Reading Walter Benjamin
Writing through the catastrophe

RICHARD J. LANE

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Casting the work of art

Aesthetic judgment

As the catastrophe of the twentieth century developed with the rise to power of the Third Reich, the arts became foregrounded as even more evidently a battleground: of revolution, totalitarianism and Fascism. The newer modernist approaches to art, such as photography and film, were also hotly contested sites of meaning: would photography continue to take over the role of painting? Was modernism to be considered degenerate\(^1\) or was it still revolutionary? Was art in the age of technological reproducibility – art produced via radio, photography, film – potentially liberating or were these technologies profoundly powerful vehicles for state-sanctioned propaganda? Benjamin's well-known essay on photography and film intersects with these questions;\(^2\) as Hansen notes in her introduction to Siegfried Kracauer's Theory of Film:

The critique of the subject that Kracauer, Benjamin, and others sought to theorize through, in, and for the cinema... has to be understood in more specific terms than those by now familiar from poststructuralist recyclings of Nietzsche. The crisis of the subject that mandated such a critique was precipitated by a particular historical experience: the experience of modernity as living on the brink of catastrophe (rather than in the trajectory of progress, as which it had been touted for decades), a catastrophe that threatened the very bases of day-to-day existence.\(^3\)

In the early history of photography there is manifest an immediate and compelling attraction that operated on the subject in parallel with all manner of anxiety – new technologies signify progress and painful, potentially disastrous change: Nadar (Félix Tournachon, 1820–1910) notes how he decided to use artificial lighting on his balcony overlooking the Boulevard des Capucines, attracting a great crowd to his photographic apparatus:

The regular return, each evening, of this light (so little utilized at that time [1860–61]) arrested the crowd on the boulevard and, drawn like moths to the flame, a good many of the curious – both the friendly and the indifferent – came to climb up the stairs to our studio to find out what was going on there. These visitors (some well known or even famous) represented every social class; they were the more welcome insofar as they furnished us with a free supply of models, variously disposed toward the novel experience. It was thus that I managed to photograph, during these evening affairs, Niépce de Saint-Victor,... Gustave Doré,... the financiers E. Perdrix, Mirès, Halphen, and many others.\(^4\)

Nadar creates an artificial aura to bring the viewer to the work's technological apparatus; the viewer becomes transformed, wittingly or unwittingly, into the object of the artwork. The artificial aura is part of the 'art of machinery' creating 'the art of light and fire', which becomes a catalytic agent for the 'destructive power'\(^5\) of photography or reproducible works. In The Arcades Project, Benjamin refers to the fact that the technological shift into photography is not a simple progression, owing to the retrograde nature of the technologies that immediately prefigured it: 'It is characteristic that the beginnings of the technologizing of the portrait, as instanced in this apparatus [the physisontrace], set back the art of the portrait qualitatively as much as photography later advanced it.'\(^6\) Benjamin thinks of more advanced technologies as being 'latent' in earlier ones: 'Just as the illustrated newspaper virtually lay hidden within lithography, so the sound film was latent in photography.'\(^7\) There is a temporal interpenetration at work here, just as there is a contextual interpenetration of technologies – the 'pace' referred to, as artistic tasks are placed under the command of the eye – pictorial reproduction, for example, is thus able to maintain pace with speech.\(^8\) Benjamin's often-quoted passage on 'authenticity' in relation to technological change is directly about the authority of the authentic work in the face of mass-scale reproduction; the authentic work can maintain that authority within tradition and the second-order simulacrum of the hand-made copy (that is, the forgery), but not in the case of technological reproduction:

The reason is twofold. First, technological reproduction is more independent of the original than is manual reproduction. For
example, in photography it can bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens... but not to the human eye; or it can use certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, to record images which escape natural optics altogether. This is the first reason. Second, technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain.

Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway...  

Technological reproduction exceeds the original, not just via multiplicity but via a technical pushing at, and transgression of, the boundaries of perception. This has important consequences for the subject, whose natural capacity for perception is supplemented by technological processes or machines, and, furthermore, whose judgments based upon perception are thus also supplemented (if not entirely surpassed). Snyder gives as an example an ‘Olympic photograph’ of a runner with both legs in the air: ‘what we might have seen at the Olympics cannot serve as the standard of accurate representation for the photograph. Vision that is somehow not technically informed cannot come to terms with this kind of picture. It must reject the photograph.’ In other words, the issue of a ‘standard’ or ‘principle’ upon which judgments are based (or measured) is complicated immeasurably by this supplement.

Before investigating this example further, it is worth looking at Benjamin’s second reason for the loss of authority in the authentic artwork: that the copy can function in multiple situations, unlike the original. In other words, the artwork is now refracted and mobile in a way completely different from its prior historical development (for example, in the case of a singular aesthetic object that is considered holy, and which has traveled across the centuries from church to church, given political change or religious upheaval within societies). The work is consumed in different ways, but, in the newfound multiplicity of the copy, it is also consumed in parallel by myriad subjects at diverse locations: the work is disseminated, scattered, made virtual (or commutable). The ‘here and now’ of the work is devalued, according to Benjamin, which leads also to the loss of authority: ‘The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it. Since the historical testimony is founded on the physical duration, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction, in which the physical duration plays no part.’ It is easy to read these words too quickly, to pass over what Benjamin is saying: that the truth of the work is lost as its historical witnessing is also degraded and abandoned; the work is no longer able to transmit the essential qualities that configure and create its value in the world. It is here that Benjamin adds his infamous comments concerning the work’s aura: ‘One might focus these aspects of the artwork in the concept of the aura, and go on to say: what withers in the age of the technological reproductibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura. This process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond the realm of art.’ The aura is further defined – bearing in mind what it gathers up – as a ‘strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.’ The interpenetration of space and time, the near and the far, is expressed literally as the ‘einmalige Erscheinung’, the unique or ‘one-time appearance’; the gathering of the time of the work, and all of the contextual marking that the work bears witness to, through time and space. Now ‘the masses’ want to get closer to ‘things’, they want to ‘overcome’ the gathering process, which is both now and cast across history: they achieve these goals through ‘assimilating’ the work via its reproduction. The gathering is reinterpreted as the same; the unique object is replaced via the commutable copy, in effect an arbitrary copy:

The stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose ‘sense for sameness in the world’ has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing significance of statistics. The alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality is a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking and perception.

