INCARNATE

PRESENCE AND VESTIGE IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE

Submitted by

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STATEMENT OF SOURCES

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

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This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Michael P. Needham
27th February 2010

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ABSTRACT

Incarnate: presence and vestige in contemporary art practice is a body of sculptural work presented as a series of human-scale physical vessels intended for installation in the gallery and other settings. In conjunction with a supporting visual and textual document I utilize these vessels to posit and explore a primary parallel between the Christian concept of The Incarnation and an art process traditionally conceived as creative experience made manifest.

My central argument is that the soteriological idea of 'God made flesh' corresponds to fundamental artistic aspirations whereby abstract concepts and propositions are rendered as tangible material form. In this way the sculptural work seeks to reflect divine aspirations while also prefiguring mortality, death and the potential for transfiguration.

Core concepts of presence, absence, body-space, and trace together with their implicit Christian resonances hold the vessels together as a coherent series of research outcomes. Throughout, the ambiguous entity of the tomb or crypt reappears to trouble the viewer with their own precarious relation to corporeality.

It is in this context that Incarnation remains a pivotal paradoxical theme of the thesis: how are we to consider embodiment as a 'containment of form' yet also as the miraculous marker of a seemingly always-impossible 'transcendence'?

As a PhD by visual research my written text is designed to exegetically extend and articulate important concerns circulating within the visual work produced as the thesis.

Contents

LIST OF FIGURES

43. Plaster relief of the author's face, 2003. Photo: M. Needham.

44. Marc Quinn, *Self* (detail), 1991. Artist's blood, stainless steel, perspex, refrigeration unit. 208 x 63 x 63 cm. Image from Marc Quinn, *Incarnate: Marc Quinn* (1998).

45. Christian Boltanski, *Christian Boltanski at Five Years and Three Months Apart*, 1970. 2 passport photos, typewritten text, index card. Approx. 7.5 x 12.5 cm. Image from Christian Boltanski, *Christian Boltanski,* with Didier Semin, Tamar Garb, Donald Kuspit (London: Phaidon Press, 1997).

46. Master of Saint Veronica, *Saint Veronica with the Sudarium,* around 1420. Oil on walnut.

47. Negative of the *Shroud of Turin* (detail of head), carbon dated at 1260-1390.

48. Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled* (Table), 1993. Resin. Image courtesy of http://jeffreylancaster. blogspot.com/2008_03_30_archive.html (accessed 10th July 2008)

49. Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled* (Bath), 1990. Plaster. 103 x 105.5 x 209.5 cm. Image courtesy of http://www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.pl?x=/cgi-bin/undo/magazines/magazines.pl%3Fid %3D944747879%26riv%3Dflashint%26home%3D (last accessed 11th Jan 2010)

50. Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost*, 1990. Plaster on steel frame. 269 x 355 x 317.5 cm. Image courtesy of http://www.nga.gov/press/2004/releases/fall/whiteread.shtm (accessed 10th July 2008)

51. Joseph Beuys, *Fat Chair*, 1964. Wooden chair, metal, fat. 90 x 90 x 30 cm. Image courtesy of http://www.designboom.com/history/stilllife.html (last accessed 11th Jan 2010)

52. Michael Needham, *The urn*, Yarra Sculpture Gallery, August 2005. Dirt, cement and steel reinforcing. 330 x 50 x 30 cm. Photo: M. Needham.

53. Urn-trace on gallery floor, August 2005. Photo: M. Needham.

54. Marmite lid 'Jesus', found by British mother Claire Allen, 2009. Image courtesy of the *Daily Mail Reporter*, 28th May 2009, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1189188/The-Marmite-messiah-How-mother-Jesus-ja.html (accessed 15th Dec 2009)

Terminal Space

55. Couvent Sainte Marie de la Tourette, Beaujolais, France. Image courtesy of L'Association des Amis de la Tourette and http://www.arcspace.com/architects/corbusier/La_Tourette/letter/ (last accessed 14th Feb 2010)

56. Individual cell, Couvent Sainte Marie de la Tourette, Beaujolais, France. Photo: Tim Benton, courtesy of http://www.artandarchitecture.org.uk/search/results.html?display=Le+Corbusier+(Charles+Edouard+Jeanneret)&_creators=ULAN32551&sort=title (last accessed 14th Feb 2010)

57. Anselm Kiefer, *Man in a Forest,* 1971. Oil on canvas. 174 x 189 cm. Image from Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth*, exh. cat. (Texas: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and Prestel Publishing, 2005).

58. Anselm Kiefer, *Melancholia*, 2004. Oil, acrylic, emulsion on canvas, glass polyhedron. 281 x 382 cm. Image from Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth* (2005).

59. Anselm Kiefer, *Sulamith*, 1983. Oil emulsion, wood-cut, shellac, acrylic, straw on canvas. 290 x 370 cm. Image courtesy of http://www.monumenta.com/2007/index.php?option=com_conte nt&task=view&id=91&Itemid=9 (accessed 8th March 2009)

60. Anselm Kiefer, *Von den verlorenen gerührt, die der Glaube nicht trug, erwachen die Trommeln im Fluss (The drums in the river came alive, beaten by the lost ones, who were not supported by faith),* 2004. Oil, emulsion, acrylic and sand on canvas with concrete staircase. 380 x 560 cm. © the artist. Photo: Stephen White. Courtesy Jay Jopling / White Cube (London)

61. Anselm Kiefer, *Landschaft mit Koft (Landscape with Head),* 1973. Oil, distemper and charcoal on burlap, with charcoal on cardboard. 210 x 240 cm. Image from Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, exh. cat. (USA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987).

62. Anselm Kiefer, *Resurrexit*, 1973. Oil, acrylic, charcoal on burlap. 290 x 180 cm. Image from Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Openings

88. Untitled third work (for *Uncontained* Part 2) entrance under construction. Artist's studio, 2007. Photo: M. Needham.

89. Untitled third work (for *Uncontained* Part 2) body under construction. Artist's studio, 2007. Photo: M. Needham.

90. Anish Kapoor, *The Healing of St. Thomas*, 1989. Fibreglass, plaster, pigment, gouache. 35 x 18 x 2 cm. Image courtesy of http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details. aspx?intObjectID=5166724 (last accessed 14th Feb 2010)

91. Anish Kapoor, *Memory*, 2008. Installation view at the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin. Cor-Ten steel. 14.5 x 8.97 x 4.48 m. Photo: Mathias Schormann, courtesy of http://www.db-artmag. com/de/52/feature/erinnerung-und-skulptur---studiobesuch-bei-anish-kapoor/ (last accessed 14th Feb 2010)

92. Anish Kapoor, *Memory*, 2008. Installation view at the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin. Cor-Ten steel. 14.5 x 8.97 x 4.48 m. Photo: Mathias Schormann, courtesy of http://www.db-artmag. com/en/52/feature/memory-and-sculpture---a-studio-visit-with-anish-kapoor/ (accessed 18th June 2009)

Crypt

93. Claes Oldenburg (kneeling) and *Placid Civic Monument* in Central Park, October 1, 1967. Image courtesy of http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/index/croak/croak11-10-2.asp (accessed 20th April 2009)

94. Scene from "Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite," in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968.

95. Scene from "Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite," in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968.

96. Scene from "Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite," in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968.

97. Tony Smith, *Wall,* AP of 3, 1964. Steel, painted black. 243.8 x 548.6 x 61 cm. Image courtesy of http://www.artnet.com/Galleries/Artwork_Detail.asp?G=&gid=141001&which=&ViewArti stBy=&aid=15768&wid=424714348&source=artist&rta=http://www.artnet.com (accessed 24th April 2009)

98. Entrance into an early Christian tomb under the name of *Gallery 5 cubiculum* (location unspecified). Image from Antonio Ferrua, *The Unknown Catacomb* (Scotland: Geddes and Grosset, 1991).

99. Stone/concrete object beneath stairwell in St Mary's Cathedral crypt, Sydney. Photo: M. Needham.

100. Ransacked tomb with image of *The raising of Lazarus from the dead* (location unspecified). Image from Antonio Ferrua, *The Unknown Catacomb* (1991).

101. Standing Buddha, Northern Qi Dynsasty (550-77). Image from Societe des Amis du Musee Cernuschi. http://amis-musee-cernuschi.org/actualites (accessed 22st Jan 2010)

102. William Torel (1275-1300) *Effigy of Queen Eleanor of Castile,* 1290. Bronze, Westminster Abbey, London. Image courtesy of Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World*, London: Calmann and King Ltd, 1996.

103. Bernardo Rossellino, *Tomb of Leonardo Bruni*, 1444-47. Santa Croce, Florence. Image Courtesy of Web Gallery of Art, http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/r/rosselin/bernardo/bruni.html (accessed 22nd Jan 2010)

104. Michael Needham, sketch for *Substratum*: a hollow plinth on top of a hidden 244 x 205 x 122 cm pit, 2006-2007.

105. Michael Needham, diagram of *Substratum* (with underground structure), 2007.

106. Michael Needham, *Substratum*, 2007, as installed in the grounds of McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park. Concrete, steel, galvanized steel, hole, interior curtain. 244 x 274 x 122 cm. Photo: M. Needham.

107. Interior detail of *Substratum,* 2008 (taken during de-installation, with top removed for photographic access). Photo: M. Needham.

Postscript

INTRODUCTION

Figure 1. Michael Needham, *Casket,* 2005. Blue-gum, steel, brass. 205 x 55 x 45 cm.

The Box: a preliminary figure of containment

At the beginning of my research towards this thesis, the first object I conceived and made was a polished wooden box much like a casket. It was constructed from Sydney blue-gum flooring and inlaid into the surface of its lid was a brass navigational star. As I perceived, and with subtle reference to the narrative of Christ; his birth, death and resurrection, it was an image of an end and a beginning, two parts combined into one.[1]

Even though there were no actual tapered sides to this box, as is often a typical trait by which a coffin is distinguished, the defaulting term for the box became a 'casket'.[2] Also, while it was never intentionally made as a box for burying human remains, a primary consideration was that it would register, in both a visual and tactile sense, as a functional holding device for which a casket is recognizably employed. In this case, and particularly on account of the unambiguously human scale of this box, it was certainly intended for it to give imaginative reference to the strange and static, yet hidden contents of a casket: the human *body* in that moment of limbo when the casket iterates its definition in the funereal setting (i.e. in the funeral parlour, hearse, gravesite etc.). However for this casket, the 'body' was not at all presented or accessible. It was only *implied* via the closed container, which expressed a preliminary point of interest. This was a reference, a displacement and a withholding of an absent yet strange and familiar subject – the mortal body - by using a simple emblem of containment.

Defaulting as a non-disclosing yet imaginative 'casket', it was also clear that the qualities of the box's displayed exterior played a critical role in terms of directing attention to its inner unseen contents. Instead of using literal characteristics spelling out external form - like the tapered sides of a coffin – a muted reference, here orienting the function of the box as a containing device, allowed for visual ambiguities of reading. This also served to *sustain* imagination and attention on the object as a whole.[3] The underlying subject expressed in the casket was of the *nature of embodiment* as limited by human

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[1] In this case, the box was intentionally made to be suggestive of a contained existence, while being centrally inscribed by what can be taken as both a nativity star, and a navigational star: an apparatus for passage. If this 'star' were read as being decorative of a coffin, it also reiterates an ancient Egyptian tradition of painting a boat onto the outside of sarcophagi, in order to illustrate the journey that is believed the dead must take after death.

[2] According to *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English*, any box used to bury the dead is a coffin. So by this definition, and incorporating an assumed functionality, my 'casket' easily and practically defaults to a 'coffin'. However, it is an American euphemism to make a distinction between a coffin - a tapered box (anthropoidal in shape) - and a casket, which is rectangular. Kenneth G. Wilson, *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English* (Columbia University Press, 1993). http://www.bartleby.com/68/43/1143.html (accessed 18th April 2007)

[3] It is worth noting that a 'casket' also pertains to a prettified coffin (a box with emphasis given to its exterior), or alternatively, a small box for holding/hiding precious keepsakes. In this regard, by appearance, my casket was at least again correctly distinguished from an all too clichéd 'coffin' (which would arguably only limit its meaning in its reference to 'death'), along with a subsidiary suggestion of meaning, referring to its interior content being personal and precious. The secretive aspect of the contents of this casket was then another defining reference serving to amplify interest in what was kept hidden and undisclosed, thus helping to sustain a sense of mystery through its withheld interior, signifying through its exterior presence.

mortality, thus indicating a kind of sensed bodily mystery defined within materiality. In other words, the limitations of embodiment within fixed form, was where a 'mystery of the body' corresponded to a haunting corporeality. Subsequently, my struggle to grasp this mystery resulted in a box, which was emblematic of 'interment' as much as it was of containment.

Realizing this subject as being familiar with my own condition, the nature of embodiment for me identified the ultimate condition within which Christ - a 'god-become-man' - would have had to negotiate. Materializing this casket was a tangible means of exploration and articulation of this ultimate condition, i.e. by engaging with it through the process of conceiving, measuring, cutting, gluing, sanding, polishing, presenting, etc. In other words, in making this box I was grappling with the nature of embodiment, specifically in relation to its ultimate limitations as represented by the form of the casket. Making the casket was in this way a means to be present with my mortality. Likewise (and not unlike the carpenter from Nazareth[4]), this situation identifies a struggle to articulate the same condition through which 'God' purportedly became an intercessor in order to open up a means of transcendence *through* it. Making and encountering this casket can then essentially be seen as an attempt to grasp and negotiate this passage: this mysterious self-abnegating proposition of making my own casket.

…

In expressing a pertinent tension in terms of what can or can't be embodied or represented within a limited corporeal entity, there is a critical frame of reference that is the kernel of my enquiry. This is the concept of The Incarnation. As contemporary art historian Georges Didi-Huberman has said, The Incarnation is "the highest and most haunting mystery of all Christian civilization."[5] This claim of a divine manifestation *incarnate* within the corporeal nature of *the human body*, is where a "haunting mystery" is also broadly encapsulated as a 'mystery of the body'.[6] In this respect, the mystery of The Incarnation – as Didi-Huberman further notes - is initially specified as a "mystery of *his* body"[7] (Christ's body), a mystery of God 'taking on the bodily nature of a man' through which the 'spiritual life could be recalled.'[8] In Christ's body, a primary religious *ideal* in which to hope for is clarified, that is, both of 'God' being manifest and of transcendence from the mortal body being available. Not only did this correspond to the resurrection but also to Christ's nature 'revealing a dignity in human nature' made in the divine image.[9] Yet on the contrary, Christ's *body* also revealed something wholly other than a dignity of human

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[4] A shrewd interpretation of Jesus grappling with his own mortality, leading to his 'call' as the Christ, is explored in Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, *The Last Temptation* (1951), and later translated into film by Martin Scorsese (1988). In Scorsese's version, the audience is introduced to Jesus the carpenter, measuring himself up against a cross that he is making for the Romans, in order to crucify one of many false messiahs. See Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation*, trans., P.A.Bien (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1975); Martin Scorsese, dir., *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Universal Studios, 1988).

[5] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans., Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.

[6] Ibid., 4. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, trans., Cyril Vollert, S.J. (St. Louis and London: B. Herder Book Co., 1947) 199, 201. http://www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/CDtexts/Compendium.htm (accessed 13th Nov 2009).

[7] Ibid., 4.

[8] Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology* (1947), 201.

[9] Ibid., 201.

nature, through the kind of violence inflicted upon it in the crucifixion, even while his bodily form (inclusive of his historical being) exemplified such a fundamental ideal. This coincidently exposed human nature at its ugliest through a loss of humanity, which only demonstrated a need for reparation (with God and/or a divine nature) like the one claimed through Christ. Further to this, the ideal exemplified by Christ's present-yet-now-absent body is rendered mystifying on account of a mode of inaccessibility; its claimed ascension pronounces a return of this body to the transcendental and effectively idealizes a kind of practical disembodiment. In my own reading, it is this accumulated *image* pertaining to Christ's *body* – beautiful and horrific, mortal yet resurrected, present yet absent - which conveys a more implicitly *haunting* mystery within the concept of The Incarnation. In a more general sense, this image resonates within the context of the remaining human condition, where the body is still a harbinger of failure and a reminder of death. In this sense, the proposition of The Incarnation *haunts* by haunting this body, which is accustomed to its corporeality, and from which the desire to transcend its physical and symbolic limitations lies close to the heart of much religious enquiry. Such is the 'mystery of the body' that divine embodiment entails.

To articulate this mystery, the position I come from is as a contemporary visual artist. The Incarnation is in this regard, a seed: to creatively pry open, to explore, to contemplate, to question and to express in terms that can be visually realized. In that the very idea of *Incarnation* - inherently yet not necessarily inclusive of *The* Incarnation - also proposes a material manifestation of an 'immaterial', abstract concept, it should also be noted that this idea in itself closely parallels the artistic process including the ideals of making and encountering through aesthetic experience. This is particularly evident when considering the artistic process through a sculptural means, whereby an abstract idea is made into form and brought-out into the tangible realm of physical things. As my artistic practice for the most part incorporates sculptural installation, this means that behind the physicality of the creative process, my own practical research methodology strategically begins by acknowledging a kind of physical, bodily dialogue with the idea and meaning of Incarnation.

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What I offer in the following artworks, and exegetically in this text, is a series of open propositions as a responsive engagement with the general idea of Incarnation. As ruminations, these in turn investigate the kinds of haunting reverberations that are initiated when explored in relation to human experience, which above all, recognizes a corporeality of the body. Importantly, each rumination ends with a physical outcome. Like bodies of thoughts congealed into form, these materializations are given to the viewer to be encountered and negotiated in the proposition of their own physicality. Their success exists insofar as they carry and disclose a 'sense of meaning' that is undergirded by a sense of greater paradoxical mystery being presented through tangible – sculptural - means. What I offer within this exploration is a response appropriate to my practice, while extending an invitation for the viewer/reader to voyage with me in this larger journey of articulation. Firstly, however, a clear definition of Incarnation is in order. It is here that varying provocations in regard to the relationship between the human condition and divine embodiment are identified, and from which multiple trajectories of interpretation also begin, each according to an

extensive reflection and the license taken through an artistic means of exploration. Like the example of the 'casket' already given, this will help to outline the context in which the following body of work will take place, while demonstrating the type of reflective engagement anticipated through them.

Incarnation: definition and a research question

Incarnation, translated from ecclesiastical Latin essentially means '*made into flesh*'.[10] This can be "a deity, spirit, or abstract quality" embodied as 'a person', although its dominant reading in the West is defined via Christian theology and refers to Jesus the Christ, claimed to be 'the embodiment of God, made in human flesh'. As a verb, the definition gets a little looser: to incarnate is 'to embody or *represent* (a deity or spirit) *in human form*'. But it is also "to put (an idea or other abstract concept) into concrete form". It also refers more simply to 'the living embodiment of a quality'.[11]

From here multiple directions begin to open up in terms of exploring this definition. One can immediately begin to think of 'The Incarnation' as the well-traveled theological proposition and debate, i.e. that which claims God is or was embodied in human form, or conversely, that which claims God cannot be embodied as such without being corrupted in the process (or that which proposes a myriad of options in between). While this would ordinarily be contained to a theological enquiry, it still bridges the way to exploring some basic corresponding issues of representation in art.

On the other hand, from an artistic point of view, one could think of the creative possibilities in terms of the kinds of qualities that could be carried over and manifested into form, as well as what kinds of qualities are limited by form. In particular, the question that stirs for me is: What kinds of abstract qualities, perhaps likened to a deity or spirit, or 'the divine' (as a quality given to 'God') can be *embodied*? How could this be determined on a level of aesthetic experience?[12] That is, how can art – as a "vehicle for aesthetic experience" – be strategically used to engender both a visual and conceptual investigation of this subject thus facilitating a 'contemplative state' informed by the senses?[13]

This is the point where my preliminary research question is asked: Can I make art that proposes the manifestation of 'God' as a material proposition?(!) The reflection that this fraught question provokes is what interests me the most in terms of its artistic potential. The *ideal* of such a proposition has certain representational implications, and this in itself can be seen as a pertinent subject worthy of visual

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[10] *The New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition*, ed., Erin McKean (Oxford University Press, 2005).

[11] Ibid.

[12] To briefly clarify, my usage of the term 'aesthetic experience,' refers simply to a subject that is perceptible to the senses based on the Greek words *aisthanesthai*, 'to perceive', and *aisthetikos*, or *aistheta*, meaning 'perceptible things'. This pertains to the realm of 'aesthetics' before Alexander Baumgarten later relegated the definition to the 'science of sensory *beauty*'. Michael Inwood, ed., "Commentary," in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans., Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 98. See also *The New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition* (2005).

[13] Noel Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 159-62.

exploration – seeking to somehow consolidate the implications - as well as being a resource of reflection in the process. Working broadly with varying kinds of visual and theoretical intricacy, it can also be said that one of the primary concerns of contemporary art is with materializing the implications of ideals (including – importantly - its own), and bringing resolution not to the implication, but to its actual representation within the work. This is inherently part of an important creative insight, through which traits such as ambiguity, perturbation, irony, strangeness, doubt and paradox, among others, have for some time been used to facilitate dialogue with the viewer by inviting reflective and conceptual analysis.[14] Where a discourse incorporating these qualities can be translated into – and extracted from - a physical encounter; that, for me, is where the realm of art critically comes into being. This is where I propose that a wide-ranging significance in art, parallel to the paradoxical nature of Incarnation, is to be realized.

My specific and more immediate research objective is to examine whether a meaningful parallelism can be established between the apparent impossible/possibility of The Incarnation, and an art process conceived as a mode of creative experience manifested in materiality. Articulating a suspicion of this objective - within the historically precarious presupposition of an impossibility or possibility (of divine embodiment) - the following question is also outlined: Is not such an embodiment also a forfeiture of the quality that is claimed to be manifest? As a specific example of a rationally conceived shortcoming concerning the ideal of Incarnation, this question is accordingly part of a larger undercurrent of questions that have been fed directly into my own artistic process. Maintaining dialogic considerations such as this within the final body of work is then also a key component that will indicate a successful research outcome, presented for the viewer's own reflective engagement.

Through this exploration and its process, my hope is for a productive dialogue between art and theology, and between the respective modes of meaning offered through their intersecting ways of thinking and rethinking around the notion of Incarnation. As the efforts of theology are made (at least in part) in the service of articulating the experiences of religious faith, it is also my hope that various ways of seeing and experiencing within the perceptual engagement and function of art, will not only confirm existing interrelations between art and theology, but form new metaphoric and symbolic associations through a sensitive cross-fertilization.

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[14] I am here primarily referring to the commonly held value that contemporary art places on differing kinds of indeterminacy, which in turn keep a work of art 'open' to interpretation, thus provoking reflective analysis even while it is 'complete and closed as a balanced organic whole.' Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans., Anna Cancogni, with introduction by David Robey (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4-5.

Discovery in the rumination that follows

Under the possibility of what the Incarnation proposes – of God, an abstract concept, made manifest - I have sought to explore and express an immaterial quality as a material entity. Accordingly, with the artistic resolution of each work a new work also began. Thus, what has resulted from this research is primarily a series of works exploring a collection of key ideas in and between their individual forms. This basically illustrates the practical nature and ongoing creative process behind this type of research. Yet of itself, this is also an underlying indication that each work failed to actualize the ideal of the subject as a single material entity. The 'result' therefore, of a *series* of works, only becomes apparent because the ideal on which they are all individually based is fraught with metaphysical delimitations, which hold that God – the ultimate abstract concept – is wholly *beyond* apprehension. While 'God' is the central (signified) concept around which this same reality is constituted, the realm of the material can only be defined in opposition to God.[15] This basically means that *resolution* (of the ideal of The Incarnation) through material means was perpetually forestalled and displaced onto the next work. The subject of Incarnation, however, fundamentally carries a predisposition for this failure in that it proposes precisely what is 'impossible'. In fact its redeeming function – as another ideal embodied in the claim of The Incarnation - is only mobilized by the hope it proclaims in the face of impossibility, highlighting 'human failure' and the reality of mortality.[16] In this sense, as each work in the series has grappled with the ideal of apprehending what resists being materialized, they have necessarily conceded to this conundrum. Nevertheless, while failing to disentangle the conundrum of the subject, they have become resolved – perhaps only - in this admission. Because of the reflective analysis that this provokes, it is this 'quality' which I have considered to be worthy of pursuing in each artwork. Therefore as a series, they have proceeded to 'flesh out' and articulate an acknowledgment of the 'ultimate' *limitations* of the nature of embodiment, as well as the corresponding complexity involved in the proposed transcendence of these limitations. Being pertinent to an explored 'mystery of the body,' the interplay between mortality and a proposed transcendence is constantly and intentionally maintained. Hence the practical and symbolic gesture of the 'box' has also come to epitomize the conceptual framework in which this is grounded.

Expounding on this interplay and with each work adding to a larger body of work, these individual objects have become a suite of body containers or crypts. Some have become vacant and waiting, others closed and dormant. In each case, they have come to singularly *designate* a *space* for or of embodiment without depicting any bodily representation. As the viewer/reader will discover, each container becomes a *vessel* or *cipher* - even while being a sculpturally fixed object - which contains and releases, conceals and reveals, and which in turn allows for a recurring *suspension* of either *embodiment* or *representation*. This is in accordance with preserving an overall mystery of the body within each work. Importantly, this has

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[15] Similarly within this system, it should also be noted that the realm of the 'body', is dualistically defined in opposition to the 'mind' or 'soul.' This anticipates a corresponding consideration in terms of attempting to 'manifest' a mystery of the body, which warrants an erasing of the body as a means of engaging with its 'mystery' in its complex metaphysical context.

[16] In context to The Incarnation – as the central revelation of Christianity - 'human failure' (along with mortality) is a term that necessarily derives from the doctrine of 'the Fall', which signals the corruption of humankind while forming the overarching premise for humanity's need for a salvation by divine grace in Christ.

identified a critical strategy for encouraging both imagination and possibility of an *incoming* yet *pre-existing* bodily presence, and so also has provided a sensitive framework for approaching some of the fundamental theological concerns on the still contested doctrine of The Incarnation.[17]

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Through this mode of physical and conceptual reflection, what is consistently offered in each of these designated spaces is a kind of *invoked* immaterial presence through a specified framing of absence. As each of these containers designates a *space* of imaginative embodiment, they also quickly come to incorporate a functional quality of the shrine, i.e. a physical place, or enclosure for housing what is held to be sacred. This can include relics in association with a divinity or person, which in turn become a form of memorabilia that is both set apart from the ordinary and designated for safe keeping in the housing of the shrine. This underscores an important development in my initial research: the function of the shrine and its own trait of distinguishing (and memorializing) sacred objects from the ordinary, while encouraging an invocation of a sacred presence, closely corresponding to the physical description by which a memorial is also defined. For the memorial, also usually a physical structure, serves as a reminder to a person or event that is no longer present. It stands in the place of what cannot represent itself, while distinguishing what is worthy of memorial honour. This link, while not usually associated with Incarnation, becomes one of the first trajectories taken up in the first chapter. In relation to recognizing corporeality within my own family circumstances, in this case concerning the death of my grandfather, I recognize at this point how the once embodied (living) human subject has since *become* immaterial. This subsequently developed into a reflection on the nature of the cadaver, the casket and the burial hole, and the crypt, while the work that formed from this reflection became a consolation device.

Leaving the desire to re-member an embodied subject in its absence, what I discovered in this process is that the memorial space/object offers new insights in terms of appealing to and possibly preserving what is (or has become) 'disembodied' through loss. In this regard, the 'box' or 'container' becomes the physical vessel for a particular kind of *retrieval* or anchorage, according to a new function of memorializing what is immaterial. It becomes a place to reconsider the traces that remain, a place *for* a re-membered presence invoked through memory. Stemming from this contemplative encounter, I intentionally took

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[17] An '*incoming* yet *pre-existing* presence' refers to the doctrine of a pre-existent Word (part of the 'Godhead') prior to an earthly manifestation in the person of Christ, which in recent years (not only in Christendom's past) has been one of the more lively subjects for re-interpretation concerning The Incarnation. Issues have generally revolved around either a 'Christ from above' or 'from below', and whether divinity in Christ (and true 'dual nature') is retained, relinquished, granted or even earned. For a brief discussion see John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 57, 250; C. Stephen Evans, "The Self-Emptying of Love: Some Thoughts on Kenotic Christology," in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, eds., Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, SJ, Gerald O'Collins, SJ, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 246-49. For a broader contemporary discussion, see John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), Michael Goulder, ed., *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued* (London: SCM Press; Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), and John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (London: SCM Press; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993, 2005). These terms (of an *incoming* yet *pre-existing* presence) also intentionally allow for and articulate the kind of 'space' set aside for an embodied God, i.e. as a space of specified absence *before* Christ in a messianic anticipation of his coming, and equally *after* Christ, both in the traces that might be left behind and in the believer's anticipation of a second coming.

the idea of an exhumed grave-space before presenting it as a similarly proportioned container into which the viewer might look, as possible consolation for a recognized corporeality found therein.

Accordingly, this exploration into memory paved the way for revisiting Incarnation as an historical event and an old theological doctrine. In this regard, the discovery of a memorial function became critically interwoven with respect to the cultural legacy of Christ, as well as the ideals and limitations by which it is recalled. It is here that I draw on Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ* as a defining image, identifying a melancholic undercurrent for which The Incarnation, incorporating both cross and resurrection, attempts to alleviate.

Figure 2. Hans Holbein the Younger, **The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb**, 1521-1522, oil on wood, Kunstmuseum Basel / Bridgeman Art Library. 30.5 x 200 cm.

An ambiguity between tombs and places of worship becomes more apparent in the second chapter, while continuing as a thread throughout the rest of the work. After following the transitional journey of a large, archaic, hollow, red-gum log, I begin to consider the historically ambiguous Ark of the Covenant: a sacred, dangerous and semi-portable object, both in its purpose as a dwelling place for God and as a kind of container or platform in or upon which God was said to be present. It was through this holy 'container' that God's manifest power was both revealed and enclosed.

Stirred by the proposition of a *containment* of God and by co-following the Old Testament narrative of the original Ark, a primary interest for me became a haunting parallel between the Ark and a *sarcophagus*. As a sarcophagus is a type of heavy-duty casket used for containing human remains and also for speeding up the process of decay, a defining similarity with the Ark pertains to a threatening and superstitious power of death, amidst a latent yet strange sense of domesticity in its 'object-hood'. In light of this intriguing relation, the development of a 'container' form becomes both a remodeling of the ark and a functionally inferred sarcophagus hewn from the large red-gum log. The 'river-red' iconicity born from this primary material, then also triggers speculation concerning the work's significance when considered in a contemporary Australian context.

As the remodeled Ark/sarcophagus was eventually presented in one of Melbourne's prominent Catholic Cathedrals, its installation incorporated a countervailing trait of *emptying* via the residues of its creative transformation being openly displayed. Here on a steel pallet, it was presented in a little side-chapel and intentionally left on its side, with sawdust and pieces of interior spewing out from the process of hollowing. In this way, while essentially expressing a mode of sacredness in its formalized display context,

the Ark/sarcophagus was to become a piece of furnishing that relinquished its holy status, especially as compared with the surrounding architecture. It was in this respect that the concept of *kenosis* was also creatively explored, which is a pivotal Christological term emerging from the early development of the doctrine of The Incarnation, and basically means the act of self-'emptying' in the process of God becoming incarnate.[18] This provoked further reflection and allowed for more conventional association to such sacramental themes as the shedding of blood, of being a sacrificial altar, and of being a reference to an open tomb; all of which were actual responses spoken by local Catholics who saw the work. In any case, the work in the end had to acknowledge that the Ark was a shrine, framing a kind of spatial emptiness for an *arc*. This enabled a re-examination of the Ark/arc as a charged space where it was believed God *dwelt*, as opposed to God being contained within the material limits of the box.

In the third chapter, the idea of a *vessel* is physically introduced through the form of a body-sized amphora that is cast in a dirt and concrete mix. The process of making this work initiated a wide-ranging reflection on the process of casting itself, specifically looking into *liminality* between interior and exterior of formwork and cast, while also exploring a kind of pathos buried inside objects formed through the concealment of matter. After stringing together objects such as the body casts from Pompeii, the death mask, some well-known claims of acheiropoieta,[19] and the practice of English artist Rachel Whiteread, the final 'image' I end with becomes a different type of cast. This is an anthropomorphized trace - as a stenciled image - left on the floor of a warehouse/gallery space when the amphora is de-installed after an exhibition in 2005. I retrace the significance of this image, formed via a dirt stain, by opening a short reflection on the symbolism of dirt within the Judeo-Christian tradition. This helps to identify some basic 'mythical' and etymological insights into the human condition, whereby the hope of divine embodiment is found positioned in a tensive relationship with the base matter, yet 'fertile' sculptural ingredient of earth.

