“Rather than invoke a process of re-membrance, images of loss may only offer ‘mem-brance’: a singular static image that is not savvy to a continued remaking, reconsidering, and reforming that is the flux of memory itself. This delay between the visual form and its referent is the blind spot of an absence made visible.”
Walking into a small white room in the gallery, my pupils dilate as if adjusting from a lit room into a darkened one. At first there is no art object in sight, and it takes my eyes some time to recognize what are white plaster shelves lining the white sheetrock wall. And with more time to adjust, these shelves appear to contain books—the edges of pages creating a ribbing effect that can only be associated with the seriality of spines in a row. And closer yet—these white bookshelves aren’t white at all, rather off-white with yellow stains, with bits of paper adhered to the surface; red, gray, blue, and black, some parts faded, some parts vibrant. It is as if wallpaper had been tediously torn from the plaster without absolute success.

Adjusting to this ghostly installation, another layer comes into view, or rather, fades out of view: there are no books on these shelves at all. The ruffling of page edges and the bits of color are merely the imprints left by books that once were, torn from the shelf, leaving parts of themselves behind. As I step back for a full visual scope of the empty library, something feels dreadfully wrong. The books’ imprints are located beneath each shelf rather than above them, suspended, as if to defy gravity. What becomes slowly and critically apparent is that I am looking at the negative space of this library. The space between pages, between books and shelves, has been filled with

Figure 1. Rachel Whiteread / Untitled (Paperbacks) 1997 / Plaster and steel / Dimensions variable
plaster, while the library itself is nowhere in sight. Walking through this bookless, shelfless space, what has become visible in this room is everything I normally deem unseen. I check my own body, to make sure that this inversion has kept me intact. Though I can physically feel myself, I have been cognitively re-placed.

British sculptor Rachel Whiteread specializes in creating casts of what she calls the emptiness between walls, the negative space we move through, the space conventionally defined by the positive objects we move around. Objects in Whiteread’s work are generally recognizable as domestic spaces, ranging in scale from the space beneath a bed to the interior of a library, an apartment or a house. As viewers, we must imagine these inverted forms as affecting our own place in space—we have become invisible, while all that is unseen rises to the surface of the visual field. Even the process of casting itself mirrors this inversion; for a cast piece to be removed from its host in the final stages of fabrication, one has to plan the cast from the final step to the initial one. Casting is normally a three-step strategy that transfers a positive object to a negative cast, to a positive reproduction of that object. Whiteread stops one link short of this process, leaving us with a negative cast. This simple act produces a complex set of ideological shifts, which complicate the correlation between what we see and what we know. What is private space becomes a public display, what we think we know is suddenly unfamiliar, what we think we see has become obscured.

Of course, the changes that are actually occurring are nothing more than cognitive shifts. A negative space cast positive is no longer negative; a room cast in plaster contains within it another room, another set of walls with a different face. The challenge to “resolve” these visual inversions asks us to face our own tendency to equate sight with understanding, to attribute a hierarchical value-system that deems invisibility negative and visibility positive. Whiteread’s casts complicate the equation that visual information breeds concrete understanding. Indeed, a negative space presented as positive challenges the notion that visual information alone is enough to solve the inverted puzzle that Whiteread proposes.

In scrolling through the empty shelves of Whiteread’s Untitled (Paperbacks), viewers are pressed to rely on invisibility to compensate for the obscurity of what’s present, thus questioning the established visual codes of positivity and negativity. The negativities presented in Paperbacks are voids that we seek to fill, and we want to complete the picture that Whiteread has torn apart. Where are the books, what were they about, and why have they been taken away? There is also a feeling of dread and sorrow; indeed, the books’ absence might prompt an unshakable sense of regret that so much knowledge has been taken from us. Yet through all of this, our bodies adapt rather quickly. In Untitled (Paperbacks), we scroll absent shelves that nonetheless sit on the wall in rows. In other bibliocentric works, such as Untitled (Book Corridors),
Figure 3. Rachel Whiteread / Ghost / 1990 / Plaster on Steel Frame / 270 x 318 x 365 cm
This piece makes itself clear through a combination of what is seen and unseen, the object, and what we walk through space where books once were, but what is not overtly clear is that the corridor has become the object, and we walk through it the space where these shelves and thousands of books once stood [Figure 2].