The destruction of the aura is not just a removal of the almost imperceptible component of the authentic work, but it is an adjustment of perceptibility and a reconfiguration of reality: it leads (without the countering, actualizing and awakening force of the dialectical image) to hyperreality. More radically, there is the notion that the standards by which judgments of the world have been made are not just altered, but suspended; as Snyder argues, ‘Benjamin wants to show that perceptual standards are neither stable nor fixed for all time.’ Returning to the example of the Olympic photograph that cannot be verified by normal, everyday or natural modes of percep-
tion. Snyder asks: ‘what can it possibly mean to say that a picture that shows us something unseeable – something that can only be shown by means of a technical process – is, nonetheless, accurate?’

What the picture shows us is something that can be actively ‘revealed’ only through the technology of photographic imaging; it constructs a hyperreality that provides its own rules of performativity and perceptibility. Rodolphe Gasché, in an insightful essay on The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, is at pains to stress that Benjamin celebrated the changes in perception via the loss of the auratic: ‘let me emphasize that for Benjamin the loss of the aura in mechanically reproducible art is not something to be deplored as some of his Frankfurt School interpreters, in particular, have held. Nor is there a double response – positive in so far as it concerns the work of art, negative in the case of the human being – to be detected in “The Work of Art”, or anywhere else for that matter, as Susan Buck-Morss, for instance, sees it.’ Gasché focuses on the cult value inherent in traditional works of art as an expression of power, before turning to the definition of the aura for closer analysis in relation to Kant’s Third Critique:

auratic objects are appearances, that is, manifestations according to the forms (or categories, as Benjamin incorrectly writes) of space and time (the reference to the pure forms of intuition is obvious), of a distance, of remoteness, of something that is beyond, that transcends the phenomenal. All appearing (of the suprasensible, or the noumenal, supposing such a thing were possible) is necessarily a singularizing manifestation.Appearances in the Kantian sense are always singular (and merely give rise to a manifold). Auratic objects, for this reason, are unique singular appearances of the distance in question.

With ‘distance’ as the substratum of uniqueness and singularity, Gasché contends that the latter two become functions of the ‘phenomenal appearing’ of ‘something non-phenomenal, something distant that transcends the phenomenal’. The gathering-up of the ‘einstmalige Erscheinung’, the unique or ‘one-time appearance’, is an interpenetration of the phenomenal with the noumenal, in other words a making visible of what should remain hidden. The unique appearance – which Gasché implies is an impossibility (or as Thierry de Duve puts it, ‘Kant’s supersensible … never assumes a plastic form’) – may thus be a mirage, ‘just as mountains, seen from a great distance, appear to form part of the landscape lying before them.’ But if indeed the ‘einstmalige Erscheinung’ is a mirage, induced via the ritual of cults, then the switch to a political and potentially revolutionary aesthetic is achieved by replacing the mirage with the hyperreal, the total image with that of the piece-meal image, its manifold parts constructed via ‘the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment’.

Benjamin does give an example of the concept of the aura as ‘a singularizing manifestation’ in an earlier essay, ‘Painting, or Signs and Marks’ (1917). After distinguishing the realm of the sign (a mysterious spatial order) from that of the realm of the mark (a medium), which is bound in time, Benjamin gives an example of the convergence of sign and mark ‘in the form of something lifeless’ in Belshazzar’s feast. Belshazzar’s destruction is brought about by his sacrilegious use of the stolen temple objects to worship false gods: sign and mark converge in the uncanny apparition of part of God’s hand, which writes on the wall. Not until this text is interpreted by Daniel is Belshazzar brought to an end. The absolute mark is here ‘a warning sign of guilt’, and the interpretive completion of the sign appears to bring about divine retribution: ‘Since the link between guilt and atonement is a temporal and magical one, this temporal magic appears in the mark in the sense that the resistance of the present between the past and the future is eliminated.’ The Messianic force sketched here is no different from that which is later detected by the historical materialist. Marks do not just emerge on living beings: they also have architectural presence, in the case of monuments or gravestones. Here they form sculptural objects which are, for the masses, an ‘involuntary memory of redeemed humanity’, to use one of Benjamin’s descriptions of the dialectical image. In The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, Benjamin turns near the close of the essay to the laws of architecture’s reception, which he notes ‘are highly instructive.’ The theory of distraction is revealed, through the eternal need for shelter and the subject’s ongoing relationship with buildings, to be grounded upon habit-formation, in other words, upon the ability to perform repeatable tasks. This is distraction as productivity, which adds another possibility to Benjamin’s formula ‘Reproducibility – distraction – politicization’. Benjamin utilizes the example of architecture to examine the two-fold reception of the subject: that is, use and perception, or the older model of tactile experience or labour versus the new optical mode of perception. ‘Attention’ is
replaced by or subsumed under tactile habit and optical 'casual noticing'. Benjamin argues that 'this form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value.' It is at this point that he applies such 'canonical value' or the 'aura of the habitual' to the various 'historical turning points' of aesthetic-perceptual shifts: For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means — that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually — taking their cue from tactile reception — through habit. The involuntary attainment of new modes of apperception has been modelled by an 'eternal' relationship with architectonic forms, and this may even include the minted coins of the Greeks, or the Greeks' 'eternal art'. At the point in which total commutability appears to replace the 'einemalige Erscheinung', architectonic forms continue to function in an adjacent metaphysical realm, one which touches upon the hyperreal at points along an eternal continuum. Marks, monuments and cast coins continue to exist, and there may be a modern equivalent to this connection of hyperreality and metaphysics: the casting and sculptural production via destruction of everyday objects and/or otherwise unnoticed spaces.