After moving on to consider the weathered cast concrete structure of Le Corbusier's famous 'La Tourette' (a monastery in the south of France), the next chapter focuses on the influential practice of German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer. Through reading a selection of works spanning across his practice, I importantly locate several parallel interests on which my ongoing investigation relating to Incarnation finds new ground. These include a heavily imbued tactility of materials displaying the raw nature of matter and sculptural form, as well as a displacement of the human subject aligning with the absence of represented bodies in my own work. A further trait, and arguably the most recurring in this body of research, becomes a recognition of human failure that is proportionate to the ideals which seek to transcend these same limitations. This becomes obvious through the failure of ideals that Kiefer evidently returns to concerning his national heritage, including the Nazi regime and its attempt at a cultural purification through the Holocaust. It is in this respect among others that a broader parallel with implications of representation become realized, while a wider cultural melancholia can also be seen as being infused within the deeper 'Christian' heritage to which Germany belongs.

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[18] To expand on the concept of *kenosis*, this defines a kind of conditioning, a 'forfeiture of divine qualities' in the process of becoming mortal, and is primarily based on Paul's Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:6-8.

[19] Translated from the Greek, *acheiropoieta* refers to images which are "not created by human hands", usually in direct relation to images of Christ or the Virgin Mary, and of which are instead claimed to have been miraculously made. Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 2.

This reading of Kiefer prepares the ground for a fourth sculptural installment. Various themes uncovered within the preceding investigation allow me to revisit the material tactility of the casting process and to think of its use in terms of architectural intervention. Here also, the authenticity of the cast object, and particularly its tactile value, becomes a primary symbolic and sculptural reference to the graveyard ornament and the crypt. This initiates reflection on the kind of secondary representative object within the crypt as a continuation of my earlier considerations of the grave-space. Amongst other Minimalist influences, including an important work by Robert Morris – which strongly resonates with Holbein's Dead Christ - a part-solid cryptal form as body-enclosure/body-monument, becomes the dominating precedent for a sculptural response. Like the 'casket' at the beginning and in accordance with the concept of a functional crypt, this work returns to the idea of a physically enclosed, implied body-space. This in turn essentially becomes a concrete casket. However this sculptural outcome does not develop without a correlating motif of the drain being used as a physical and spatial counterpart. In this case, an intervening grate was inset into the floor almost directly beneath it, which was positioned to infer an interrelated and disclosed spatial cavity. Through site-specific installation and overall formal composition of this work, a play between enclosed and dis-enclosed space outlines the type of reflective encounter enabled through its display.

Figure 3. Michael Needham, *Untitled* ('casket/plinth/crypt'), 2007.
Concrete, steel, fibre cement.

I then diverge to read into the work of American artist Robert Gober, including his motif of the drain. However, the drain becomes a more pertinent subject in context to his wider practice, which incorporates a strange blend of banal objects, charged iconography and a consistent trait of deceitful mimicry. In this light, I open the reflection with a contentious work from 1997, featuring a punctured statue of the Virgin Mary. This paves the way for discussing the kinds of implications involved when signifiers are altered, either shockingly or subtly, and made into effigious simulacra. I then consider a later work from 2005, which features, poignantly, an unconventional crucifix. This allows me to speak directly to the challenging image of a transmuted Christ, before moving on to discuss critical developments in my own work.

As an extended counterpart to the previous work, this artwork accordingly forms the focal point of the fifth chapter. Through an accompanying reflection I continue to expand on both the work of Gober and Kiefer, and acknowledge a further influence from Anish Kapoor's practice incorporating a sculptural relationship with the void. Stemming primarily from these influences, a more intentional connection between the tomb, the womb as well as the wound is here also explored as a specified bodily encounter for a standing viewer. The resulting work becomes constructed from steel and stained cement sheet, and uses a materially emphasized exterior against a more immaterial quality of a darkened and visually infinite interior. In this way, a threshold between exterior and inner space or sanctum is conceived within the rigid structure of sculptural form. The site-specific placement of this particular work also helps to identify an echo with the gallery's own doorway and stairwell, meaning that it enables a subtle dialogue with the site's own architecture as enclosure.

Figure 4. Michael Needham, *Substratum*, 2007. Concrete, steel, galvanized steel, hole, interior curtain.

As a final chapter to this research, the last work develops by building on an extended discussion around the crypt. This begins by returning to consider an outdoor grave-hole, which in this case, is an 'anti-monumental' sculptural intervention by Claes Oldenburg in New York City's Central Park. This leads to a consideration of negative space as a kind of underlying shadowy other, which is compared with the ambiguous and enigmatic object/space of the 'monolith' in Stanley Kubrick's classic film 2001: A Space Odyssey. By interweaving a short analysis of some related text concerning 'the image' by Maurice Blanchot, the discussion makes important clarifications regarding the relationship between Incarnation and the recurring subject of the crypt.

Critical reflection is offered in respect to a remaining quality of indeterminacy concerning the crypt, both as a physical and psychological place. As an attempt to shed some light on, and if possible decipher, some of this indeterminacy, the discussion makes way for considering interior cryptal spaces and the kinds of objects that are found therein. This subsequently leads to an analysis of the effigy, before using this analysis to clarify what has been an underlying strategic departure from figurative representation in my own series of works, including, importantly, a sixth work specifically for this chapter.

This sixth artwork is positioned to embody many of the themes explored throughout this thesis, while also expanding on a critical interaction with the viewer. Playing on a visual and physical encounter with an externally defined sculptural form, this work opens up a secondary and more dominant experience by revealing a large interior within it. Cast in concrete yet again, it

becomes strategically presented as something akin to an unassuming plinth: something quite commonly found in the sculpture park where it becomes temporally installed. Blending in as if it were some kind of forgotten sewer or bunker, the work accordingly displays a quality of ordinariness with which to subvert. Anticipating this interaction, a large grate is inset into the top of the plinth and utilized as a detail, an apparatus for luring the viewer closer. At this point, viewer's become primed to actively discover a large excavation within the box, which also spatially extends beneath the viewer at the moment of looking in through the grate. Consequently, the work facilitates an experience of looking into the ground, and looking into a vertiginous space of mortality through a body-sized concrete frame.

Accordingly, visual comparisons are identifiable with already mentioned works by Morris and Oldenburg, both as sculptural body-spaces. Their influence is here reinterpreted for the purposes of creating an alternative yet comparably active space: a space for recognizing and contemplating one's corporeal nature.

Since I am approaching this exploration as a visual artist, it is necessary to point out that I am not *writing* a thesis. Nor is it a 'theological' thesis. Firstly, my 'argument' fundamentally lies in the body of visual work and its presentation, which is re-presented in this document for the reader. In this regard, and in accordance with a thesis by creative research, this visual and textual document is positioned as an important *exegesis* of the visual work. Discourse is therefore both extended and supported by this accompanying text, while acknowledging the primacy of the visual work (as opposed to the visual work being utilized only as an illustrative tool for a written document). Secondly, my topic of interest, as with my enquiry, lies appropriately in my own area of discipline. As a professional practitioner of contemporary art, this necessarily entails an ongoing investigation through the means of visual language. However, this is not to say that other multiple fields of discipline cannot be tapped as a resource for informing this visual language of art, especially as art research continues to anchor-in as a recognized academic practice. In this way, other disciplines certainly offer critical insight into art research by drawing on interrelated concepts and theories, ways of thinking, seeing, interpreting, analyzing, processing or articulating information. My interest in Incarnation (or *The* Incarnation), in so far as it exists within an extensive field of theological enquiry – in this case studying the 'nature of God' according to a specifically Christian doctrine – intentionally references theology in this way. Among other relevant disciplines such as art history and theory, philosophy, and psychoanalysis (to name some recurring fields of reference), it is theology that brings pertinent discourse to my artistic exploration, especially as it helps to identify the basic parallel with the artistic process via the definition of Incarnation. Accordingly, I will refer to relevant examples of academic scholarship within theology and these other disciplines, and in doing so I will intermittently pick up and drop an academic 'voice'. Though in this respect, and as an artist speaking appropriately to the primacy of the visual work, readers will recognize that I will constantly return to a more candid and personal voice. This is the voice of an artist who is inspired, intrigued, bewildered and haunted by the kinds of reverberations that are uncovered and discussed in relation to the whole body of visual work, including its ideal premise in light of the limitations of embodiment.

Ideally, I would hope that the reader would also be the viewer of the original body of work – presented to coincide with the production of this document - and so be able to experience the actual work 'in the flesh'. Realizing that this is not quite possible however, readers will be able to at least imaginably engage

with the visual work via the use of illustrations interspersed throughout this document. This will apply to my own work as well as other visually apparent imagery, such as reproductions of relevant artist's works, or other similarly appropriate photographic or diagrammatic references. In most cases, visuals will be placed alongside the text in which it is either explicitly or implicitly referred. Though in some cases, important images will be scaled-up and utilized to create a strategic pause in the text and in order to help facilitate an alternative contemplative engagement with the visual work in its documented site of display.

Aside from such images within the text, an appendix will be dedicated to a selection of my own visual work, according to each chapter. These will serve to retrospectively showcase the body of artwork presented in previous exhibition spaces, as well as in stages of production and installation. In this respect, I hope that through the appendixes, the reader will feel somewhat familiar with the physicality of the work, which would otherwise be experienced through a phenomenological encounter.

Lastly, and before moving on to the body of the thesis, I would like to pose a question in order to position the viewer/reader for the discussion that lies ahead. This question will also resurface at the conclusion: Can this thesis ever be complete? The nature of this question necessarily returns to the nature of the subject, which is essentially to ask whether on not there can be *closure* concerning Incarnation. The provocations I open up are intended to not only explore this subject, but to suspend an answer. If successful, the visual body of work will be resolved as works of art, yet offer no definitive 'resolution' as far as this question is concerned. Whether optimist or pessimist, materialist or spiritually inclined, religious or non-religious, or a myriad of options in between, my hope for both the reader and viewer is that there is precisely an ongoing engagement with the mystery of Incarnation.

MEMORIAL

I never really knew either set of grandparents. My memories of them are mainly through short Christmas visits to South Australia and a few cousins' weddings.

In August 2005 my grandfather, 'Bamps', passed away. At the time, he was in hospital recovering from heart surgery. I remember some days later, my grandmother saying, "I keep expecting him to just walk in through the screen door at the back of the house." And here it seemed that in the moment to moment of scattered emotions and the many years of memories, it was Bamps' failure to return that marked my grandmother's loss.[1]

At the funeral (as a pallbearer), I remember the heavy weight of the coffin and then stepping over and onto the green artificial turf that was laid around the outside of the grave. For a while, that glossy box sat there suspended above its beckoning hole. All the mourners stood around, quietly gazing at it. Beneath the carpet turf, I could see the cut edge of the dirt. The layers of earth were dry and crumbly, yet beautiful. A displaced pile of soil a few metres away just blended in with the surroundings.

Figure 5. Gravesite at Angus Butler's funeral, August 2005.

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[1] In "Adieu", a eulogy dedicated to Emmanuel Levinas (delivered on Dec 25, 1995), Jacques Derrida raised a similar definition of death, in referring back to what Levinas himself had written about 20 years earlier in *La Mort et le temps* (*Death and time*). Rather than death being an "annihilation, non-being, or nothingness…" as Derrida writes, it is a "…certain experience for the survivor of the "without-response". And quoting Levinas: "There is here an end that always has the ambiguity of a departure without return, of a passing away but also of a scandal ('is it really possible that he's dead?') of a non-response and of my responsibility… It is, in my relation, my deference toward someone who no longer responds, already a guilt of the survivor." (Emmanuel Levinas, *Dieu, la mort et le temps* (Paris: Grasset, 1993), 47,199.) Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 200, 203-205.

As the coffin was lowered, I remember thinking that this is where Bamps' memory would reside; it would go with him. He wouldn't be returning via my grandmother's back door, nor would her memories of him speak of real or live presence again. They would all gradually lapse and seep deeper and deeper under this green veneered void: this opening and closing in the ground.

As I observed during the remainder of the ceremony, I wondered more about the transiency of our memories of him that this body in death would hold, draw, consume to itself in its own decomposing disposition. Even after the dirt was placed back after him, I could imagine the remaining, waning memories slowly passing through our surface world to where his quiet body lay.

I also wondered about his *presence* that was missing, even despite seeing his body the day before at the viewing.

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It's strange to think about our way of remembering. For Bamps, we place his body in a box, then view the body before the box is placed in a hole. We acknowledge his existence by marking his name on a head stone. We place a stone slab on the ground, which designates where his body is now located. It is essentially a ceremony denoting a person now abstracted: a non-embodiment become memorial. But even before this ritual of 'closure' and memorializing takes place, the body itself harbours a strangeness that is hard to describe, for without a living presence that really breathes, talks or responds like the Bamps we knew, one couldn't really say this lifeless body contains the essence of 'Bamps'. Whether it is buried or still floating between hospital to funeral house, between hearse and gravesite, it doesn't return anything; it fails to return or equate to the Bamps we remember. In that solemn zone between death and burial, held within the iconic moment of the viewing, this body seems just an anonymous yet strangely familiar cadaver.[2] Withholding something more, this body is like a non-subject with a passing *unreal* resemblance.[3] The place of this body, now buried, is the designated memorial site. Though hidden from

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[2] It is worth noting that this strangeness of the corpse – sighted between death and burial – can be clarified within the context of the 'uncanny'. This is particularly evident when considering a definition by E. Jentsch, which is used as a critical example in Freud's essay on "The Uncanny" (1919). In reference to comparable feelings of ambiguity arising when viewing 'waxwork figures, life-like dolls and automata,' this is a distinct sense of "doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate". This is not to say that when viewing a corpse, its deadness isn't fully acknowledged. It is more of an ambiguous feeling towards the lifeless likeness of the corpse of the person that was once living (seen perhaps only minutes, hours or days earlier), and also from which a remaining lifelikeness is evident on account of a tensive desire to see them alive once more ('tensive' because to see a corpse reanimate would induce the most uncanny feeling of all). Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans., David McLintock, with intro by Hugh Haughton (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 135.

[3] In his essay "Two Versions of the Imaginary", Maurice Blanchot more succinctly captures this strange state of the corpse in his description of the cadaver (analogously in relation to an enquiry of *the image*). Here the "strangeness of a cadaver", is due to the bodily remains before us as "neither the living person himself nor any sort of reality, neither the same as the one who was alive, nor another, nor any other thing". "[P]resent in absence…", as Blanchot postulates, the cadaver is "reflection making itself master of the reflected life, absorbing it, substantially identifying itself with it by making it lose its value in terms of use and truth and change into something incredible – unusual and neutral… preeminently resemblance,

view, it is a placement, which equally designates where his living presence is ultimately misplaced. And so it is the naming of this *no-body* which replaces 'Bamps', that seems to frame a greater absence. It is more of believing that he is here, if only to abate the greater certainty that he is missing.[4]

I started to think about the role of the crypt.

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and… nothing more". Maurice Blanchot, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, ed., George Quasha, trans., Lydia Davis, Paul Auster, Robert Lamberton (New York: Barrytown Ltd., 1999), 419-421. Brian Grosskurth also recapitulates Blanchot's observations: "The dead man is so absolutely himself… that it is as if he were *doubled* by his features and were tied to a solemn impersonality through an uncanny likeness. The dead person resembles himself. Indeed, the cadaver is resemblance and nothing but resemblance. The similarity is absolute. But finally the corpse represents nothing… an ungraspable absence marks its traits. For these reasons, the image [as the "cadaverous image" - here applicable to the viewing of Bamps] cannot be reduced to meaning, truth, or sensory or intelligible visibility. It withdraws from the world of the determinate entity into a realm of immobile, frozen likeness". Furthermore, Grosskurth's paraphrasing "absence as presence" is then an image – like the memory of 'Bamps' thereafter, "… in which the ties which bind object and world become dissolved." In the affecting presence of a cadaver, this can also highlight Freud's remark that "our emotional attitude to the dead…has been toned down [perhaps in a cautious response]…to an unambiguous feeling of piety". Brian Grosskurth, "Lartigue and the Politics of Enchantment," in *The Aesthetics of Enchantment in the Fine Arts (Analecta Husserliana)* 65, ed., Marlies Kronegger, Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 107; Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (2003), 149.

[4] This absence recalls an almost identical discussion around the meaning of *ash*, which Mark C. Taylor raises in relation to a series of works by Anselm Kiefer (*Your Blonde Hair, Margarete* (1981), *Your Ashen Hair, Shulamite* (1981), *Your Golden Hair, Margarete* (1981)). Here Taylor raises Derrida's claim that ash is "the name of what remains of what doesn't remain". It is "a cipher that commemorates what was destined to be forgotten, destined to become a name, nothing, no one, ash". (Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth," *Midrash and Literature*, ed., Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 333, 334); M C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 302. Thus it seems 'ash' abstracts what is lost by becoming the name of what is lost, the trace of which it refers to being otherwise "unnameable and immemorial", hence "always forgotten". Taylor also suggests that the "forgetting of this unnameable…is a strange forgetting". Perhaps it is because this is a 'forgetting' that is (at least in Bamps' case of a burial) at the same time a 'believing', or rather, a tentative faith; that it (the remains) still holds a name by which the memory of what is lost can be recalled. In relation to a corpse, and to the misplaced identity of a loved one inscribed on a memorial, the meaning of ash as a material also literally incorporates the remains produced from a cremated body. In this regard, the physical body that turns to smoke and ashes illustrates a bodily dissipation, a disembodiment like a reverse transubstantiation, where both the 'person' and the body dissolves/abstracts into the ether, while the last of the remains exist in the name and medium of the ash.

In April 2006, I was involved in an exhibition at St Patrick's Cathedral just down the road from the University in East Melbourne. I was to exhibit some work there over Easter time before taking the work up to Sydney to be exhibited in St. Mary's Cathedral crypt. For various reasons this didn't eventuate. However, I was able to visit St. Mary's while viewing the Sydney Biennale a few months later.

After paying my visitor's entry fee I went through a heavy iron gate and proceeded down the stairwell to where the crypt was located. Of the many features lit with a pensive ambience, I was quickly drawn to one of the artifacts on display, which happened to be a 19th century confessional box. What was particularly odd, was that this box was a free standing and portable object, made even more obvious by the undersized slab on which it was placed. Having moved large sculptural forms to and from venues for some years now (including the more recent operations in St Pat's as mentioned above) it also conjured up images of a traveling confessional booth, not unlike the little library bus or art-van that probably still drifts between schools in the country, or even the various images that come to mind of a clunky horse driven cart, bearing a migratory or nomadic doctrine of Catholicism around.

Figures 6 and 7. Antique confessional booth, St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney; interior view.

Although this box, with its unusual form and rustic charm was now in a very silent and sacred space, its move-ability spoke of a piece of domestic furniture. In this sense, there was a strong invitation to go up and touch it, to familiarize with it, uninhibited, through the rest of the senses. As an open form, this type of acquaintance also effectively required me to lean over and peer down inside it. As I did so, there was a weird emotion that stirred: something that I couldn't articulate at the time other than to recognize that an *emptiness* 'found' therein was not at all disappointing. I only suspect that it may have had something to do with the distinct sense of confirmation that I felt, eliciting a feeling of "this is why I came." Or rather, perhaps this was a conviction or even a consolation, possibly for a remote or at least analogous 'survivor's guilt' (in regard to Bamps' death),[5] particularly as I

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[5] I should stress that this use of the term 'survivor's guilt' is not intended to trivialize its meaning in regard to severe trauma, but instead to speculate on the link between an empty confessional box (a designated – awaiting - place for confessing guilt) and the architectural and psychological place of the crypt. With the kind of familiarity I felt toward this box, even before touching it, this could similarly suggest a kind of personal 'identification' with the vacant interior. This term 'identification' is used frequently by Freud, and particularly in relation to a merging of the ego with a lost or abandoned object, as a symptom of melancholia. Identification – "ambivalent from the very first" - can in this respect refer to a subtle extension of love or mourning, or, be indicative of the pathological condition of melancholia. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14 (1914-1916), trans., James Strachy (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 249; Sigmund Freud, "Identification," in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Standard Edition, Vol. 18 (1921), (1957), 105. For a clear definition of melancholia in relation to this thesis, see page 32. See also Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 30.

Further speculation could also be initiated on account of the vacant and empty confessional booth, being a bodily space in which a priest sits as a mediator facilitating communication and/or reparation between God and the layperson. This continued reading might then suggest that the 'antique' confessional box is made redundant, either in its purpose for

had visually and mentally placed myself inside this confessional box, which, moreover, was on display in the cavernous enclosure of the crypt.

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Figure 8. Sewerage access in the backyard of author's rental property.

On arriving home from Sydney, another encounter from beneath ground level was waiting. However, things were coming to the surface here that was certainly not intended. The sewer was blocked. When the landlord came to fix the problem, to my surprise, he went straight to a sewerage access point in our backyard. The backyard was such familiar ground, yet I had not noticed that there was quite a serious cavity lying dormant, undiscovered, directly in front of the back shed. There was a sense in which it seemed to have simply arrived, implanted itself. But of course it was always there. It was only a veil - a cast iron cover - that when lifted, revealed a hidden space receding into the ground. In subtle ways, this hidden space, always there, was to impact me for some time afterwards. As if a lid had been lifted to realize myriad other receding spaces - and equally other empty spaces framed by square parameters - I was clearly becoming receptive to previously unnoticed or simply hidden spaces. Contemplatively, I was beginning to open up a world of possible reflections and existing memories to which the present would begin a dialogue with both its past and future.

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redressing guilt or in the need for a mediatory priest, or alternatively, that the confessional still has a functional means of drawing contemplative attention to an innate – perhaps pathological – condition, which is highlighted in the context of the crypt as a place for framing a mortality as a fundamental part of the human condition.

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I recall visiting my other grandparents many years ago, where I have a strong memory of being in my Grandpa's garage in Adelaide. Among other things, I remember seeing what appeared to be a couple of wooden storage boxes, covered in dust. As I remember, they were square in shape and were a little larger than the old tea chests used in exporting, but they had distinctly rounded corners. I thought it was an interesting design, and I liked them because they were old. I had no understanding of what they really were or what was contained in them.

More recently I asked my grandpa ('Pop') about them and he told me that they were made from marine ply. He was in the air force around the time of WW2 and apparently they were used to transport 1000lb bomb tails. There must have been plenty of these thrown out or acquired by disposal shops shortly after the war. It's been years since that first brief sighting. However, for some reason I've maintained a clear image of them in my mind. Even though Pop's memory is not as good as it once was, he could still unhesitatingly recall the history of these crates.

While I waited for Pop to send me some hard-copy images (fortunately he still had the actual crates in his possession), I began working on an artwork. This work was the culmination of a combined image, which arose from two distinct memories. One memory was of being in Pop's garage looking at some strange boxes. The other was at the burial site of Bamps' body on the day of his funeral. Incidentally, this combined image also emphasized an underlying generational connection, thinly held, between my forefathers and myself.

My request for some photographs was actually delayed for at least six months, presumably due to Pop's short-term memory loss. In the meantime, I proceeded to make the artwork based upon what I had remembered from earlier observation and then imagined as a result of further written descriptions made while engaging in discussion with Pop.

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What I wanted with this new work was to somehow hold these two main memories: to place them into a form more tangible than my own mind, like a memory box of keepsakes. It would resemble some sort of vessel: an exhumed vessel that would carry not just these two memories but also those previously forgotten or buried. In turn, this would open the possibility of both storage and retrieval of old memories, while reflecting the creative purpose and journey of the box itself. As I conceived, such a vessel would

then become a holding space: a container with a means of making tangible what has slipped into the realm of the intangible. Yet importantly, as far as I could anticipate, a container like this would always need to remain empty, unoccupied, in order to allow space for invoking such memories (or indeed new visions also). Like a hole in the ground, only above ground, it would be a waiting space: a suspended space framing *re*-membered memories that were once present moments. I needed an apparatus fit for invoking the arrival of lost presence, and also the *not-yet-present*. I needed a new beautiful container: one that anticipated the possibility of new creative embodiment and not just the obviousness of absence perceived in the negative of container's emptiness.

Figure 9. Michael Needham, Preliminary sketch for the *Container*, 2005.

But it was always going to be more complex than this because my memory of Bamps in particular isn't really built from significant interactions or many actual experiences. This means that any recollection would be re-invoked many times over in a rudimentary attempt to preserve the few memories that I do have. When I think of him now, there are two images that stand out as a result of my recent attendance to them. The first image accounts for the most recent memory of a motionless body in a box at the funeral parlor, described previously. The second image is not a memory of an event or encounter, but a projected posthumous image that appears as an imaginary vision of that familiar-yet-anonymous body in a dark underground cavity. Remembering Bamps in this way is obviously inauthentic and in some sense seems basically disrespectful in its kind of violation of a more sacred image 'in memory of Bamps'. For me this demonstrated how 'memory' holds and fosters clear differences from what is actually experienced, whilst still naturally taking influence from what is known to have occurred. It seems that what I recall in a *memory* – as with any *image* projected or concocted - is a muddy blend of what is seen, what is desired to be seen, and, what is impossible to see.[6] This is somewhat equally steeped in a necessity to fill in the gaps with my own imagination.

Figure 10. Interior view of the *Container*, 2006.

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[6] The failure of memory to 'appropriately' remember - specifically in relation to the death of a loved one - closely corresponds to a kind of 'divided mourning', of which Derrida's articulation theoretically locates my feelings of uncertainty regarding my recollection of Bamps'. As Derrida states, "[m]ourning is [or incorporates] an interiorization of the dead other". This corresponds to the melancholic lost object being incorporated into the self, but is not, as Derrida also argues, only a trait of melancholia. In this context, an 'experience between fidelity and infidelity' towards the lost object or deceased is identified, while signaling a "double constraint of mourning", of letting the deceased go as well as 'keeping them inside (me)'. Writing on this 'divided mourning', Nicolas Royle further explains Derrida's thoughts, saying that "[o]ne has to keep the memory of the loved one within oneself, to remain faithful in memory and to the memory of the beloved. At the same time, one has to let the other remain other, in other words to ensure that the other is not assimilated or effectively wiped out as other". This conflict, in terms of an attempt to preserve the loved one both inside and outside oneself, explains a 'double bind' of memory in relation to mourning, and where as Royle poignantly refers to a Derridean aporia: 'success fails and failure succeeds.' In this respect, my posthumous image of Bamps - as a means of attempted remembrance – comes as a resistance to believe that he is absent. His *visage* in my mind – whether or not this could be classified as an interiorization of a lost object - is rather a materialist's belief that he (somehow still hauntingly 'attached' to his corpse) is still remembered. It is a way of orienting the process of mourning and memory around a still visualized bodily presence in order to stave off his inevitable absence in his invisibility. Jacques Derrida, "Dialanguages," trans., Peggy Kamuf, in *Points…Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed., Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 151-52; Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: For Paul de Man*, rev. ed. trans., Cecile

Figure 11. Hans Holbein the Younger, ***The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb***, 1521-1522. Oil on wood, 30.5 x 200 cm.

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My posthumous image of Bamps itself vividly recalls *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521-22), by Hans Holbein the Younger. Besides the title relaying the content plainly, one of the painting's primary recognizable features is that it is elongated in the same horizontal manner as the dead body it presents, and so the enclave of the individual crypt - as a framing device - is itself the open coffin that the viewer looks into.[7] As such, this is an image that continues to raise a similar line of questioning, and complication, in respect to its quite impudent depiction of a body in a tomb (as previously uncovered in reference to Bamps). Perhaps Holbein's image raises even more questions through the shrewdly condensed revision it brings for the broader narrative of Christ's death and resurrection, which forms a crucial component of Christian doctrine. Here, the memory, that is, in the cultural memory of the legacy of Christ, is left vulnerably open to interpretation in ways contrary to its orthodox version; for within the painting's representative role, the body of Christ is dead and visibly in a state of rigor mortis. It is very clear that this body is in an unredeemable state of corporeality. Thus for cultural memory under-girding belief - here in terms of the significance of resurrection for Christ's legacy - the effect of this image clearly carries momentous implications.[8]

Lindsay, Jonathon Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 34-35; Pascale-Anne Brault, Michael Naas, eds., "To Reckon with the Dead: Jacques Derrida's Politics of Mourning," in Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, (2001), 9-12; Nicolas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2003), I51-53.

[7] This aspect is poignantly phrased by Neil MacGregor and Erika Langmuir in their visual analysis of Holbein's *Dead Christ*: "His life has shrunk to six feet by one – the picture is the same size as a coffin. It is a coffin". While capturing the idea of the coffin as a framing device for the body, this fragment of a description equally recapitulates the concept of a transition from an elevated stature of divinity to a base horizontality of corporeality: in itself a summation of kenotic incarnation as much as the conditioned status of human life. Neil MacGregor, Erika Langmuir, "The Body Lowered and Raised," *Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art* (New haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 179.

[8] It has been widely discussed that this image illustrates a particularly nihilistic line of questioning through the portrayal of Jesus' mortality and the death of the Christian idea of God that this subsequently infers. Yet equally as much, there have been many readings, which point to the crux and even revamping of faith in view of the reality of Christ's death, and that this death necessarily precedes the resurrection. Within this context and fueling both divergent readings, one well known yet striking interpretation was outlined in Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* (attributed to the influence Holbein's *Dead Christ* had on Dostoevsky), where initially Prince Myshkin stares at a reproduction of the image and says "At that picture! Why that picture might make some people lose their faith!" Later Myshkin's friend Ippolit goes on to speak of "no trace of beauty…a faithful representation of the dead body of a man…how could they possibly have believed, confronted with such a sight, that this

The uncertainty emanating from Holbein's *Dead Christ*, evidently comes from its quite realistic portrayal of ordinary mortality, once captured and preserved, while at the same time disclosed and displayed in contrast to the ideal of an incarnated God in human form. In the face of this image, the idea, the belief, the cultural memory of Christ as God, transcended and transcendent, confronts a visualized historicity of the event of Christ's death. The fact that the visual image is static, or stagnant, like the photograph of the inside of any tomb would be, further feeds this confrontation. Hence the image disallows a movement towards an anticipated transcendence from death (essential for orthodox Christian doctrine), while at the same time proposing a premature and permanent ending to the legacy of belief that obviously depends on Christ's resurrection.[9]

In this reading, as a representation of what should remain unrepresented, or perhaps hidden, Holbein's *Dead Christ* is practically a defacement of the more abstract *idea* of God Incarnate. However, by pivoting the significance of Christ on this single image, the claim *for* God Incarnate is also suspended. The privileged position, from which the viewer peers into a sealed tomb, is by the same token the invitation to see and believe, see and not believe, see or believe, or believe despite seeing. In other words, the miracle of Christ's resurrection is couched in its impossibility. Likewise, impossibility is the ground by which the hope of resurrection might occur. That is, a *miracle* understood in the correct sense of the word - as an inexplicable event - would not be possible if it weren't for the opposition it faces. And so the interpretation of Holbein's work, here as an opened crypt, equally swings in the direction of an expectant faith. The *dead* Christ is but a crucial hiatus.[10] Holbein's image therefore visually grounds the problematic reality of a mortal saviour, while the faithful must try to 'visualize' an image that both supersedes and transcends this harsh reality. They must subdue their doubt in the belief and hope that can only be based on an ideal image existing beyond this reality of the grave.[11]

When considering the combined suspending effect of Holbein's image, which allows for pertinent interpretation either way, it seems clear that there is an overall haunting quality that remains. This corresponds even more so with how much one is personally invested with the person whose body is represented, particularly where such an image represents the lifeless, albeit lifelike, body of a loved one. Owing to a simple desire to not depart from the departed, it is easy to see how the last point of contact with the deceased would logically be the primary context by which they return in the mind. Whether it is the Christian viewing the painted image of Christ's cold dead body, or anyone viewing the real dead grandfather in a coffin, (including imagining him under layers of soil), there is an obvious sense of

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martyr would rise again?" Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1996), I, 202, 381-382.

[9] In relation to her study on melancholia, Julia Kristeva observes a similar sense of non-redemption in Holbein's *Dead Christ*: "The unadorned representation of human death, the well-nigh anatomical stripping of the corpse convey to viewers an unbearable anguish before the death of God, here blended with our own, since there is not the slightest suggestion of transcendency. […] this corpse shall never rise again". Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans., Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 110.

[10] Hans Urs Von Balthasar continues: "…the hiatus of Cross and Resurrection…, the hiatus that fulfills everything so completely only because it radically calls everything into question"…where the "fellowship of followers…falls into the ground and dies like a grain of wheat[;]… The hiatus of the death of Jesus…[the] 'not-word'… [in light of his claim as the] present Word of God". Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Vol. VII, trans., Brian McNeil, ed., John Riches (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 96, 129.

[11] "With no intermediary, suggestion, or indoctrination, whether pictorial or theological, other than our ability to imagine death, we are led to collapse in the horror of the caesura constituted by death or to dream of an invisible beyond". Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (1989), 113.

being a viewer, a witness, a responsive and connatural human being who is implicated by the mortality of their own body.[12] This feels awkwardly transgressive as if it were somehow soiling a 'non-corporeal' memory that the deceased deserve. Speaking therefore in a language of etherized disembodiment seems one means of avoiding this feeling, while holding onto the hope in some kind of future meaningful exchange.