Untitled (Book Corridors), as well as the series of library studies made in the same period, suggests that we rely on absence because sight has betrayed us; what we see before our eyes is not enough for us to gain an understanding of this space. This piece makes itself clear through a combination of what is seen and unseen, known and unknown. Cognitive understanding surfaces with the combined efforts of sight, memory, and the imagination, just as in its title, an ambiguous description, “Untitled,” is followed in parentheticals by a concrete and unmistakable reference, “Book Corridors.” Additionally, we can neither positively identify the cast itself, nor the library that this cast came from. Memory and imagination work together here, for the library that this cast came from. Memory and imagination work together here, for the library that this cast came from. Memory and imagination work together here, for the library that this cast came from.

As this description suggests, empirical visual evidence has been displaced by the non-visible prompts of memory and the imagination. We must combine an image in our heads with the physical object in front of us in order to comprehend the work, and still this comprehension leaves more to be desired.

The process of designing and casting a space in Whiteread’s work is a process of explication and destruction, both materially and immaterially. In her work Ghost, for example—her first room-size cast—a living room was pulled from an old Victorian house that was awaiting demolition. The sculpture was poured and the walls removed (or, as in Book Corridors, the plaster was poured, and the books and shelves torn away), which prompted a repositioning that continues to complicate the roles of visibility and invisibility. Prior to the casting, it was the negative space of this living room that we imagined. The positions have switched, and while its innards are, for the first time, explicit, the room itself is gone, existing now as a memory. Its living history gives way to the resulting, “mummified” sculpture, which in turn memorializes, preserves, and archives its life [Figure 3].

Plaster casting is an apt process for capturing the visible history of a space, because no remnant is too small to make its presence known. The smallest hair is sure to survive the translation between an original space and its cast reproduction. Ghost picks up these remnants: soot from the fireplace, chips in the skirting board, and stains in the wall are indexical markings that narrate the “social space in which lives were once lived out.” A living room quickly becomes a dying room in this scenario, its life brought to a static halt in order to be gazed upon by a “viewer.” Another repositioning occurs as well: the soot, stains, and scrapes that translate from the original living room were once the product of an ongoing relationship, a space that repeatedly recreated itself through the daily meanderings of domestic life. When this process stops, we are able to “see” these marks as holding some historic importance, and can thus graft our own narratives onto what has become an objectified space. We lose one kind of visibility and gain another.

Upon viewing the negative, what we inevitably see is space from the perspective of the inside of a wall—we see the back of a light switch, the cavern of a fireplace, spaces that were recessed now raised, shelves torn away. Whiteread had what she called an “epiphany” after casting Ghost. Upon seeing it assembled for the first time, “I’ve made myself the wall,” she exclaimed as she stood back, “I’ve made the viewer the wall.” This work provides a visual, conceptual and physical shift, to think, see, and feel in opposites, against the grain and against how we habitually operate. These shifts are mirrored in the very process of casting itself, a process that must be realized in backward order.

The inversion of negative space into positive form is appreciated as an art move within the gallery, an inverted form of minimalism that draws attention not to the object itself but to the space inside it. (Perhaps Donald Judd’s minimalist shelves could fill the uniform bookshelves that are absent in Whiteread’s library.) The stains and marks that transfer on a Whiteread cast are appreciated intimately in the gallery, as narratives that betray stories of lost objects and conjure up stories of our own. This experience changes dramatically when taken outside the gallery into the public sphere, and at no point was this more evident than when Whiteread cast her infamous work House, an interior casting of the last surviving house in a typical Northeast London terraced Victorian row. Whiteread had not anticipated the monumentality that a change of context would inspire, as she completed this private commission in a public space. House created a furor, inspiring politicized debates among art connoisseurs and the public at large about gentrification, race, and working-class London, and raising broader issues of public and private life, inclusion and exclusion, collective and individual memory and forgetfulness [Figure 4].
Despite its public presence, House was not universally accepted as a public sculpture. Even so, it was this work that won Whiteread the prestigious Turner Prize in 1994, and propelled her into international acclaim. House inspired name-calling and was defaced with graffiti that stained statements like “NOT ART,” “WOT FOR,” and “HOMES FOR ALL, BLACK + WHITE” into its porous plaster skin. After fiery debates between city officials, gallery owners, and residents, House was razed to the ground. Its short life lasted only two and a half months. As Whiteread recalls, “It took three and a half years to develop, four months to make, and thirty minutes to demolish.” House was an invisible scar all of a sudden made visible, and the impassioned protest as well as the swift demolition of this visualized domestic space reveals the pain of visualizing the proverbial space under a bed—whether a working-class struggle, the effects of gentrification, or the private stories of domestic life. House was not given the time to air its symbolism out; as soon as it was born, it was put to death. This structure became an accidental memorial that the public at large was unprepared for. While its sudden thrust into visibility may have been representative and even cathartic, it could not be tolerated.

