17 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-1974).

² Sigmund Freud, "Beyond Pleasure Principles," *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 18 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74) 38.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein and Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State U of New York P, 1996) 6.

⁴ Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (London: The MIT Press, 1993) 108.

Gestapo for holding, torturing, and executing Russian and Polish prisoners.⁵ After the war, the tower was closed, the windows were filled with bricks. It remained in this condition, barricaded but roofless, for the next fifty years. With great difficulty, Horn succeeded in gaining permission to reopen the tower and install *Concert in Reverse*. Horn describes some of the public reaction to the installation:

I developed *Concert in Reverse*, where I had forty silver hammers banging on the walls of the prison cells like a communication from the past. And, here and there, were small candlelights of white energy for the souls. Above, from the highest trees, I hung a large glass funnel, from which water dripped, like a metronome or a kind of Far Eastern water torture, nine meters down into a black pond. Then to bring more life energy into the building, I added two pythons, which I think were in love with each other. Their diet of mouse twice a week so upset the organizers and the people of Münster that the show became a political scandal. Perhaps the symbolism of the snake upset their solidly Catholic spirit. But the hysteria over the death of a couple of mice was ironic, if not lamentable, after the silence about what had happened there fifty years ago.⁶

The tower itself, while not built by Horn, represents the basis of the work. The choice of the site reveals the desire to raise issues of memory embedded in the collective sub-conscious.⁷ Therefore, by choosing a given site, Horn shows her desire not to let the horrors of history become forgotten past. In this case, this need is particularly acute because the tower signifies not only the desire to forget but also the impossibility of forgetting. After all, the local population did not destroy the tower but barricaded it. Even without the installation, the tower would have maintained a ghostly quality of something that should be destroyed but could not completely disappear from the earth.

The spectral quality of the tower is, however, countered by the tower's resemblance to a monument. By reminding people of what happened in it during World War II, it bears an indexical quality like any other monument.⁸ On the other hand, any monument that stands in one place for a significant amount of time risks having its indexical quality references forgotten. It becomes "just another object," ceasing to represent the past

with any real sharpness.⁹ Robert Musil notes that, "the most striking feature of monuments is that you do not notice them. There is nothing in the world as invisible as a monument. Like a drop of water on an oilskin, attention runs down them without stopping for a moment."¹⁰

By re-opening the tower, Horn, therefore, renews the actuality of the structure and brings up the ghost of a seemingly forgotten past. It also can be argued that this work may be seen as recalling the uncanniness of a haunted house. The tower in the park had become so familiar to the population of Münster that it can be equated with a home—their hometown. By re-opening the tower, Horn not only brings up ghosts of the past, she also unsettles the familiarity of everyday life. By changing the tower, Horn haunts the whole park and city with an uncanny past that was either forgotten or never experienced by the majority of the population.

The process of the installation and its elements also create the ghostly, uncanny quality. Consisting of hammers that knock quietly but distinctly, the installation recalls prisoners knocking to communicate among themselves. The candles, which are located in various places in the tower, could symbolize the Judaic traditions of remembering the dead by the lighting of candles. The black bath and pythons symbolize death. Lastly, there is the glass funnel from which the water drops every twenty seconds down to the pool below. The sound of dropping water refers to a grotesque torture, in which the victims took a long time to die; therefore, the sound of monotonously falling water orchestrates viewer response.

Although Horn herself referred to the site in Münster as having acquired new energy as a result of her installation, most components of the work—candles, water, snakes—relate to death not to life. Horn succeeds in raising ghosts of the past, revealing the horror contained in the space to a new generation of Münster's population. She also attempts to show another dimension of time because in her work time has several circles. The first, the twenty-second cycle of the water dropping, gives the viewer the feeling of an uncanny repetition. The knocking of hammers gives another dimension of time, an individual's measure of human life and experience. Lastly, the re-opening of the tower gives the time a historic dimension. However, the historical aspect of Horn's installation is less important than the notion of human existence. Her objective is to communicate the life cycle of the human being.

In addition, the work as a whole, like many others of Horn's installations, refuses to allow a full interpretation. The space retains an inexplicable mysterious feeling even when all the parts of architecture and installation are deciphered

⁵ Germano Celant, "The Divine Comedy of Rebecca Horn," *Rebecca Horn* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1993) 50.

⁶ Rebecca Horn, interview with Germano Celant, "The Bastille Interviews I, Paris 1993," *Rebecca Horn* 20.