My own posthumous projection of Bamps' body inside the coffin evokes certain realism and is arguably a logical and personal means of dealing with his missing presence. However, the crudeness of this image again seems simply inappropriate. In many ways, this problematic image of Holbein's *Dead Christ*, haunting as it is, has already merged – perhaps irreversibly - within my own belief and hope in Jesus' legacy. Despite a hope in the resurrection of the dead, which follows Christ's resurrection and his anticipated 'return', the lingering image by Holbein seems to stain my few memories of Bamps. In the most fundamental sense, my own projection of what or who is missing in Bamps, is more emblematic of a perpetuating envision-ment of loss. Hope in this context is but a symptom of the contrary being perpetually forestalled.

In a more banal comparison with my unreal memory of Bamps, my memories of Pop's bomb-tail crates are, at this time, also not *quite* true. One indicator of this is that I only received some actual photographs of the crates *after* I had finished designing and constructing my responsive engagement in the form of an artwork, which was at the time on display at the university gallery.[13] After having already made the artwork, looking at these images from my memory was surreal, for while the photographs confirmed my memory of the particular crates, they seemed to have been strangely incorporated into the artwork without my own hands being involved. I recognized at that very moment that reality and memory had merged, as though my childhood memory had actually, and incidentally, been rewritten. Like an updated file with no means of going backwards, it seemed then, as now, that it is practically impossible to recall my older

Figures 12, 13 and 14. Bomb-tail crates in Donald Needham's garage, Adelaide. **Container for the Absent Body**, 2006, ACU National Gallery.

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12 While Kristeva notes that the *Dead Christ* is "separated": "cut off" from us (as viewers) through aspects of its composition *inside* the picture plane, a countervailing connection with the corpse (through the image) is also apparent. Here, in what can be taken as a comparable relation to Andres Serrano's *The Morgue (Cause of Death)* photographic series (1992), and positioning the viewing of the corpse within a masochistic framework, Kylie Rachel Message notes that the corpse remains intriguing and seductive, which then explains the desire to engage with it on an imaginative level beyond physical limitations: "this hyperreal sign [the "body-become-simulacra"] seduces its spectator through promising a meaning that is infinitely deferred, or always absent, unless the spectator enters into an optical exchange and continuous relationship with the corpse as desired object… This engagement demands a transgression from the bounds of the real". Obviously this transgression is also apparent in the sense that one is drawn-into the image, psychologically, to where the corpse is, while at the same time being repelled by its occupation of space and presentation of death (as abject). Kylie Rachel Message, "Watching over the Wounded Eyes of Georges Bataille and Andres Serrano," in *Images of the Corpse: From the Renaissance to Cyberspace*, ed., Elizabeth Klaver (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 114-15; Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (1989), 113-14. See also Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3-4, 108-109.

13 *Private Lives*, November 2006, ACU National Gallery, Melbourne.

original memory without the still imagery of Pop's photographs hovering above it.[14] Such uncertainty of 'memories' - or as illustrated in Pop's case, the degenerative nature of the faculty of memory in general – highlights a suspicion regarding the capacity for grasping an accurate image of something once it is no longer present. At the same time, if this is remade or re-apprehended afterwards in an attempt to resurrect a presence of someone or something that has passed, or to capture a nostalgic 'original' moment, it would seem that a deeper issue of loss and consequent grief lies waiting here also. The desire itself to grasp a more accurate image – whether possible or not - appears to be laced with an irresolvable melancholic undercurrent.

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To speak of the death of a loved one - and its after-effects – in relation to melancholia, Freud posited that there is both a loss in regard to an object as well as a loss in regard to the ego that is invested in it.[15] In mourning for example, a process takes place where the libido learns to withdraw from its attachments and gradually find a replacement. Memories recalled, as with other expectations of effective exchange with the object (now lost), are in this case 'hyper-cathected'; the libido appropriately detaches and the ego becomes unbound.[16] Freud also points out that this underlying transition of *detachment* mirrors the original 'attachment,' which has been influenced by a narcissistic basis of identification with the object. The main difference between mourning and melancholia however (according to Freud), is that the latter occurs when instead of the libido successfully withdrawing from its attachment to the particular object, it is effectively 'incorporated' into the ego, which becomes indistinct from the lost object. Thus, dealing with the original loss is substituted with melancholia, resulting in (among other things) reproaches against the object, which accordingly surface as a series of reproaches against the ego.[17]

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[14] This phenomena is an example of one of the major criticisms of memorials, of which, like all externally based embodiments of memory, S. Brent Plate notes, that "once erected, we can cease remembering internally (in our minds)". S. Brent Plate, "Zakhor: Modern Jewish Memory Built into Architecture," in *Religion, Art and Visual Culture: A Cross Cultural Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 199. Brent Plate also quotes from Pierre Nora's *Between Memory and History,* who articulates a loss of memory - through transference and dependency on the material archive, by saying "[t]he less memory is experienced from the inside, the more it exists through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs". Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," trans., Marc Rousebush, in *Representations*, Vol. 26 (University of California Press, 1989), 13. Most succinctly however, and concerning the photograph as this 'material archive', is Roland Barthes comment that the photograph "blocks memory, [it] quickly becomes counter-memory". Barthes also follows with the example: "One day, some friends were talking about their childhood memories; they had any number; but I, who had just been looking at my old photographs, had none left. […] The Photograph is violent:…*it fills the sight by force*". Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans, Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 91.

[15] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14 (1914-1916), trans., James Strachy (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 247.

[16] Ibid., 245.

[17] Ibid., 244-49. This theory is more succinctly summarized by Ilit Ferber: "The loss of the ego that Freud inscribes to the melancholic is the aftermath of the loss of love. It comes about when the lost object is internalized into the pain-stricken ego, consequently splitting it apart, dividing it from the inside and rendering the ego itself lost. The internalization of the loss, presents an interior absence within the ego, turning the latter into the battlefield of separation, which at the end of the process is emptied out. The schizophrenic divide within the ego, creates a space in which the ambivalence and hatred

While the symptoms of self-hate are not obvious in the present reflection about Bamps, there is still a close correspondence to other traits of melancholia. Here, one can see that there is identification with the lost object (i.e. Bamps), of which there is a clear desire to preserve (or even concoct) a kind of attachment - through memory - if only in order to move on.[18] The macabre image of Bamps' dissolving body, evoked through this process, is an image of a lost object *incorporated,* in this case – somewhat unhealthily - by my own imagination. Ambivalence towards this image, as with ambivalence towards my imagination that conceives it, obviously suggests a kind of revilement due to its representation of the irreversible decay of a loved one. But the imaginative conception and identification with this revilement in the first place, equally suggests a personal identification with this interior space of a coffin. This not only opens a broader field of reflection on death, but reveals a preoccupation with both death and the cessation of being. This is a central concept from which narcissism, manifested by the instinct for self-preservation (as Freud elsewhere notes), draws its need for an object of identification in the first place.[19] All this could be indicative of a predisposition towards melancholia. There is now a question of how much my image of Bamps', both dissolving and suspended in its half-buried state, reveals a substitutive melancholic mode of self-abasement in its representation of a more *personal* mortality. At this point, my image of Bamps effectively becomes a site of self-projection, where my own conceited and idealized – though inevitably suspended – assumptions of immortality are challenged. Here, the compulsive instinct to preserve, drives my underlying ideological hope of resurrection and eternal life. This is a predicament because hope, as with conceit, requires fundamental failure in order to exist.[20] In other words, as stated earlier, a "miracle would not be possible if it weren't for the opposition it faces." Such is the ambivalence caused in the revelation of seeing myself reflected in the mortal state of the body.

Failure of memory and of imagination to bring hope, is most evident when an undesirable image is unearthed *from within*. In this instance, a decaying corpse quickly consumes and displaces any remaining sentiment. The broad image of this melancholic predicament permeates like a shadow. It is under this

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originally produced with regard to the loss, is turned towards the self. The pathological identification with the lost object is thus the ground upon which the ego attacks itself". Ilit Ferber, "Melancholy Philosophy: Freud and Benjamin," *Discourses of Melancholy*, E-rea, Revue electronique d'etudes sur le monde anglophone: http://erea.revues.org/index413.html#ftn2 (accessed 2nd January 2009).

[18] Ferber raises Giorgio Agamben's point that the melancholic lost what was never actually had in the first place, "thus maintaining a relationship with the imaginary". As Agamben stated, "[t]he imaginary loss that so obsessively occupies the melancholic tendency has no real object, because its funereal strategy is directed to the impossible capture of the phantasm… [T]he introjection of the libido is only one of the facets of a process in which what is real loses its reality so that what is unreal may become real". According to this, my image of Bamps' would therefore signal the loss of a bond with my Grandfather, which I never had, and so effectively representing a double loss: an 'ego' already shadowed by loss. Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans., Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 25; Ilit Ferber, "Melancholy Philosophy: Freud and Benjamin," *Discourses of Melancholy*, http://erea.revues.org/index413.html#ftn2 (accessed 2nd January 2009).

[19] The "instinct of self-preservation", Freud noted, is attributed to a "primordial narcissism". In this, the fear of death brings on its denial, which as a "defence against annihilation", the 'immortality' of the soul becomes the first component of a doubling of ones self. And in this sense, the energies directed towards denying death can be seen to logically perpetuate the seeing of oneself projected in relation to death, which in the context of melancholia, can be indicative of both reproach and reverence. Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 14. (1914-1916), trans., James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 74; Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans., David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 142; see also Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, trans. and ed. Harry Tucker Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

[20] I am here referring to Freud's observation that the lost object can not only be a person, but an "abstraction" such as "one's country, liberty [or] ideal". The correspondence between melancholia and the "loss of a more ideal kind" is amplified when considered in relation the Christian hope in Christ, whose resurrection proclaims victory over death, yet while suspended in the face of a mortality that necessarily remains. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1957), 243, 245.

cloud of *black bile*, that the failure of memory and imagination seems to be located, and is therefore paradoxically also where hope is both buried and reborn.

Figure 15. Michael Needham, ***Container for the Absent Body*** (The Pod), August 2007, Bus Gallery, Melbourne.

Surely then, within my artwork as a 'memory box', an infection of loss has already begun, which continues to fester as it would in a container of death. Though the container was created *for* the memories, they are already barely held together and become increasingly difficult to reinvoke, as if the nature of memory is not just prone to fading but is actually altogether spectral. Adding to this sense of the spectral, which signals some sort of lingering presence triggered by absence, is the endless return of these images - as inner ghostly projections - standing in for what is no longer available in tangible reality.

These 'memories' waft between the deep cryptal burial place in the unconscious mind and the brief reappearance into the conscious. They then dissipate into a sea of new and imagined imagery drawn-out in a reflection such as this. However in lieu of this movement, it is for me conceivable that a physically determined placement is what's required for 'memory' to be conjured/held/sustained in *any* sense. In other words, like a keepsake, or monument (only much less monumental in character), my own memories are still pinpointed by actual things: i.e. dusty boxes in a cluttered garage, plastic turf isolated in a gravelly graveyard, an antiquated confessional pushed into a corner, or the musty air that lingers around a familiar screen door at my Grandmother's house. Here, it's as if *the box*, generic in its capacity to contain, yet specific in its association with a slippage of embodied human presence – through its own physical presence and designated absence - calls within me, for a comparable sense of containment and possible embodiment. It is as if this box were also a device for a personal stability, and equally for consoling my own embodiment. As if indicating the cusp between the possibility and impossibility of re-imagined presence, it is the basic materiality of the box's form and function of framing and containing, which suggests a triggering of what barely remains in the form of memory.

However, within this mode of invoking or representing, the box's means of holding, obviously misrepresents as much as it contains. All of its contents, all the associative materiality from the screen

door to the grave space: these are still merely stand-in elements, withholding or dispelling a lost object of Bamps only via association, but hopelessly unable to depict his physical presence. This perpetually reveals the deeper temporal and uncontainable nature of memory.[21] The box, among all it resembles in domestic appearance, is but a thin veneer of materiality, which masks what inevitably fades. It is an embodiment, perhaps only confirming the minds' own abyss, as opposed to the actual object or content of the memory it seeks to apprehend.

Once held as moments in the present, these memories now seem irretrievable, either being replaced by refigured imaginings, sculptural re-presentations, or updated by low-grade photographic documentation that rudely flashes any coherence of the past away. Perhaps it is just such a replacement through raw theatricality that incubates a very real and affecting nostalgia, a yearning for an unattainable tangibility in itself, though yearning precisely because there is no immediate escape from the perceived barrier of materiality.

In this digressive sense, the only interior lasting memories other than the ones it now seems I almost never knew, are alas, the ones concocted: the ones since internalized and tended by the active process of trying to articulate their significance in their original context. In the case of Bamps, the predominant 'memory' of loss is the 'image' of him inside the coffin, suspended between decay and spectrality. Surely, to *re*-member *this,* to refigure, to re-inscribe and revive *this* image, would only defile, disfigure, and dis-member any remaining image of Bamps that lived.[22] Though akin to that identified in Holbein's *Dead Christ*, this confirms a condition of mortality for which hope is an indispensible consolation.

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[21] S. Brent Plate aptly describes an almost identical process: "Memory is not somehow stored *in* a material object. Rather, the object works with personal and collective minds to *reenact* memory. Instead of thinking of memorials as "stand-ins" for memory (and thus *idols*), we might think of them as "triggers" for memories (and thus *icons*). The experience of/at the memorial then becomes an ever-new memorializing activity. Memory cannot be indelibly tied to objects; the link is always tenuous and ephemeral, open to spontaneity and innovation. Meanwhile, we must remember the "problematic," "deceptive," and "treacherous" nature of memory…" S. Brent Plate, "Zakhor" (2002), 199.

[22] Mark C. Taylor writes, "The immemorial is not simply forgotten but is inseparable from a remembering that is not a re-membering and a recollection that is not a re-collection. The memorial to the immemorial recalls a lapse of memory that dis-members". M C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 302. This also suggests that memory enacted through the interior of ones own mind is not necessarily less dismembering than that which an exterior memorial offers.

THE POD

The physical artwork that came about from a reflection on these memories was in many ways quite a simple object. Though in lieu of a broader and underlying complexity contained within it, it was named *Container for the Absent Body*. To give it a working title it was then nicknamed '*The Pod*', [23] which also granted it an obscure but candid means of referring to it in conversation.

Transience of memory was certainly part of its inner complexity as well as being a distinctly recurring theme. Nevertheless, the work, as it came about had more to do with mourning that which passes over from the realm of the tangible and present, into the transient and incomprehensible. The emphasis on memory, particularly the desire to preserve it, then stood to exemplify not just a static polarity between what is tangible or intangible, but a longing to reverse that same kind of passing by trying to *render tangible* that which has become irrevocably *intangible*. Rather than the artwork simply being a memorial in terms of any intention of functionality, it was much more a *response* to the problems I personally felt when trying to hold onto a few fading images, while still finding myself defaulting towards an urge to memorialize.

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An inherent subsidiary in the mourning that takes place for the dead, is admittedly a revived awareness of corporeality.[24] A farewell to the departed returns a silence that reverberates from depths rarely accessed within oneself. Like a reminder of another kind, one that leaks from any open grave or cadaver, this acute sense of corporeality (and human condition epitomized) seems to merely sit.[25] As my own

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23 'The Pod' was also named after 'the Cocoon', a very sci-fi looking coffin marketed by UONO, a German based coffin design company. And while 'The Pod' is much more clearly a box, and hardly anything like 'the Cocoon' by UONO, the glossy exterior and strange proposition of presence outside of the grave seemed to unite them under the associative term 'Pod'. See http://www.uono.de/ (accessed 11/03/08). Evidently, 'pod' is also widely circulated among other coffin designers, as names (or variations thereof) of burial containers on offer that obviously tap into the allegory of regeneration and rebirth after death.

24 With specific relation to the remaining body, Kristeva notes: "corpses [as refuse] *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. […] The corpse…is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life". Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), 3-4.

25 In his book dedicated to the "dread of death" and its influence on belief (as well as reiterating Kristeva's observations of a negated ideal of transcendence in relation to Holbein's *Dead Christ*), Jerry S. Piven succinctly notes: "[d]eath confirms that we are this too solid (sullied) flesh which melts and thaws. Putrescence denies the fantasy of transcendence of the body and engenders further disgust for this mortal coil". Hence, as Piven mentions prior to this, death is repressed from consciousness because of the threat (of non-existence) it signals and the anxiety it creates. Jerry S. Piven, *Death and Delusion: A Freudian*

mind is constantly brought back to that specific and generic place where Bamps was laid, the grave's lingering sense of simply *being-there* has become a dominant image in my mind. My own thoughts have since been directed further inwards (and outwards) as many other encounters of interior spaces have increasingly come to resemble an empty, waiting grave. This kind of haunting was, and still is, very intriguing. Acknowledging this, it would be correct to say that my artwork was born out of a response to this distinct affect of the passing of Bamps, and that this underlying essence is what 'The Pod' equally came to manifest.[26]

In simplified physical terms, it would be easy to refer to 'The Pod' as 'an empty box' that accordingly replicates the waiting interior of the grave. But it is neither a box that is just about an interior, nor is it just empty. For as a box that implicitly duplicates the box of a burial casket, I could never say that the preceding image of a casket – one that for me imaginably still contains an inanimate effigy of Bamps - *was* or *is* simply empty because its vacancy quickly triggers my own projections of it being invisibly occupied. Likewise, while initially being a work of response to a grandfather's passing, amidst the fading disposition of personal memories as an example of the intangible and immaterial qualities embodied within it, there is always going to be different responses offered within this space. Its vacancy also allows for the viewer's imagination, and so there is also likely to be a lot more that it will contain as well as fail to contain. Though within its embodied emptiness, together with its intended referential function of containing and not containing, I can at least anticipate that 'The Pod' elicits both a general and specific representation of *death* – as a mode of focalized non-presence - through its designated space of bodily absence. Within this context, and in terms of what is perceived to be 'manifest' in this body-space, strategic attention was given to its material composition, in order for it to retain and reveal much more as an overall embodied 'presence' within its material parameters.

✷

A major physical feature already inferred about 'The Pod' concerns its formal dimensions. Its length and width is based on the size of a generic burial hole. In terms of interpreting this size and space and translating this into an accessible sculptural form, this then meant exhuming the dimensions of this space and placing them above ground as an object: an inverted hole.[27]

Analysis of Mortal Terror (Greenwich: Information Age Publishing, 2004), 21, 52.

[26] In relation to 'The Pod' as an embodied 'grave-space' being 'manifest' as an idea in the mind, then translated into sculptural form, this can be metaphorically likened to an exhumed repression brought *into* consciousness, while at the same time rearing something previously and perpetually buried *out* of consciousness in order to face it.

[27] In terms of artistic influences, one contemporary of this kind of formal *inversion of space* is that of British artist Rachel Whiteread. See "Castings" for a detailed analysis of her work in relation to my own.

Now the depth of a hole used for burying the dead (even in your standard suburban cemetery) is actually varied and not necessarily the clichéd six feet.[28] For the purpose of functional interactivity with a standing viewer, a six foot depth translated into height, would also have been too high to allow most people to peer over and engage with the inside of the box. Therefore, the height became determined by an average human eye level, as well as the height required to invite the viewer to stand on tip-toes once at the perimeter of the box.

As an object occupying physical space, the external presence that this box initially projected, was far from resembling a 'grave space' in the sense of negative space. In fact with its polished and illuminated marine-ply exterior – itself a quality of 'veneering' that I wanted to reframe in connection to the fake green turf around the perimeter of Bamps' grave hole - it stood more immediately as a piece of domestic furniture. It was only as the interior came into view, that it revealed any intention in its exterior presentation for *disclosing* an intriguing embodiment of the grave.

Upon taking hold of the work's edges in order to look inside, viewers were also introduced to the tactile quality of the black/rusty steel frame.[29] This enabled them to feel an immediately cold and gritty texture in contrast to the polished ply, while ascertaining the thickness of the actual wall of the box, as well as the solid character of its structural density. Accordingly, it was a combined action of looking and touching that introduced the viewer to 'The Pod's' interior focal point.

Incorporated into this action of looking over an edge was another subtle yet pertinent sensory element: that of smell. A dank odour was embedded into the cedar wooden boards that lined the interior of the box, aided (at times all too pungently) by small parcels of organic matter buried underneath the box via a little trap-door hidden beneath its false floor.[30] The production of odour was to be an intended side effect of an actual build-up of dairy residue, applied regularly to the interior lining over a period of about a month. This involved using a mixture of expired milk or yogurt (depending on what I could nurture or retrieve), sometimes with a bit of ink or ash added into the mix. This was then crudely splashed and painted throughout the inner cavity. The aim was to produce an atmosphere where mould would cultivate, to the point where it smelled and stained, in lieu of the interior being in the early stages of rotting.

This, in itself, is not the sort of thing I would think to actively do to something I had spent months of valuable studio time to create. Producing a moist atmosphere, which in turn provided the conditions for breeding mould, would possibly damage joints or corners or even warp parts of the structure where

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[28] In Victoria for example, only a minimum of depth of 750mm below ground level is required for the burial of non-cremated human remains. "Depth of Burial" - Regulation 14 (Cemeteries and Crematoria Regulations 2005): *Cemetery Operation Information*, Victorian Government Health Information, www.health.vic.gov.au/cemeteries/cemopinfo.htm (accessed 31st October 2008).

[29] By 'black' steel, I am referring to what is commonly referred to in the steel industry as un-primed, un-galvanized mild steel. As it has no protective coating, it is susceptible to surface rust even from moisture in the atmosphere.

[30] At the outset, I should note that smell – subtly hidden such as it was in 'The Pod' – can be an indicator of the uncanny. In his extensive study on *The Uncanny*, which closely analyzes Freud's essay, Nicolas Royle refers to smell as at times being "familiarity itself". Furthermore, "[s]mell has an uncanny duplicity: it can in a split-second drop us out of the erstwhile familiarity of our present into the strange, painful and/or pleasurable, impossible country of the past; and yet smell resists being recalled, in reality, even for a moment". Having an intentional smell attached to 'The Pod', these kinds of qualities were then also offered as part of the overall viewer's experience. Nicolas Royle, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 139-40.

vulnerable. Yet the idea of the box was always going to incorporate, as best as possible, a simulated, concentrated and somewhat contained space of decay. As if opened after years of burial, this was the musty air that the viewer was given to breathe, the material they were compelled to touch, as well as the condensed space itself on which they were to meditate. If they would believe it real, to the point that the entire space occupied and framed by the box is thickened by the implications for simply being there (like an exhumed grave-space), this was what I considered to be the material authenticity required for its making. For as I perceived it, in the variety of sensory elements explored in the framed space of 'The Pod' (sight, smell, touch), all these values would have their affect according to the levels of material familiarity they triggered/evoked in the perception of the viewer. In this way, the box became a device for ensnaring the viewer's interest through multiple sensory means, whereby they were drawn to discover, and upon discovery, they were drawn to contemplate a combined imaginative uncertainty found therein.

In terms of triggering a 'familiar' quality via the odour lingering within 'The Pod's' interior, it was important for this to give subtle reference to the body, being sensed as the trace of an absent body. This was to assign the interior space as a 'corporeal space,' a space for a kind of abstracted embodiment. The use of odour could also bring the sense of a recognizably conditioned body into this space as a central motif, and in turn allow for a recognized vulnerability to decay to be read in connection to the grave's reminder of mortality. While many smells can be intriguingly but problematically indeterminate - evoking numerous associations for different people - one of the most distinctive I could (and can still) think of is that which emanates from decaying flesh.[31] This was equally appealing as an appropriate constituent of materiality to use in association with a space of corporeality.[32] Accordingly, small amounts of rancid meat became a key ingredient used in conjunction with the lactic animal fluids already applied to 'The Pod's' interior. The meat was buried amongst some soil beneath its false floor in order to control its aroma, and this enabled 'The Pod's' inner space to become physically associated with decaying bodily fluids and the release of posthumous gases.

What I sought in this space was to both hold and display a genuine process of decay as an indicator of death's lingering and somewhat vaporous (and difficult to contain) presence. As has been shown,

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[31] Of course in considering the actual use of flesh for its odorous effects, 'subtle' is a factor that cannot be overrated. The distinctiveness of rotting flesh is commonly known via the overpowering nature of its stench, particularly when it is in a contained space. Thus to allay this issue for viewers of 'The Pod', measures were taken to appropriately curb its stench.

[32] Besides 'flesh' being a substance that quickly putrefies and releases a distinctive air of death in its process of decay, the term itself (as with its substance) obviously carries a variety of symbolic meanings. A quick dictionary survey identifies that 'flesh', as 'all flesh', unites humans and animals alike, inferring either a kindred-ship with all creatures or a subtle *lowering* (depending on ones beliefs) of the human status to the level of instinct over intellect. Though 'the flesh', as a prominent use of the term, signifies the substance (in theology and philosophy) from which the soul/spirit traditionally finds its primary contrast. Here, 'the flesh', commonly refers to the pleasures, sins, and gratifications of the human body in its carnal state (*carnal* translated from Latin *caro* or *carn* – 'flesh'), while needing a specifically human soul, again, from which a state of carnality struggles in its opposition to 'spirit'. This stands as a necessary component of a real humanity; a "totality of all that is essential to manhood, i.e., spirit, soul, and body". Yet most underlying in the context of this study, is the use of the term 'flesh' (as a verb), 'to flesh out', or, 'to make into flesh'. Thus to 'incarnate', as mentioned earlier, is to embody an abstract or spiritual quality (such as a deity) in human, hence conditioned form. 'Flesh' is therefore both appropriate and poignant to use *as a material* in terms of the multiple levels of meaning it signifies, whilst always grounding the condition of (and setting the stage for) human embodiment within physically perceivable traits. The use of rancid meat, as a remnant of the body, dominates the reading of flesh as conditioned, ultimately, by decay. As far as this combined sculptural/conceptual research is concerned, actual flesh is therefore simply too rich a material to pass up: for 'flesh' is almost synonymous with 'mortality'. *The New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition* (2005); W.E Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (1996), 437-38.

this was not a presence represented by a cadaver or a cadaverous effigy, but as a space of *prior* bodily presence. Hence bodily absence was to render this space in which a body *could* be visualized or in a way re-membered. This subsequently signaled as a mode of disembodiment.[33] 'The Pod', in this case, became a hub: a brooding 'focal point', from which a broader trait of death merely leaked out to betray and release its inner absent contents. In this way, it was anticipated that viewers would discover 'The Pod' as if discovering a leak, a strange but familiar smell, an isolated and seductively spot lit box to peer into. In short, it was a curious presence that simply required further investigation. On encountering the box and its interior (here as the source of the smell), its absent 'contents' were at once sensed and already immaterialized; the exhumed remains were already dissipating and dissipated, as if they were already disembodied long ago.[34]

By utilizing crudely tangible traits displayed in a physical and temporally active state of decay, as well as less tangible qualities (such as 'The Pod's' odour), the box also became a kind of cipher in which a central bodily absence summoned the contrasting bodily presence of the perceiving viewer. Emphasized also by the mirroring scale of the box's recess, an intimate realism of this interior enclosure became a critical feature for creating the feeling of ambivalence towards it. That is, ambivalence in lieu of a temporal bodily physicality being echoed through the container's densely framed aperture of an absent bodily subject. It is from this point of uncertainty that I anticipated the viewer's response would take place, here in this grave that has been left open: beautiful on the outside, yet ominous and compellingly unsettling on the inside.[35]

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With 'The Pod's' replicated space of putrefaction, there is also a return to the body-enclave of Holbein's *Dead Christ*. Albeit this is without a body, and it is an object/space constructed in sculptural form as opposed to being a painted picture.[36] In addition to this correlation, 'The Pod' symbolically becomes

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[33] Disembodiment, as a form of defaulted remembrance recognized through bodily trace, could logically illustrate that such *designated absence* contains and suspends loss, in the same relation that, as Freud posited, the 'lost-object' withdraws into the ego and is absent from consciousness. In this sense, the attachment to the lost-object, as part of its basic denial of loss, "escapes extinction" by being buried/repressed, like a perforated grate at the bottom of 'The Pod' – as a false floor - allowed for. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," (1957), 257.

[34] Going back to the work's odour, the idea of confining a subtly managed smell inside a large open container was problematic from the start. This is not a materially stable element, especially when compared to the tangible and sculptural quality of wood and steel. Hence, during its installation time of three weeks, its odour had all but dissipated by the end. In a practical sense, this meant that viewer's really did take part in a transition of the trace of smell, dissipating until it had dissipated.

[35] Correspondingly, the paradox observed by Jerry S. Piven is thus: the disgust with the body (in this case, in its evident putrescence) is caught up in an alternating cycle of cause and effect. It is both repression of death and the horror of death itself, which feeds and perpetuates the attempt to escape the all-too-material condition of the body. Jerry S. Piven, *Death and Delusion* (2004), 51-52.

[36] To clarify, Holbein's *Dead Christ* does indeed incorporate sculptural qualities as part of its ornamental frame, which also houses its Latin inscription. While its illusory enclave - in which the body of Christ lies - is painted, this means that the work was designed to have a function, in its architectural features and compositional intensity, for drawing focal attention to the space illustrated within it.

a kind of *crucible* for holding and putrefying the traces and excesses of the mortal body, which when compared to the tomb of Christ (following the Latin *crux* or *cross* from which the word 'crucible' is part derived) – again as a kind of symbolic apparatus for transforming the mortal condition of humankind - its relational potency becomes quite clear.[37] Furthermore, the reading of 'The Pod' as a crucible, can be extended to its purpose of *purifying*, both in an alchemical and Eucharistic sense. In this regard, the crucible is the alchemical 'container' in which various material substances are subjected to chemical transformation: a process that is believed to produce a coinciding allegorical purification of the participant's soul. Similarly, as Christians believe, 'the grave' is where the 'stain of sin' is left through the purifying agency of Christ via death and resurrection. Here also, in respect to partaking symbolically in Christ's bodily death through the sacrament of the Eucharist, 'The Pod' is akin to the 'container' or *cup* from which the offering of his mortal 'flesh and blood' (represented as bread and wine) is ingested. In this way 'The Pod' cannot be summarized as a work 'about' death. It is an exploration seeking to look beyond the finitude of the body, if indeed possible, through its physical proposition and its parallel limitations pertaining to the nature of embodiment.
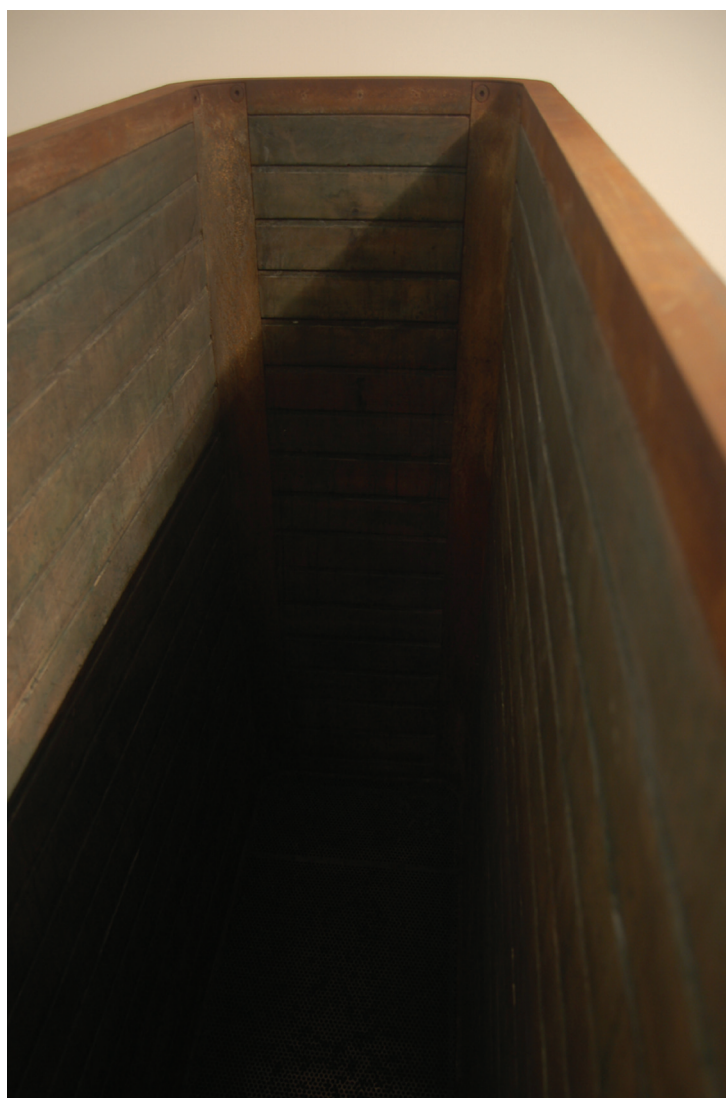
Figure 16. Michael Needham, ***Container for the Absent Body*** (The Pod) (detail of interior), August 2007, Bus Gallery, Melbourne.