II. Rachel Whiteread’s Holocaust Memorial 1995/2000

Whiteread’s flip of positive and negative space interrupts the relationship between seeing and knowing. It takes a certain letting go of positivity, a forgetfulness of
what we “know,” to see in reverse. From House we learn that Whiteread’s play with positivity and negativity is weighted differently in public. Despite the fate of House, she accepted the commission to design a Holocaust Memorial in Vienna’s Judenplatz, a Jewish center in medieval times and the site of a tragic siege in the pogrom of 1421, which is considered a unique space for the remembrance of Jewish culture. Considered by some critics to be a response to the historically self-named “people of the book,”20 Whiteread proposed to cast an inverted library for which Paperbacks, Book Corridors, and other absent library works were studies. After nearly five years of Viennese bureaucratic obstacles, Holocaust Memorial was finally erected in 2000. While initial models suggested that this library would be a positive casting of a negative space (as in her preceding library studies), Whiteread instead resolved to create a cast in the positive. She cast from wooden replicas that achieved an anonymous uniformity uncharacteristic of her work, a shift into the positive and a distinct shift from her cast negative spaces [Figure 5].

The rectangular building sits on the lower end of an oblique plaza. It shimmers in white plaster, giving off a hint of weathered staining that blends almost seamlessly into the cobblestone ground it sits upon. It pivots slightly to face the statue seated upon. It pivots slightly to face the statue that achieved an anonymous uniformity uncharacteristic of her work, a shift into the positive and a distinct shift from her cast negative spaces [Figure 5].

The walls that line this building, which appear no longer as bars but as books, form columns and rows that wrap the building in its entirety. The shelves have also been cast in the negative, which creates horizontal voids that support these hovering books, whose sheer quantity seems to create an intense enough pressure to resist gravitational pull. They face away from us with their spines away from view, so that all we can see are the repeated edges of petrified pages, a collection of knowledge that seems forever out of reach.

As these innumerable pages and their anonymous volumes seem to imply, the memorialization of the Holocaust straddles the visible, memorable, invisible and forgotten. The task of visualizing loss is tall: how to sufficiently represent a complex absence, in one swift visual move? The process of memorialization referred to as “counter,” or “anti”-memorialization is selectively skeptical of visibility as it interacts with the representation of loss. As the scholar James Young has noted, counter-memorials have risen from the efforts of the post-World War II generation, who perceive conventional methods of memorialization to be rooted in the practices of totalitarianism.9 Counter-memorialists handle fixed visual representation as a risk—that it may manipulate a presently felt loss, redeeming and displacing memory altogether. It is a truism in post-war aesthetic and philosophical discourse that the Holocaust can never be explicated with any degree of truth or justice in a single, fixed visual form. It is not, Whiteread seems to be suggesting, a question of who can be more representative, rather it is a matter of who can interact more honestly with the impossibility of representation. Whiteread’s Holocaust Memorial implicitly signals not only that one sculpture is inadequate to the task, but that even an entire library could never tell the story.