⁷ The word sub-conscious is used here to show that this kind of historical memory lies not in people's unconscious, from whence this awareness of historical memory would be almost impossible to raise, but closer to the conscious.

⁸ The word "indexical" is borrowed from Rosalind Krauss' discussion of Rachel Whiteread's *House*. Rosalind Krauss, "X Marks the Spot," *Rachel Whiteread: Shedding Life* (Liverpool: Thames and Hudson, 1996) 74-82.

⁹ For more detailed discussion of this phenomenon see James Lingwood, introduction, *House* ed. James Lingwood (London: Phaidon, 1995) 7-11.

¹⁰ James Lingwood cited Robert Musil in his introduction to the *House* (11). Lingwood did not indicate the source of Musil's remark.

and explained. This resistance to full interpretation proves that the work, although based on known historical facts and created in a given space and time, remains uncanny.

The destiny of *Concert in Reverse* also demonstrates the spectral quality of the tower and the installation. Sometime after 1987, Münster's local government decided to renovate Zwinger tower and install *Concert in Reverse* permanently. Finally, in 1997, the sculpture was bought and reinstalled in Zwinger in a somewhat altered condition: the funnel expanded so that it almost covered the structure as a giant Plexiglas roof. The infamous snakes were replaced by two metal tongues, which moved around and away from each other, reminiscent of wired, electrical snakes.¹¹

This further development of the tower demonstrates that the specters of the past that Horn evoked could not disappear completely. *Concert in Reverse* permanently disrupted the perception of the past by Münster's population and, therefore, became part of the unforgettable past. The change of the most problematic part of the installation—the snakes—can be seen as an attempt to make unpleasant memories less traumatic, or, in Heideggerian terms, to adapt the being-toward-death to the unauthentic condition of everyday life.

On the whole, however, the 1997 version of *Concert in Reverse* loses a significant part of its immediacy and site-specificity and, therefore, becomes just a monument, similar to other public monuments which in time become unnoticed and lose some uncanny qualities.

Concert in Reverse fits into Schelling's definition of something that is supposed to be hidden coming to light.¹² However, this installation also shows that in order to be uncanny, it has only partially come to life. Hidden elements of the tower come back to life, but the space is still enigmatic. The uncanny quality of *Concert in Reverse* is inherent in its capacity to show the co-existence of life and death, which was expressed by symbols such as candles, representative of the souls of the dead, and by goose eggs, which, conversely are representative of the cycle of life. Therefore, *Concert in Reverse* offers hope by showing the possibility of new beginnings, however, it simultaneously rejects this hope by reminding the viewer of death through the dark past of its spatial setting. In a Heideggerian sense, *Concert in Reverse* reminds the human being (Da-sein) about its being-towards-death. The work reveals human anxiety over death, which in society is usually masqueraded by the elaborate formalities of funerals and funerary monuments.¹³ In Horn's work, the viewer cannot escape the totality of life. *Concert in Reverse* is an uncanny work because it uncovers

the essence of death within the everyday realm of Münster's park and, consequently, of another home.

Whiteread's *House* conveys the theme of death using different materials and a different context. *House* was produced in 1993 as a cast of a Victorian terrace house that was slated for demolition. By virtue of coming to life, it destroyed its original. This occurred because of Whiteread's technique of non-traditional casting in which the stage of "lost form" is omitted and the object itself becomes the lost form. In the case of *House*, Whiteread stripped the walls of the original house, sprayed the structure with concrete, let the concrete dry, and then dismantled the original house giving life to the gray, mute, and minimalist monument that stood vulnerable but solid in East London's Bow Neighborhood.

Similar to *Concert in Reverse*, *House* was not created as a public monument in the strictest sense of the word. However, it raised and perpetuated important matters concerning memory and loss. Being a temporary monument, *House* also had the advantage of being new and, therefore, easily noticeable. Furthermore, it brought attention to itself by raising issues that society wanted to forget, such as homelessness and political and racial exclusion. *House* remained visible because, as Nietzsche observed, "only that which does not cease to hurt remains in memory."¹⁴

House raised a great deal of controversy. People either liked it and considered it to be an original and interesting piece, or they aggressively hated it calling for its immediate demolition.¹⁵ This can be explained by *House*'s raising of the notions of memory and nostalgia which, consequently, gave the viewer uncanny feelings.