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37 I'd like to thank my supervisor Ross Moore for raising this relation of putrefying and purifying in context to the crucible and Eucharist.

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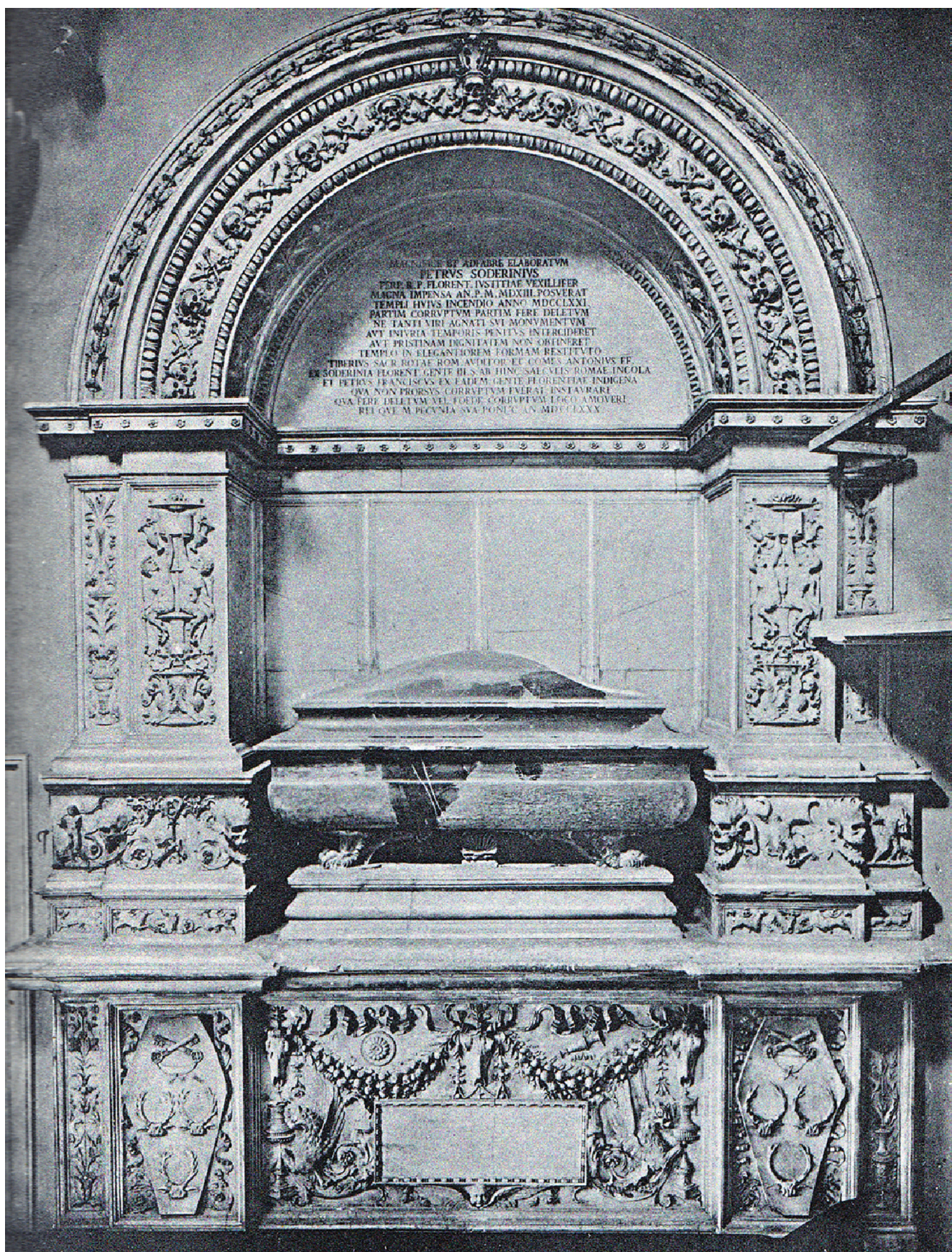
Figure 17. Benedetto da Rovezzano, *Tomb of Pietro Soderini*, 1512, in the principal chapel, S. Maria del Carmine in Florence.

It has been said that creating a memorial is an attempt to visualize the invisible by locating the past within the present.[1] Various problems of representation inherent within the ephemeral nature of memory could in this case be just as true when referring to representations of the Divine and its incomprehensible nature. S. Brent Plate alludes to a very interesting relationship between these two areas in his introduction to "Zakhor: Modern Jewish Memory Built into Architecture." He refers to the story of the Israelites crossing the Jordan and the subsequent pile of stones left on the riverbank both as a *memorial* to this event and as a marker of *divine intervention*.[2] Under this premise of a correlating function, both memorials to the past, and designated places for Divine manifestation and/or worship, are not only related, but have an intriguing element in common. This is representing and/or invoking what is held to be sacred through their material presence. Also worth noting is that in both cases, there is a physical component – a demarcating site or structure - used to facilitate an acknowledgement of an 'immaterial subject:' i.e. a subject, which is or has become defined by immaterial qualities. It is via this same physical component that remembrance or worship is composed as an interactive means of access to the particular immaterial subject. It is here that remembrance or worship 'reactivates its subject in the present.'[3]

The fact that memorials to the past and places for worship are given a material structure, is a fundamental expression of the sacredness that is attributed to their respective subject of honour. A designated structure or place is a way to identify that something is worthy of either remembrance or worship, and it can accordingly be revisited for ongoing acknowledgment or devotional use. However the quality of *sacredness* is in this sense heightened, if not largely defined, by the fact that a material structure or site represents what cannot represent itself. That is, sacredness – largely pertaining to an immaterial subject - requires a material apparatus to represent it: a kind of surrogate presence. While a subject is sacred *because* it is or has become immaterial, sacredness could also be defined by the *loss* – the material misapprehension – that undergirds it. This paves the way for seeing a mode of absenteeism in the definition of the sacred, which is only part dispelled (though at the same time made implicit) by the use of a material 'stand-in' presence. With these concepts in mind, I find myself quickly returning to my Grandfather's grave, and in particular, to the functional use of the tombstone erected in the place where the dead (in general) cannot represent themselves.

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[1] S. Brent Plate, ed., "Zakhor: Modern Jewish Memory Built into Architecture," in *Religion, Art and Visual Culture: A Cross Cultural Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 198.

[2] Ibid., 195. See also Joshua 3:1 – 4:18.

[3] Ibid., 196. In regards to the memorial, Brent Plate remarks that it is 'past times' and 'spaces' that are "reactivated in the present". This however, is only a way of "embodying the present" rather than the past: "[w]e write, we record, we build, we draw, based on what is present, yet nothing can guarantee a re-presentation at a later point in history". Appropriate examples of this, is the Passover in Judaism and the Eucharist in Christianity; each being a kind of remembrance/devotion enacted through the use of certain materials standing in with specific symbolic attributes.

✳

The various meanings in the definition of the word *shrine* already provide clear evidence of a relationship between memorials and places for Divine manifestation/worship. In this regard, a shrine can mean both a sacred place of worship, as well as a 'tomb' (or even an individual container) for burying and remembering the remains of the departed.[4] Extending this definition, a shrine usually incorporates a specific object (or objects) of intentional purpose. This can be an object of worship as an offering, or as images/statues/symbols of deities, or both. It can also be an object of remembrance: something that holds the remains of the deceased or as a representative monument itself, or both. It follows that the relationship (linking places of worship and remembrance with the definition of the shrine) continues to exist between the place of the shrine and its incorporated object. In this light, deities and corpses are quite closely interconnected.[5]

In identifying this basic and extended relationship - essentially between tombs and temples, together with their purposes and objects - a similar correlation between *divinity* and *mortality* can also be pieced together. As I perceive, this inherently involves proposing a tensive relationship based on a kind of represented absence (as indicated above). Though more fundamentally, a tension in this link is inaugurated (and perpetuated) by the conceptual implications of bringing these two states/qualities together in the first place, for in relation to one another, 'divine' and 'mortal' are basically oppositional definitions. A defining example of a deep-seated incongruence between divinity and mortality is accordingly found in the concept of The Incarnation. Depending on how it is interpreted (as a valuation or dismissal), this is either an incongruence or a *paradox* of the 'Word of God made flesh,' a corporealization of God, which critically incorporates the dual natures of 'human' and 'divine' in the person of Jesus Christ.[6] Indeed much of the broader profundity in the concept of The Incarnation, is both established and maintained in the ongoing attempt to make sense of its own 'ultimate' and seemingly contradictory synthesis of God and Man (precisely Divine and mortal).

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[4] *The New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition* (2005).

[5] Linking gods and the dead by identifying them as both objects of love/worship and primordial fear, art historian Erwin Panofsky states, "the borderline between the dead and the gods tends to be fluid". This is particularly evident when considering religions that incorporate a worship of ancestral figures. Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture: Four lectures on its Changing Aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini*, ed., H. W. Janson (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 10. Also, Maurice Blanchot initiates a similar equation when he refers to the "deceased" - as with the(ir) "cadaver" - as being "not of this world," a characteristic usually granted to the non-material 'beyond-ness' of deities (and particularly so with the Judeo-Christian God). For Blanchot, it is as if the cadaver signals a "behind the world" and so allowing for "the possibility of a world-behind, a return backwards," knowable only through a reconstituted presence and proximity of the cadaver left behind. Maurice Blanchot, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays* (1999), 419-20.

[6] Referring to The Incarnation, Pseudo-Dionysius' congealed term, the 'God-man', as well as Soren Kierkegaard's "Absolute Paradox" of this same junction of opposites within a single term, are both pertinent examples of a contradictory synthesis of God and Man. Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite, "Letter Four," in *Pseudo Dionysius – The Complete Works*, trans., Colm Luibheid (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 264-65; Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments, Johannes Climacus*, ed., trans., Howard V. Hong, Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 37-48.

It is important to note that preceding this 'paradox' of the Incarnation, its paradoxical quality - as revisited contradiction/incongruence - is only formed by the dialectical operations enabled through a larger system of binary opposites, and where the opposition between the 'mortal' flesh and the 'Divine' Word is determined. In this system, The Word as *Logos*, and claimed as Christ, belongs to an extensive legacy of Greek philosophical thought, from which 'metaphysics' - a system which determines distinct categories - produces language (and meaning) by upholding and proliferating binary oppositions.[7] According to Jacques Derrida, moreover, it is in respect to a hierarchical structure between these oppositions, as well as play of signification that opens up between them in the process, which constitutes language as a 'system of differences'.[8] In the case of an opposition between divine and human, 'God' (conceived and valued as an ultimate 'reality' or 'center') is regarded as the 'unknown', 'eternal', 'infinite', 'transcendental', 'immaterial', 'absolute'. These values are given priority over 'Man', who – defined in opposition to these terms - is ('therefore') 'knowable', 'mortal', 'finite', 'corporeal', etc. Hence in our 'limited' capacity to understand, 'God' can only be conceived as 'absolute difference'. To understand the nature of 'God' in this way is to know the (oppositional) finitude of 'Man'. These respective 'nature's' of God and Man in turn, form the basis on which the paradox/contradiction of The Incarnation is established.[9] This shows that divinity and mortality are related (in opposition), but that a relation claimed between them certainly brings complex implications into any representation (or attempted representation) of the divine. This is particularly so when considering the *human* ('fallen') subject as a primary means of representation.[10]

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[7] It is worth noting that prior to the identification of "metaphysics", yet certainly since incorporated into it (with the soteriological premise of Christianity), is the concept of The Fall. This is where a difference between God and Man is defined; the story represents a fall from ideal unity into disunity: [h]owever it is read, the Adamic myth is a story of proliferating dualisms or, more precisely, proliferating hierarchies. The Fall from innocence to experience not only divides the world but also introduces a definite structure of value; we fall from an undifferentiated knowledge of good to a differentiated and fatal knowledge of good and evil. From God's presence we pass to His absence; from immediacy to mediation…from fullness of being to a lack of being…from life to death". Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 5. Accordingly, it is Derrida (following Hegel), as Kevin Hart elaborates, who returns to the story of the fall as 'explanation for the genesis of philosophy', and metaphysics necessarily with it. Ibid., 3-19.

[8] Regarding this hierarchical structure, Derrida notes that "[a]ll metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not *one* metaphysical gesture among others, it is *the* metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, the most profound and most potent". Jacques Derrida, "Limited Inc: a b c…", trans., Samuel Weber, in *Glyph: Textual Studies*, 2 (1977), 236. Cited in Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, (2000), 84. What is important for explaining the wider, complex scope of this structure (and which leads us back to the significance of the Word made flesh), is that in correspondence to these oppositions and orienting their 'play' into language (as supplements, permutations, substitutions, transformations), the primary and 'superior' *signified* is valued as a '*presence*', 'origin', 'center', or 'ground', over the secondary *signifier*. Under this principle, this is where a 'devaluation of *writing*' – as a signifier - is identified, accordingly as a representation of *speech*: "[w]riting…is the external, the physical, the nontranscendental [;…] [w]riting presents language as a series of physical marks that operate in the absence of the speaker" Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 91. This privilege of speech/voice over writing leads to a "logocentrism" of metaphysics, "the orientation of philosophy toward an order of meaning – thought, truth, reason, logic, the Word – conceived as existing in itself, as foundation". Ibid. p.91. Logocentrism is then also an attempt to preserve the primacy of speech from the corrupting nature of writing. Hence the superior term of the '*Word' of God* is reinforced. Yet, if 'manifested' as an *inferior* 'exterior' form in the body/flesh of a man, it follows that a disruption - a negation of its privilege - will be brought to this first superior term, and also to its meaning constituted as superior. Such an event/claim would then also signal deterioration or corruption, if not incongruence or contradiction, or alternatively, a *paradox* made possible by the structure that attempts to disallow it.

[9] When the doctrine of the dual natures of Christ is translated into the structure of metaphysical language, "Christ is both signifier and signified…Christ *is* God, what He signifies is signified in and of itself. He is what Derrida calls a 'transcendental signified'. Yet Christ is also a transcendental signifier" (Christ is God *and* a representation of God). Paradoxically, 'His *body* is uncontaminated by the Fall; from the distinction between presence and the sign of a presence'. Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, (2000), 7-8.

[10] Adding another level of complexity and counterargument to The Incarnation's merging of divine and human (or other oppositional) qualities, is the statement found in the beginning of the Gospel of John. It is here claimed that 'the Word *was*

As a specific example of divine representation *embodied* as a human subject, the idea of The Incarnation becomes a pertinent 'conduit' through which its implications can be approached and discussed. Derived from the Latin *conducere*, the term conduit means to 'bring together,' and as a term describing The Incarnation, it accommodates for a kind of interactivity or play between the usually opposing 'dual natures' that are attributed to Christ: *human mortality* and *divine beyond-ness*. Being more generally known as an apparatus for domestic plumbing, this idea of a 'conduit' enables a 'fluid' dialogue to be held as a bi-fold yet united image or form.[11] The role of the conduit is to connect in this way, just as Christ – in the Christian tradition - is commonly regarded as being a mediator.

Ascending to the divine and descending to the human, the concept of Incarnation *as a conduit* can be metaphorically likened to a tree. A tree's *trunk* - the main stem or 'artery' – both reaches to the sky above and burrows into the earth below. Extending this metaphor, the movements of ascending and descending can be seen as basically interchangeable, for they operate simultaneously within an established line of passage, i.e. photosynthesis occurring in the foliage, feeds the tree, while moisture in the ground feeds the foliage through its roots. Continuing with this picture, the roots can be seen to support and nourish a reach towards the sun, as if the goal of the tree were to express this reach towards the life-supporting sunlight. While the roots support this action, it is also the roots that anchor the tree to the earth, thus establishing the tree's naturally determined limitations (which are not so much limitations as they are manifested qualities). This connection between a movement of ascension, and its limited/determined qualities - which both support and counteract its movement – seems to highlight something absurd about the notion of 'transcendence'.

The ideal of transcendence is like a separation from the ground: a separation from the desire or the mechanism that cultivates and supports it. In this respect, to see a desire for transcendence fulfilled, this requires a kind of detachment from what appears most obvious and determined, i.e. the limits of materiality. Yet this detachment does not 'fulfill' desire as much as eliminate it. In my mind, an underlying question pertaining to transcendence thus remains: surely it is not simply to be 'cut off'

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with God and the Word *was* God.' In this regard, the 'Word' is constituted as a *sign* of God's presence; it is the 'Word *of* God,' a 'signifier' of the 'signified'. But it is also identified as God – united to God – and not differentiated from God. In other words, the Word is God *and* a supplement of God. The Word (God) is a presence that presents itself, yet the Word is (also) a supplement that represents God, who can only – according to this system - be represented in absence. This statement effectively epitomizes a tension caused by a relation between distinctions (or identity between differences). Where 'difference and likeness comes together' this is where The Incarnation seems to hover at the threshold of the limits of metaphysical language, and its 'paradox' then redirects this tension and puts it in the service of producing a new meaning. Accordingly it is the claim of The Incarnation, which appeals to a transcendence from a difference between God and Man through its proposed synthesis. Yet in this way, the paradox and meaning of The Incarnation still depends on the oppositional structure which foregrounds it. The play between sign and signified is both upheld and challenged, both affirmed and unsettled.

[11] The term 'conduit' comes from the Latin *conducere,* meaning *'bring together' (The New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition* (2005)). As a term, it then also accommodates for a 'fluid' dialogue around the dual natures of Christ, claimed as being both *human* and *divine,* as that indicated by the Nicene Creed of 325 (in the First Council of Nicea 325, and in the Second Ecumenical Council in 381) and then definitively established in the Chalcedonian Creed of 451 (the Chalcedonian Council of 451): "Following, then, the holy fathers, we all with one voice teach that it should be confessed that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the Same perfect in Godhead, the Same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the Same {consisting} of a rational soul and a body; *homoousios* with the Father as to his Godhead, and the Same *homoousios* with us as to his manhood; [...] made known in two natures {which exist} without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the difference of the natures having been in no wise taken away by reason of the union, but rather the properties of each being preserved, and {both} concurring into one Person (*prosopon*) and one *hypostasis* – not parted or divided into two persons (*prosopa*), but one and the same Son and Only-begotten, the divine Logos, the Lord Jesus Christ...". Creed taken from Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition, Vol One: From the Apostolic age to Chalcedon (451),* trans., John Bowden (USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 544.

from an embodied life? Surely to die is not to transcend corporeality, but to be subsumed by its ultimate condition. Alternatively, an embodied and hence conditioned life surely plays an important role in transcendence?

If I return to the example of a tree as a representative image (admittedly a highly anthropomorphized image), it is perhaps this perpetuating incongruence regarding a desire fulfilled/unfulfilled that is its clearest trait. In attempting to rein-in this incongruity for the sake of procuring a clear represent-able definition (of a conduit – a passage - between ascending/transcending and descending), it seems easier to contend that transcendence and death interrelate to the point that they simply belong in the one image, just as 'looking into the face of God' means equally to be annihilated. Here, again, The Incarnation can be observed under the *tension* of its divine/mortal relations. It 'brings together' both a beginning and an endpoint, in the birth of a savior; an act of descending, and in the death, resurrection and final ascension of Christ and his followers, which is a coinciding endpoint and moment of transcendence. Between death and transcendence (or death and resurrection), what culminates here is a circular process, like the seed that dies in order to be reborn. Alternatively, this movement illustrates a kind of *arc*.

Similarly in regard to The Incarnation, its central - and memorial - image connecting these terms is that of a tree, where ascendance is achieved by (firstly) being raised-up upon a cross of crucifixion.[12]

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The previously mentioned crossing of the Jordan River is a short narrative account belonging to a series of events within the 40-year period after the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. Within this period, and central to this narrative, is a single mysterious artifact with supernatural power. It is this artifact that is held responsible for the waters of the Jordan being miraculously held back. This was the *Ark of the Covenant*, a gold covered chest said to contain two stone tablets inscribed with the Law of God.

The Ark of the Covenant was conceived during one of the most remembered events in the story of the Jewish people. Three months after the exodus from Egypt, it is said that God descended to the top of Mount Sinai and spoke directly to Moses regarding a new covenant with the Israelites through the Law of the Ten Commandments. It was within this event that Moses was given a set of instructions for building a physical tabernacle, as a sanctuary in which God would dwell. The Ark was then the central artifact amongst a number of furnishings for adorning the tabernacle.[13]

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12 John 12:32-33: "[…]But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die". A comparable dialectics (being less ambiguous about a binary structure) is mentioned in Luke 14:11: "[…]For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted".

13 For a detailed description of the Ark, see Exodus 25:10 – 22.

The handing over of these instructions was a significant event, for it meant that Moses *saw* the glory of God settled on Mount Sinai. Here Moses stayed enveloped in a cloud for forty days and nights. The Ark of the Covenant bears *testimony* to this event. Though it is also within the context of God being *present* among the people - by the giving of a covenant as well as the giving of the covenant itself – to which the Ark of the Covenant bears such testimony (and the Ark of *this* covenant thus becomes similarly known as *The Ark of the Testament*). In this case, even before the story of the Ark unfolds, it is already loaded with this sense of the presence of God. Correspondingly, a grand and glorious sense of divinity is destined for it, manifested by it, and ultimately contained within it, through what the Ark both symbolizes and memorializes.
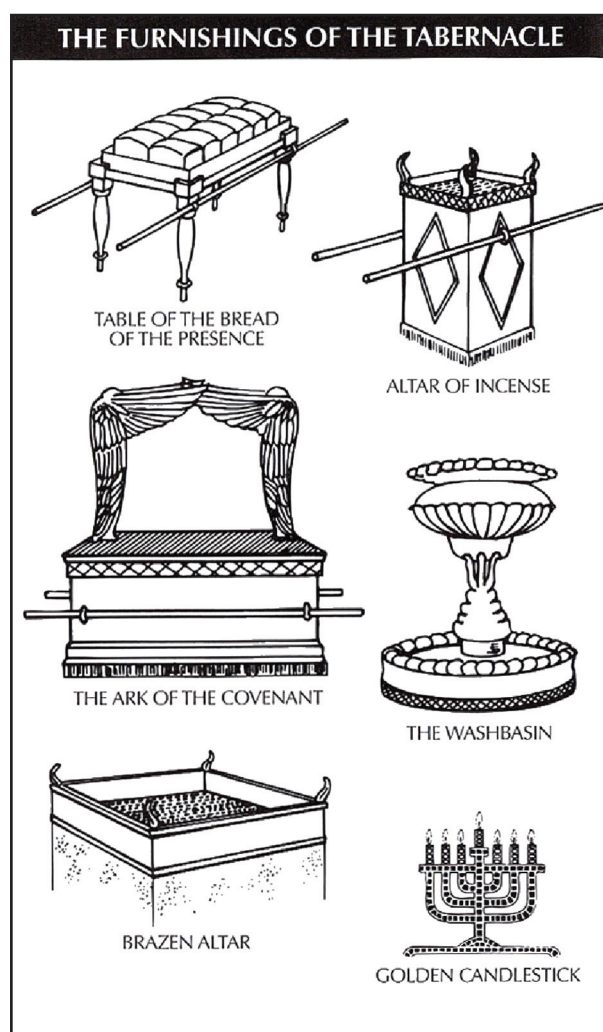
Fig 18. 'The Furnishings of the Tabernacle' (including the Ark of the Covenant), from Wilmington's Bible Handbook, 1997.

Yet while amazing and miraculous stories can be expected to follow, readers of its account must necessarily labor through the particularly monotonous attention given to the various materials, dimensions and other definitive details pertaining to the construction of the Tabernacle and its furnishings. Even though these instructions are words coming straight from God's mouth, it can be generally perceived as quite a dry transaction and reads not unlike an engineers report inserted into a fantasy novel. It is also hard not

to think, as least from a modern Western perspective, that there is a lot of glory invested into what would seem to be merely plans for some domestic furnishing (even if consecrated within a temple).[14]

Reflecting on this observation (if only in order to find a more tactful means of expressing it), it becomes increasingly evident that the whole textual account constantly slips between particularly detailed and repetitive descriptions, and short, fantastical and mysterious moments of acknowledging God's voice or manifestation in some form. The moments of tedium seem to significantly stand out as intervals, which in turn (and in my own reading at least), appear to have a function of knitting the whole story into a coherent picture. In effect, given that the fantastical particulars, such as the descriptions of God or narrations of God's voice are peppered throughout the text, the evidence of a parallel banality suggests something of an unedited factuality of the text. In other words, the highly imaginative particulars initiate a strong sense of the story as mythical, while the moments of banality seem to read as history-documented. As a modern-day reader, equally with a 'Christian' background informing my familiarity with the stories of the Old Testament, I am suspended between believing and not believing.

This lends to the experience of reading about the Ark, a strange and affecting quality. Likewise, with an imaginative image building in the mind, the mysteriousness of the Ark - in its possible/impossibility - also broods within the complimentary descriptiveness of its physicality. One might even say that this sense of mystery easily slips into a sense of the uncanny: for the mystery and the evident danger (as later revealed) inherent in the account of the Ark's mere presence, increases at the same rate at which its ordinary state as a piece of mobile furniture is both equally and plainly disclosed. If this developing image of the ark can be compared to anything, it is perhaps the plain yet auric presence of the old confessional box, which I stumbled across in the Crypt of St. Mary's Cathedral.

Because of this subtly disconcerting aspect of the Ark and its context, when I place myself imaginably into the story, my own ambivalence of belief induces a feeling of being implicated under the same haunting sense of threat that speaks from the mere possibility of the Ark's once real presence. Thus again, as a reader I find myself sitting on an imaginary boundary between fantastical mythology and a cultural historicity.

<div align="center">✳</div>

The account of the Ark's capture and return by the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:11 – 7:1), further illustrates a sense of the Ark's threatening presence. According to the biblical account, upon the Ark being acquired by the Philistines, it is taken to the city of Ashdod. It is then carried into a temple and set beside a local god, Dagon. In the morning, the people discover Dagon's statue "fallen on his face on the ground before

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14 "[T]he ark was made by Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah". Exodus 31:1–3, 35:30, 37:1–9. The skeptic might equally ask why there is such attention given to these facts, when the accounts of God's glory are so bare.

the ark."[15] So the people restore Dagon to his upright position. The very next morning they discover Dagon, again, "fallen on his face on the ground before the ark." This time his head and hands are broken off.

The account ends with a very matter of fact statement, which operating like a typical folklore didacticism, initiates a further sense of ambivalence around its real or fictitious disposition:

> "That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold."[16]

Directly after the encounter with Dagon, the account states that the people in the Ark's vicinity become afflicted with tumors. When the Ark is moved on to other cities, more outbreaks of tumors occur and many people die. It is then decided to return the Ark to the Israelites, with an extra offering of five gold tumors and five gold rats (an intriguing image in itself). When it arrives back on Israelite territory (on a cow driven cart that wanders into a wheat valley driverless), seventy men are struck dead because they look inside the ark.[17] By now, caution is clearly spelled out for the reader imagining the object, for it carries not just a powerful, victorious presence, but is a threat even to those who hold allegiance with it.

One of the most arresting accounts of the threatening, volatile nature of the Ark is told through the fate of Uzzah, one of two brothers assigned to accompany the Ark on a journey from the house of Abinadab to Jerusalem. The account proceeds as follows:

> "They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. …
>
> …When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down dead and he died there beside the ark of God." (2 Samuel 6:3 – 7)

As one reads further, each account of the Ark put together, describes an object that is less and less definable, and increasingly strange and unpredictable. Yet within this, a sense of the Ark's ordinary domesticity (as a piece of furniture) is actually never lost, for there are many other stories where it is only briefly mentioned. In these citations, the accounts do not seem to promote the Ark's representative status or the glories of Israel's almighty God transpiring through it. Indeed, in many cases, the Ark is only peripheral to the narrative being told, seemingly as if its sense of contained power is inert, or at least dormant.[18]

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[15] 1 Samuel 5:3

[16] 1 Samuel 5:5

[17] This figure of seventy men is unclear between translations, varying between 50,070 men killed, to seventy men and 50 oxen killed: the indistinctness adding to a mythical disposition (or, adding to the *oscillation* between sensing it as 'real' history or myth).

[18] Most of these accounts are short and intimate narratives documenting the mere presence of the ark as an object, as well as its interaction with particular characters. Below is a short list of these and related passages, which are interesting to read as they further compose a unique and intriguing picture of the ark. 1 Samuel 3:1-10, 1 Samuel 4:3, 4, Judges 20:24–28, 1 Kings 8:9.

<p style="text-align:center">✳</p>

Reading through these accounts, the Ark's journey clearly propagates an aura of reverence, mystery, and superstition around it as an object. As if the Ark's journey somehow continues in the very imagination it obviously breeds, there is something of an instinctive urging that this same imagination needs a place to land, if only in order to believe it, enshrine it, or to let it return to a distant ether of biblical folklore. The Ark, as it is seen within this realm of conjured imagery, becomes a pertinent basis on which to create new sculptural work, which is inspired by such density of mystery and uncanny sense of presence.

As an artist responding to this conjured presence of the Ark, one of the primary aspirations would be to try and replicate its intriguing qualities. In this case, I would need to draw on a similar sense of presence with - yet somehow still surpassing - a direct physicality, and through which the implications of such an objectified concentration of mystery, could be conveyed. Practically speaking, this could either be achieved by resembling the ark according to its physical description (and then draw on its narrative), and/or by invoking specific characteristics within its physical presence, which could *trigger* similar readings of reverence, mystery or superstition.

From this basis, the idea of essentially creating a copy obviously goes further than mere replication of its physical aspects. In fact, because of the mysteriousness in which the Ark is imaginably enveloped, the underlying interest in recreating it, incorporates a desire to re-invoke (or perhaps even witness) these qualities of presence and affect, as opposed to merely reconstructing an impotent display of its physically modeled accuracy.[19]

The idea of simulating the Ark in this way, raises a peripheral dialogue about the dangers of *simulacra*. With regard to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, both *simulation* and *simulacrum* are shown to have a function of deceit. This is because a copy signals a 'remove' from reality, as either a shadow or reflection, which in turn presents a false reality that substitutes the real.[20] In attempting to defend any concern about this kind of deceit with regard to my own 'secondary' ark, there does however, seem a basic point of exemption carried in the 'original' Ark. This Ark was a physical means of representing God's presence and was

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[19] In this case, my new – remodeled - ark would tend for categorization that sits in-between the respective definitions of *simulation* and *simulacrum*, with 'simulation' generally referring to "a set of actions…deceitful in its display of "some situation or process," while 'simulacrum' "…bears a resemblance to the thing that it imitates only on the surface level… [T]he simulacrum is defined as a static entity, a "mere image" rather than something that "imitat[es] the behavior" of the real thing on which it is based" (second brackets in text). Though as is directly speculated, there is no intention to deceive. Devin Sandoz, "simulation, simulacrum (1)", *Theories of Media: Keywords Glossary* (The University of Chicago, 2003). http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/simulationsimulacrum.htm (accessed Jan 9th 2009)

[20] The Allegory of the Cave incorporates the idea of shadows projected onto the rear wall of a cave, owing to a screen of puppets lit from behind by a fire, all of which are levels of varying imitations and effects of/from the Sun existing outside the cave. A narrative is woven through this context in order to articulate a moral about the deceptiveness of simulation, and how we must learn to seek the real, which we cannot see while taken in by the false. *The Republic of Plato,* Book VII, trans., A.D. Lindsay (Heron Books, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., n.d.), 514-18 (207-212). Though just as pertinent, and echoing Plato's allegory, Jean Baudrillard's is much cited for this particular quote regarding the *signifier* (not the 'real' or 'original' *signified*) which has been substituted in the process of representation: "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real." Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* trans., Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 4-5.

sanctioned by God, who in the context is understood as nothing less than the ultimate reality. My ark draws from this original sanction, but on the other hand is not an attempt to usurp God's original reality or power. My 'secondary' ark is not attempting to be the Ark as presented in the history of the Israelites, but is a means to better grasp the original, which is materially absent. Furthermore, because there are the physical instructions for the original ark – readily available in Old Testament scripture - there are already multiple representations of the ark made for the purpose of illustrating its easily accessible visible characteristics. These visual qualities are no secret, and the 'original' Ark is surely not made any more vulnerable to the limitations of representation simply on account of the one that I am proposing. In fact the Ark's 'power' is already largely stripped because of these domesticating simulacra.[21] If anything, and specifically in regards to my own ark, it seems more beneficial to *reveal* a stripping of 'original' power. For this allows me to use such a trait, for identifying the powers that were believed to be present in the original - physically determinate - object of the Ark. This can also help me to formulate (and back-trace) a parallel 'kenotic' trait of divine qualities forfeited – yet somehow mysteriously maintained - in the Ark, which effectively precedes the concept of The Incarnation as a corporealization of God.