As Young has explained, counter-memorials negotiate the threat of visual representation by using the memorial as a vehicle to “return the burden of memory to those who come looking for it.”11 Indeed the process of remembering death can be a complex burden, and as such, the counter-memorial asks that the viewer carry some of this weight. The counter-memorial seeks to provide a space that prompts viewers toward recollection, but does not steer them toward it. As Whiteread herself noted, “I don’t think that looking at memorials should be easy ... it’s about looking; it’s about challenging; it’s about thinking. Unless it does that, it doesn’t work.”11 Counter-memorials like Whiteread’s tread a fine line between what aspects are challenging, and to what degree, in what ways they should be invisible, and to what degree. The recipe is one part object and one part viewer: the memorial must provide enough space to house memory, but equally, the viewers must be ready to engage with what they themselves know of the events commemorated. Indeed, if we approach Whiteread’s Holocaust Memorial familiar with the events and images of the Holocaust, we may wish to be both admitted into and released from this library. At once an overwhelming inventory of knowledge, the books are also shadowed by an overwhelming sense of death.

Subverting visibility to the breaking point of invisibility is not, however, a perfect solution to the problem of representing loss. Counter-memorials may risk being absorbed into the depths of a general postmodern critique, becoming “poorly distinguishable from the general
deconstruction of identity and art ... the protestations against monumentality could stand in for any number of post-modern critiques—those of progress, truth, reason, or patriarchy." As Young identifies it, a landscape of invisible memorials risks being over-determined by the viewers’ knowledge of history, to balance the equation between what is shown and what is withheld. As he suggests, “The question is if we will always know enough to bring our memory and history back to these sites; in 50 to 100 years, this is doubtful.” Hence the counter-memorial finds its position somewhere between historicism and ahistoricism—wanting not to subscribe to the fixed historical markers of a totalitarian past, while relying on some specificity to prompt the viewer’s process of memory. How can the survival of certain stories—those of perpetration, injustice, death, personal and collective losses, be ensured for the future viewer?

The counter-memorial’s reactive tendency to subvert narrative to the breaking point of abstraction may also unwittingly invite other problematic consequences. The success of the counter-memorial may come at the cost of a few failures; it may compromise longevity for immediacy, and coherence for contradiction, in the interest of articulating a very raw and presently felt devastation. In Young’s words, “Better a thousand years of Holocaust memorial competitions in Germany than any single ‘Final Solution’ to Germany’s memorial problem.” While counter-memorials may not provide the perfect recipe for visualizing the Holocaust, the hesitation in the face of portraying this death and destruction is rooted in a profound and traumatized relationship with visibility and understanding. Some of the recorded testimonies of experiences in death camps painfully illustrate the prisoners’ relationship between what is seeable and knowable. While some men and women were able to maintain a sense of agency in facing the most debilitating of conditions, others submitted not only to unfathomable torture, but to a complete loss of will and consciousness. These were the prisoners in the camps who, as Giorgio Agamben describes it, had “touched bottom”: traumatized beyond recognition, pressed to the threshold of human and non-human being. These prisoners, labeled die Muselmänner, were described by others as being so detached from human consciousness and emotion that they had become objects, nothing more than “vegetative machines” that could not feel, think, or express anything other than the bare mechanics of a dying body. Die Muselmänner were perceived by prisoners and guards alike as “the living dead.” Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, recalls the disappearance of life in such a man. As he writes:

*Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the Muselmänner, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead in them,* already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, they are too tired to understand.

They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose the image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen. As Levi describes this frozen and mechanical mass, Whiteread’s Holocaust Memorial feels more fixed and solidified than ever. Like the books, they are endless, anonymous, and vacant. They too are without a specific identity, each identical to the rest. Yet Levi also individualizes the Muselmänner. He has been selected out of many, realized by Levi in one crippling description, given shoulders, a face, and a pair of empty eyes.

Seeing the Muselmänner is both futile and unavoidable, it is an “impossibility of vision that cannot not be seen.” Agamben illustrates this concept in one ephemeral moment, when he describes the case of a cameraman shooting post-Liberation documentary footage, steadily recording the thousands of naked corpses piled in common graves, sparing no visual detail of this traumatic site. An unintentional gaze passes over the Muselmänner, swiftly regretted, and forever irrevocable:

The camera lingers almost by accident on what seem to be living people, a group of prisoners crouched on the ground or wandering on foot like ghosts. It lasts only a few seconds, but it is still long enough for the spectator to realize that they are either Muselmänner who have survived by some miracle, or, at least, prisoners very close to the state of Muselmänner ... the same cameraman who had until then patiently lingered over naked bodies, over the terrible [prisoners] dismembered and stacked on top of one another, could not bear the sight of these half-living beings; he began once again to show the cadavers. ... A heap of dead bodies is an ancient spectacle, one which often satisfied the powerful. But the sight of Muselmänner is an absolutely new phenomenon, unbearable to human eyes.

