

Title:

Question 2: Exploring art outside the Gallery space discusses how artists have developed art practice utilising space and or place. Focus on more than one example of practitioners and or thinkers.

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Within this essay I will be analysing the development of practice outside the gallery space surrounding artists Ana Mendieta and Rachel Whiteread. I will be applying the thinker Gaston Bachelard's philosophies on space within their work along with other philosophical sources to demonstrate the significance of open space works. Gaston Bachelard was a French philosopher who was born in 1884 and died in 1964. He had extensive knowledge of maths, science, psychology and philosophy, this is made evident in his writing where he analyses a way of thinking in the context of memories and pronounces it Topoanalysis in 'Poetics of Space' (1994) -

"A psychoanalyst should, therefore, turn his attention to this simple localization of our memories. I would like to give the name of topoanalysis to this auxiliary of psychoanalysis. Topoanalysis, then, would be the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives."

Within this literature/philosophy study, he discusses that a house is a space in which memories are created and flourish. He emphasises a house isn't a physical or exact place but a space of nostalgia, where memories are placed in different parts, a metaphorical house / space. In summary, he states the time of the memory is commonly unknown but the remembrance of the space it took place in is what remains prominent. In relation to this I believe that artist Rachel Whiteread's use of space in 'House' (1993) is very complimentary to Bachelard's philosophy on this house of memories and gives a literal physicality to that metaphorical house he discusses.



Rachel Whiteread's '*House*' (1993)

Rachel Whiteread, born in 1953, is an English artist that works primarily on sculptural objects using casts. She was the first woman to win the Turner prize in 1993 for her most established piece '*House*' (1993). She began to have a liking for sculptural objects after she took a casting workshop with Richard Wilson, a sculptural artist, where it is said she began to see the possibilities of this medium and the benefits within her work. She attended Cyprus College of Art for a short period and then moved on to Slade School of Art where she was taught by artist Phyllida Barlow from 1985 to 1987, graduating in 1987. I will be analysing her architectural piece '*House*' due to its unique format and place. The *House* (1993) was on Grove Road, Mile End, in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, where she made a concrete cast of the inside of an east terest house. During the meditative period of the work, she began to consider the piece with the assistance of James Lingwood in 1991, where they looked at several houses to cast but found no success, eventually she designed her

own. What's interesting is that the exterior of the house is the previous interior, bringing you inside the house visually. She demonstrated an inordinate use of space using the surroundings to the work's benefit by placing it in the particular location. She creates a scene of entrapped memories in a form recognisable to all due to the common surroundings of living in a town. It's surrounded by a field and there are houses in the background, in any other context it might not have been recognisable to this extent. An interesting addition to this was the influence of the space around it made it a seminal piece of work as it was only standing for a few months before it was demolished due to the "Tower Hamlets council's plan to create a Green Corridor, unifying the broken line of parkland between the Isle of Dogs and the established lung of Victoria Park." - *Roman Road London paper* (2015).

The ephemerality of this piece makes the economical and historical context more impactful and thus creating a relationship with the poetic house Bachelard discussed in *Poetics of Space* (1994) -

"Of course, thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated."

Whiteread's *'House'* (1993) also presents an essence of Plato's allegory of the cave, one of the most famous allegories in philosophy. Plato's allegory is told as a story, which begins with people in a cave who have never seen the light. Amongst the darkness the people in the cave see shadows of objects and conspire about what they are, convinced that they know and are right. The story continues with one of the

cave dwellers finding a way out of the cave and witnessing the light and outside world. Stunned by the light, they head back into the cave and trip and fall inside. The other cave dwellers assume the person has gone mad and is wrong about what they saw, thus concluding in the cave dwellers killing the enlightened person. The conclusion to this allegory is that there is a need for open mindedness, the nature of belief over knowledge. What we see here with the house, is the inside exposed from the outside, a format of the house we have never seen before, we only know the inside of the house once we have stepped in it. To see this from the outside perspective is unusual, making Rachel Whiteread's cast the outside of the cave, enlightening those who see it creating a conflict between our knowledge and our sight. The house exposes us to comprehend the true nature of the reality of the piece, through observation of the external interior that we're presented with.

A source I find relevant to this work's use of space is the award winning National Trust photo for the front cover of the 2017 National Trust handbook. The photo is of a family running by the seaside, which would be considered abnormal for a National Trust photo as they are dominantly forest and countryside based. There is a significance to the photo being taken in the landscape it was in, by the seaside. There is a significance of this place to the demographic of viewers due to it being a common landscape everyone is aware of and creates memories in, a familiar space. There has been discussion through the media that discusses the importance and significance of landscape to convey a message to the observer through simple formatting and generic settings, as in the National Trust stock photo. The relevance to Whiteread's work is the implication of memories being made based on the

landscape/space, as the photo generates stories of different contexts such as historical and cultural contexts.

This further emphasises the importance of the landscape of Whiteread's House and its significance of the space it is in. The house is a place in which people live, make memories and pass by everyday. This is demonstrated by the way the house has been placed, whilst also signifying economic identity and creating a historic memory through its ephemerality and circumstance, all due to the development of the space in which it was placed. It's also mentioned that some people may not understand the message of the photograph by simply looking at it but they presented it to a target demographic, people who will already understand due to circumstance. This can be seen with the House piece as the people around it will understand the work because they may have similar houses on the inside, or they live in a common area where it's recognisable for its economical background and importance, something not achievable in a gallery.