In many critical essays, *House* was connected to memory for bringing up not only the sweet memories of a long-gone peaceful past, but also the darker memories of the Thatcher years. During this period the surveys indicated that homelessness has risen dramatically throughout Britain in the early 1990s and that the problem in London was especially acute.¹⁶ One can argue, however, that the reason why the viewer experienced such negative feelings was not primarily the connection of *House* to the political and historical past, but the uncanny, ghostly quality of the work.

House connotes death through its repetitive nature. It is a negative cast of an architectural space—it functions on the same level as photography because it makes indexical references to its original. The original house destroyed by the time *House* was assembled is embedded in the sculpture as specter or ghost. This representation of the past is comparable to

¹¹ Permanent re-installation of the work, "The Contrary Concert" contribution to the Sculpture Project 1987, Skulptur Projekte in Münster '97. Internet. 18 June 2000. Available FTP: <http://www.museenrw.de/landesmuseum/ausstellungen/index.html>.

¹² Freud, "The Uncanny" 225.

¹³ Heidegger 25.

¹⁴ Andreas Huyssen, "Sculpture, Materiality and Memory in the Age of Am-

nesia," *Displacement*, ed. Jessica Bradley and Andreas Huyssen (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1998) 18.

¹⁵ My statement is based on the articles that James Lingwood attached to the edition of *House*. For example in the *Guardian* of 22 November 1993 out of five passersby two hated the work and three stated that they liked it.

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of memory and nostalgia regarding *House* see Doreen Massey, "Space, Time and Politics of Location," *House*, ed. James Lingwood (London: Phaidon, 1995) 36-49.

Barthes' connection of photography to death:

[Photography] is the living image of a dead thing. For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: The Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ("this-has-been"), the photograph suggests that it is already dead.¹⁷

Therefore, photography and an architectural cast, by the very virtue of their creation, signify the death of the moment. Whiteread's cast allows the viewer to see the "naked death" without its elaborated masks of social ceremonies. Because the cast is not an exact replica, it has a life of its own. But this is a life that always references death. In the case of Whiteread's work, this is even more enhanced by the mausoleum-like appearance of her work. The familiar "house" refers to death through the uncanny in a way similar to photography, in which death is embedded as permanent "has-been." Therefore, *House* can be seen as referencing both the death that is embedded in reproduction as well as the potentiality of death through the uncanny.

Moreover, *House* as an architectural work can be explained within the tradition of metaphysical architectural metaphors. By casting a non-functional structure, it can be argued that Whiteread has built a metaphor for the house. Rooted in traditional architectural education, *House* as a cast of the solid space of an interior can be read according to Wigley, as representing the very essence of metaphysics:

As the traditional figure of an interior divided from an exterior, [house] is used to establish a general opposition between an inner world of presence and an outer world of representation that is then used to exclude that very figure as a 'mere' metaphor, a representation to be discarded to the outside of philosophy.¹⁸

Therefore, *House*, which consists only of a solidified interior, represents the embodiment of the architectural metaphor within

metaphysics. It represents the very entity, the being, and the presence, which in metaphysics can be sustained only by the form of the house.

Whiteread's *House*, however, does deconstruct the architectural notion and, therefore, the architectural metaphor itself. By casting interior space outside, by depriving the structure of its usual functionality, and by reversing the viewers' conception of the house as an inhabited place, Whiteread dismantles traditional notions of architecture within the architectural domain. While non-functional, *House* is undoubtedly still definable as architectural structure. Architecture is represented here as being stripped of all its ornamental and representational decorum.¹⁹

In Horn's *Concert in Reverse* and in Whiteread's work, the house is not seen as a metaphor for innocence; it is no longer just about keeping violence in the interior. These works deconstruct the essence of home and domesticity by estranging the architecture they are dealing with from such notions. In *Concert in Reverse*, this happens through the process of "destruction" of the viewer's familiar notion of tower, making it instead a reminder of death and eternal homelessness. *House* literally turns the walls of the structures inside out. By solidifying the interiors, Whiteread brings all the repressed desires and thoughts outside. Ultimately, this process deconstructs notions of domesticity through radical practices in art and philosophy.

Horn and Whiteread create works that deal respectively with the "deconstruction" of the notion of home. *Concert in Reverse* and *House* bring forward the dark side of the familiar space of the house. They demonstrate that within the familiar realm there is always something uncanny hidden, something which in its turn can completely change the meaning of the object and the viewer's the relationship with it. Horn's and Whiteread's pieces undermine not only the viewers' perceptions of a tower in Münster or a Victorian terrace home, they disrupt the normal relationship between being and house—between any human being and his/her presumed place in the world. Therefore, they deconstruct the notion of architectural shelter as well as the philosophies on which they are built.