The relative ease of gazing at a pile of corpses is a visual objectifiability, a declared end to the process of life. When Agamben describes the satisfaction that corpses afford the powerful, it is surely because the corpse acts as proof and promise that domination has been achieved. In the moment that Agamben illustrates, it is the corpse, as gruesome as it may be, that offers some ease to those who witnessed the disastrous effects of Auschwitz and the
immeasurable loss of life. The Muselmänner, on the other hand, is the living proof of the paradigms of loss, the after-effects that continue to haunt us. It is in this lifeless being that we can try to read and attempt to understand the illegible and unknowable scope of loss. The Muselmänner is—and the Muselmänner are—evidence of a death more profound than the corporeal loss of life. He is—and they are—the devastating image of a death we cannot understand and cannot testify to.²¹ It is unbearable to human eyes, it is impossible to see, and still we look.

These accounts of life in Auschwitz illustrate the burden of visibility placed on the memorial as a viable space for memory. The inversions of Whiteread’s casts recall the fact that the process of logic does not offer its condolences. We are excluded from understanding this library, which suggests that visual, logical, and numerical tools are not fully equipped to explain what this memorial hopes to commemorate. The Muselmänner pass the threshold of what we understand as human into non-human terms; the loss of life becomes the production of death.²² How do we expect to offer a visual language to something, and someone, who has crossed the threshold of language itself?

Perhaps this is why we cannot be granted access to the content between the pages in Whiteread's Holocaust Memorial. Unlike Whiteread's previous library casts, Holocaust Memorial faces us with books that are definitively present. There is no variation in size, color, or shape. They are identical to one another, lining the walls in nondescript unison. The books face away from us, the door will never open. We are, in every sense, excluded from understanding what constitutes this library. No original was destroyed to make the cast, and likewise, no original story and no original truth was betrayed to make this memorial a representation of loss. Though we are intellectually and physically barred from entry, it is our memory and imagination that are unconditionally invited to trespass between these porous plaster walls. We can see the edges of pages and are prompted to imagine what lies upon them; the spines facing away from us inspire images of people inside this structure, confined to a life of viewing and re-viewing this private collection. Since we know so little about the specifics of this library’s inventory, we cannot presume that the nature of this reading material is fixed. There is a beauty in imagining these volumes in a constant state of circulation. The soft white plaster feels ghostly, and this library resonates like an afterlife full of books whose nondescript appearance is the result of a restricted mortal gaze.

The books come alive with each tier of our imagination. Staring closely at the sculpture's deep relief, the play of light and shadow makes the books optically quiver, taking on individual agencies that defy their fixed, mechanical identities. White plaster produces after-images; traces and shadows color this collection. We are not offered the same scrutiny of visual absence and trace that we are in Whiteread’s other absent libraries. The work of this memorial is not that easy. We are asked to graft our own experience onto these books with less narrative, conducted by the names of concentration camps that lie at our feet, by the presence of the voluminous collection that surrounds us.

We are presented with a library of silent stories. One cannot help but think of the stories lived equally in silence by survivors of an experience beyond language, a pressure building up over a lifetime that keeps bindings pressed against each other, sealed. These stories may begin to thaw upon interaction with a viewer, the rows they float in may begin to droop, books may fall to the ground, pages may start to release themselves from the strongholds of stubborn bindings—binding lives, binding truth, and binding silence onto a body forever bound by the weight of a story that cannot be told. The viewer can do nothing but face these books, these frozen bodies, and wait. We, the viewers, are asked nothing more than to become witnesses, to patiently wait and stand at attention—as
perhaps the monument of Gotthold Lessing has always done—for a story to expose itself onto our eyes, to etch itself into our ears. As witnesses, we make a promise to venture to the edge of what we know, and testify to an unknown [Figure 6].