'Space Under my Chair'

One method of conceiving of objects that function in ways equivalent to the theory of the photograph in the essay 'The Work of Art' is via the collector's presentation of items, as such, 'in our space'. Benjamin calls the latter the 'true method of making things present', where the subject's being is not displaced into the object, but the object steps 'into our life'. Examples from the twentieth century are Bruce Nauman's concrete sculpture A Cast of the Space Under my Chair (1966-68) and the related works from 1966, Shelf Sinking into the Wall with Copper-Painted Plaster Casts of Spaces Underneath (wood and painted plaster) and Platform Made up of the Space Between Two Rectilinear Boxes on the Floor (fibreglass). Nauman's manifestation of spaces should not be thought of as occurring in isolation from his well-known performative pieces; his sculptures can be categorized as exploring four related conceptual approaches: works originating from the idea of showing the backs of objects, or the play between inside and outside; works having to do with hiddenness, or inaccessibility (physical and/or psychological); works based on molds of

"spaces between"; and participatory works. Nauman relates that A Cast of the Space Under my Chair functions 'outside of art' because of the way in which, once given a conceptually understandable title, the casting process itself (not the artist) defines (and justifies) the space thereby represented. Rosalind Krauss calls A Cast of the Space Under my Chair 'the complete anti-Minimalist object'. In part, this is because the sculpture is in itself not a dissemination of signification, but an 'implosion or coagulation': 'and the thing to which it submits this stranglehold of immobility is not matter, but what vehiculates and subtends it: space itself.' While Nauman theorizes his casts as being outside art because of the clarity of the work's captioning, Krauss strategically strips away the titles to present a more radical statement:

Nauman's attack, far more deadly than anti-form — because it is about a cooling from which nothing will be able to extricate itself in the guise of whatever articulation — is an attack made in the very name of death or, to use another term, entropy. And for this reason, the ambiguity that grips these residues of Nauman's casts of interstitial space, the sense, that is, that they are object-like, but without the title attached to them like an absurd label, one has no idea of what they are, even of what general species of object they might belong to, seems particularly fitting. It is as though the congealing of space into this rigidly entropic condition also strips it of any means of being 'like' anything.

While Krauss's point concerning the indeterminacy and entropic condition of an object that manifests something that is not visibly there in the first place is without doubt valid, the notion of stripping away titles is unclear, as this would be (ironically given her argument) a contextualization of the art-object into, or as, some other place; maybe the object is simply placed unlabelled and unnamed in a shopping mall, or on the street, something that in this instance at least is highly unlikely. Nauman's objects, in galleries or publications, are not unnameable. It is possible to see his sculptures not as ambiguous, and not in opposition to the residual mimesis of minimalism (that is, the object is still like something in the everyday world), but rather as a gathering of the entire art-making processes, including normally unseen stages and even mistakes; as van Bruggen argues, this way of conceiving the work relates to Nauman's interest in Wittgenstein:
Nauman found support for his method of reviewing the whole process of making an object (and if necessary of backing up a step) in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations ...* which he read during the early 1960s: Wittgenstein would follow an idea until he could say either that it worked or that life doesn't work this way and we have to start over. He would not throw away the failed argument, but would include it in his book. 

Another parallel with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is the way in which Nauman's casts of interstitial space initiate and facilitate the exploration of fundamental questions about the aesthetic object, just as the *Philosophical Investigations* function in an initiatory sense with regard to philosophical reflection. 

What we have in this set of analogies is the manifestation of otherwise virtually indeterminate space, a space which is fundamentally transient (is the space under my chair the same space when the chair has been moved to another room?), generating discussion about not just the singular object but the perception and perceptibility of art-objects in general.

A more recent, sustained and produced of such interstitial space can be seen in the works of Rachel Whiteread, a British artist who has been making casts of everyday objects since the 1980s. 

casts usually made of plaster resin rubber and concrete of various objects (and the spaces around such objects) such as books mattresses sinks closets floors tables chairs staircases rooms and, most infamously, an entire house. Surface textures are a major part of the sculptures; earlier works had pieces of the original wooden furniture left embedded in them, while later works, switching production materials, reveal various levels of imprinting. Whiteread seems to suggest that the imprint of things on our memories is more important than the things themselves. The sculptures that emerge are also of course things, inverse repositories for our sensations. 

Krauss argues for the importance of the surface detail, especially in maintaining the 'grid of meaning' questioned by Nauman's work:

Content to register the identity of the object that served as the mould for her casts, indeed to heighten this through a careful attention to surface detail, Whiteread's work self-evidently attaches itself (unlike Nauman's) to the whole array of indexically produced forms that extends from death masks to photographs, all of these extremely resonant with the sense that they have been cast (whether physically or optically) from 'life'. And like the death mask and the photograph - at least the photograph as Barthes has wanted to consider it - this work is continually moving through a funerary terrain, a necropolis of abandoned mattresses, mortuary slabs, hospital accoutrements (basins, hot-water bottles), condemned houses. Indeed Barthes has already written the outlines of a critical text on Whiteread's art, in his own consideration of photography as a kind of traumatic death mask which is paradoxically both 'structured' (thus constructed in terms of the paradigms or oppositions that undergird semiosis) and 'asymbolic'.