Another artist I feel has a relevant and unique use of space is Ana Mendieta. Who utilised the nature around her as a space to perform her works in. Ana Mendieta was a Cuban American, sculptural artist born in 1948 and died in 1985. She was known for her interaction with nature within her works and the embrace of her surroundings. I decided to compare this artist with Rachel Whiteread due to the contrast in style and the external and internal links. Whiteread's house brings the inside outside, whereas Mendieta leaves an imprint. Another contrast is the use of surroundings, Whiteread used the land and scenery for impact, Mendieta actually incorporates the

natural surroundings and uses them in the piece. This makes the surroundings act as a frame for this imprint of self, as a painting would be framed in a gallery.

Before going into Mendieta's works that utilise space outside the gallery, I will be analysing the development of her work from the gallery space to the outside world. Her early works were inspired and came from her education in the University of Iowa, where she focused on discrimination, violence and feminism due to a traumatic event of a school friend that was raped and murdered on campus. She performed 'Rape Scene' and took several photographs of herself naked from the waist down and covered in blood, these photos were hung in her apartment where people were invited to view them. Developing from this, it is evident she became more involved in performance art outside in nature as she explored feminism more and the spiritual connection she believed women had with the earth, transitioning to her use of space in a unique way outside the gallery. I will be analysing pieces from her *Siluetas* series.

"Through my earth/body sculptures, I become one with the earth ... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs."

Ana Mendieta (1980)

She was very passionate about these works and conducted herself directly to the female body through social and societal views. Art historian Cabanäs quoted in *Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 1999) -

"Her body was the subject/ object of her work, revealing the society conditions by which the female body is colonised as the object of male desire and roughed under masculine aggression."



Untitled - Silueta series (1973 - 1978)

In this piece *Untitled from the Silueta series (1976)* we see how the space and landscape interact with the piece. The piece uses the space around it by creating an indexical mark, an index someone was there, demonstrating a mechanism of natural movement using the landscape. Mendieta would typically use her naked body for pieces like this, demonstrating the stripping away of the inessentials, creating a direct intimacy with nature, exploring and connecting with it. The piece is an imprint of her body in the sand next to the sea, and as the tide comes in the imprint of herself in the sand fills up with the water, and the bubbles and foam create patterns and give the imprint life. What I admire about this piece is the relevance of the interaction between the bubbles and foam to the intent and how it carries out a dialogue of the human body and landscape surrounding it.

The piece expresses femininity and the foam creates a spiral at the stomach area, as if there's life there, signifying women creating life, to my interpretation. A relevant

reference to this I believe is philosopher Carolyn Merchant's writings on the early scientific gendering of nature in *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1996). Merchant discusses the links made between women and nature throughout history and how the Mother Nature figure came into place in art through the patriarchal world. She mentions how in early art women were portrayed as one with nature within artworks, but when King James I became king of England and incorporated witchcraft penalties, that portrayal changed. It transitioned from women being beautiful, life bearing and with nature to women being a wild nature in need of control. Ana Mendieta takes this work back to before those times, back to the roots in history where women were respected and powerful forces of nature in society.

The water creates an additional elegance to the piece as if she's wearing a dress, emphasising traditional femininity. In addition to this, there is a feminine essence to the piece psychologically, through Barthes Semiotics theory of signs where connotations are made through colours and symbols. In this case the pale, pink glow the work possesses creates a feminine ambience through traditional female colours through old stereotypes. This work utilises that theory of semiotics by using the landscapes and spaces tones to romanticise and explore that aspect of femininity. Furthermore, the scene where this work takes place creates a dramatic, romantic atmosphere merely by it being beside the ocean, a place of traditional romance through stereotypes in the media over the years.

In this series of works there is an ephemeral element, like Whiteread's house, only the works aren't demolished by people, it's by nature. This sand piece was washed away over time making it more impactful due to it only being witnessed by Ana

Mendieta herself, further emphasising the intimacy with herself and nature whereas photo is what everyone else witnesses. This demonstrates a unique use of space that creates a natural mechanism that couldn't happen naturally in a gallery space.



Alma Silueta en Fuego / Soul Silueta on fire (1975)

In his piece Mendieta demonstrates a different natural element, fire. The fire represents Mendieta's rage against the treatment of women during the 1970s and the patriarchy, ahead of her time for this form of social statement. The piece of work is an impression of her body in the ground like the untitled sand piece but with a flammable material placed within it. The actual piece is shown as a video that captures the flames burning in the figure until they eventually fizzle out, leaving ashes. Evidently the use of space was a key element for this piece, as it is something that couldn't be safely done in a gallery, but more so because the piece is natural, it shows the natural element of fire and it was only fitting for the piece to be in a natural habitat. As the literal interpretation with Whiteread's house and Bachelard's philosophy of a house, here we see a literal interpretation of Plato's allegory in the cave. This fire brings light to the eyes of its viewers, exposing the truth

within the patriarchy and the mistreatment of women, but those unwilling to learn about it remain ignorant to it, like the cave dwellers. This is one of her more violent pieces incorporating the outside space and once again containing that ephemeral element thus making it more impactful and intimate.

Through this research I've been able to consider the different positive and effective aspects of the use of space outside the gallery. Works of art outside allow the landscape to create a message for the work or even emphasise the intended message. I intend to carry this research into my further practises as ana mendieta and rachel whiteread did after their workshops in casting, sculpting and gain an awareness of space and the potential impact of it. To conclude with a quote from Poetics of Space by Gaston Bachelard that I feel is fitting for the works I've analysed

“Thus, by approaching the house images with care not to break up the solidarity of the memory and imagination, we may hope to make others feel all the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us at an unimaginable depth.”

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