The survivor Dori Laub writes of the process of bearing witness as an exchange between a speaker and a listener (and indeed, an object, and a viewer) that brings the weighted stories of trauma to life, peeling them off the body:

To a certain extent, the [listener] takes on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he bore alone, and therefore could not carry out. It is this encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener, which makes possible something like a repossession of the act of witnessing. The joint responsibility is the source of the re-emerging truth.  

This opportunity to listen, to wait and become a witness, helps us reconsider Lessing’s place, as well as the paneled windows that surround this memorial, as spectators. Lessing faces Whiteread’s memorial in a bronzed, unwavering stance. Fittingly, it was this Jewish dramaturg who said, “There is no staging without interpretation.” While the memorial may sit quietly and blindly, it is caught in a web of gazes, directed at this library in a continuous act of looking. The windows and the windowless seem to compensate for each other’s sight and sightlessness. The testimony resurfaces perpetually when sight meets blindness; ears meet voice, and object meets eyes. Survivor and listener come together in a soft promise of testimony. When a story is given an audience, as Laub suggests, the act of witnessing one’s own telling of their story repossesses the act of witnessing. One can finally testify for oneself. The listener (or viewer) witnesses this moment, and what is endlessly reciprocated is a reaffirmation of a trauma brought to the surface. The site of trauma re-emerges with new sight.

We stop staring at the books, take our focus away from individual edges, optical effects begin to fade. We stand back and look again at this weighted mass of books, frozen and unable to be jostled. We are faced with a hard-edged plaster structure, asking us to remember what is fragile, what shatters at the exhalation of our breath. This is the advance and retreat of a re-emerging truth; always at our fingertips and barely touchable.

I imagine that this is the debt that viewers are asked to pay. Memorials must return the burden of memory to those who come looking for it. I can think of no greater burden more necessary than to honor the vast and intimate distance that lies between the memorial and its referent, between a visual structure that represents loss, and the very unrepresentability of loss itself.

We must hold our gaze.
Notes

3 Mullins, 78.
6 Whiteread enters a lineage of public work that preceded her here—for example, the work of Gordon Matta-Clark in the 1970s provides an interesting background for the manipulation of private space into public sculpture.
7 Mullins, Rachel Whiteread, 55.
8 While some have found this a fitting response, this was also a point of criticism by some who opposed the original design, which argued that this would contribute to a stereotype of Jewish culture.
10 Young, 12.
13 Young, “Eclipse of Humanity: An Interview with Professor James E. Young,”
14 James E. Young, At Memory’s Edge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 12.
15 Giorgio Agamben explores the etymology of this name, and finds that in various death camps these “living dead” prisoners were referred to in various ways: “donkeys,” “cretins,” “cripples,” “camels,” and “trinkets.” Agamben speculates that “the most likely explanation of the term can be found in the literal meaning of the Arabic word *muslim*; the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God … but the *Muselmann* of Auschwitz is instead defined by a loss of all will and consciousness,” *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 44.
16 Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 44.
18 It is worth noting, that by drawing a comparison between Levi’s account and Whiteread’s books, I am unwittingly referring to Whiteread’s books as male. While a book may be genderless, Levi’s *Muselmann* is defined as male. While they share similarities in descriptive terms, I consider Whiteread’s library to be a genderless space. Levi’s account raises questions regarding the imagination of a female *Muselmann*.
20 Agamben, 50.
21 Agamben, 41. Agamben begins his section on the *Muselmann* with, “The untestifiable, that to which no one has borne witness, has a name. In the jargon of the camp, it is der *Muselmann.*”
22 Agamben says this so eloquently that I would like to reiterate it here: “In Auschwitz, people did not die; rather, corpses were produced. Corpses without death, non-humans whose decease is debased into a matter of serial production.” *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 72.
24 Lessing: The inventor of dramaturgy, he says, “There is no staging without interpretation.” Lessing is concerned with theater, but the implications of his thought are much larger; there is only text as a call to interpretation, and the interpreter is the one that really gives the work meaning.