The opposition between the structured and the asymbolic, Krauss argues, also places Whiteread somewhere between an articulation of meaning (at the level of a substrate upon which meaning can be developed) and a de-articulation as detail becomes amorphous as a result of the casting process (details are replaced by mass). The surface, in Whiteread's sculptures, is not always what it seems, however, because of the intricacies of casting. For example, an empty space, say a space under a chair, is artificially given surfaces, that produced by the materials used to bound or restrict the space to be filled by resin rubber or concrete; in other words, the sculpture's surfaces, in this instance, are a composite imprint of the chair 'itself' and the artificially imposed boundary materials that were never there in the first place.

The series

It is generally agreed that Whiteread's sculptures have a complex relationship with time: via the series, the repeated thematic or cast object (or family resemblance with a series of objects), via remembrance (the foregrounding or manifestation of the functional space that has been lost through time or destroyed in the casting process), via recovery. Whiteread's work is not so much a remembrance of things past as a remembrance of things otherwise unnoticed. The asymbolic elements, to use Barthes's terminology via Krauss, are so outweighed by the symbolic reinvestment in the everyday object as to be of no real concern. Instead, the cast objects are overloaded with symbolic meaning, precisely where we would expect to find none. One way of approaching this overloading is via the theory of the found object, discovered as such, as the Surrealists put it, via 'objective chance': 'the object is also trapped in the network of objective chance - a movement in which it ultimately loses its 'aesthetic' char-
acter. It can be used to signify that which it is not, in appearance or at first glance. Whiteread's sculptures maintain a level of indeterminacy, but also a rapid oscillation between object and imprint, where the representation of the object continually breaks down and recovers itself in an ongoing chiasmus (the sculpture is not the object which is often instantly registered by a viewer, with the phrase, 'oh, that's an...'; rather, it expresses a relationship with the object). The series of found objects (or sculptures produced via or as imprint of the found object) reveals, among many things, a repetition compulsion: In the compulsion operative in objective chance, the subject repeats a traumatic experience, whether actual or fantasmat, exogenous or endogenous, that he does not recall. He repeats it because he cannot recall it: repetition occurs due to repression, in lieu of recollection. This is why each repetition in objective chance seems fortuitous yet foreordained. Hal Foster relates the repetition compulsion to Breton's 'portents', revealing a multi-temporality which is also aporetic and enigmatic: 'the anxiety in Bretonian surrealism is a "signal" (Angstsignal), a repetition of a reaction to a past trauma triggered by a perception of a present danger. Repressed, the trauma is subsumed by the signal, just as in the uncanny the referent is subsumed by the sign. The enigma of the signal, then, attests not to a lack of signification to be filled in the future but to an overdetermination produced in the past.' Whiteread's exploration of childhood claustrophobia is merely the beginning of this overdetermination that begins to over-layer her work: bathroom fixtures, once cast and imprinted by Whiteread, become sacred vessels; libraries, involved and imprinted, function to memorialize the Holocaust. As Foster also suggests, each repetition of the aporetic signal functions to shock the subject: in Whiteread's case, the shocks encountered are also analogous to those produced via photography. This multi-temporality of Surrealist objects and the photograph is of importance to Adorno and Benjamin: 'the link between photography and shock, with its moments both of violence and of instantaneousness (as we hear in the English " snapshot" and the German "Momentaufnahme"), is central not only to Adorno but also to Benjamin in the "Art work" essay. Further, Adorno interprets Surrealist shocks as having both prospective and retrospective import, as both awakening from the nineteenth century and anticipating the twentieth century. The transformed found object has a multi-temporality that has been interpreted along the twin-tracks of Adorno's

and Benjamin's Surrealist shock interpretations, that is to say, via socio-historical (Adorno) and psychological (Benjamin) critique. Adorno resists the latter precisely to reinscribe the Surrealist shock-image within a multi-temporality: the Surrealist shock-image looks 'both forward and backward in time'. This debate between Adorno and Benjamin is also contextualized precisely by the transformation and shocks of the modern city via new technology and war:

The Surrealist concern with the city looks forward to the explosive destruction of cities to come. "After the European catastrophe the Surrealist shocks lost their force. It is as though they had saved Paris by preparing it for fear: the destruction of the city was their center." At the same time, the Surrealist images, created through a montage technique, looked backward to reveal the libido encapsulated in the fetishized commodity objects of the late-nineteenth-century interior.

The differences between Adorno and Benjamin, on the question of photography, converge once The Arcades Project is brought into the equation: Adorno's Surrealist shocks function to awaken or force the subject out of his or her uncritical unhistorical slumber, just as awakening is the central force of The Arcades Project (Benjamin called the book 'an experiment in the technique of awakening'). The centrality of awakening leads to the dialectical turn of 'remembrance' in The Arcades Project: this dialectical turn is one way of describing the notion of the image constellation: 'wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill.' Benjamin's montage process here brings together and transmutes the temporality of dialectics via image: 'the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [philosophisch].' Whiteread transmutes the ordinary object in the casting process via a subtle shifting of the form, character and substance of the object; in her work, we have a concrete example of construction via destruction. Two main examples (cast everyday objects and House) are explored here and then related to the new authority developed in her sculptures, a new authority that invests the works with auraic potentiality derived in part from an intersection of the mass-produced and the singular. Perhaps the closest Surrealist object to the processes developed by Whiteread is the bronze glove in Breton's Nadja. Breton had been visited at the Centrale Surréaliste by a woman
wearing blue gloves; she had refused to remove these gloves for Breton, and eventually returned and left instead a bronze glove:

The erotic appeal of the object is not difficult to decode, for it not only casts a human form in a deathly mold, but also captures a fetishistic response to castration, which Breton can both recognize (in the displaced form of a "severed" hand) and disavow (although empty, the hardened glove remains on, as it were, to cover any absence). It is thus a double uncanny reminder of both the primordial condition of inanimation and the infantile fantasy of castration.65

Salvador Dalí's definition given in Breton's 'Surrealist Situation of the Object' (1935) is 'an object which lends itself to a minimum of mechanical functions and is based on phantoms and representations liable to be provoked by the realization of unconscious acts'.66 The bronze glove, completely functionless, although still pointing towards its everyday use, is one more in a series of fetishistic objects, in Foster's reading 'a fetishistic substitute for a lost object',67 returning via the uncanny throughout Breton's text. However, the anonymous photograph of the bronze glove in Nadja (1928) reveals not a glove being used as such, with a foreign substance substituting for the hand and wrist that would otherwise fill the glove, but a bronze version of an unused glove, even an abandoned or lost glove that has been cast. This is less a displaced or castrated human form, and more a reminder of the everyday object itself, cut off not from its human wearer but from its missing opposite. In fact it may be essential that the glove is in the singular - because of the implications of the referent of the cast brought back into the equation, the deictic statement that displaces the cast and recovers the object, or the misrecognition of the cast and recognition of the absent object that it refers to - and not one of a present pair, since the latter leads inevitably to the question of restitution.68 The blue gloves, so desired and feared by Breton, may have in fact been phantoms, impossible manifestations of the gloves that might have once belonged to Van Gogh: 'Here the blue gloves, joined like two hands... in a waiting passive mood, are paired in diagonal symmetry with a branch of cypress, a gesticulating tree that was deeply poetic to Van Gogh... the gloves and the branches belong together.'69 Derrida's 'Restitutions' is an elaborate critique and play on the desire to restore (or claim) ownership of the represented object, and the desire to claim the authority and knowledge even to make the critical connections between represented object and owner in the first place. More than a simple question of interpretation, the process of restitution operates both at the level of specific analysis (creating a narrative of ownership upon which and through which concepts are developed, as in Foster's reading above) and as a component of an elaborate metaphysics of presence. Van Gogh, in this instance, infamously appears in Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art', but Derrida, questioning the location and destination of 'the' painting referred to, reveals the ghosting effect that is also the beginning of a series of objects and owners: 'the identification, among many other identifications, of Heidegger with the peasant and Schapiro with the city dweller, of the former with the rooted and the sedentary, the latter with the uprooted emigrant... in this restitution trial, it's also a question of the shoes, or even the clogs, and... of the feet of two illustrious Western professors, neither more nor less.'70 Thus Derrida's 'Restitutions' is also a text which is concerned with the pull of the earth, the soil, the rural encounters so beloved of Heidegger, versus the restoration of a sceptical, urban perspective, and the ways in which each perspective builds an ideology of truth, the truth of the art-object, the truth of locating the art-object, and of the ownership that the art-object concerns itself with. In other words, the text deconstructs the philosophical claims made concerning the represented object, and reveals how this leads to radically different notions of the work.

The artwork is the site of a struggle and a claiming that disturbs the grounds upon which aesthetic categories are constructed in ways as radical, in Derrida's reading, as that of Duchamp's Fountain, or signed found object: a urinal (signed with a fake name).71 The deconstruction of Heidegger's claiming of the work is also expressed by Levinas's notion of Heidegger's 'suspicion of outsiders':

Levinas's fundamental argument against Heidegger is that his distinction between Being and beings, and the alleged priority of the former to the latter, is a manifestation of the most vicious of all tyrannies, that of the 'same' over the "other." In Levinas's view, Heidegger's thought had its origins in a primal peasant mentality, a mentality suspicious of all outsiders and determined, through a pre-technological power of possession, to make everything its own.72
be bothered to throw them away. The destruction and disposal of the objects have been delayed, deferred and redirected (or claimed) via the casting process: the objects are photographed and negatives are printed, or the objects are removed and brought into the artist’s workshop or studio, to be destroyed in the casting process whereby they enter another order of existence as sculpture or work. The casting process is a consumption of the objects, that is, not a supplementary completion (an endless task), but an unexpected direction, in Heidegger’s sense: “consummation” does not mean a last addition of the still missing part, nor the final repletion of a gap hitherto neglected. [...] It is the unconditioned and complete installation, for the first time and in advance, of what is unexpected and never to be expected. Compared with what has been up to now, the consummation is novel. 72 Field together in Heidegger’s definition is the ludic, the playful (the open) and the closed, the completion (as in the end, close or completion of metaphysics in Nietzsche, or completion of history in a Messianic sense). The unexpected in Whiteread’s work is that the everyday mass-produced object should find completion in its destruction and afterlife as sculpture: in this case, a destruction that parallels the usual processes of landfill, combustion and recycling. Whiteread’s House, the most hyped and visible manifestation in Britain of Whiteread’s consummation of everyday objects, underwent, however, a further stage: that of its demolition. House, an Artangel project in London’s East End, was, and involved, an elaborate cast, as object and of characters.