Within the as yet theoretical anticipation of the making of this ark, the image of the original Ark is arrestingly painted in the mind through its real/mythical, magical and dangerous qualities. A reconstructed sculptural form would then also provide a physically hypothetical access point (with a form of material evidence) to a manifestation of the divine. Standing as a substitute ark - like the *mediatory* purpose of the 'Ark of the Covenant' is deemed to address in the first place - a new ark could continue (potentially) to actively conjure, hence *allow,* such an idea of manifestation through tangible means. A work like this would, in a way, provide a physically engaging ability to investigate what is usually left to the more conceptual speculations of a rabbi or theologian. Making the Ark/ark is in many ways only a matter of transition: from an articulated idea, to the physical form it calls to be.

However there is further basis on which a question of deceit can be negotiated, which ironically, brings a twist that invigorates it with a new ambivalence of suspicion. At this juncture, and with more direct reference to the Ark of the Covenant and its earlier conception at the top of Mount Sinai, it is the second commandment (given amongst the 10), which stipulates there be no representations of the one true God.[22] As an extension of the first commandment ("You shall have no other gods before me"), this second commandment is also evidently, the first to be broken in the making of an artifact (the Ark) that

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[21] In the instance of a proliferation of simulacra, whereby a power is stripped from the divine (as an ultimate reality signified), Baudrillard expresses the means by which this occurs, while equally clarifying an iconoclastic predicament in the process: "But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme power that is simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp of fascination – the visible machinery of icons *substituted* [my italics] for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? This is precisely what was feared by the Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today. This is precisely because they predicted this omnipotence of simulacra, the faculty simulacra have of effacing God from the conscience of man, and the destructive, annihilating truth that they allow to appear – that deep down God never existed, that only the simulacrum ever existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum – from this came their urge to destroy the images. […] [T]heir metaphysical despair came from the idea that the image didn't conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination. Thus this death of the divine referential must be exorcised at all costs." Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (1994), 4-5.

[22] Exodus 20:4. This commandment, also being of a general ban on imagery (contemporaneously coined by the German term *Bilderverbot*), signals one of the primary traits of the three major monotheistic religions.

stands to represent (via containing) God, or God's presence.[23] From here, and going right back to the very origins of the Judeo-Christian story, one could even draw a correlation to the premise of The Fall, where 'original sin' was the attempt to "be like God".[24] As attempts to assimilate in a capacity of *being* or *embodying*, these are both notable transgressions against the same underlying principle of the second commandment, instituted to protect against the falsifications of *simulation*. In this case (and predating the Greek thought of Plato), there is already well in motion within cultural Judaism, a history of simulation/ simulacrum and its implications.[25] Furthermore, the Ark, as a material artifact displaying God's glory, even stands as a kind of contained simulation of God and thus both incorporates and perpetuates the problem. Here, one might accordingly suspect that the Ark has been endorsed to fittingly undercut its own contextual terms against representation. Or rather, that the *Covenant* the Ark embodies, appears to be instituted precisely because its own means of representation (of God), is found tangibly *defaulted* at its very core. The Ark is a signifier - a material anchor for the presence of God - even though God apparently transcends materiality.

Figure 19. 'The Ark of the Covenant from Rev. John Brown's 1873 Illustrated Bible'.

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[23] I am here referring to the account of the Golden Calf. Exodus 32:3

[24] Genesis 3:4

[25] The unpronounceable Jewish term for God, YHWH, is a prime example of a suppression of a signifier of God, even while it still serves as a name, which signifies the transcendental as a term for God/wholly other. Derrida interestingly clarifies the context of this name in regards to the tower of Babel and its attempted simulation of a 'wholly other' status of YHWH (Genesis 11:1-9). Accordingly, the tower of Babel was built in order for men "to make a name for themselves, to give themselves the name, to construct for and by themselves their own name, to gather themselves there…the one as well as the other, the one as the other." Effectively imitating the privileges of YHWH, YHWH then comes, "*descends* toward the tower" proclaiming his name as "Bavel" (Babel), "Confusion." Mankind, indeed '*bears* the traits of YHWH's name,' but only as 'Confusion', in the curse of not understanding, in the fact that 'his tongues are (henceforth) scattered' in a multiplication of signs due to a multiplication of languages. Derrida continues by adding that this is "according to a descendance that in its very dispersion remains sealed by the only name that will have been the strongest, by the idiom that will have triumphed (i.e. unpronounceable YHWH, as Babel, Confusion)." Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed., with introduction by Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 106-109.

In addition to this paradoxical position of the Ark, there is the somewhat incidental ambivalence already inherent in the reading of the Ark's mythical character, which shrouds a difference between the Ark as 'real' or 'false': historically factual or socially invented. Thus, the difference between the original Ark and my secondary one arguably carries an already part-instituted reprieve against the dangers of deceit or idolatry. If there is no original (Ark that is), my own ark is just going to physically fill a picture that has already been visualized in its written representation.
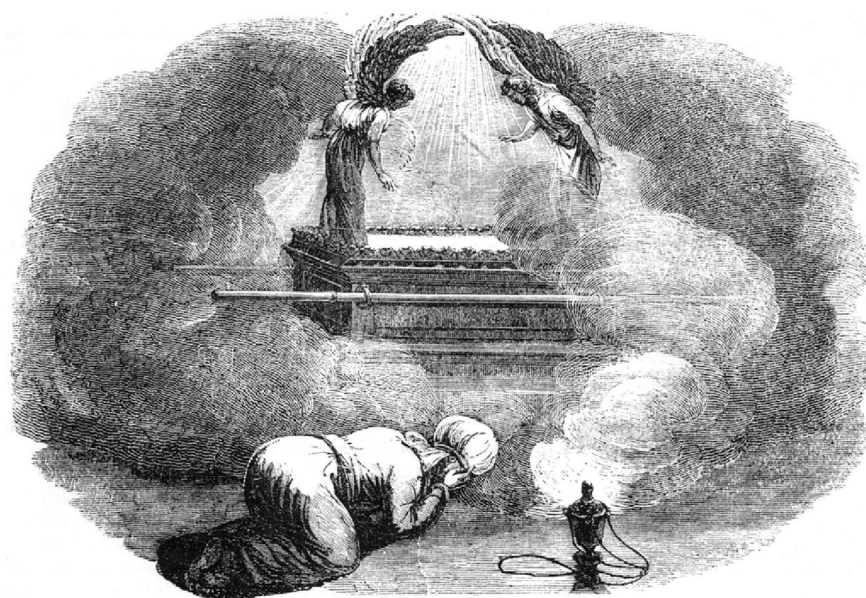
281.—Probable Form of the Ark of the Covenant.—Exod. xxv.

Figure 20. 'Probable Form of the Ark of the Covenant – Exod. Xxv.' Image from www.prweb.com (accessed 13th Jan 2010).

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Within my own construal of the Ark as an object of mystery-in-itself, there is another fundamental reading that has been almost completely missed. In a later passage about the Ark, just after it was brought into King Solomon's newly finished temple, it is candidly stated that, "There was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets."[26] This is an incredible statement and can obviously be read, or translated, in a variety of ways, each throwing the interpretation of the Ark in rather conflicting directions, given the more significant context for the ark already explained. For with nothing inside but the "two stone tablets", it is possible to forget what or whoever it was that struck out to kill all those 'irreverent' or merely unfortunate people that happened to get in its way. The question of what the Ark really represents, as a *container,* is equally stirring. I.e. is the Ark merely for holding the 'testimony' of the tablets, rather than being representative of/for God in its physicality or function?

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[26] 1 Kings 8:9, 2 Chronicles 5:10

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With the Ark's contents so casually revealed, the power and mystery based on an interior that is withheld, is basically rendered ineffective, unless of course, this initiates another speculative account (given that the seal on the mystery of the Ark is broken) on the nature of the stone tablets *as* the Ark's contents, and from which the Ark's power emanates. These tablets were, we are told, inscribed by God's own hand.[27]

Yet the statement of "nothing in the ark except…" raises the interesting and crucial matter of a contained *absence/emptiness*.[28] This throws the whole reflection into a different direction far away from the actual object-hood (the material Ark), and supposedly away from the *containing* representational status of the Ark (the tablets it holds), which seems to be potentially undermined by the revelation that there is "nothing in the ark except…" In this conjecture, with the Ark's physical significance giving way to its contents, it can begin to be perceived as an empty shell.

Adding to this perception is another account of the Ark, again as if it were only of minor significance or a passing comment merely tacked on: "…the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned *between* the cherubim."[29] Having conjured and secured a visual image of the ark from the start of this segment, the cherubim are physically placed on top of the ark's lid, not inside it (see figures 18, 19 and 20). As they face towards each other and their wings touch or almost touch, they create a negative space between them. This is not an ark as such, but an *arc*: a charged space between two golden, and hence highly conductive figures, functioning as positive and negative terminals.[30] This designates the *actual space* where 'God' dwells and from which God's power and/or presence emanates.

This space of God "enthroned between the cherubim", now recognized, is mentioned in another six passages, including a crucial one attached to the very instructions for making the physical ark. In this one it reads:

> "There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you…" [31]

In this way, the Ark is not just a mysterious chest that releases a superstitious curse to those who touch it or open it. It is also, and primarily so, the throne of God. Hence the lid of the ark in some translations is referred to as 'the mercy seat'.[32] As the Ark is a vessel *and* a memorial of the Covenant, it speaks all the

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[27] Exodus 24:12

[28] The continued emphasis on this statement admittedly takes a peripheral slant on a literal interpretation, which in terms of an artistic reflection, it begins to be isolated from its scriptural context. However, the translation of the actual words appear consistent, with most other Old Testament translations saying: "There was nothing in the ark except [or "save"] the two stone tablets…"

[29] 1 Samuel 4:4

[30] Accordingly, there is a theory essentially describing the ark as a powerful electrical 'conductor': "a device capable of producing thousands of volts of static electricity"; able to both store and discharge electricity and even create a "glow" or "corona", in the space between the cherubim's wings. Michael Blackburn and Mark Bennett, "Re-Engineering the Ark," *ForteanTimes*, March (2006). http://www.forteantimes.com/features/articles/106/reengineering_the_ark.html (accessed 13th March 2008)

[31] Exodus 25:22

[32] Exodus 25:17-22 (New King James). The mercy seat (otherwise "atonement cover") is also named as such as it is the central site of propitiation – physically and symbolically - of atonement, hence equally embodying the component of mediation that is required for the covenant. In addition, as blood was sprinkled on the lid of the ark (Leviticus 16:14-15), the lid - receiving the blood, withholding the ark's inner contents and then acting as a plinth for the space of God's presence - is itself a physical object foreshadowing the Incarnation of God in Christ as much as it materially designates the non-physical symbolic nature of mercy.

more of a non-material, non-visible presence, dwelling (and somehow manifesting) *between* the cherubim. Though it should be made clear that this point of contact with this 'presence of God' is not with the actual physical object, but that God dwells in the space that is materially designated by the Ark/arc. As much as God is not contained by it, the Ark creates an intentional focal point by which a divine entity is imagined and housed.
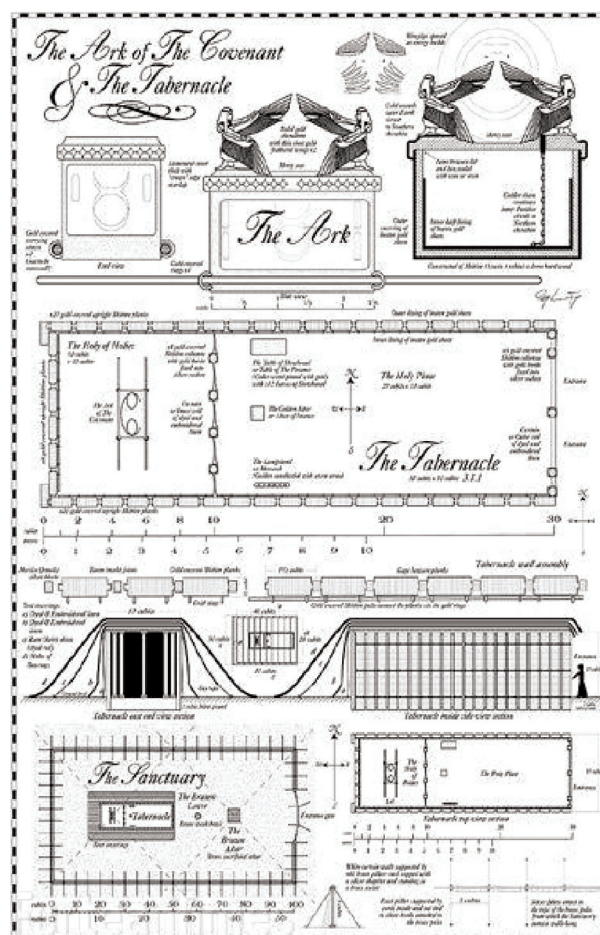
Figure 21. 'A diagram of the Ark' (The Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle). Image from www.forteantimes.com (accessed 13th March 2008).

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The Ark is still an object. But it is an empty space at the same time. Thus the Ark/arc is like an object *and* a space. It doesn't just occupy space and so fill the viewer's field with a physical form. It frames space, designating an otherwise unspecific space and charging it with imagination, cultural memory and belief in the possibility of divine presence. It offers a mode of tangible grounding for all these readings as much as it acknowledges a more or less immaterial character of such 'presence'. All the readings and meanings of the Ark/arc are then doubled up and loaded into what my secondary object will hold and frame.

The fact that the Ark and its contents have never been found archeologically, is arguably the biggest reason why the Ark is still, for many people, clouded in mystery. As long as it is missing from the hands of historians, archeologists, scientists, religious leaders and theoreticians etc, the Ark and its ordinary or threatening presence, will remain fundamentally mythological. As such, it will also remain an icon of both suspended belief and/or perpetual doubt. A question is then raised about just how much divine mystery would either be manifested or lost if the Ark were to be discovered.

THE LOG

Just prior to beginning this reflection on the Ark, a search for a new artwork had already been taking place. I knew what I wanted: the biggest log I could practically manage. But it had to be hollow. So without traveling beyond the state, this meant my immediate search was basically for a large Australian red-gum trunk.

What I required from this log was for it to capture a sense of retiring monumentality; to contain something awesome on the basis of its dense constitution and large-scale form, yet one long given over to a natural and highly visible state of decay.[33] In this sense, I anticipated a tree large enough to make one feel dwarfed in its presence, yet not so oversized that it had no bodily relationship when surveying its whole. It was within this kind of connatural relation that I hoped the log would betray its decaying elements and in turn, convey its ordinariness and somewhat familiar (comparable) state of corporeality in an overall state of dejectedness. Ideally, it would be so rotten and gutted that it would possibly even need additional bracing inside in order to hold it together. In this case, the new work was a matter of discovery, of resurrecting and reclaiming what had long been abandoned, salvaging what has been 'exposed to the elements'. This is the body of a local tree, a comparable beginning to the original Ark crafted from local acacia wood.[34]

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As I imagined it, the state of the log, in its hollowness, would physically frame a certain absence. This would be an absence denoting where the core of the original tree once existed. Such a feature of the hollow and its missing/depleted 'heartwood' would then allude to much more than a physical hole, especially when considering that trees can develop hollows while still living.[35] In such cases, trees can

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[33] This idea - with less obvious emphasis on decay, was carried out recently by Anselm Kiefer in his 2007 show of recent work at the Art Gallery of NSW. This primary installation, entitled *Palm Sunday* after its thematic content in which Kiefer had been investigating, incorporated an entire palm tree, 12 metres in length: uprooted and left lying on its side on the gallery floor. As a extra point of interest both countering and correlating with my own interest in decay, at the time when I saw it (a couple of months in), fresh green shoots were emerging from the base of the tree. Thus the image of the growth and death (and re-growth) of the tree is perpetuated, in this case, rather fittingly (in the Catholic tradition) as an Advent reflection looking forward to the Resurrection.

[34] See Exodus 25:10, for the ark's description as made from acacia. Also, *Acacia melanoxylon*, or 'Australian Blackwood', would be a more accurate match to use in relation to the ark, however, finding an available and already felled specimen, large enough for the above description, was a far too narrow proposition for the time-line of this new work. Neither was it quite that necessary, even though it would have certainly added an extra dimension of like-ness.

[35] In circumstances when a tree's heartwood is exposed to the elements (i.e. the outer tree is wounded through stress fissures,

both grow and die naturally from the inside out, and a long, almost symbiotic exchange of resistance and acceptance, can take place for many more years before the whole tree actually dies. To clarify this example, the core which is a tree's central shoot (and around which subsequent layers are built year by year as indicated by its growth rings) is also - at least in many eucalypts - one of the first parts to rot away when it naturally dies.[36] Such a resulting absence in the hollow of an old *log* then indicates to some extent, how long the *tree* has been dead or in the process of dying. At the same time, a tree's increasing hollow gradually erases the history that is embedded in its growth rings.[37] Thus without its inner rings specifying its early history, the relic of a hollow log carries a sense of the mythological: an almost ahistorical presence, while still being physically and tangibly present.

A hollow log encountered as such is never just a static lump of dead wood. It is thoroughly active in its state of decay. Also, particularly in the case of a larger log/tree, there is a kind of monumentality perceivable from the consideration of its size, age, and historical presence.[38] If such a log is so old that it clearly outlives ones own existence (perhaps even many times over, as some species can live for thousands of years), its monumentality thickens via its somewhat latent sense of authority. The log's thickness of presence continues further in the sense of having duration of existence beginning prior to one's own birth and remaining for a good time after one has also passed away. As far as a relationship goes between one's own life and the tree's almost ahistorical ancientness, the log clearly harbours a tangible mode of permanence in contrast to the shortness of human life. With characteristics comparably likened to Christ's claim of being the *Alpha* and *Omega*, the tree, remembered in this way, could arguably parallel a symbolism of divinity.[39]

However, while a comparable sense of permanence may grant such a tree/log like-ness with divinity, its position as a piece of 'creation' is of course still conditioned. The body of the log that once lived, is the trees' own tomb. The tree doesn't require any memorial to stand-in for it because its physical presence still remains.[40] Reading the log in this way – as a kind of monument doubling as its own tomb - the log already serves as a *memento mori*. It signals an authority from which vanity of like-ness with divinity cannot

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fire scars, self-pruning of branches or borer holes etc.), this wood becomes vulnerable to decay, while the outer sapwood still functions and the tree lives on. Philip Gibbons, David Lindenmayer, *Tree Hollows and Wildlife Conservation in Australia* (Melbourne: CSIRO Publishing, 2002), 34-38.

36 Ibid., 34-38. While outer branches commonly die first, heartwood decay from these branches effectively feeds back into the trunk from which they sprouted, and from which they drew the tree's life-giving sap. This dual growing/dying of the tree also adds an allegorical twist to the circularity of the funereal phrase, "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19), and even more so in regard to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's somewhat ironically titled book thematically based on the acceptance of death, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975).

37 Ibid., 37. As Gibbons and Lindenmayer note: "heartwood decay typically commences in the pith (the oldest heartwood) and radiates to outer (younger) heartwood over time".

38 Where older trees in particular are scarred or carved (often due to bark being removed for making shields, canoes or other indigenous implements), these become important historical markers of indigenous occupation: such as camps and ceremonial sites. In this case, the tree can serve as a marker for indigenous inhabitants, as well as a memorial for indigenous culture.

39 Revelation 22:13. "I am the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End".

40 Like Blanchot's observations of the cadaver as earlier noted (see footnote 3 in 'Memorial'), the *log* is resemblance of itself, the tree: "preeminently resemblance, and…also nothing more", "already monumental", and also "doubled" by itself, in the sense that its "shadow" is constantly present with and behind its physical form. Again as an analogously divine attribute (never in need of representation: "I Am what I Am" Exodus 3:14), the log is the tree having surrendered itself to "nothing – except being". Maurice Blanchot, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader* (1999), 420-22.

stand, while also possessing a stark and simple distinction from divinity in the sense that it is decaying inanimate matter sinking into the ground.[41]

With its bare presence remaining, it is the dead horizontal mass of the tree that is but a familiar narrative invoking a lost sky-reaching glory. In this case, imagination and yearning are reined in and redefined under the memorial's function of recalling. Surrendered to gravity, the log is not so much a vessel *carrying* evidence of prior life, but prior life that has been devoured, and buried deep in its sunken weight.

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After a few months of searching I found the right log. It had no branches, and was noticeably weathered away, half embedded on a 'hundred-year' flood plain on a property in Northern Victoria. Most importantly, it was hollow, though barely, but it would certainly suffice.

By testimony of the farmer on whose property the log was found, it had floated here in the 1939 Easter Floods of Eppalock and surrounds. So while it had allegedly been lying there for 70 or so years, one could only speculate about the exact spot where it originally grew. Judging by some aged charcoal at one end, it had also been partially burnt. While inspecting in and around this burnt area, I remember noticing a few old scattered rabbit turds, which suggested that it was generally abandoned, even by the native wildlife.

It was a huge log with a girth of more than a metre. Judging by its size, I was told by a local timber worker that the tree from which it came would have been at least 200 years old. That put the age of this log at around 270 years (at least). So while it was an old dead tree among many, it evidently outdated British colonization of Australia.

With this embodied history in mind, it is compelling to think of what this log has 'seen' over its lifetime. Recalling the iconic images from our own Australian painter John Glover for example, how many indigenous people camped under its shade or kept warm by fire made from its shedding branches? Indeed what sort of interaction might it have silently witnessed as the new white settlers came onto the land? Now as a temporary shelter for European vermin introduced well after its life began, the log as a silent witness issues forth a heavier melancholy and *original* sense of presence, by containing and conjuring either actual or speculative or simply unknown accounts of this largely buried past.[42]

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[41] I am here referring to *memento mori* not just as "an object serving as a warning or reminder of death" (*The New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition* 2005), but by the sense of an underlying authoritative position from which this warning comes, which, in itself, then refers to its other use of pointing to a didactic measure of truth beyond the futility of mortal life.

[42] Writing on Glover's work in context to *A corrobery of natives in Mills Plains,* 1832 (pictured), Ron Radford and Jane Hylton have noted that the nature of Glover's interaction with the indigenous people was limited, thus many of his paintings depicting aborigines (including this one) were most likely painted in their absence from the landscape, at least in groups large enough to hold a corroboree. The fact that they had to be (re)imagined certainly strikes a haunting chord. And as

Figure 22. John Glover, *A corrobery of natives in Mills Plains* (A corroboree of natives in Mills Plains) 1832. Oil on canvas on board, 56.5 x 71.4 cm.

Also, in my own artistic intention and subsequent appropriation of the log, there is a personal question arising in respect to my own generational presence. That is, in my position as a white Australian artist, I can feel on a personal level that there are underlying implications concerning the fact that I am subjecting this log – this material piece of 'unclaimed' history - to my own particular ideology. Furthermore, the idealism (and skepticism) I have concerning the concept of Incarnation, is indelibly tied to the Christian ideology and colonial pursuits of 'white mans' culture, brought to Australia under a premise of 'saving' the indigenous population from their 'primitive' ways. As I perceive, this broader and deeper *stain* of an imported European culture and religion, certainly sits uneasy in my mind. This is only further accentuated by the fact that the log is fundamentally a material resource for me to use for a (seemingly unrelated) artistic purpose, which is based on a reflective account of the Ark: a distant artifact belonging to a foreign people in a foreign land. Having said this however, and while recognizing this uneasiness, it is the physical and symbolic qualities of the log that could be creatively utilized as a means of reconciliation. In other words, there was always going to be a specific role that this log played: a role that was already 'foreseen' in

subjects painted in absence, Radford and Hylton's comments are a shrewd interpretation of where Glover was coming from and what he was really painting: "It reveals Glover's poignant sense of loss for the departed Aborigines. Settler Glover is complicit in their sad displacement. Glover has silhouetted the dark native tree, tortured against a lurid sky. It is bent and dying as the sun sinks. It becomes a gloomy metaphor for the fate of the ancient race. The dusky figures dwarfed beneath the writhing tree seem mere shadows, ghosts of a former civilization. [… It remains]… an image of what the settlers had displaced and dispossessed". Ron Radford and Jane Hylton, Australian Colonial Art, 1800 – 1900 (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1995), 68-70.

my somewhat conceited 'artistic vision' relating to the larger claims of the Incarnation, including importantly, its 'universal' and 'conciliatory' purpose. Being inspired and haunted by the ideals and shortcomings surrounding this premise, there seemed something innately, or even precisely connected, that had drawn me to the log. This was the log in all its connatural physicality, as a piece of material waiting to be claimed, appropriated, transformed: used as a medium through which my creative urge (privileged as it is) would be 'realized', 'identified'. This is the same *something* that made me search the log out, in order to (re)find this something – this potential for transformation - embodied in the log: first in its unfound yet imagined state, then in its derelict condition, then in the process of physically intervening with it. In this way, the log was implicitly utilized (and not altogether intentionally) for the purposes of extending a reflective dialogue concerning Incarnation – of grasping something that seemed to be confoundedly absent - here in the context of being an Australian artist.

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After negotiating weeks of wet weather and soggy ground, I finally had the log brought to Melbourne. Using a lopping chainsaw and a carving blade on a grinder, I proceeded to hollow it out even more. I also cut a square hole in its side, as if a cubed block containing the heart of the tree had been extracted.

Figure 23. Hole cut into centre of log, as seen from above..

The process of excavating was itself closely aligned, physically and conceptually to that pursued by *arte povera* artist Guiseppi Penone in his paring back of the block of wood in order to "recover the tree inside" (see figure 24).[43] However, my intention was not to *find* the tree inside, but to cut it out: to rid the tree if its interior and frame an absence instead. The purpose was to displace the sense of the original matter within the log in order to further highlight its witness to history as *missing*. As I conceived, I needed to then make the log look like it was when I found it in a 'naturally'

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[43] In what has been a sustained interest since the late 60's, Guiseppi Penone has been excavating what is predominantly already milled timber, in order to, as he has said, "return it to the semblance of the tree that it was at a precise moment in its plant life. […] At this point I not only obtain a form, but I have also retraced the entire phenomenon of growth, back to the moment…[when it was] brought to a halt". While Penone is primarily interested in the process, importantly, this process creates and amounts to "[a] relationship between the real time of growth and the personal time of 'peeling back the bark'." Such a relationship obviously allows the tree's history (outliving ones own) to be - in a very real sense, tangibly negotiated. Ben Curnow, ed., *ArtePovera: Art from Italy 1967-2002*, exh. cat. (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002), 98.

deteriorated state. In effect, I burned it and scrubbed it with a bleach and cement mixture to hide the evidence of fresh cutting. This act of counterfeiting meant that the overall appearance of the log was consistent with its long history of sitting abandoned in a paddock. Cutting out its inside also enabled me to speed-up a process of hollowing that would have eventually occurred through its natural decay. In this respect, the disguising of its altered properties was equally as much a means of assimilating a *return* to a 'naturally unaltered' state.

Weeks later, the log was hauled into an artist-run space Northeast of the city. Here alongside a suite of other objects, it was presented in the foreign and artificially sacred space of a gallery (see figures 24 and 25). Leaving it as a cold, damp relic with gaping ends, anyone inspecting it quickly found its square wound and its gutted interior, empty and grey.

Figure 24. Giuseppe Penone. Image from his 2008 retrospective at the Accademia Di Francia, Villa Medici, Rome (2008).

While the initial vision for the log stayed closely on track, its exhibition alongside other works, obviously meant that the log would have an ensuing interaction: physically, spatially and conceptually. Looking back on the show in retrospect, the log itself was never actually conceived only in isolation. It was always intended to reference a journey, as a process and presence of death and decay, yet only with a vague inference of new life beyond its embodied decay. In this case, the other sculptural works – with which it interacted both in essence and form - were envisioned, constructed and installed in such a way as to emphasize a manifestation of death and decay migrating between similar forms. Accordingly, they were constructed and spatially arranged to demarcate the sense of a traveling connectedness between them. One of the other objects in the show was a polished wooden box closely resembling a casket (as mentioned already in the Introduction), while the other was an elongated cross-section of an urn, cast from dirt and cement. The primary content of the installation then consisted of three rather bare objects, somewhat similar in their voluminous presence but more intentionally connected through their

comparable horizontality.[44] This connected journey was circular in its physical arrangement, by means of the log being positioned (as with the other forms) as either heading towards or coming away from a small domestic wood heater positioned nearby.

Figures 25 and 26. **Vestiges**. Red-gum, blue-gum, steel, brass, dirt, stainless steel, dimensions variable. Yarra Sculpture Gallery, Abbotsford, July/August 2005. Dimensions variable.

[44] By the term 'horizontality' I mean it in a rudimentary sense to indicate form, that, whilst held together as a recognizable sculptural *object*, it nonetheless "yields to gravity" under its compression of apparent weight and density of form, all holding close to the surface of the ground. As a "*lowered*" *verticality*, this use is then a step back (and to the side) from Robert Morris' horizontality of *anti-form*, which, as Rosalind E. Krauss explains, is an "operation…make[ing] the force of gravity apparent *as* it pulled form apart: "random piling, loose stacking, hanging" (my italics). Though by retaining form structurally, and condensing the weight via design in shape and material with which it is built, these forms in turn display a horizontality (of gravity) that is contained, and which, importantly, outweighs (visually, physically and spatially) the vertical axis through which the viewer is accustomed to perceiving. As such, there is an implicit "attack" on "the verticality of the axis [of] the body," which in regard to these works, is a threat of a more immanent horizontality of death and the implications this brings to ones living (though decaying) body, while also metaphorically extending to level ones apparent 'stance' or 'standing' in life. Yve-Alain Bois, Rosalind E Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 94–98. In addition to this outline of the term just mentioned, I also consider horizontality to incorporate the emphasis of a relation to the viewer through the perceivable interconnectedness of forms in a given space (i.e. within phenomenological awareness): an interconnectedness specifically demarcated through the horizontal plane of the floor. This is a relation I have learned to appreciate throughout my own practical studies in perceptual drawing.

This wood heater, a blackened-steel cylindrical oven, stood simple and bare, though tangential to the other works. Reaching tall with a chimney ordinarily sprouting upwards, it stood subsequently as the only counterpoint by which the arrangement had any vertical formality, thus again emphasizing the presence of a dominating horizontality. Through the silent procession of objects within the oven's vicinity, I had hoped that a subtle poetics would be read into the fireplace, both as a symbol of a vulnerable endpoint – for red-gum 'firewood' - as well as a place for possible alchemical transformation between the objects evidently held close to the ground under their own gravitas.

The log however, with such a sheer mass of folds, layers, generations of flesh and half petrified bark, seemed to generate an immediate and very commanding presence beyond its obvious state of decay. This meant that my own conceptual ideology for the show seemed to have been largely overlooked by those who came to see it. By acknowledging this as a *failure* to clearly convey the installation's general premise, the *success* of the log's continuing sense of monumentality (as earlier considered) was more obvious, and thus prompted a resumption of its physical and conceptual journey beyond the space of the gallery after this exhibition. That is, with the log's evident resistance to its appropriation within an allegorical or symbolic order, the end of this initial exhibition only marked another beginning. Its commanding presence would be felt over a longer period of time by the need to store it in the front yard of my current rental residence.

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When the log was brought back to the front yard of our rental house on a tow truck (in lieu of no alternative studio space at the time), a realization of the log's dead cumbersome weight was unavoidably obvious. With constant questions and strange looks from passing neighbors, a 2-tonne log parked in the driveway of an inner suburban residence, is clearly a bit absurd. It just sat there. Every time I walked past or mowed around its perimeter, or awkwardly maneuvered a trailer around it, it spoke of a monumental yet vulnerably inert presence. While this was still a displaced mass, its commanding presence held promise, if again relocated and repositioned within the context of the 'Art' gallery (or if not at least separated from its new domestic abode). Yet while remaining in my driveway it also inevitably displayed a very obvious passivity akin to the inanimate piece of wood that it essentially was when first found, after 70 years of sitting.

Figure 27. Loading the log outside Yarra Sculpture Gallery, August 2005.

This base awareness however, of underlying entropy, was provoked and relentlessly fuelled by the contrasting positions within my own mind, which purposed to defend its grandeur and sense of value as a kind of vague memorial. Recognizable in this oscillating dialogue was a returning and underlying doctrine sitting uneasily within my artists' mind. This is the narrative account of a generic idol-maker in Isaiah 44, which outlines a comparable dialogue between a man and his block of wood.[45] Here, the author details how a carpenter cuts down a tree before kindling a fire to cook food and keep warm. He then proceeds to carve an 'idol', with which he deludedly converses and ultimately worships, thus receiving the curse of the author speaking for God:

> "The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker… He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine.
>
> […]
>
> Half of the wood he burns in the fire: over it he prepares his meal…He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." From the rest he makes a god, his idol… He prays to it and says, "Save me; you are my god." They [the idolatrous carpenter and his kind] know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand.
>
> […]
>
> He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"[46]

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[45] Isaiah 44:9-20.

