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Reflections on Trace

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This is a short text contributing to ARCA's installation TRACE, shown at Margret Howell Wigmore Street as part of the London Festival of Architecture.

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When I first heard of ARCA's plans to model the space of the Bankside air raid shelter it made me think of Rachel Whiteread's casts of architectural interiors, specifically the piece *Untitled (Room 101)*, which was cast in 2003 and displayed for almost a year in the Italian Cast Court at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Just like the Bankside air raid shelter, *Untitled (Room 101)* has wartime connotations, one literary the other real. On the one hand referring to the torture chamber in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, on the other to the actual room from which the piece was cast: Room 101 at Broadcasting House, supposedly the location of George Orwell's office when he worked for the Eastern Service during the Second World War.

But as I thought a little harder about what exactly ARCA were proposing to do the initial association with Whiteread began to seem less and less convincing.

It was the architectural historian Anthony Vidler, in his book *Architecture and Anxiety*, who first authorised the connection between Whiteread's sculpture and the modernist preoccupation with space in architecture. Writing of Whitehead's notorious casting of *'the interior space of a soon-to-be demolished terrace house,'* Vidler suggests:

*Whiteread's House, far from undermining modernism's spatial ideology, reinforces it, and on its own terms. For, since the development of Gestalt psychology, space has been subject to all the intellectual and experiential reversals involved in the identification of figure and ground, as well as the inevitable ambiguities between the two that were characteristic (...) of modernism itself. Thus many modernists have employed figure/ground reversals to demonstrate the very palpability of space.*¹

Vidler then proceeds to give the example of the Italian architect Luigi Moretti, who, in the early 1950s had made plaster models *'to illustrate what he saw as the history of different spatial types in architecture.'* As Vidler explains, Moretti's models were made by casting as solids what were in reality *'spatial voids; the spaces of compositions such as Hadrian's Villa were illustrated as sequences of solids as if space had suddenly been revealed as dense and impenetrable.'*²

But the fact that Whiteread's sculptures are life-size casts of actual interior spaces means that the resulting artworks cannot be understood in the same way as Moretti's negative models of spatial compositions, because Moretti's process works at an entirely different level of abstraction to that of Whiteread. Moretti worked in the architectural tradition of the formal model, by first reducing the subject space to a set of geometrical relationships, even if he does then cast it as a volume, rather than form it as a void. Whiteread does something altogether different, in her process there is no intervening level of geometric abstraction, she makes a direct imprint of the subject space. Whiteread's working process registers the subject space in a

¹ Anthony Vidler, 'Full House: Rachel Whiteread's Postdomestic Casts,' *Warped Space, Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, London, England, 2000, 143-149, 145

² Ibid

manner that is not unlike the way a footprint or tyre-track is recorded in the damp earth, in mud or in sand. ARCA's process of working with the spaces of the Bankside air raid shelter is much closer to Moretti's, for they are proposing to reduce the space of the air raid shelter to a volume, their strategy for doing so can be schematised as follows: first, to survey the subject space, second, to build a formal model based on the survey and, finally, to make a negative cast, to some specified scale, of the interior spaces defined by the model.

In this respect it is interesting that ARCA have opted to entitle their piece 'Trace,' because it implies that at some level the work is about looking for something that has become lost: a trace of the past. The temporality associated with Whiteread's work is often thought of in a similar way: that the cast captures a specific state of matter that would otherwise dissolve into the flux of time. The architects' 'hands-off' mode of working does not deal in specific states of matter, thus the open question of what it is 'Trace' traces, seems to me what is truly beguiling about the work.