House was completed on October 25 1993. There had deliberately been almost no press until one day before. Slowly at first and then more quickly, interest and comment began to grow [...] Newspaper leaders and letters, columns and cartoons appeared and multiplied. Visitors grew day by day. On November 23 two decisions were made simultaneously in different parts of London. A group of jurors at the Tate Gallery decided that Whiteread had won the 1993 Turner Prize, and a gathering of Bow Neighbourhood Councillors voted that House should be demolished with immediate effect. It was an incendiary combination. 76

The destruction of the object’s afterlife took Whiteread’s House to another level: that of the ‘incendiary’ and explosive work situated firmly within an urban environment where, however, art-objects are not to be ignored or securely accommodated in galleries and archives. While Benjamin asserts that ‘the art of the present is geared
toward becoming worn out'.77 The spectacular destruction of House re-interjects the work into the Surrealist discourse of the ‘fixed-explosive’.78 The auratic potentiality derived in part from an intersection of the mass-produced and the singular is modified here with the repeated attempt at destroying the object: the work’s singularity is constantly recovered, transformed and lost again, via material processes. The work, in the process, becomes highly charged, to the point of being explosive. Working backwards, from House to the entire range of earlier cast objects, and forwards, to Whiterhead’s Holocaust Memorial, the taking-over of the essentially modernist phrase ‘fixed-explosive’ needs to be investigated, especially in relation to the explosive potentiality of Benjamin’s dialectical image.

Fixed-explosive

The Surrealist category of ‘the marvellous’ parallels the processes of profane illumination and approaches, conceptually, dialectics at a standstill, where ‘In order to combat the continuum of historical progress, the dialectical image fixes attention on the contradictions of history without resolving them in a Hegelian Aufhebung’.79 Hal Foster elucidates the critical constellation of the marvellous:

the primary purpose of the surrealist marvellous is clear: the ‘negation’ of the real, or at least of its philosophical equation with the rational. If ‘reality’, Aragon writes in 1924, ‘is the apparent absence of contradiction’, a construct that effaces conflict, then ‘the marvellous is the eruption of contradiction in the real’, an eruption that exposes this construct as such. [...] the marvellous is a ‘dialectical urgency’ in which one ‘bourgeois’ reality is subverted, and another revolutionary world advanced. Here the marvellous appears responsive to historical contradiction, which, Aragon implies, might be invoked through aesthetic ‘displacement’.80

The eruption of an unresolved or non-sublated contradiction in the real can be related to a process theorized by Heidegger as ‘rift-design’: Heidegger argues that ‘Truth establishes itself as a strife within a being that is to be brought forth only in such a way that the conflict opens up in this being, that is, this being is itself brought into the rift-design’.81 The rift-design is the ‘basic design’, ‘outline sketch’ or schemata that holds in tension the essential (from Heidegger’s perspective) conflicts of being without resolving them, bringing into clear outline originary components of subjectivity. Notions of the subject’s ‘strive’, ‘striving’ and ‘testing’ are also brought into the open by this schemata. The rift-design is closer to Aragon’s definitions of the marvellous than Breton’s, but nonetheless both examine production via the marvellous of ‘convulsive beauty’ as modified by Foster in the following formula: ‘Beauty will not be only convulsive or will not be, but also compulsive or will not be. Convulsive in its physical effect, compulsive in its psychological dynamic... it partakes of the uncanny’.82 The further Surrealist definitions of convulsive beauty include the ‘veiled-erotic’, the ‘fixed-explosive’ and the ‘magical-circumstantial’.83 The fixed-explosive relates intimately to photographic shock, which Foster reads in psychoanalytic terms where ‘the shot that arrests one is an uncanny fore-image of death’.84 The fixed-explosive is ‘reality convulsed in shock’.85 In other words, reality undergoes a process of folding, convolution and involution: the uncanny is now placed in the foreground and comes abruptly to the surfaces of experience; contradictions are revealed and held under tension as rift-design. Via the fixed-explosive the otherwise smooth and homogenous surfaces of the real are broken down into ruins, which is also a temporal intervention: as with dialectics at a standstill, which ‘blasts the epoch out of the reified “continuity of history”... and explodes the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins – that is, with the present’.86 For Benjamin, rift-design processes are multivalent, that is to say, the tensions in the valences increase and decrease according to structural repositioning:

To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts, Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions - there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest. Hence, the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process.87

The caesura is potentially a shock moment in the ‘gap’ between thoughts; it is also the explosive potential as the dialectical opposites increase in tension, yet are still held in place. Without the spacing of the caesura, thought itself would not exist; but similarly, without the opening created by the caesura, the dialectical opposites would far too rapidly proceed onwards via sublation.
Sublation can be thought as a sequential reprocessing, or can be thought in an instant or moment, because Absolute Spirit drives the dialectic from the start. That is to say, while Absolute Spirit from one perspective drives sublation towards the terminus, from another perspective it has always already arrived; the sequential processing takes place in time, but the short-circuit of having always already arrived is in this regard other to or outside such a definition of time. Heidegger calls this Hegelian treatment ‘nothing less than leaving time behind on the road to spirit, which is eternal’.88 He expands upon the question of ‘otherness’ and time:

At the beginning of its history, absolute knowledge must be different from what is at the end. Certainly. But this otherness does not mean that knowledge is at the beginning not yet and in no way absolute knowledge. On the contrary, this knowledge is right at the beginning already absolute knowledge, but has not yet come to itself, not yet become other. Rather, it is simply other. The absolute is other and so is not absolute, but relative. The not-absolute is not yet absolute. But this ‘not-yet’ is the not-yet of the absolute. In other words, the not-absolute is absolute, not in spite of, but precisely because of its being not-absolute. The ‘not’ on the basis of which the absolute can be relative pertains to the absolute itself. It is not different from the absolute. It is not finished and lying dead next to the absolute. [II] ... expresses a mode of the absolute.89