[46] Ibid., 44:13, 16-18, 20

The overriding principle in this text is clear: If you think that God is an inanimate block of wood, you are a fool. However, if you forgive the sarcastic rhetoric of the account (which is impossible to miss), it would appear that the carpenter identifies a basic human aspiration, if only ill directed, to look for 'God' in the familiar and accessible elements that already serve as provision. The wood is a materially reliable means for cooking food and giving warmth from the cold. Surely, it's just a piece of wood, but who can deny there is something much more fascinating and mysterious (and in this sense likeable to qualities of the divine) contained within it, whether or not this is a scientific appreciation of complexity or belief that this is akin to a subtle Augustinian pantheism?[47] If one cannot see that a block of wood carries something in and beyond its physically unique congealment of matter, which is also a remnant of a living organism, perhaps 'they' are just as blind as Isaiah's 'idol-maker' is made out to be.[48]

But while this position might be easy enough to argue in my own mind, the mere existence of the 'idol-maker' stirs unease from many years of reflection and religio-cultural influence. In turn, my own beliefs and doubts about the potential of the log as an artwork, correspond almost identically to a movement between the iconoclastic voice of Isaiah (and of course other prophets or Calvinist theologians) and the soul of a primordial man searching for a trace of the divine in the *accessible* elements of nature.[49] Yet by searching for a sense of the eternal in nature's own continuous reflection of life and death, unease is both reified and allayed as I recognize my own connatural - passing - state encompassed within nature itself.

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[47] Indicative of a manifestation of God in nature (*through* what is 'made'), Augustine wrote: "And I replied to all these things which stand around the door of my flesh: "You have told me about my God, that you are not he. Tell me something about him." And with a loud voice they all cried out, "He made us." My question had come from my observation of them, and their reply had come from their beauty of order."
"Is not this beauty of form visible to all whose senses are unimpaired? […] But man can interrogate it, so that "the invisible things of him…[sic] are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made." Admittedly, there is still an underlying ambiguity in this text, safeguarding against an all-out pantheism: an ambiguity carried further into the reflection of the main text. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans., ed., Albert Cook Outler (Mineola and New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 176-77 (Book 10, Ch. 6).

[48] Other examples similar to Isaiah 44 are Psalm 135:15-18, and in the Apocrypha, Wisdom 13:10-19, and Letter of Jeremiah, each of which, as Aiden Nichols notes, charge the idol with falsity based on a reading of its dumb "physicality," rather than an object for 'contemplation.' Aiden Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate: Theology and Symbol from Genesis to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 20.

[49] As David Morgan has noted, "[i]conoclasm presupposes idolatry", which is to say that the notion of idolatry requires an opposition, or 'other', from which to keep its ideology of an un-graven, singular sacredness clear. However, and partially to keep this opposition in the picture, iconoclasm essentially doesn't *purge* but *replaces* idolatrous images with alternative, "material expression[s] of revealed truth that requires reverence as a physical presence of the holy", i.e., scriptural text. This means that "a countervailing tradition of hesitation", can equally and easily exist, and so perpetuates the oppositional forces of iconicity and iconoclasm. David Morgan, "The Violence of Seeing: Idolatry and Iconoclasm," in *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005), 115-117, 119.

The log sits. It lies silently in the driveway next to the neighbor's garage. Pressing into the garden with its burdensome mass, and with garden-variety weeds growing up around it, it quickly resumes a rather inglorious journey of decomposition. Here it will eventually devolve into formlessness: retiring more or less as ash or carbon rich soil. Either naturally or unnaturally, the log is on a constant procession towards this end point.

With a silence that seems to stagnate under its dead weight, the log is clearly a natural form that is here most unnaturally. It has been brought in from the weather and 'saved'; 'salvaged' or 'reclaimed' as it is referred to in the recycled timber industry. But of course it has also been taken away from where it peacefully rested. Brought here, it is only subjected to another kind of decay and abandonment, repeated and perpetuated.

Yet as I dialogue with it in this way, the log also waits. I can imagine it waiting for a genuine transformation: waiting for some kind of escape from the poor ornamental garden feature that it threatens to remain.

A new vision would bring the log back from its 'dead', or dormant state. It would embrace the log's potential as a material resource, while tapping into what is still imaginably embodied within its form. In other words, this new vision would transform it into a new object whereby a sense of sacredness in its commanding presence is reactivated. As indicated previously, this new vision is to rebirth and to enshrine the log as an ark, inspired by a general physical shape, and function, of the Ark of the Covenant made and carried by the Israelites. In turn, the transformed log would carry the prospect that a powerful and divine presence is somewhat accessible inside it.

In order to become anything like an ark, as a hollow and empty box, the log needed to be carved up and hollowed out even more. This would also necessarily make the ark lighter, and hence make it more practically feasible to move around. In the process, the log would reveal – even more so – its inner contents. As this would only be a stand-in/replica ark - in a materialist sense - what it releases would fortunately only be its internal wooden mass and not a horrific curse.

As a heavy, hollow box, an ark also resembles a sarcophagus. Given the type of hidden or buried spaces in which these are found and exhumed, a sarcophagus is another kind of ancient relic loaded with a comparable brand of superstition to that portrayed by the original Ark. The iconic anthropoid sarcophagi made for the Egyptian pharaohs, even belong to the same period of history as the Israelites exodus into the desert where the Ark was first conceived and made. Perhaps this is only a loose observation. However the relationship between the Ark and the sarcophagus becomes more significant

Figure 28. The log outside author's rental residence, October 2005.

as multiple similarities between them become more apparent. Accordingly, a sarcophagus will *consume* the corpse that belongs to it because of its very efficient management of bacteria.[50] Here, unless the corpse is embalmed or part-embalmed (which was known to be the case with the Egyptian mummies) a sarcophagus is specifically known for advancing and confining what is a natural, yet accelerated process of decay. In other words, the sarcophagus *hides* as well as *harnesses* the power of death. In a similar way, the Ark was said to *harness* the power of the sacred presence of the Almighty God. According to biblical accounts, its presence also generally needed to be kept *hidden* away precisely because of its sacredness as well as its associated power being at times hard to contain. Like the leakage of a lethal curse, as was attributed with any mishandling of the Ark, this merciless power of death was manifested.
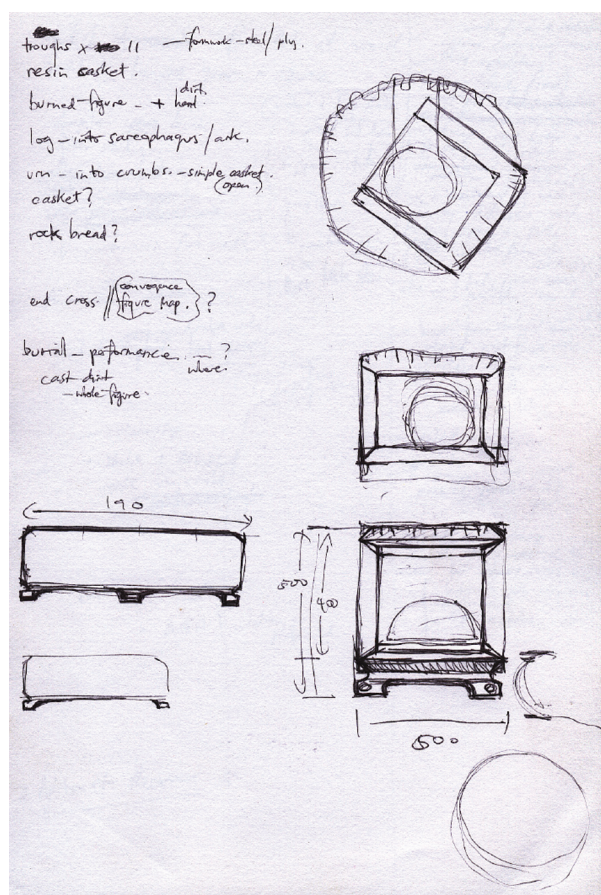
Figure 29. Working sketches, from log to ark, 2005.

Whether an ark or a sarcophagus: both are laden with parallels. Each is used for containing and confining, embodying, preserving, or alternatively *dis*embodying something else. Each is used for hiding something powerful, something *mortifying* through its powerful qualities. Here, as two artifacts in one, and perhaps remaining so quite ambiguously, each definition and its respective function will be implanted in the image of the log transformed.

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[50] As explained in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the sarcophagus is originally a coffin made from limestone (in Latin commonly used to refer to those made from pottery, wood, papyrus or other material), of which, as was believed, "had the property of dissolving the body quickly": in some references – in a matter of weeks. Hence the Greek sarx, "flesh"; phagein, "to eat" (and lithos, "stone"), referred to the coffin as a "body eater". *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol 10. Micropaedia Ready Reference, 15th Ed. (Chicago, 1998), 449-50. See also 'sarcophagus'. Dictionary.com, *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*. MICRA, Inc. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sarcophagus (accessed 9th November 2008).

Ironically however, as the log is emptied in the process of it becoming an ark/sarcophagus, and the raw red-pink-brown colour of its flesh is revealed, together with the smell of its freshly sawn innards released, nothing will remain hidden or actually set apart. Nothing will remain in the 'holy', or *sacred* sense,[51] because the 'set-apartness' or 'holiness' of the emptied log is actually a form of disembodiment, or enacted disemboweling. Like a *kenosis* of its own, repeating a narrative of 'self-emptying,'[52] the log will stand in as an open gaping container spewing forth its very God-ordained matter: its own ingrained substance, its own history embedded in its growth rings. Its very core, which holds its first years of life, will even resemble heaped up firewood as part of its transformation, obviously returning to a base domesticity. By demarcating its hollow container-form primarily by the insides that it relinquishes, it will be an object for which the claim to hidden power is dissolved, its mystery all but forsaken in its quasi, furniture-mimicking, ornamental standing. Being hollowed out, this metaphorically comparative 'self-emptying' is equally an 'opening-out' of its inner substance; a movement both reiterating and sculpturally interpreting the more general doctrinal terms of a 'revelation' or 'disclosure' of 'God in Christ'.[53] The outcome however, cannot be said to continue with the full metaphor. In other words, this parallel goes only as far as a 'disclosure' resulting in a perpetual 'emptiness'. This is an emptiness revisited within the image of the hollow log/ark, and even somewhat suggestive of the 'empty tomb'. Although again, no image of fullness or resurrection is returned after the principle motif of emptying.

Figure 30. Ark/sarcophagus in process, in author's backyard, 2005.

With the log's insides, its parcels of wood splinters and sawdust strewn, these pieces are also akin to words spilled out, once inscribed by a Creator God: inscriptions of life promised and given like those on the tablets which Moses brought down from Mt Sinai. Yet these 'broken tablets' are thus laid out as a broken Word, exposed, apparently devoid of power in an unreadable scramble. The log, seen in this way, iterates a grander narrative spoken/written: revealed yet encrypted.

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[51] "Holiness", in New Testament text from Greek *hagiasmos* (noun) or "holy", *hagios* (adj), signifies "separation to God"; "separated..," or dedicated, "…consecrated to God, sacred." *Hagiazo* (verb), literally denotes "to set apart to God". W.E Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville and Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 555-56.

[52] As noted in the Introduction, *kenosis* is a Christological term referring to the notion of the 'self-emptying' of God in the process of becoming human; a notion primarily extending from Paul's *Christ Hymn* quoted in Philippians 2:5-8.

[53] For a basic explanation of these terms, see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction, Fourth Edition* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 153-54, 274-75, 297-98.

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With its drive to reach the sky and receive the life giving ingredients of sunlight and rain, it was previously inferred that the tree is symbolic of a divine order in nature.[54] However the log - like the remaining torso (trunk) of a disembodied tree - is severed many times, first from its roots, its home, then from its recognizable form: being sliced into various pieces. Here, it is cut once again from the inside: being separated, 'set apart' (though again with reverence lacking), to the point of its interior being reduced to saw dust. The act of creating this piece, even while seeking after a contained image of the higher order it came from, is an act of disrupting the tree's natural course of being. As such, it is in multiple ways an act of desecration.

However, this final cutting in the making of the new ark-container (if this is indeed its last one) echoes a natural transition. It speaks of inevitable, if only accelerated, passage or journey. This is not from its *growing*, as something coming of age. Nor is it of its *forming*, as something being formed. It is more a passage of constant, ultimate, and inevitable, diminution aided by human hands and the construct determining its need to be made better. On this journey, it migrates from an old and monumental 'grandfather' tree reaching to the heavens, to a broken fallen log. Then it is subjected to a gradual erasure in the effort to retrieve something that could, in a materialist sense, never be apprehended anyway. Presumably in its distant, ahistorical sense, it was once a young vulnerable seedling. All this would tend to be the bigger discourse fittingly contained in the image of the log, a discourse still quietly yearning to reach beyond the current and constant unease of its associated dialectical complexity and material limitations. If only it could return to the profound simplicity of its origins as a small seedling.

Such young innocence lost, unrelenting in its summation and material brutishness of the inert wooden remains, recalls a similar narrative at the time directly preceding the Ark of the Covenant. This was the unleashing of a great and terrible power, the Angel of Death, come to take the firstborn of all the Egyptians as a response to their failure to release the Israelites from slavery. According to the biblical account, unless the Israelites painted their doorposts with the blood of a freshly slaughtered sacrificial lamb, thus creating a symbol (evidently a blood arc) for the Angel to 'pass-over', Death too would come and take their own firstborn.[55] Now as is widely known, it is the Jewish feast of the Passover, which commemorates this event, which importantly includes the deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

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[54] I mention this not as an argument for 'Intelligent Design,' but that metaphorically, the image of the tree encourages the idea of a divine order somewhat silently governing from above (to which mortal human life aspires in many ways), and that such an example provides various offshoots of thought in the direction of a contemplative natural theology/theosophy. In addition, the 'Tree' is well known for its archetypal religious significance, which in Western spirituality, is based on the Edenic Tree's of both Knowledge (of Good and Evil) and Life (and here setting the stage for a separation between God and Man, no less than stating the cause of God's *absent* presence). The crucifixion of Christ on the tree of the cross then becomes part of the apparatus by which Christianity makes its claim for humankind being reunited to God: enabling an effective partaking of the Tree of Life. Whilst not the place to outline the tree's significance in other cultures, such is the metaphorical 'divine' status of the tree within the context of this reflection.

[55] Exodus 12:21-30

Figure 31. Michael Needham, Log as **Hallowed Object**, Blessed Sacrament Chapel, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, April 2006. Red-gum, steel, brass.

It was 2006 at the St. Patrick's Catholic cathedral in Melbourne, wherein the event of the Passover happened to coincide with the exhibition of *Hallowed Object*: the log transformed as the ark/sarcophagus (see figure 31). Here, the log's new form was exhibited in a little side chapel in St. Patrick's known as the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, a chapel dedicated to the 'Host', or the bread consecrated for communion, and believed to be (in the Roman Catholic tradition) the transubstantiated body of Christ.[56] As this particular chapel is used for ceremonial purposes on Palm Sunday (a major event in the Christian calendar

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[56] An interesting point to further note, is that centrally located on the altar in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, is a little golden panel, which is the door effectively to a small cupboard. It is behind this door that once a year – also at the time of the Passover – the consecrated bread or 'host' is stored. This is for a kind of symbolic safekeeping, which re-enacts the body of Christ being hidden away in the tomb. It is because of this function of 'storing the host as the body of Christ,' that this little 'cupboard' is colloquially regarded amongst the catholic clergy as 'the sarcophagus.' I would like to thank Rev. Dr. Patrick Negri for this insight.

anticipating the joint Passover/Easter time), the log, which was installed in the middle of the chapel floor, had to be temporarily moved to an alternative location within the cathedral.

It was negotiated to move the log into another little chapel around the other side of the ambulatory. This was a dimly lit chapel known as the Shrine for Aquinas. The log then began a journey across the tiled floor of the cathedral, which was a delicate process already practiced from when the log was installed a few weeks prior.

From the back of the station-wagon the moving equipment was brought in: a wooden ramp, a few wedges of wood, a crowbar with padded ends, an old piece of carpet, a pair of axles, two sets of wheels and a pallet jack. While rudimentary, all this equipment was considered specifically for lifting, rolling and positioning the log according to the necessary care required regarding the cathedral floor. Firstly the pews were shuffled out of the way (and I might add that it's a strangely liberating feeling, having the privilege of walking into this grand cathedral, dumping all this (seemingly) clumsy gear down and proceeding to rearrange the ordered furniture). The ramp and carpet was then laid down in front of the chapel gate before I entered the space and knelt down before the log. Kneeling, in this case, in order to sweep up the wooden pieces sprawled out as part of the installation. Five green supermarket bags of dust and two duffle bags of larger pieces were filled. Next, the jack was brought in, slid under the steel plinth/pallet on which the log was presented, and accordingly lifted up. After attaching axles and wheels and aligning the log with the ramp, the hydraulics on the jack were eased down until the weight was held entirely by the wheels. The log was ready to go. With just a little push and a few loud clunks echoing through the cavernous cathedral, the log made its descent down through the chapel gate to the bottom of the ramp.

Everything was paused and silent. But as the pushing started, so did the creaking of the bearings and the groaning of the wheels under the weight of the old dead tree. Both curious and startled, people who wandered about the space looked on as this strange moaning object crawled past. "What is it?" Some would come up and ask. "Is it a new acquisition?" "Where is it from?" "Where is it going?"

"It's an artwork," I would answer. "It's in an upcoming show". Some others would inquire further, "But what is it?" "I'm not sure?" I would say, "It's like a coffin or sarcophagus, but it is also something of an ark". Such was the curious and reverent attention caused by the log as it moved along the cathedral floor.

As we turned the last corner in the direction of its destination, a beam of light was mysteriously lighting up the very centre of the shrine. It took a while to figure out that it was a small shaft of direct sunlight making its way through a small amber window from way over on the other side of the cathedral. It was a strangely poignant and beautiful moment, as if the log were being silently ordained, guided by the gentle illumination of its waiting space. Incidentally, it was one minute away from the parking meter expiry time. I raced out and met the inspector one car away from mine.

Figure 32. Log towards Shrine for Aquinas, St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne. April 2006.

CASTINGS

Figure 33. Formwork or mold for casting plinth, July 2006.

Figures 34 and 35. Formwork with poured cement, July 2006; Cast form (plinth) revealed after formwork taken away. July 2006.

One of the most ancient and still widely used methods for creating sculptural form is casting. Conventionally defined, this involves the pouring of liquid ingredients into a hollow cavity. Having first been melted or made into slurry, the liquid fills all the internal spaces and crevices within the cavity before hardening to create a solid and positive version of what was previously hollow. Once the formwork of the original cavity is pried away, the anticipated form, including any detailed features, is revealed; the insides are now disclosed.

While the preparations for casting may involve fashioning form to begin with (like a clay or wax prototype), the process itself thereafter utilizes an exact negative: an inversion of the form being sought. So instead of building-up - as if one were kneading clay into figure, or taking-away like a stone or woodcarving - casting produces a form created via the embodying of a space that is pre-defined. The cooling or setting that takes place in this space, casts a form in the shape of its physical limits. Thus, it is the hidden interior of the cavity that essentially defines the exterior surface of the form to be.

Figures 36 and 37. 'The Sleeping man', Pompeii; 'The Grauballe man', Denmark, estimated at 1700 years old.

When the negative of the outer formwork is removed, the revealed form effectively embodies the last moments of an interior space before becoming solidified. This process also breeds an image akin to the last moments of an insect that is preserved in the sap of a tree, or the remnants of a fish later found fossilized in stone. In both cases there is something beautiful yet pitiable in these natural phenomena, which have captured a once living form in a permanent caesura. Such a sense is further evoked if one extends this image to think of relating human examples, like the ashen figures, as recast body cavities, from the ancient city of Pompeii (see Figure 36),[1] or even comparatively, the 'bog people' of Denmark found preserved in mud (see Figure 37).[2] In both examples there seems a timeless silence, haunting,

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[1] The bodily remnants from Pompeii are re-embodied by way of a casting process generally attributed to Giuseppe Fiorelli in 1864. As indicated in Theophile Gautier's short story *Arria Marcella: A Souvenir of Pompeii* (1852), in which the imprint of a woman's body is discovered, such an imprint was due to the bodies of the victims being encased in muddy ash after death. As the ash solidified and the corpses decomposed, this created multiple body-hollows, in which, plaster was then poured into by utilizing the hollows as readymade molds. The "sarcophagus of ash", as Natasha Sheldon coined the surrounding material, was then chipped away to retrieve the plaster figures, and each effectively becoming a spatial re-embodiment of the victim at the approximate time of death. Eugene Dwyer, "From Fragments to Icons: Stages in the Making and Exhibiting of the Casts of Pompeian Victims, 1863-1888" *Interpreting Ceramics*, Issue 8 (2005). http://www.uwic.ac.uk/icrc/issue008/articles/06.htm (accessed 22nd Jan 2009) See also Natasha Sheldon, "Human Remains in Pompeii: How the Bodies of Pompeii's Inhabitants were Preserved," *suite101.com*, Aug 17, 2008. http://archaeology.suite101.com/article.cfm/human_remains_in_pompeii (accessed 20th Jan 2009)

[2] This is not a strict example of casting, but precedes a relevant process of preserving, by anticipating the lengthier process

in the fact that they are bodies exhumed and displayed, yet peaceful in their motionless sleep. This type of bodily presence, with its either real or re-embodied last moments, leaks with a sense of ancient pathos, speaking for a mortality that is eternal.[3] Accordingly, mortality is the entropic 'mold' against which all forms of organic life are cast in the journey towards equilibrium.

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In completing the casting process, the hollow space of a mold is obviously filled and is therefore replaced by solid form. While casting is employed as a means of producing sculptural form, it is in many ways a blockage of an empty, perhaps otherwise unconsidered space. If it weren't for this blockage, this space could be used to produce a kind of implied presence. It is this stage in the casting process which, if observed, illustrates how a form need not be physically manifest in order to produce a quality and even immediacy of presence in the various features and indentations of its negative.[4] In this sense, an absent space itself, such as that created via an imprint of form, can be utilized and objectified as a means of both alluding to form and invoking it, without positive form being visually or physically represented. A pertinent example of this is American artist Bruce Nauman's work, *Collection of Various Flexible Materials Separated by Layers of Grease with Holes the Size of My Waist and Wrists,* 1966. As the title infers, the artist has used his body as a measuring device, not for recasting or directly representing a bodily presence (as a positive form), but for leaving negative space that corresponds to an absence of his body. It is the *trace* (both as a vestige and as a drawn outline) that activates the work by invoking his bodily presence.

Focusing on the waiting (or remaining) space of the mold/hole in this way, it is easy to see how a hollow space like this is never simply empty, absent, or even hollow. It is loaded with imagination and preemptive presence. Hence it is not hard to recognize that the interiority of a mold as such, corresponds with the interior and imaginative space of the mind.

Drawing attention to the hollow empty space of the mold/hole, or alternatively the 'filler' as the intended solid form, it thereby paints a generally didactic view of the casting process. In turn, it also becomes

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of fossilization. See Peter Vilhelm Glob, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*, trans., Rupert Bruce-Mitford (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

[3] Writing of 'entropy' in relation to Robert Smithson's text "Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction", Rosalind E. Krauss condenses a similar observation: "For each rock, each lithic band is the evidence of whole forests, whole species that have decayed – "dying by the millions" – and under pressure of this process have become a form of frozen eternity". Yve-Alain Bois, Rosalind E Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (1997), 216.

[4] Gautier's story of *Arria Marcella* (mentioned briefly in footnote 1), is a perfect example of how 'implied presence' in the context of bodily trace (as absent form), can be used to incite the qualities of presence imaginatively. Sacha Colby observes as much in his analysis of Gautier's literary archeology, noting that Gautier's story evocatively illustrates an "archaeology of filling the "hollow impression" of an antiquarian relic with completing fantasies of reconnection, transforming an aesthetic of absence into [in this particular story] an erotically charged full-presence". Sasha Colby, "The Literary Archaeologies of Theophile Gautier", *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, (Purdue University Press, 2006), 10. http://www.swan.ac.uk/german/bcla/clcwebjournal/clcweb06-2/colby06.html (accessed 20th Jan 2009) See also Theophile Gautier, "Arria Marcella," *Theophile Gautier's Short Stories*, trans., George Burnham Ives (New York: Books for Libraries, 1970), 46-95.

easy to miss the existence of liminal space *in between* the hollow cavity within the mold and the form cast from it. This is to say that there is a *relation* between positive and negative, and that this relation, is what actually gives birth to both an imaginative interior and a formed exterior. This is not an easily definable component of the casting process, but it still seems to be a crucial ingredient rendering the outcome of the casting process with something of an inbuilt ambiguity.[5]

Figure 38. Bruce Nauman, ***Collection of Various Flexible Materials Separated by Layers of Grease with Holes the Size of My Waist and Wrists***, 1966. Aluminum foil, plastic sheet, foam rubber, felt, and grease. 7.6 x 229.2 x 48.5 cm.

To use an example, one might compare this relation of 'in-between-ness' to the ambiguity sitting between positive and negative fields, as illustrated in Rubin's Face/Vase Illusion. Here pertaining to a figure/ground relationship, the interplay between black and white is basically a perceptual movement back and forth, with each part being as true as the other as far as visual recognition can be discerned. In other words, it is the border that defines either a face or a vase, and not the face or vase alone. In this case, the border signals the difference between both parts. This in turn activates a duality by which each part is recognized or displaced. It is within this *difference* that definition of form is also *deferred*, the result being summed up by the ambiguity between the face(s) and the vase.[6]

Another relating example is the famous *Fliegende Blätter*/Jastrow duck-rabbit, 1892/1899 (see Figure 40), which highlights a similar 'difference' and 'deferral,' though not one that is distinguishable through

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[5] I am here referring to ambiguity primarily as that which "belongs to [and obviously determines] two categories", which at the same time 'disturbs' as part of its 'lack of precision'. See Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 13.

[6] In regards to Jacques Derrida's notion of *differance*, Rubin's Face/Vase Illusion is a pertinent diagram. As Niall Lucy articulates, "nothing can be said to exist on its own or in its own right. Nothing exists outside of difference… Every thing is 'inside' the field or the play of the spatial and temporal relations 'outside' of it. This means that what a thing 'is' must include its difference or differences from what it is not; its difference belongs to 'it,' inhabiting its identity… [And] 'without the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present,' nothing could be said to have meaning or value in 'itself'… To say that something *is* is to say that it *differs*. It is also to say at the same time that, in so far as it differs, it *defers* endlessly its 'own' constitution as an autonomous or fully complete entity". Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary* (Malden, Oxford, Melbourne: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 25-27.

a particular 'border.' Ambiguity in this diagram is instead produced via dual recognition – attributable to a duck or rabbit - pictured in the one image (which is not a distinction between positive and negative space). The generically recognizable image(s) of a duck and a rabbit is what enables a double illusion to take place in the mind of the viewer. However, the lack of a literal diagrammatic 'border,' which could be traced as part of identifying the locus of where and how an ambiguity is created, is also a trait attributable to the casting process in its three-dimensional physicality.[7] In this regard, it is helpful to reconsider an overriding characteristic of ambiguity in the casting process, which can allude to recognizably different forms without fully allowing a concrete determination of either.

A comparable sculptural example is the British artist Marc Quinn's body casts produced throughout the mid-late 90's. Like Nauman, the artist's own body is the primary tool and reference point by which the work is made, and the work in turn involves an implicit play between bodily presence and absence (of the artist). Using multiple materials and slight variations of form, these display molds or casings made *from* his body as well as castings *of* his body, which in turn evoke indeterminacy in respect to the body and its interior or exterior. Positioned to hang from the ceiling, the closest thing they seem to depict is that of a recurring cocoon from which the body is born. Yet given the title of a particular group of works, *No Visible Means of Escape*, 1996-98, or in their relation to another work *The Great Escape*, 1998, the image of a cocoon is but a clear reference to the body itself as a skin, a vessel that is either possible or impossible to 'shed.' They suggest 'new life' (perhaps only illustrative of inner psychological states) as much as they declare an inescapable corporeality.

What seems to be fundamentally clear in this kind of physical (and here figurative) work is that the viewer doesn't 'see' an ambiguity: they *recognize* it via a relation to their own body. For it is through the body (embodied) that the senses perceive. In regard to Quinn's work in particular, the viewer is involved in the artist's play between interior and exterior, embodiment and disembodiment, which is of course *interpreted* through the interior apparatus of the mind. This function of interpretation is obviously, neurologically, still part of the body, but this is not apparent in the immediate tangible sense. As such, there is already an ostensible distinction and 'correspondence'

Figure 39. Rubin's Face/Vase Illusion, 1915.
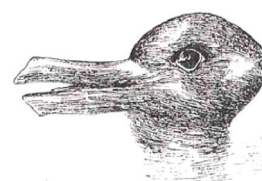
Figure 40. *Fliegende Blätter* / Jastrow duck-rabbit, 1892/1899

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[7] Such a strict literal transition might presumably have to entail some kind of physical rendition of two compacted substances, and of which a recognizable distinction between them would be crucial. Though, unless one breaks these substances apart, a distinction as a state of liminality, border or difference – as that which really occurs *inside* or in-between the compaction - might simply remain unrecognized. And if broken apart, a liminality, as two substances joined together, would also be disconnected. One might then opt to expose some internal stratification against a cross-sectional face, but this would merely be a reversion to a mode of two-dimensional framing as opposed to being physically perceived form. Thus a less literal means of transition into 3D form is the most pragmatic means forward.

between psychological and physical perceptual functions.[8] Owing to an ancient difference between the mind and the body, this relational difference seems to harbour several layers of ambiguity wherever physically encountered sculptural form elicits a basic mental response.[9] This concerns artwork (or other forms) that are also much more subtle than the example of Quinn. As a sculptor familiar with the fundamentals of this practice, it seems to me that the cast form, born in particular from a *physically dualistic* process (form/formwork, positive/negative etc), reveals these playfully dualistic layers even more so in its formed simplicity. In its compressed and solidified state, the cast form is loaded – embodied – with metaphor and meaning.

Figure 41. Marc Quinn, *No Visible Means of Escape III and II*, 1996. Polyurethane rubber and rope. 183 x 74 x 30 cm; 348 x 80 x 23 cm.

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[8] To use Richard Wollheim's term, 'correspondence', this refers specifically to the correlation of "parts of nature with psychological phenomena" i.e. when a psychological property is attributed to a part of nature or material thing. This correlation or 'affinity' also recognizes that "a work of art expresses an internal condition by corresponding to, or being of a piece with it". Richard Wollheim, *The Mind and it's Depths* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 145-57.

[9] Ibid., 144-58. According to Wollheim's theory, it is the bi-fold usage of "psychological predicates", given to describe inner mental condition as well as external things of nature, which is essentially a "doubling-up of the predicate". And as Wollheim further notes, "[p]sychological predicates that double up *are* ambiguous". Here, ambiguity occurs on account of the *metaphoric* positioning of the predicate, which describes a given thing not by direct fact but by "indirection". As a description of a particular property, such 'indirection' contributes to denoting a property itself as "unusual". This leads Wollheim to discuss "projective properties" as properties identified through prior experience (i.e. 'aftermath', 'memory'), and thus becoming a crucial part in the process of *expression* of art for the artist, as well as in the 'corresponding' experience of *perception* for the spectator.

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As a sculpturally cast form *embodies*, its qualities seem to be less representational than its display of properties which speak from a rudimentary kind of 'being'. The body casts from Pompeii for example, are not merely representational lumps of plaster. They are of course much more than this, because of their material constitution and connatural shape with which one can personally identify. Indeed what is intriguing and haunting in the Pompeii body casts, is a correlating engagement with ones own personal corporeality, imaginatively owed to the horrific circumstances of their formation and to the sense of permanence dramatically captured in their modes of being, embodying both presence and absence. On a physical level, they each re-embody a space previously and intimately embodied by real bodies. This is a kind of sculpturally tautological embodiment, which is arguably emphasized by a sense of physically apprehended ambiguity perceivable in the process of their being cast; the essential moment of preservation is also their moment of death. This testifies to the implicit *complexity* embodied within their 'simple' modes of being, which cannot be explained only by their material constitution or shape. It is all these combined qualities, which are in turn transposed physically into the details of their (re-embodied) plaster exterior. Such a quality of sculptural form clearly goes beyond representation as it is usually understood or employed in art.

Many of the ashen body casts of Pompeii also contain the skeletons of the deceased. This accentuates a sense of presence, which is thickened and congealed in the fact that they are actual relics, both from the event of the destruction of Pompeii, as well as from the archeological project that inaugurated the process of their plaster re-embodiment for a direct form of preservation.[10] As they hold and preserve these skeletal remains within their forms, they are also containers, safekeeping their own evidence of existence while at the same time bearing the story of their demise. Evidently, though without the figurative shape as a reference, this is similar to a very haunting work by the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles, titled *Burial* (Entierro), 1999. On the outside, this is a rather plain looking block of concrete. However on the inside, as indicated by the title and the work's materials, it has the remains of a human fetus embedded and thus entombed within its form. In this work, its weight of significance is not produced by a visual means, but by the knowledge of the work's hidden contents and the circumstances of its making according to the proposition of its physicality.[11] It is a suspended vision, a physically blocked vision, yet clearly this is what triggers (and is employed to trigger) the imagination of the viewer and which in turn defines the overall mystery of presence that the work holds. This is a rudimentary object – unapologetic in its brutishness – while at the same time being a strange, quiet but disturbing and part-ghostly memorial. Even as sculpture, such work seems to sit in between the physical and psychological: between the material object and the mental picture that remains in the mind.