York University

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997) 79.

¹⁸ Wigley 102.

¹⁹ Wigley, 118.

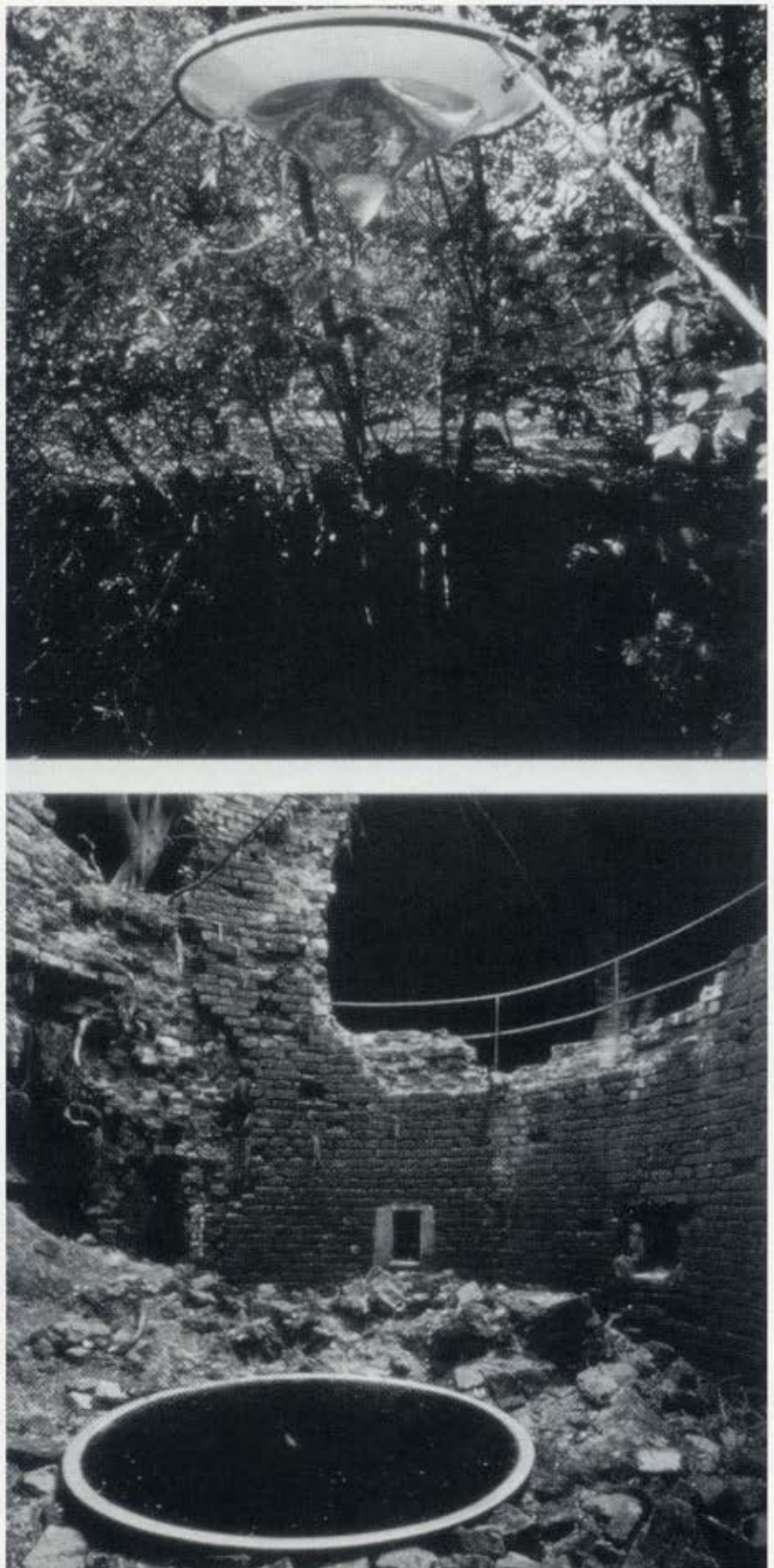


Figure 1. Rebecca Horn, *Concert in Reverse*, 1987. plexiglas funnel, forty steel hammers with motors, forty candles, two steel funnels, glass cage with two snakes, goose eggs and two steel rods, site specific installation for Skulptur Projekte in Münster. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