Dialectics at a standstill is a necessary intervention, replacing the ‘instant’, whereby dialectics is both inside and outside time. The crude division between inside and outside here concerns a primarily human history, and the alternative Messianic event that signals the end of or completion of such a history. From Benjamin’s perspective, this ‘outside’ is an end which humanity is not responsible for, regardless of the technologies of destruction being developed, and the subsequent cancelling out of knowledge, progress and the ‘burial’ of the subject.90 This end is not the culminating event of European nihilism, but one where the struggle is survival beyond this point.91 For Brit, Messianic time (or more accurately the interpenetration of human time with ‘chips’ or splinters of Messianic time) is approached via the dialectical image, where the latter is defined as ‘the historiographic archive of pure language, merging opposites in a dense representation that yields fleeting insight’.92 This merging or conflation of opposites, following the interpretation of a non-sublatory rift-design, would have to happen after the caesura or event of the rift-design (which holds opposites apart); in other words, it would be the next move after the caesura, instead of, or as an alternative to, the move of sublation. Brit argues for a union of ‘theology and politics’ because Benjamin is arguing for a history which ‘represents both the “Messianic cessation of happening” and “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.” These two functions coincide in the critical retrieval of memory.93 The latter is the process of seizing hold of memory ‘as it flashes up at a moment of danger’.94 The task here is to think through this caesura-seizure in relation to the aesthetics of Whiteread’s casting process, the ‘incendiary combination’ of casting and destruction, or production and destruction, in the same work.

Benjamin calls his process of dialectics at a standstill ‘materialist historiography’, where the objects chosen are not arbitrary: materialist historiography ‘does not fasten on them but rather springs them loose from the order of succession’.95 The object of Whiteread’s House, a house that once existed in London’s East End, can be thought of as an object loosen from the ‘progressive’ policies of Bow Council, which involved knocking down perfectly sound properties to make way for parkland, at a time when Londoners desperately needed housing more than open spaces (the parkland in question runs alongside a relatively disused canal which connects Victoria Park with the Thames). The caesura-seizure in question involves transforming a process and discourse of private and public housing into a death-mask that memorialized, however briefly, the tensions and disputes in relation to the uses of urban spaces. The dialectical image can be thought of not just as freezing time, but as holding together competing potential movements in tension: progressive time, and a revolutionary alternative (be it sacred or profane); similarly, the cast object can contain or freeze ‘two histories’: ‘its own past and the past of the object it replicates’.96 For Richard Shone, the perfect example of such a dual process, one that has in itself a vast historical range, is the death-mask: ‘It captures all the physical accretions of the human face soon after that face has completed its living existence and before rigor mortis accelerates it towards disintegration. It remains in the world to remind us of the dead, as both portrait and memorial, a replica and an object in its own right.’97 The fact, as Shone points out, that a house had to be demolished before Whiteread’s work ‘could come into being’ relates it intimately to the death-mask,98 furthermore, the cast brings the contradictions of the
aesthetic and socio-political urban space to the fore, and it is these contradictions, rather than the work itself, that may have contributed to the need to destroy it (again); a repetition compulsion of dismantling and regeneration, or an eternal recurrence of the same.

The death-mask and the death drive come together in the technologies of photography: as Foster suggests, 'Photography points to the logic of the death drive in two ways: in its shock... and in its tense (the future anterior of the photograph: this will have been).'

The repetition compulsion is 'keyed not only to primordial death but also to personal trauma... the basis of its third category, the marvellous as magic-circumstantial.' It is at this point in Foster's own analysis of Surrealism that he brings in the notion of the sublime:

In animate and im/mobile, the veiled-erotic and the fixed-explosive are figures of the uncanny. Breton recodes the 'morbid anxiety' provoked by this uncanniness into an aesthetic of beauty. And yet finally this aesthetic has to do less with the beautiful than with the sublime. For convulsive beauty not only stresses the formless and evokes the unrepresentable, as with the sublime, but it also mixes delight and dread, attraction and repulsion: it too involves 'a momentary check to the vital forces,' 'a negative pleasure.' In surrealism as in Kant, this negative pleasure is figured through feminine attributes: it is an intimation of the death drive received by the patriarchal subject as both the promise of its ecstasy and the threat of its extinction.

The holding in tension, or holding apart, of the rift-design, signalled in Foster's phrases 'inanimate' and 'im/mobile', reveals also the caesura-seizure operative in the sublime cast object; that is to say, there is a 'negative pleasure' associated with the experience of the cast object or work, a tension that gathers together the pleasure and pain involved in recovering memories of the originary (dispersed, mass-produced) object and the pleasure and pain involved in the concomitant feelings of loss.

As with the sublime, the viewer both is detached from the cast and the processes that go into its construction and is the protagonist in the scene of the cast, or the scene(s) invoked by the cast. In the case of House, this is the scene of domesticity, and regardless of the scale or lack of luxury involved in the historical object in London's East End, it invokes a shared experience, regardless (also) of whether there is an affirmation or interrogation of domesticity under way: 'Potentially at least it exposes the complexity of meaning of "home".'

Casting the Work of Art

*House* emphasizes – indeed it throws in our faces – the fact that its meaning always has to be interpreted: that there was never any simple "authenticity"; that the meaning(s) of home are always open to contestation. The juxtaposition in the phrase 'home/House' deliberately reveals the jarring involved in describing and naming the cast object not as someone's home, but as a historical location that sequentially is called 'house' with layered meanings or accretions (*House* names not 'my' experience of domesticity, but a palimpsest of socio-economic changing conditions and existences), for example, in terms of the ways in which the building was interpreted by visitors to the site after it had been re-configured and transformed by Whiteread. Some visitors sneered at the apparent meanness and poverty of a terrace house, some decried its loss as a valuable housing space compared with the brutalist modernist public housing estates that scar the neighbourhood (and much of Britain's cities), some realized that the house had features that made it a cut above a lower-class terrace house, and so on. The debates about the destruction of the original house would, bizarrely, be paralleled by the debates about the destruction of Whiteread's original work *House*; after its destruction, the sublime event of *House* revealed its narrative and momentary 'incendiary' status, as it was violently 'expelled' from the continuum of historical process.