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[10] See footnote 1.

[11] Burial was made using a miscarried fetus, which was donated by a friend who apparently could not afford a burial. Cuauhtemoc Medina, "Semefo: The Morgue," in Ruben Gallo, ed., *The Mexico City Reader* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 316.

Figure 42. Teresa Margolles, **Burial** (Entierro), 1999. Concrete, human fetus. 15.5 x 66 x 43 cm.

Certainly in a Pompeian body cast, one can imagine and just about see, the last asphyxiating breath in the very process of the victim becoming permanently cast. In this sense, the simple and rudimentary remains of these body casts entail a kind of leakage, from physical matter into the realm of psychological affect. By altering focus from the material remains to the mind that re-imagines and vice versa, as a sculptor I find myself in the realm of visualizing, interpreting and conceiving a comparable means of embedding significance into the physicality of matter. Similarly, to carry an *authenticity* of matter seems to strike at the heart of such a basic yet complex idea of sculptural form as embodiment. The question then becomes simply: How might these kinds of inbuilt properties be harnessed through sculptural practice? Likewise, how might one approach the possibility of re-creating or re-'channeling' such correlating ambiguity, as 'in-between-ness' or otherness of distinction being 'embodied' within sculptural form?

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In attempting to transfer a still largely abstract 'in-between' zone into the actual physical components involved in casting, it seems that the circumstances of formation, or the residues of its liminality, is neither located in the inner skin of the mold or the particles of air that caress its surface. In fact, neither the formwork, nor air around it, or prototype, or cast object actually defines or pinpoints a state of 'in-between-ness' through their material properties. It is much more a perceptual/psychological push-and-pull effect (as previously indicated), perceived between an original source that makes an imprint (be it a clay, wax or even human prototype) and its recast form. The imprint physically records a point of contact and thus creates a recognizable determinant by which a state of liminality occurs. In short, such 'in-

between-ness', is a relation, a 'correspondence' occurring on multiple levels, not a materially identifiable thing and equally not (or not yet) a space.

However, prying further into this line of thought, it is worth questioning how such a conceptually understood relation translates when considered from another side of the casting process: the side from which any cast form is encountered in the physical sense. This is when a form is removed from its mold and a point of contact between form and mold is no longer sustained. In other words, in the immediate moment when a cast form is released from its mold, it could be said that a relation determined by a border - as a liminality between form and mold - effectively 'opens up' to become an interstitial space. The form and mold then frame a *gap* in between each other rather than an equal and opposite liminality of a border. Though after this moment, and even commonly as part of this process, the mold is lost or destroyed. This means a state of liminality between form and mold, perceivably opens up from a tightly knitted interaction, to something of a permanent interval or cavernous space. Here, the quality of space, or spaciousness, can in turn signal an extra 'haunting' characteristic in lieu of what is then designated as an absence. This distinction may not be significant, but an additional trait of absence would seem to highlight another ambiguous quality regarding difference and deferral, which the casting process seems to have harboured from the start.

Although a state of actual contact between form and mold disappears in the process of casting, a *relation* still exists by the contact that is recorded. It is just a different type of relation noted via the now absent disposition of one component. With this observation, it would seem that a difference in relation is not so much an absence itself, but a relation with a spectral component, detected through the visual trace of cast features. A state of liminality, as a relation, would then simply continue in the wake of its formation. Yet while a previous liminality (the original relation to the mold) is re-membered via acknowledging residual evidence left within and on the cast, its new spatial relation is deferred and displaced because it is always and already based on an unstable identification, i.e. a positive/negative binary.[12] With the relational trace of liminal features remaining, this might explain something of a doubled ambiguity, which can be perceived as though a sense of underlying absence has been released or disclosed, to which it then lingers around the features of the cast. These features are both familiar and strange, seemingly because this same sense of absence carries the equal and opposite sense of *presence* as a spectral liminality. This is a recognizable sense in other forms of bodily casting, namely, the death mask.

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[12] I am essentially talking about a confusion of difference here – as opposed to clear boundaries (or 'violent hierarchies') - at the heart of binary oppositions, which Derrida has famously pointed out in his notion of differance. However, this is to say that a relation always exists, where the confusion primary to it, only calls for harder clarification of opposites, which would in turn – and by means of default – attempt to resolve the confusion (and ambiguity) in order to deduce clear meaning. As Derrida poignantly – though convolutedly - notes in Positions, "[b]y means of this double, and precisely stratified, dislodged and dislodging, writing, we must also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what is high, and the irruptive emergence of a new "concept", a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime". Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans., Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41-42.

The death mask is a cast made from the face of someone recently deceased.[13] A mold is usually made from plaster and so it is the cold wet liquid that slumps and settles over the equally cold and supple features of the face. In the time it takes the plaster to set, the entire face is covered. In this time, there is a concealed and somewhat ironic intimacy that is recorded between the curing plaster (which can incorporate a gauze - akin to bandages - as a kind of substrate for the plaster), and the face of a person that hereafter deteriorates quickly.

When the cast has set, the mold of the mask is removed and the body obviously moves on to be buried or cremated. When the mold ceases to contact the face, this would then be the point at which a comparable liminal zone opens up and becomes a multidimensional space. This is firstly a physical space between the face of the deceased and the mold taken from it. Secondly it marks a point in time, from which a linear distance increases thereafter. Thirdly, as a visible record of a face frozen in death, the cast form obviously denotes an absence of the person whose face can never be known 'in the flesh' again.[14] So while a replica of the dead person's face is then made to represent and commemorate them, it embodies a depth and multi-layered thickness of *space*, which throws what is effectively an ambiguous state of liminality out into the open and onto those who feel its infectious state as a haunting mode of absence through the presence of the mask.[15] However, this haunting modality is by no means limited to the death mask, for the same applies to a cast taken from a live subject.

Stored in the back shed for a number of years now, is the positive relief of my own face leftover from an unfinished sculptural self-portrait. Here, captured in this grubby plaster block, is the petrified face of a younger man who will never age yet equally never live. Indeed, gazing into this face is like looking into a mirror and seeing not a living reflection, but the impenetrable surface of a dead and petrified version

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[13] Just to clarify, the 'death mask' is a replica of a dead person's face, not the outer mold, as the term *mask* can suggest. Though the term is clearly ambiguous (relevantly so, I should add), and equally denotes a replication of the recognizable facial features, which is a secondary casting process. Also, as photographic representation has since become a more dominant and contemporary means to capture the facial likeness of people, a discussion of the death mask can in many ways apply to photography.

[14] These variations of opened 'space' identified around a subject correspond to Roland Barthes notion of the *noeme*, the 'that-has-been' - the 'intractable', irretrievable thing that has been recorded – in photography. This identifies a 'superimposition of reality and of the past' and a time-based space between the *operator* (the photographer who records the subject in time) and the *spectator* (the viewer of the photographic image), where the subject (in the photograph) "has been here [before the lens], and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred". This is also an example of Barthes *punctum* (a poignant and disturbing element or attracting detail within the photograph, which is felt by the viewer: a sting, a speck, an accident, a wound, a thing which triggers a 'subtle *beyond*'), a *punctum* in this case realized and constituted primarily by 'time'. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans,, Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 26,27, 43-59, 76,77, 94-97.

[15] In regard to the death mask, there is a similar relation concerning *faciality* as described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. A basic understanding of the idea of faciality is that the face is an "abstract machine" of signification. This is explained through a complex dialectical framework, where the face is constituted within a "white wall/black hole" system. It is a surface that is read - topologically - like a map, and it is through the depressions and extrusions (a kind of liminality) that the signification of the face is produced, i.e. 'faciality'. It is a system of outer – announced – identification, which according to Deleuze and Guattari, is not specifically human but *inhuman*: "that is what the face is from the start. It is by nature a close-up, with its inanimate white surfaces, its shining black holes, its emptiness and boredom… If human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face [the faciality of the face]". Concerning the death mask - a reproduction of the outer features of the face – this is essentially the face reduced to (and employed for) its bare faciality, which nonetheless heightens an underlying signification of 'inhumanity'. Yet a death mask, as with a dead face, renders its signification redundant, for it is *emptied* of signification. This face cannot stare back; it is wholly mute and inactive, indicating strangely, the certain end of its signification. Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, "Year Zero: Faciality," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans., Brian Massumi (London: The Althone Press, 1988), 168-171. See also Patricia MacCormack, "Death, Becoming Horror: Faciality," *Pleasure, Perversion and Death: Three Lines of Flight for the Viewing Body* http://www.cinestatic.com/trans-mat/MacCormack/PPD3-5.htm (accessed 1st Jan 2010)

of myself. This is a weird and affecting experience because the face I look upon, though undoubtedly familiar, also has a psychologically threatening quality through 'standing-in', or mirroring the face in which my *self* establishes a visual mode of identity.[16]

Figure 43. Plaster relief of the author's face, 2003.

In addition to this physical premonition of reflected death, the plaster effigy exists - and persists - as a reminder of an irretrievable past. Here, the contrast between my actual living face and its younger copy obviously increases as the years go by. This simple block of plaster becomes an entity, or host, of a simple and honest corporeality.

Preceding his extended series of body casts, this concept has been taken up by Marc Quinn in his much-publicized work *Self*, 1991. *Self* is a cast of his own head, made not from plaster but from his own frozen blood, which is "direct corporeal art born from his body," as one critic has written.[17] This congealment of form *and* content (or content into form), is indeed a complex rendering of the self. These combined

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[16] To recall Barthes once again concerning photography, yet here applicable to the life/death mask, "the photograph [of Barthes, or transposed as 'myself'] is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity. […In being photographed] I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person". Extending this concept, it is the photograph – mirroring one's 'image' - which strangely, "disincarnates the face, manifests its genetic essence" (its identifiable 'look') yet which does so, moreover, by revealing 'pathos' and 'melancholy' in the 'death that is inscribed', the death that is an 'anterior future' embedded in the photographed defeat of time. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (2000), 12,14, 90-97,105.

[17] "For Quinn, life's material and immaterial condition(s) are exposed by a continuous analysis of human transitory and ongoing processes… A creative concern with incarnation, both of self and self as 'other', is the investigative question… Likewise an engagement with his body is a commitment to the shell of our verifiable and actual physical containment… [Thus] [i]n Self the artist empties the interior material content of himself in exposure to others [note the precise kenotic language]… to reveal the shared ephemerality of human life and its internal processes; those contingencies that all of us possess". Mark Gisborne, "*Dis*-incarnate," in Marc Quinn, *Incarnate: Marc Quinn* (London: Booth-Gibbons Editions, 1998).

qualities return a likeness on multiple levels, which thickens the meaning of the work and of the concept of self, as well as making it/self more ambiguous and unstable in ascertaining a sense of meaning.[18] The work's 'content' of blood, cast as the positive filler, is just one of these decisive but intense complexities. Adding to this weight in implication however, is that starting from 1991 with the first *Self*, Quinn has so far made several others, in keeping with his intention to make a new head with fresh blood every five years for the rest of his life.

Figure 44. Marc Quinn, ***Self***, (detail) 1991. Artist's blood, stainless steel, perspex, refrigeration unit. 208 x 63 x 63 cm.

Utilizing this idea of a time-space interval between portraits, sculpturally reiterates a work by Polish artist Christian Boltanski. *Christian Boltanski at Five Years and Three Months Apart*, 1970, is a diptych of two photographic self-portraits. As explained in the title, this work stands as a crude documentation of the artist, revealing a comparable difference of appearance within a five-year period. As evidenced, the two images also uncannily *double* each other by depicting different 'selves' (as self portraits) at different times, yet as the same person. The work thus stands – simply yet profoundly - as basic archive. Similarly in Quinn's work, each head (produced according to their five-year intervals) maps out subtle changes in his face as he ages, while the energies used to preserve them as embodied representations –

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18 Uros Cvoro observes Rosalind Krauss's understanding of this exact characteristic of entropy within the casts of the artist Rachel Whiteread's (discussed in more detail below). Here, Cvoro importantly notes that, "[e]ntropy eradicates the distances between binary oppositions such as form and content, thus contesting the production of meaning", which is a poignant reiteration of Derrida's *differance*. Uros Cvoro, "The present body, the absent body, and the formless – public sculpture by Rachel Whiteread," *Art Journal,* Winter (2002), http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0425/is_4_61/ai_96134612/pg_8 (accessed August 24th 2006)

all within individual refrigeration units - emphasize the constancy of the entropic force at work behind the mask of a suspended equilibrium. In a very visible and materially obvious way, *Self* heightens the awareness of aging as a symptom of dying even while living.[19] In this regard, Quinn's work shows that mortality relentlessly beckons and that it has a hauntingly familiar face, perceivable particularly in ones own premonitory 'death mask.' This is despite its apparent pausing of life's inner circulatory processes, whether such a mask is actually frozen, sculpturally rendered or even simply photographed.

Figure 45. Christian Boltanski, *Christian Boltanski at Five Years and Three Months Apart*, 1970. 2 passport photos, typewritten text, index card. Approx 7.5 x 12.5 cm.

To then *be* cast physically and figuratively into an image, one intrinsically subjects oneself to these implications that are both hidden and obvious. This is a conceptual inversion encroaching upon the uncanny edges of life's positive form.

Though with my own younger face suspended by its plaster effigy and tangibly held in a more stable condition to that of my own vulnerable flesh or blood, its symbol of death is equaled by its mode of immortality. That is, while made of 'dead matter' itself, the plaster face will outlive me by the features preserved as evidence of my existence.[20]

With the idea of an image – as a portrait - outliving its signified subject, this invokes a scenario comparable to the legacy of Christ as carried by two better-known claims of acheiropoieta (i.e. that referring to images, which are "not made from human hands").[21] The legend of the 'Veronica' for example, as the sudarium or headcloth that Christ 'allegedly wiped his perspiring and bloodied face on the road to his execution,' is an image that depicts the face of Christ in a permanent sorrow of anticipated death. Realizing that this is purportedly done so through a point of contact with Christ's face - which leaves a 'visual imprint' on the cloth thereafter - the image is not a depiction as much as a trace, an impression testifying to the significance of a point of contact.[22] Claimed as it is without a fabricating

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[19] Art historian David Thorp has remarked that Quinn is concerned with "see[ing] himself as a constantly moving present and his work debris that has fallen off in his wake like a slough of skin". This is an observation that essentially denotes *being* as a process, and thereby highlights human transience amidst the activity of living. Marc Quinn, *Incarnate: Marc Quinn* (1998).

[20] Besides actual facial features within its form, a plaster block made from the spent mineral gypsum, originally taken out of the earth, also suggests that its own *content* as a mineral of the 'earth' will always and already outlast an individual human life.

[21] Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 2. Also see footnote 19 in the Introduction.

[22] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 207-209. In regards to the Veronica, Hans Belting also notes that "visual impression [produced via 'direct contact with the body of Christ'] thereby… became a relic of physical contact," an "authentic imprint," which "proved the historical existence of the person who had left a bodily imprint while alive… [while demonstrating] that person's extratemporal presence [in this case], since the images continued to work miracles". Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 53-57. For a detailed account of these images (and if one can read German) see Ernst von Dobschutz, *Christusbilder: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende*, Leipzig (1899).

hand, the Veronica is in this way a casting of another kind, a cast at once 'authentically' and 'miraculously' recording and suspending Christ's face in this important moment of his Passion. Fittingly enough, the Shroud of Turin (the famous burial cloth bearing the bodily image of a crucified man and believed by many to be that belonging to Christ) can equally be compared as a material artifact, a physical trace, claimed as being effectively 'impressed' with the bodily features of Christ. This too has been appropriated as a ('non-fabricated') portrait of Christ, in turn giving a visual and recognizably human form to the legacy of Jesus. Among the many scientific claims pertaining to the shroud's image, one prominent hypothesis speaks of an unusual (perhaps miraculous) occurrence of 'radiation coming from inside the enveloped body,' in effect producing a kind of photocopied image of the bodily features.[23] It is essentially a burial cloth stained with the blood and sweat of a corpse, although the possibility of this body being that of Christ is what makes it a holy relic (as opposed to it being a rather morbid keepsake). However, besides its more obvious uncanny resemblance/depiction of Christ in its popular negative format (looking like a photographic positive), what is both intriguing and haunting about the Shroud, is that it is an image of a dead man produced during some strange and still undetermined transformation of an entombed body.[24] It is a vestige endowed with mystery because it visibly displays an ambiguous point of contact, as a cast trace of the most important event in Christianity. It is an image signifying and physically testifying to a liminality between the dead body of Jesus and the resurrected Christ. The polarity of positive and negative - or here, mortal and divine - are incorporated into the one mysterious image. This explains why such an object displaying these traits lives on as a sacred memento, to carry the traits that Christ's now absent body once did.

As an artist, I am compelled to search out other variations or adaptations of these kinds of traits, which stem from a correlating casting process. For as is evident, there are certainly other means of leaving an imprint as well as other ways in which a bodily or psychological image is cast off, cast away, cast against or cast into, a clearly conditioned and/or peculiarly immortalized form.

Figures 46 and 47. Master of Saint Veronica, **Saint Veronica with the Sudarium,** c. 1420, oil on walnut; negative of the **Shroud of Turin** (detail of head), carbon dated at 1260-1390.

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23 Giulio Fanti, Francesco Lattarulo, Oswald Scheuermann, "Body Image Formation Hypothesis Based on Corona Discharge," *The Third Dallas International Conference on the Shroud of Turin: Dallas, Texas,* September 8-11, 2005. http://www.dim.unipd.it/fanti/corona.pdf (accessed 14th Dec 2009)

24 Alternatively, there are hypotheses claiming that the Shroud was produced by an artist, which in turn would lead to the result that it is merely a forgery. See Gary Vikan, "Debunking the Shroud: Made by Human Hands," and Walter C. McCrone, "The Shroud Painting Explained," in *Biblical Archaeology Review,* Nov/Dec 1998. http://www.shroud.com/bar.htm (accessed 14th Dec 2009). However, as has been recently noted, 'no tested artists' works are able to show (or replicate) the Shroud's peculiar characteristics.' Fanti, Lattarulo and Scheuermann, "Body Image Formation Hypothesis Based on Corona Discharge," (2005). For an extensive compilation of articles on the Shroud, see Barrie M. Schwortz, ed., *The Shroud of Turin,* The Shroud of Turin Education and Research Association, Inc., (1996-2009). http://www.shroud.com/index.htm

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In considering objects materially cast, the work of Rachel Whiteread, another prominent British artist, comes to mind. In her work, the object born from the formwork carries a dry yet distinctive ambiguity, which lends it a weight and mystery of presence. There is also a clear embodiment of binary associations that are contained both by her cast forms, and the obvious process by which they are made. One reason for this is that Whiteread's objects (for the viewer reading the sculptural and spatial image in her work) are invisible spaces that are filled to become physically present. Perhaps more simply said, they are *spaces* taken and re-defined as objects; they are *spaces* born anew, yet cast into and against domestic physical forms.[25]

Figure 48. Rachel Whiteread, **Untitled** (Table) 1993, resin.

[25] It was earlier in 1965 that Bruce Nauman made a cast of the *space* beneath a chair, and thus embodying space (here domestic space) as an object. This idea also holds a striking parallel to the ashen filled domestic spaces that resulted from the volcanic fallout on Pompeii, and to which this filled space – hardened - provided the means for a reverse casting in order to retrieve the trace of human presence via time-effected bodily absence (as mentioned in footnote 1). However in this regard, it was also other domestic artifacts, such as wooden doors, chairs, etc, which having been long-since decayed and thus leaving a hollow in its place, enabled a re-casting process to take place and so retrieve forms likening to the original artifacts of Pompeii, indicative of their ancient domesticity.

For example, in *Untitled* (Table), 1993, the space beneath a table is cast. The object that is presented is a literal mold; a solidified echo of the table's physical form, yet without it simply being a copy or a representation. In this way, the object that remains and occupies space, becomes a physical negative, though not in the same manner as one imagines the cavity of a mold. It is itself a 'presence' of the space that is the unseen, physically implied object. These forms are simple and minimal yet inherently enigmatic because of a paradoxical perplexity they embody.[26]

An enigmatic quality is a significant point of Whiteread's practice, for she subverts the usual conventions of the casting process itself, as a means of creating and compounding a play of presence and absence.[27] This play again correlates with the conundrum of perception offered by Rubin's Face/Vase Illusion. Whiteread's work obviously manifests physically, offering a phenomenological encounter between form and space through the presentation of an exterior boundary that both unsettles and redefines interior and exterior surfaces. In this regard, the image (of space), as a conundrum physically presented, exists as a materially tangible proposition, being on one level externally accessible yet on another level slipping into a state of inaccessible blockage.

The ambivalence created in Whiteread's work has been described as a very literal oscillation between abstraction and figuration.[28] This is itself a pertinent logical strategy for presenting what resists being represented. Such oscillation is achieved not just by giving actual matter to grey and abstract areas of thought, but also by giving hard concrete rationalizations over to matter, which then in their physical immovability, renders them as irrational and inconclusive.

Using such oscillation, both thought and sensed, Whiteread's sculptures show how a simple, minimal object can emit an arresting sense of presence.

Figure 49. Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled* (Bath) 1990, plaster. 103 x 105.5 x 209.5 cm.
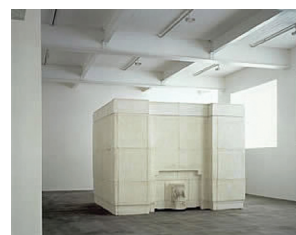
Figure 50. Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost* 1990, plaster on steel frame. 269 x 355 x 317.5 cm.

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[26] Writing of Nauman's work (in the example of his chair-space, among others), and to which is applicable to Whiteread's work, Rosalind Krauss refers to the initial casting of such space as "casts of interstitial space". This 'space itself' is, "object-like, but that, without the title attached to them like an absurd label, one has no idea what they are, even of what general species of object they might belong to". Though further, this is noted in context to an 'ambiguity' of 'congealed space' speaking for the force of 'entropy', which un-likened to anything else, also "congeal[s] the possibility of meaning" by effectively eliminating the observable points of differences that produce and define meaning. Hence this articulates ambiguity as a thickened and inaccessible paradox. Yve-Alain Bois, Rosalind E Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (1997), 214-216.

[27] Talking of Whiteread's *House* (1993) (a casting of the interior of an entire three-story terrace house), Jon Bird extends on what is arresting about this process, where in a "constant reminder of interiority, absence is made presence as solidified space [sic] inviting the spectator constantly to decipher the relationship of sign to referent, to try and make sense out of ambiguity and contradiction. *House* was profoundly contradictory, offering a *gestalt* of wholeness and coherence followed by the negation of that apparent inaccessibility". Jon Bird, "Dolce Domum," in James Lingwood, ed., *House/Rachel Whiteread* (London: Phaidon Press in association with Artangel, 1995), 121-22.

[28] "Cuts, cracks, incisions, apertures, slits, gaps, fissures, these are… liminal orifices where the exchange between inside and outside takes place. All of Whiteread's sculptures carry such traces – the 'supplement' which can unravel the threads of meaning and create the tension of an ambivalence as the object oscillates between abstraction and figuration, seeing and knowing". Ibid., 123.

In Whiteread's particular case, this is a presence that exists where an otherwise ordinary and unnoticed domesticity would have resided. However, this extra 'sense of presence' is certainly not separate from what is ordinarily considered domestic, suggesting that this is exactly where a sense of its power originates. It is a sense of space filled as if it were figured; an implied space physically apprehended as a casting of it, which then bares an 'extra-ordinary' sense within and through identifiable domestic features.

Having the features, and even physical remnants of these forms traced, impressed and remembered into the exterior of the new cast object, an absence of a familiar non-presence of space is physically felt. This positive mode of negation, as an object, is the material witness to a familiarity that has since vanished, yet, is still sensed. In other words, the only practical connection making the object tangibly identifiable is, at the same time, *physically* misapprehended. For the viewer perceiving this mysterious, ambiguous mode of presence - similar to an inversion of a thick ghostly lack - this creates an uncertainty, which is a classic example of the uncanny.

<p align="center">✳</p>

In his much-cited essay on *The Uncanny*, Freud articulated on the underlying mechanisms of the uncanny based on a sense of the *heimlich* (homely and familiar) that has become *unheimlich* (unhomely and unfamiliar), thus inducing a feeling of uncertainty. In addition to this, he linked the cause of the uncanny to certain repressions, the symptoms of which include the creation of ambivalence towards the familiar things that intuit or characterize their inevitable return.[29] For example, affecting experiences of objects or spaces that involve or elicit an element of *doubling*, could be traced back to a "defense against annihilation" which, as Freud posits, is born from a primordial narcissism. As with doubling, there is a similar relation purported in its counterpart, *repetition*, which is exemplified through a "duplicating or multiplying of the genital symbol," which – surfacing in the language of dreams – is said to occur in lieu of a fear of castration.[30] As basic compositional elements in sculptural work, doubling and repetition are not necessarily obvious indicators of such hidden repressions. Whether harbouring repressions or not, Whiteread's work can still be primarily recognized by recurring traits of doubling and repetition: through distinct repetition of form, inverted copies of existing artifacts, or symmetrical compositions returning through the use of the mirror image.

However, in terms of an overriding (and underlying) sense of the uncanny in Whiteread's work, enacting doubling and repetition as castings of existing space, her sculptural forms stand most clearly as a presence specifically replacing a lack or absence. The viewer's sense of the uncanny arising from the various

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[29] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans., David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003), 123-59 (though particularly p. 132).

[30] Ibid., 142. This observation by Freud is taken from Otto Rank's study on *The Double* (mentioned briefly in footnote 19, in "Memorial").

sensibilities in her work, then correspond to an innate ambivalence towards lack, absence or *inversion*, where lack and absence is replaced by presence, and thus could, when viewed through Freud's ideas, correlate with a repression (of lack, absence, inversion) that has become manifest.

As I understand, a Freudian reading would here suggest that the negations of lack, absence and inversion, signal a symbolism of repression in at least two ways. Firstly, *doubling* can be seen to both anticipate and compensate for an inversion of the presence of the self; the annihilation and subsequent absence of self being entailed in the threat of death. In short, ambivalence toward doubling can be indicative of a repressed fear of death. Secondly, *repetition* can similarly be seen as indicative of a counteraction against an inversion of the 'positive' male genitals; an inversion of the phallus, which as Freud posited, entails a fear of castration spurred by sight of the 'negative' of the female genitals. In other words, uncertainty towards repetition may signal castration complex, or even the repressed fear or desire, of returning to the womb: an original homely – hence domestic - abode.[31] This second negation corresponds to the open womb or grave of the earth (akin to a return to Mother nature), where one is ultimately "annihilated" by death. It is then death that is a common delineator, which seems to threaten by way of being an inversion of life and of living existence. Freud suggests it is such repressions as these, that create an uncanny feeling, not just when something familiar is seen to have become unfamiliar, but also, going back to his recognition of Schelling's definition of the uncanny, when "something that should have remained hidden… has come into the open".[32] In other words, and in Whiteread's case, this is where space or *absence*, has been inverted by being made into a solid mass; it is a *presence* that shouldn't be because it makes space visible, which in effect replicates space as an uncanny opposite. One might then say that the possibility of repressions being made manifest, or disclosed (here metaphorically assumed by Whiteread's work), is what causes the strange feeling of uncertainty, ambiguity and/or unease. Furthermore, it is perhaps this reason why the effective *incarnation* of anything, supposed or thought-to-be hidden, is a haunting prospect in general.

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It seems that Whiteread plays on the assumption that space as a quality, is abstract, and is therefore perceived more through the faculty of the mind than the senses of the body.[33] In this regard, space isn't

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[31] Ibid., 151. Freud notes that what is found uncanny/unhomely about the female genitals (for neurotic men), is that it is "actually the entrance to man's old 'home', the place where everyone once lived", and of which, as Freud alludes, a 'longing to go home' - in respect to this original home – is part of the cause of such ambivalence towards female genitalia. However, regarding the hypothesis of castration complex (from which an uncanny feeling pertaining to the female genitals is said to occur), it can also be read alternatively as a 'state where the feminine reappears, thus haunting an insufficiency of male plenitude.' In this way, a feminist reading of Freud can be recuperated. I'd like to thank Dr. Ross Moore for raising this latter point.

[32] Ibid., 132, 148.

[33] This would be attributed to the priority given to mind over body, the precedent being set by Plato's Allegory of the Cave (see footnote 20, in "Ark / Arc"), and also directly propelled by his articulation of space as *receptacle* in Timaeus, concerning

seen; it is merely the interval or depth between ones body and the tangible things around it. While space is actually thinly dispersed matter, it is more or less undesignated matter, unlike other solid objects. Hence, to perceive space and conceive it as a sense-able thing - contained as a thing - is tricky. Yet Whiteread is also without doubt a sculptor, dealing in very obvious material volume and weight, evidently, in direct negotiation with the experiences of the physical body. Her work is blatantly tactile. This negotiation of perceptual opposites, surely helps create a very thick aura of ambivalence around a given image/object. Ambivalence in Whiteread's case, becomes a very physically manifested space as 'once invisible' and as 'once an indicator of absence'. Casting the shape of an un-visible space and impressing a negative into the formation of a new object, an image of the previous implied or known space is then not only impressed physically, but it has to be cast *back* into the viewer's mind in order for it to be recognized.

Here Whiteread's work invokes reflections on space as lesser-known matter. This is matter not thick enough to be tangible, yet is necessarily interconnected with tangible domestic objects and so nonetheless implicitly carries a sense of associated intimacy. This contemplation draws out traces of prior conceptions, memories, and other random past and present resonances, usually associated with a space only contained - or accessed - in the *back* of the mind. In other words, there is a perceptual return, a slipping or mirroring, which occurs because the physicality of Whitread's cast space can't quite confirm or disconfirm being familiar as an actual space or object: hence the aura of ambivalence. This is also accentuated as the cast object 'stands in' as a *replacement* for the previously unseen space, meaning that one of the only ways to remember it, as vacant space, is to temporarily reconstruct it *in the mind*. In this process, there is a subtle forcing-back of the material world into the mind and its own cipher of imagination. In this way, the cast object seems to have a further uncanny power to equally extract what's hidden in the viewer's mind, by inciting the desire to re-embody what is evidently missing.[34] Paradoxically, this appears to be the same conceptual action as attempting to dislodge a 'space' that is now physically impenetrable: a space that, to be retrieved, or rather re-imagined, would have to be un-visible, a quality that being 'missing' equally signals as a mode of *loss* in the first place. Like the blocked interior of a room, the *mind* is somewhat blocked - displaced - and left looking for resolution in view of a lost yet filled space. Such are the implications of having an abstract quality materialized into a physical object.[35]

Also playing a crucial part in the creation of an aura of ambivalence is Whiteread's predominantly domestic – and intimate - subject matter itself. Chairs, beds, doors, baths, and bookshelves, not to

three *catagories* of things, in which 'space', being peculiar and neutral, doesn't easily fit catagorization. The key indicator of this Platonic precedent is that if something is seen/perceived with the senses of the body, it is placed in the category of the material world; the world that deceives. While space between objects is material and does not actually transcend materiality, accessing and defining space – in its abstract quality - through conceptual reasoning, uses the same faculty of the mind said to be that which allows one access to the realm of *forms*; the realm which transcends that of the body and its deceptions.

[34] Here my own image of Bamps under the ground and inside his coffin (see "Memorial"), together with its awkward and transgressive feeling, can be attributed to this particular trait of the uncanny. This type of imaginative disclosure of familiar (or at least named) presence, while still actually buried, also parallels as a kind of ambivalence toward being haunted, as one can earnestly desire for lost presence to be re-embodied, whilst also dreading it for what implications a literally resurrected body might bring with it, i.e. in terms of horribly manifest decay, spoiling any sincerity of an image that remains a mere memory.

[35] In her own words, though here specifically concerning the work *Ghost* (1990), an entire room cast in plaster (see figure 50), Whiteread notes that she "wanted to mummify the sense of silence in a room, the air in a room". A space as an object, as such, as with the kind of object that incorporates this space, essentially has a "whole history and resonance [of a previous life] which becomes part of the work". Sandy Nairne, *Art Now: Interviews with Modern Artists* (London: Continuum, 2002), 51, 52.

mention her famous *House*, 1993, have all been used as subjects from which to make casts. Again, they are all familiar homely objects, which ordinarily you wouldn't expect these subjects to carry any profound meaning beyond their everyday function, or indeed apart from their sentimentality. But when the very space around or inside these objects is made solid via casting, the literal occupation of such personal space renders tangible their hidden and intimate nature, which also accentuates any sentiments attached to them. This makes physically present what 'shouldn't be' in more ways than just physical presence. A form that blocks this intimate, personal and even bodily space, is effectively existing as an *intrusion* of personal space, which is otherwise unseen or just taken for granted. Noting this, a corresponding domestic functionality entails a certain amount of invisibility in its recognized ordinariness. Hence the power and affect contained in this 'filled-space' is also strengthened by any defense of the now irretrievable sanctioning of ones personal space: a space previously defined by the peripheral field of the body in relation to the domestic function of the object. Such personal space is a form of private space, recognizably 'sacred' in the sense that it has been destroyed - taken away - filled by an inanimate, obdurate material instead. Inaugurating recognition of the sacred (immaterial) in this way, the manifest stand-in is paradoxically an iconoclastic erasure of the prior space.[36]

Figure 51. Joseph Beuys, *Fat Chair*, 1964, wooden chair, metal, fat. 90 x 90 x 30 cm.