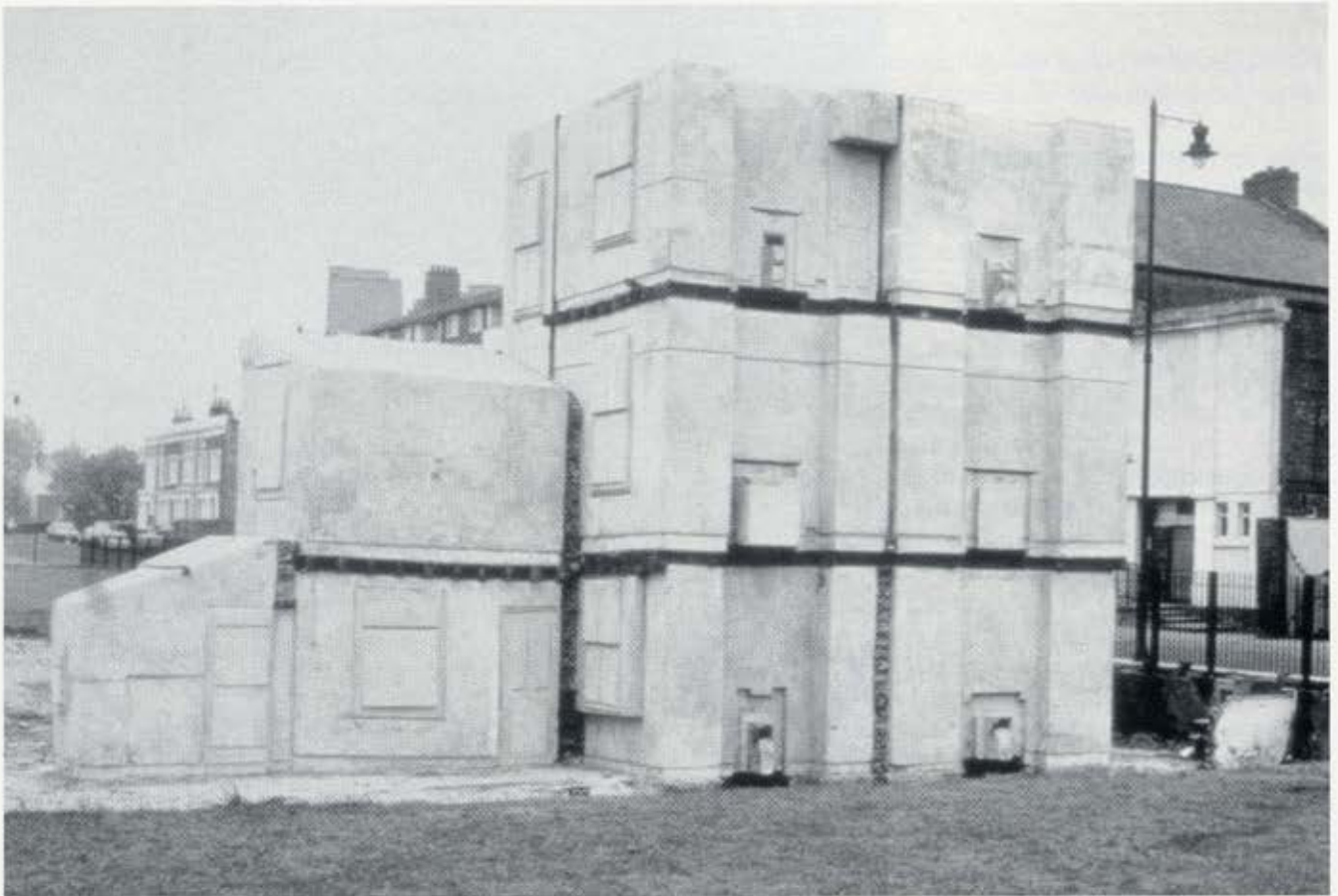


Figure 2. Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993, plaster and cement, 193 Grove Rd., London, October 25 - December 1993. Courtesy of the Artist and Luhring Augustine.



Figure 3. Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993, plaster and cement, 193 Grove Rd., London, October 25 - December 1993. Courtesy of the Artist and Luhring Augustine.