Memorial aesthetics

The demolition of *House* appears to contradict the saying *Vita brevis, ars longa*. Life is short, art is long. As caesura-seizure, or dialectical image, the work in question removes the contradiction: *House* functioned, in part, as a memorial, that is, an act of remembrance, and as a utopian hope for the future (be it in the realm of aesthetics or politics). The phrase 'memorial aesthetics' has been used elsewhere, notably by J. M. Bernstein in *The Fate of Art*, where he argues that the Kantian complex of pleasure and pain in the beautiful is also a memorial, that is to say 'a remembering that is also a mourning.' Bernstein asks what is mourned in the *Critique of Judgment* as a whole, and summarizes by saying that it is the separation of beauty, truth and goodness: 'Of course, the architectonic goal of the third *Critique* is, through reference to the supersensible, to engineer a reconciliation or unity of nature and morality, understanding and reason, truth and goodness, through judgement and beauty. Kant's
argument in this regard has convinced no one since the German Romantics. In place of this failure to convince, Bernstein explores the post-aesthetic philosophies of art that 'employ art in order to challenge truth-only cognition'. In other words, in Bernstein's text, the work of Adorno, Derrida and Heidegger, read as continuing the radical possibilities of Kant's Critique of Judgment. The memorial aesthetics of the dialectical image, however, functions as a critical constellation that does not abandon the absolute, even while it mourns the subjects lost with the termination or culmination of reason's self-certainty and power, in other words, with the Shoah. The absolute is reinscribed in memorial aesthetics via the traces of utopian thought that are immanent to mourning, where hope is defined as having 'its positive correlate' as Bloch puts it, 'the still unclosed determinateness of existence, superior to any res finita [finite thing]' Thus, utopian thought is not a subjective, arbitrary dream-state, but a determinate component of thinking: 'what is designated by this concept [the utopian] lies in the horizon of the consciousness that is becoming adequate of any given thing, in the risen horizon that is rising even higher. Expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become: this is not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but, concretely corrected and grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as a whole.'

The utopian element of memorial aesthetics is directed towards what Benjamin calls 'the perfected state of the world' with 'the now of knowability' or manifest visibility, 'das Jetzt der Erkenntbarkeit'. Knowledge and image come together in this phrase, translated in relation to the dialectical image as 'the now of recognizability'. In 'das Jetzt der Erkenntbarkeit', Benjamin argues that there is a binding between the inauthentic and the authentic, between the imperfect and the perfect; this binding can be reconstructed via memorial aesthetics, where the failure of an event and its utopian possibilities (or transformations) are simultaneously symbolized (literally, 'thrown together'). In his 'Theory of Knowledge' Benjamin moves towards the interpenetration of the binding or nexus, the overcoming of the false disjunction between subject and object, and the 'appearance of the knowing man', but then he withdraws, steps back from the 'perfected state of the world' which would also seem to exclude the binding or nexus, the thrown together.

The repetition compulsion which leads to the creation and destruction cycles in the cast as memorialization also approaches and withdraws from 'das Jetzt der Erkenntbarkeit' in this sense of knowledge and 'total' recoverability.

There are obviously cultural differences in the time of this approaching and withdrawal as memorialization, as Bartomeu Marí reminds us: 'The tradition of the memorial is specific to the Jewish culture in which it is practised very frequently. The Christian tradition confines the commemoration of the dead or tragic events to anniversaries. The Jewish culture extends this to more everyday manifestations of remembrance.' Building a Holocaust memorial which incorporates cultural and temporal differences became one element of the task that resulted in Whiteread's cast of a library, situated in Judenplatz, Vienna. Adorno's infamous question about post-Holocaust literary production is answered not with the fine points of philosophical or theoretical argumentation, but by an imprint of an object that contains the library of knowledge, regardless of the category of text: philosophy and fiction, theology and science. The library also symbolizes the moral law (and its rejection or transgression by the Nazis): the ultimate object of Kant's sublime event or scene, where reason surpasses all else. The memorial points not just towards a singular event, however, but towards the realm of knowledge that encodes, and potentially decodes, the ongoing event as multiple or plural catastrophes: 'The truth of a given circumstance is a function of the constellation of the true being of all other circumstances.' The memorial brings together or binds the plurality with the library: a simultaneously closed and exposed structure, the latter in the sense of a structure radically open to interpretation. The cast of the moral law is also a cast of the history of the catastrophe, one manifest in the object and the repetition compulsion, this time, of the desire to halt the destruction of the object, the book and its library housing. Whiteread's cast or imprint of books is exposed to damage, decay, defacement from passing subjects: the books are no longer sheltered; they are themselves out in the open. This clearing reveals a hidden, but repeated, event: the event of the systematic murder and effacement of a people, the function at the centre of the National Socialist project.
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CASTING THE WORK OF ART

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READING WALTER BENJAMIN

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CASTING THE WORK OF ART

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the peripheral consideration whether that work will give rise to a “culture” or to an “acceleration of decline” (Ibid.).


92 Britt, Walter Benjamin and the Bible, p. 128.

93 Ibid., pp. 128–129.


95 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, p. 475 [N10a.1].


97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Foster, Compulsive Beauty, p. 28.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.


103 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, p. 475 [N10a.3].


105 Ibid.

106 Ibid., p. 4.


108 Ibid., 7.


110 Ibid., pp. 276–277.


113 See Jean-François Lyotard’s discussion in his The Differend: Phrases in Dispute, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988, ‘silence imposed on knowledge does not impose the silence of forgetting; it imposes a feeling... the common person has a complex feeling, the one aroused by the negative presentation of the indeterminate’ (p. 56).