Equivalent to an invasion of private space, this kind of effect is similar to what I personally felt when I first saw a reproduction of Joseph Beuys' legendary *Fat Chair*, 1964. In high school at the time, a lump of fat on a chair was to me, a ridiculous proposition. Even in something as seemingly mundane as a chair, a usually functional yet now functionless object sat uneasy. "Why?" I could only respond to a domestic object that had been made alien to my own domesticated cognitive abilities with the question "How does one…sit?" It was the physical occupation and confounding of the element of bodily space that I hadn't cared to think about before. This alone was an image firmly impressed upon my mind, possibly just as much as the question arising from the previous simplicity and innocence of the generic chair.[37]

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36 This basically indicates a kind of underlying Platonic hierarchy, where the 'material world' of the senses in held in opposition to the non-material 'real' world of Ideas and Forms. Whiteread's work plays with the dialectical nature of this framework by filling-in the non-presence of space with material presence - pushing and pulling at the 'relativity' of matter - while *obstructing* the 'real' world and toying with its 'beyond-ness'. Stephen Watt, Introduction to *Plato: Republic*, 2nd Ed. trans., John Llewelyn Davies, David James Vaughan (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), xiv.

37 In his book coinciding with the 2005 Joseph Beuys exhibition, *Actions, Vitrines, Environments* (at the Tate Modern, London, and The Menil Collection, Houston), Mark Rosenthal shrewdly notes, that, "Beuys's sculpture manifested content rather than symbolized it". Essentially, this 'confounds' materials and objects that are regarded as being simple or static, and/or identified through their bare signification of being simple or static in nature and use, by 'extending the boundaries' of sculpture whilst encouraging change in existing perceptions of these materials through a renewed and ongoing means of creative action. In other words, by including humble components such as a chair and a lump of formed fat in and as a work of 'sculpture', this was part of Beuys' larger and iconic scheme of working raw, chaotic, shapeless substances, into resurrected,

Whiteread's own employment of such negation/denegation and inversion/doubling of 'ordinary' domestic space (and its relating object) might seem as if her sculptures are essentially about an awakening or thickening of an immaterial quality, i.e. most generally speaking, absence. Yet her works are *physically* as much about the impassable material presence where domestic and bodily space is itself filled to the very edges, as an absence since materialized, unapologetically. Her concerns are then presumably more about both presence and absence (or material and immaterial) at the same time, and even more pertinently, about creating a tension and an in-definability between the two. This would translate as confoundedness, with particular attention directed towards emphasizing both the viewer's own bodily presence and the psychological reception of this experience. What an amazing thought: that thick inaccessible blocks of plaster, concrete or resin, could apprehend such a paradox (as well as such a combination of correlating paradoxes), and thus in such mass of materiality, render the presence of sculptural form as so pertinently mysterious!

<div align="center">✳</div>

To summarize, Whiteread's forms are not really casts of objects, but of spaces in between them. They are part inverted, absent object as well as part objectified space. There is a huge impressive difference. Yet it seems also that the only means to make this distinction is held, practically speaking, by the thin film of indented features between the two: the trace of liminality in the sculptural form. In other words, here exemplified in Whiteread's work is a chasm between absence and presence that is equally, barely separated. Going by this analogy, it is in the attempted grasping (conceptually and physically) of the indefinable space between the formwork and the object, and even in the interchangeability between such space and form, that there are myriad reflections to be made, and drawn out from such an enigmatic concept. In this space somewhere in-between the viewer and the object, a physicality of Rubin's Vase/ Face Illusion returns, with deeper implications as it is encountered in space, and pushing well beyond the 2-dimensional or perceptual realm.

"vibrant, life-enhancing and soul – and spirit – promoting form". Thus, as ideal as this seems, such ordinary materials, confounding in their elevated use in art, is a 'stimulant' to a kind of transformation; an inversion of states, metaphorically carried by the work, and psychologically felt by (or ideally incorporated into) the viewer. Mark Rosenthal, with Sean Rainbird, Claudia Schmuckli, *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments* (Houston: The Menil Collection in association with Tate Publishing, 2004), 25, 26.

THE URN

In my mind, the 'urn' was an image of an archaic monument waiting to be unearthed. Then, as if found in some archeological dig like a fragment of earthenware, it would be taken from the soil and ascend to the surface. Here it would be showcased with a sense of ancient sacredness exhumed (a romantic notion to be sure), carried and restaged.[38] Though still echoing common earthenware, it would be formed, or rather cast, from the clay of the earth and correspond to the shape of a vessel.

Figure 52. Michael Needham, *The Urn,* August 2005, Yarra Sculpture Gallery, dirt, cement and steel reinforcing.

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[38] This aspiration is essentially repeating a 'modern role of art', as Robert Nelson has theorized it, in the sense of an 'artificial' value of spirituality; a "spiritualized corporality which is the fundamental paradigm of art", retaining glamour and prestige, via a staged and enshrined abstraction of deeper qualities. In this case, these deeper qualities allude to a presumed ancient sacredness, preexisting modern times, and strategically mimicking the 'sacramental' by which the work's physical presence is set apart as art, and so invested with contemporary prestigious-ness. Robert Nelson, *The Spirit of Secular Art: A History of the Sacramental Roots of Contemporary Artistic Values* (Clayton: Monash University ePress, 2007), 01.1-01.14, 02.12.

The urn, as it materialized, became a low-lying form made in the shape of an elongated vase. However, it was a bisected cross-section, and thus remained as one half of a whole. This was an implicit reference to larger amphorae in ancient Greece being used as coffins, which were split down the middle in the same way in order to allow a body to be enclosed.[39] Though in this case, with only one half present, it was left wide open; its inside, as a vessel, would never be able to physically contain anything apart from holding its own physical shape. While being a body-sized vase or chalice, there would however, be no corresponding 'face', either within this vase (to refer back to Rubin's Face/Vase Illusion) or apparent in the immediate proximity of its negative space.

Lying on the ground, the urn stretched out to just over three metres in length. Across this length, its concave interior was again like that belonging to a large and ancient amphora, which was typically characterized by the 'bottom end terminating at a point'.[40] As such, its generic shape and volume was comparable to a small canoe. As well as this, a major characteristic of the urn's physical presence was that it was cast from a mixture of dirt and cement. While being an additional reference to the common earthenware amphorae, this meant that with the organic matter in its composition, its edges were quite fragile, while its actual weight came to nearly 400 kilograms.

In this way, the 'risen' presence of the urn posing as an exhumed artifact, would in many ways be contradicted by its downward pull, both as a structure cast with soil as well as an object of cumbersome weight, which would render it – in its fragile state - unlikely to last. By this perceived contradiction, and with allegorical resonances to the human condition, embedded within its shape and composition, an anticipated 'thickening of presence' (akin to it being endowed with an extra sense of gravitas) would be possibly carried by the urn.

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The urn went on to be part of a larger installation, which was in fact, the same exhibition in which the *log* also featured for the first time in 2005. One aspect in the presentation of the urn, included brushing it over with diluted glue and letting a fresh sprinkling of dirt settle over and around its surfaces. This helped to hide some of the damaged areas caused during the installation, as well as giving the object a minimal yet necessary aesthetic ground on which to be located within the indoor space of the gallery. From then on, lying on the cold concrete floor in the gallery, the urn seemed to plant itself and wait for the show to begin.

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[39] While most amphorae were for storing oil, honey, wine or other such consumables, it was discovered in 1825 in Salona (the city of Amfissa in Modern Day Greece) that they were also for burying the dead. The vessel was first divided in half 'in the direction of its length, before receiving the remains, and the two halves were put back together again'. William Smith, ed., with Charles Anthon, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, 3rd Ed. Rev. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1847), 54.

[40] Ibid., 54.

As an image of an earthen vessel containing something of an embodiment of its own 'base materiality', it almost - if not all too clearly - achieved this by the fact that it was *only* a base embodiment and hardly anything more.[41] It appeared, as was my own impression, to be treated as rather banal by most viewers entering the gallery as if it were *only* a found object, akin to an abandoned couch, rather than an ancient artifact. Whether or not this was a failure of the work or simply reflective of the audience it attracted (as an artist-run space outside a usual gallery run area), or indeed both, this certainly wasn't the gallery or museum treatment that I had anticipated. It just sat there poised between the surface of the ground and the layers of concrete and soil beneath. All it did was lie close to the ground and secrete a minute amount of moisture from its still curing ingredients. No one seemed to notice that of course, for this was just an incidental part of it being there.

Only after the urn was packed up and hoisted onto a trailer, was there any noticeable suggestion that something else had taken place where the urn had lain in the gallery. While it sat there for a few weeks, a residue left on the ground beneath it had also formed and dried.

I vividly remember discovering this residue. I had already taken the urn away and had come back to mop the floor. There in all the hurry of packing up, I almost didn't stop to see it. When I did however, I dragged a ladder over to get a better view from above. Looking down on the image it had left on the ground was a strange and beautiful moment, for something previously unseen, was here revealed. The image itself, like a frottage of the urn, was uncannily anthropomorphic. At the same time, a whole different reading of this new yet familiarly human image, seemed to be awakened. Here in the now empty and uncontrived space of the gallery, its revelatory presence seemed to shine through its solemn hidden-ness.

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[41] Regarding 'base materiality', In *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Georges Bataille refers to the basis of materialism as operating within a set dualism, originally defined against a hierarchy of spirit over matter, but which is claimed to have moved beyond such relations. However, it is quickly determined that "[t]he conformity of dead matter [the materialist's primary subject] to the idea of science is, among most materialists, *substituted* [my italics] for the religious relations earlier established between the divinity and its creatures". In other words, *idealism* has merely shifted from one system of thought to another, without recognizing the arrogance by which it does so; a point of arrogance which is also reiterated by Nelson in regards to a 'pretentious duplicity' in secular art (see Robert Nelson, *The Spirit of Secular Art* (2007), 01.14). What Bataille then considers is that above all, materialism is "the obstinate negation of idealism". This is poignantly summed up by his reflection on "The Big Toe", where besides man's big toe being a primary feature which distinguishes him from other animals, "man, who has a light head [he is a perpetually elevating himself with his idealisms], [...] sees it [his distinctly *human* big toe] as spit, on the pretext that he has this foot in the mud". Here, while necessarily part of his erect position reaching to the heavens, man's big toe is what diminishes his ideals by connecting him to the soiled, grounding matter of the earth. It is the part of his being that returns him to a commonality that is essentially his own conflicting 'base materialism', for such "[b]ase matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations[...]: it was a question [corresponding in this case to a practice of Gnosticism] of disconcerting the human spirit and idealism before something base, to the extent that one recognized the helplessness of superior principles". Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans., Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 15, 16, 20-23, 45, 51.

Figure 53. Urn-trace on gallery floor (viewed from ceiling), August 2005, Yarra Sculpture Gallery.

In the gallery, the urn had been laid to rest. Then it was winched up and carried away. But here in its trace left on the floor, the urn was somehow rising *and* returning from/to the dust, yet only as dust, for these remains were only caked up dirt. This was an inverted image, as if this mark on the floor was the urn's missing half: its missing double. Here, gazing down and onto the concrete, it was as if it were a mirror, like a projected reflection of my own body with its recognizably human shape. Sure, the figure itself was empty and generic: it was a hollow effigy. But this was all the implied and unfilled bodily impression I needed in order to insert myself into it psychologically and thus perceive a presence of meaning from it. But again, this self-interment made this 'reflection' seem all the more weird and uncanny, for it circumvented my own aspirations of the original urn, by its more ephemeral and accidental existence. While it continued to speak as a reflection of myself in this moment – projected, I presume narcissistically - it also served to reflect and displace my self with its actual outline of something missing. By this, my reflection was equally alien, an inversion of a peculiar kind. Such was what the trace of the urn revealed.

In another interpretation however, this figure could be seen as a miraculous manifestation of a deity, undoubtedly as a projection again. Only this time it is manifested in the superstition of a sacred gaze, thus facilitating the seeing of things sacred in everything.[42] Yet as a human form imaged as a deity, like an archetypal Christ, and recognizing the image of human form as mirroring my own, surely this is analogous, if not tantamount to an underlying form of idolatry in its anthropomorphic assumption. This would perhaps indicate something of a primal narcissism observed within Isaiah's aforementioned account of the idol-maker, where "He [the idolater] shapes it [the object of his attention and devotion] in the form of man, of man in all his glory" (the curse of which is arguably more damning than its main interpretative description of pagan/animistic practice).[43] One could just as easily question why such an accidental phenomenon, found here mimicking an image in human likeness, would at the outset be attributed to an occurrence or appearance of something divine. Similar scrutinization could apply to any one of the hundreds (or perhaps thousands) of miraculous apparitions or manifestations of Christ (or his blessed mother) seen by hopeful or superstitious (or indeed entrepreneurial) believers throughout the history of Christianity.

Figure 54. Marmite lid 'Jesus', found by British mother Claire Allen, 2009.

To be fair, there is another concept deeply ingrained in the genesis of the Western mind, which seems to always seep from and return to, both the symbolic and tactile element of dirt. Accordingly, it is legitimate to explore this concept in terms of the content of the urn and its trace, thereby granting an insight into the tendencies of meaning drawn from it. This is the inherent symbolism attributed to the Genesis account of the creation of Adam, who was "formed from the dust of the earth".[44] Although included in this symbolism is the 'image of God', which through 'Adam', was also breathed into humanity. From the outset, a corresponding paradox can be sensed between lowly dust and that of the image of divine likeness, a trait that the urn (according to my own experience) has suggestively displayed. For this reason, a short analysis of the meaning of 'Adam' is worth looking into, if only to see why dust as a material, might inherit a more archetypal

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[42] As David Morgan has said, a sacred gaze encompasses "particular configuration[s] of ideas, attitudes and customs that informs a religious act of seeing". It is "the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or act of viewing with spiritual significance". This is also not isolated to religious images or a mode of seeing within religious practice, but symptomatically, it denotes a "viewer's experience [of] an absorption in an image". Thus being a "projection of conventions… [enabling] certain possibilities of meaning", it entails "a constructive act that transforms the spiritual into the material", and similarly, the material into the spiritual. David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005), 2-4, 20.

[43] Isaiah 44:13. Additionally, love of self over God would be a breach of the 1st commandment, the one that Jesus evidently quotes and redefines in order to sum up, and hence prioritize, the old covenant commandments in view of repositioning a new covenant based on love – in this case - of others over self; arguably the primary Christian principle. See Matthew 22:36-38

[44] Genesis 2:7

meaning and so provoke and encourage certain readings (both symbolic and material) within the traced image of the urn.

The etymology of the word 'Adam' is densely embedded in multiple layers of underlying ambiguity, which its singular modern meaning as a name does little to allay. Firstly, from the Hebrew *ha-adam*, 'Adam', translates as 'the man', yet as *ha-adamah*, it means 'from the dust of the ground'. The combined meaning suggests 'earthling'.[45] At its initial mention, 'Adam' however, is not a proper name; it refers to the more generic 'man' or 'humankind'. The root *dm* is "connected with the colour 'red'," suggesting the colour of soil,[46] a relation that further symbolically binds man (humankind) to the later curse of 'working the ground from which he had been taken'.[47] Similarly, *adam* (with lowercase 'a') also means 'ruddy', a term signaling the lowness and commonality of a human individual or of the human species in general. However, also attributed to *adam*, 'ruddy', means 'red' denoting blood; to "be red" and to show it, i.e. through blushing[48] (which of itself conjures further images pertaining to desire and shame in relation to the Fall). Likewise, the Akkadian *adamu* also means 'blood', with *adamatu* meaning 'black blood' in "pathological conditions". Furthermore, the plural meaning of *adamatu* is "dark, red earth (used as dye)",[49] which then suggests something akin to a stain.

With the latter part of Adam's origins laid out, it is difficult not to observe strong undertones of despondency. Even if Adam, 'created in God's own image', was originally meant to be some kind of emulation of God's own essence, his crestfallen nature seems to be the presiding definition; being always defined in hindsight after the Fall, *against* this divine image. In reading this account of our humble (or rather humbled) beginnings of a lowly condition and dark curse of black blood, such a materially rich definition is found to be possibly comparable to the 'black bile' that stands behind the definition of melancholia.[50] This is a relation further suggested by an ancient Egyptian belief that "man was formed from miry and swampy land",[51] as well as in the Psalmist's lamentation (69:2), "I sink in the miry depths", thus breeding an image of both a disease and a nature infecting humanity from the beginning.

Adam as a representative of the human race, paints a particularly physical description of the human condition; a condition that belongs to the fundamental narrative of the creation of humankind at the

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[45] *Encyclopaedia Judaica,* Vol 2 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971), 234, 235.

[46] Ibid., 235.

[47] Genesis 3:23

[48] *Strongs Numbers Online Bible Dictionary*, 199 – 121. http://strongsnumbers.com/hebrew/119.htm (accessed 11th February 2009)

[49] *Encyclopaedia Judaica,* Vol 2 (1971), 235.

[50] In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Julia Kristeva notes an Aristotelian observation (*Problemata,* 30, I) that melancholia, in an example of the philosopher, is less of a disease that "his very nature", a disposition informed by the opposite energies of being both great/genius, as well as being forsaken from this in 'being'; above all, human. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989), 6,7. This also corresponds to an observation made by Bataille in "The Big Toe"; "Human life entails, in fact, the rage of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse – a rage that is easily directed against an organ as *base* as the foot". Of course it is part of Bataille's point that this foot is "in the mud"; the mud that humanity incidentally rises from and returns to. However, owing to a reversal of the baseness of the foot, Bataille points out that it is a particular trait of baseness that endows it with a radically seductive allure. This becomes indicative of an elevation of the base – a kind of spiritual highlight – then again susceptible to a fall, "psychologically analogous to the brutal fall of a man". Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (1985), 20-22.

[51] *Encyclopaedia Judaica,* Vol 2 (1971), 236.

core of Western spirituality. Dirt, as a central material, carries this underlying symbolism.[52] Whether it is material prior to formation, or inanimate matter prior to being animated with 'spirit', or as matter or material *after* such form, or apparently dejected of such 'spirit', the basic meaning of dirt continues as a kind of metaphoric *and* palpably definitive leveling 'ground'. However, this narrative symbolism clearly permeates a wider context outside 'religion' and does so arguably through most manner of self-elevating thought. Such human-centric thinking tends to symbolize either a primary transgression by which a divinely created race fails, or the self-appointed heights from which narcissism makes its fall.[53] Thus, despite the fact that humankind is 'banished' from this original immortal breath of God (as is told by the monotheistic religions) and the image of man is therefore graven in its self-reflexive idolatry, there is still a vestigial – if only analogous and oppositional - divinity carried across to the generic human image, from its own archetypal origins in the Adamic race. This would explain a basic inference of, or tendency of seeing, a reflected divinity while looking into a stain, an enigmatic blemish on the ground, evidently made of dirt and appearing with some likeness to a human figure.

Perpetuating this dual fallen/divine symbolism in the element of dirt is the story of the 'golem' from Jewish mythology. Continuing directly in the vein of another figure being created out of the dust, the golem is a servant made from clay before an incantation is performed (including being breathed on and reciting Genesis 2:7) in order to become alive. As the story is told, the golem is created to protect and serve, while holding supernatural powers. However, when the golem's use has passed, the incantation is reversed and it is turned back into clay.[54] Perhaps more interestingly and consistent across most accounts, is that the golem's supernatural powers are apparent on the basis that it does not have a soul. On the other hand, humans do have a soul, which is the same reason why they are not endowed with supernatural powers.[55] Ultimately this lack of power, along with the evils of humanity (in their fellow humans) from which the Jews in the story need protection, is the reason the golem is created and employed to serve them. While only as a postscript of one particular account, it is also mentioned that the golem's life is reneged, partly in order to prevent it, with its supernatural powers, from being regarded as an idol.[56]

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[52] In her analysis on dirt in *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas notes that 'dirt is absolute: essentially disorder, which offends against order'. A resulting consideration of dirt "…involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death". Because of this, including the ubiquitous symbolism carried by dirt, it initiates "…a positive effort to organize the environment", in other words, to attempt to live with it, and wherever possible to counteract its entropic terrain. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2003, 1966), 2, 6.

[53] The Genesis account of 'the Fall of Man' (Genesis 3) is of course the major premise within Western spirituality, whereby 'man' transgresses 'his' 'image in God' by claiming divinity prior to its due appointment. According to this account, it is human-centered thinking that causes humanity to be cast outside of divine inheritance. Thus in opposition to God, even while origins speak of being somewhat indistinct from God ('made in God's image…' Gen 1:27), its more general definition outside of a strictly religious narrative is what drives the symbolism of the Fall into the ethical and metaphysical depths of its consequences, as a description of the 'human condition'; mortal, transient beings that we are.

[54] For an extensive compilation of Golem sources, from which to read or view one of its many renditions, see Deb R. Lewis, "Mythology: The Golem," http://www.debrlewis.com/DebDocs/GolemBibliography.rtf (accessed 11th February 2009)

[55] "The golem was created with a special power that prevents him from being killed with any weapon; neither can he be burned by fire nor drowned in water". The golem "was not worthy and suitable that the light of divine soul shine in him […] That is why the golem was not subjected to any weakness or illness, for he had no desire that stemmed from the power of the evil impulse. Therefore, for him everything physical existed on a level proper and fitting for him, according to the criteria of his body, no more and no less. And if people like us could behave in like manner we would never experience weakness and disease", nor, as the moral rhetoric would have it, would we have true humanity. Yehudah Yudl Rozenberg, *Golem and the Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, trans., Curt Leviant (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 188, 190.

[56] "[A]lthough the Golem was not possessed of a soul, one could not fail to notice that on the Sabbath there was something peculiar in his bearing, for his face bore a friendlier and more amiable expression than it did on weekdays. It was afterwards

Further complicating simplicity of meaning, is that despite the golem's supernatural powers and despite no apparent soul, "everything he did stemmed from his great dread that he would immediately cease to exist".[57] Beyond dust itself as the matter in which both humankind and golem find their limits, and in view of the moral value of life that emphasizes mortality, it is self-preservation that is an underlying theme. The question might then be asked whether this trait is just a basic instinct for survival or a desire for immortality, the difference suggesting an appreciation of life somehow slipping into a questionable (i.e. selfish) desire for procuring god-hood. While obviously strategic for the overall allegory portrayed regarding the golem, such minor details are fascinating to reflect on in terms of recognizing recurring themes all within the element of dirt.

As a tale, the story of the golem replays the beginning of humanity and its condition as coming from the immediate and universal substance of the earth. The earth (effectively synonymous with dust or clay) is similarly figurative for this beginning and conditioning. Likewise, the privilege of true humanity is obviously a central theme. At the very least, reading between the lines, this humanity is implicitly incomplete as evidenced by the desire to create a servant to ease the burdens of the people. The story of the golem is set in Germany in the 16th Century, and the suffering is caused by anti-Semitic persecution (perpetrated mainly by Christians). In this way, the allegorical language, still rising from the dust of an ancient mythological past, seems to be harbouring a dark parallelism pertaining to the human condition. This is identifiable in modern times with the Holocaust as a pertinent example, which is still a real memory for many. However, an incomplete humanity is further highlighted by the fact that a supposedly central God, is effectively absent, in that a Divine being is non-interventional. As such, the people take matters into their own hands (together with magical incantations and en-spirited breaths) in order to make the golem. There is also a suppressed messianic undertone in the need for a kind of supernatural saviour, effectively expressed through the summoning of a 'second Adam.'[58] Yet in all this, a defense for an absence of God stands by preventing the golem from mistakenly being regarded as an 'idol' (as a divine intervener). Although the supernatural quality of the golem is of lesser privilege than being human, its disposition *without* a "light of divine soul" is somehow regarded as a threat to God. Hence the golem's life must be taken back: diminished, reburied.

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related that every Friday Rabbi Loew used to remove the tablet on which he had written the Ineffable Name from under the Golem's tongue, as he was afraid lest the Sabbath should make the Golem immortal and men might be induced to worship him as an idol". Angelo S. Rappoport, *The Folklore of the Jews* (London: Soncino Press, 1937), 195-203. See D. L. Ashliman's index of folklore and mythology electronic texts, at http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts.html (accessed 18th Feburary 2008)

[57] Yehudah Yudl Rozenberg, *Golem and the Wondrous* (2007), 187. Also, as Rappoport's version states, "Whatever action he performed he did under compulsion and out of fear lest he should be turned again into dust and reduced to naught once more". Angelo S. Rappoport, *The Folklore of the Jews* (1937), 203. http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts.html (accessed 18th Feburary 2008)

[58] The 'second Adam' is referred to in Christendom as Christ, the Messiah, based on Paul's letter to the Romans 5:12-14, 17, 19; and 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45-47. However, as is evident in these verses, Pauline doctrine emphasizes the fallen Adam to cast a poignant binary opposition, against which, the sinless Christ becomes, as Aiden Nichols notes, the "inverted image of Adam's sin". Aiden Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate: Theology and Symbol from Genesis to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 43.

In all this, along with the residual stain of the urn left on the gallery floor, the common ingredient is earth, dirt, dust; here as a potent (or rather fertile) substance and symbol of materiality. It paves the way metaphorically and of course sculpturally, for germinating a sense of the present and the eternal in the imaginative reference to the beginning and ending of life. This however carries the implications of its figurative duality, referring to a relation as well as a separation between human and divine, fallen and free. Such a relation is split - somewhat ambiguously - between material embodiment and immaterial disembodiment. The tension is perpetual.[59]

In any case, the effect of the remnant cast upon the floor of the gallery was undeniable, leaving me haunted ever since with both doubt and curiosity. Needless to say however, I was the only one around to appreciate it.

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[59] A poignant observation of this human/divine tension is summed by the subtext attached to Rabbi Doniel Baron's article, "The Meaning of Adam", which states, "The potential to sink lower than the animals and [to go/rise] higher than the angels". Rabbi Doniel Baron, "The Meaning of Adam: Insights into the Hebrew Language," *Aish Ha Torah,* Philosophy: Spirituality (Feb 2008). http://www.aish.com/spirituality/philosophy/The_Meaning_of_-Adam-_Insights_into_the_Hebrew_Language.asp (accessed 11th Feburary 2009)

TERMINAL SPACE

Built in a forest clearing near the town of Beaujolais in France, is a Dominican monastery named Couvent Sainte Marie de la Tourette. Constructed between 1953 and 1960, it was designed by the modernist architect Le Corbusier who had been developing an ideal aesthetic, one of which (for La Tourette in particular) included the use of raw concrete as its main construction material. The building has since been described as a "powerful, sculptural container… an inspired staging area for exploring twentieth-century materials, forms and symbols and their relationship to the spiritual".[1] It has also been said to be "one of the most haunting, numinous buildings of the twentieth century", an observation that might also, perhaps incidentally, be said in lieu of La Tourette's current state of disrepair.[2]

I have never visited La Tourette. In fact, I only stumbled across it as an existing piece of architecture whilst doing some preliminary research on the work of German born artist Anselm Kiefer (who had spent some time there prior to pursuing a career as an artist). In the context of Kiefer's early practice, similar descriptions of La Tourette were also outlined, each suggestive of the kind of influence it had on his work. Such intriguing, and recurring descriptions of La Tourette as architecture, and in the context of its use as a modern tabernacle or monastery, builds a haunting and poetic image that simply begs further exploration.

Figure 55. Couvent Sainte Marie de la Tourette, Beaujolais, Eveux, France. 1953-1960.
Viewed from north-west.

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[1] Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth*, exh. cat. (Texas: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and Prestel Publishing, 2005), 30-31.

[2] Making this initial observation, of which Auping equally cites, Jonathan Glancey writes of La Tourette's current condition, with "concrete walls… beginning to crack. Water seeps from light wells above crypt altars… electrics are suspect", each describing a rather animated image of a *haunted* building. Jonathan Glancey, "Divine Inspiration," *The Guardian*, January 14 (2002). http://arts.guardian.co.uk/critic/feature/0,1169,641813,00.html (accessed 19th Feb 2009)

For a particular piece of architecture to be described as "sculptural", one can immediately begin drawing on a literal relation between sculptural form and architecture. In addition to this basic relation, when something "sculptural" is referred to as "powerful", "haunting" and "numinous", this speaks volumes about the kind of actual encounter La Tourette offers, over and above what *sculpture* within art appreciation or in an ornamental capacity usually does. These kinds of qualities point toward an encounter that encompasses the whole viewer as *its own* subject rather than the work simply being a subject of the viewer's gaze. In this regard, being contained *inside* a piece of architecture (or sculpture) suggests an intimate, compelling and all-encompassing way of encountering, beyond formal, aesthetic or other visually dominant values.

The very idea of architecture as a rudimentary concrete container, also breeds an image of an enclosed space that is cold, dark and mysterious. It is the description of a dwelling as a 'container' that becomes particularly potent: for *dwelling* usually describes a space in which to live, a space to inhabit, whereas a 'container' - as an atypical description of a domestic dwelling - portrays an internal space in which one is enclosed.[3] Whether intended or not, this suggests a level of confinement in a neutral sense at least; the building's design being employed to carry, hold or restrain, or even to prevent some sort of contamination either coming in or going out.

If *containment* is indeed a function anticipated for the "container" of La Tourette, as a place for habitation or indwelling, it carries a sense of being kept inside with a limited capacity to get out.[4] As such, even before actually encountering La Tourette in person, the imagination clearly builds an interior held within heavy and permanent concrete boundaries. Congealed yet porous and empty, such an *interior* space, breathes of certain gravitas and caution. This is La Tourette, the "concrete catacomb".[5] To then see this at work *in the flesh*, or encounter it alternatively materialized in a compressed sculptural form displaying similar qualities of enclosure and containment, would certainly be an engaging image to both encounter and to potentially reproduce in some form.

In this sense, there doesn't necessarily need to be an encounter with La Tourette in the real, in order to believe in its affecting qualities, or to encourage these qualities to thicken into an imaginative (or

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[3] Le Corbusier himself was quite forward about calling a dwelling a "container". He even described the health and soundness of modern man necessarily being based around the "biological logic" of the "human unit", thus the use of the term "container" as a dwelling was also more or less interchangeable with "cell" (with internal walls as "membranes", delineating the different rooms, or "vessels" within the container). Le Corbusier, *The Radiant City: Elements of a Doctrine to be used as the Basics of our Machine-Age Civilization* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1933, 1964), 29-31, 143-146.

[4] With the instrumental purpose (as function) outlined by the description of the 'container' of La Tourette, one can draw a direct parallel to that of the "spatial nesting" in Michel Foucault's functional analysis of various 'observatories', i.e. "estates, hospitals, asylums, prisons, schools" etc. While Foucault's theory incorporates a strong critique against institutional powers and the way these powers are calculatedly wielded, including the powers of organized religion (which the Dominican order that commissioned La Tourette shares a unique history; see Glancey's "Divine Inspiration" for a brief account of the Dominican inquisitors), a basic relation (hence more neutral in its observation) can be drawn to La Tourette and its function characterizing enclosure. Its 'omnipresent' concrete, if not an omnipresent deity, may account for some of its apparent affecting qualities; the feeling of being haunted, *being* contained by a bigger enclosure. Only for the sake of further interest outside this thesis, having made this initial relation of functional containment, does the question beg for how much La Tourette, the monastery, is part of a larger apparatus of power relations and social control, even if this is invariably part of Le Corbusier's 'constitutive utopianism'. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans., Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 170-177. See also, Nathaniel Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 115, 116.

[5] Glancey uses this term, as encompassing the severity, poverty and coldness of La Tourette. Jonathan Glancey, "Divine Inspiration," *The Guardian*, January 14 (2002). http://arts.guardian.co.uk/critic/feature/0,1169,641813,00.html (accessed 19th Feb 2009)

materialized) simulation of its essential character. In addition, *as* a container, it would also be amiss not to recognize that 'La Tourette' is an effective, infective, framing device, a breeding ground for the imagination. This notion can also be seen to align itself within Le Corbusier's underlying utopian ideals, though reverberating with what already seems to inherently haunt, i.e. in terms of imagining oneself inside a brutal ominous enclosure.[6]

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Le Corbusier's monastery is not quaintly stone-walled. As a building it is grounded in post WWII France, meaning that it cannot carry remnants of an earlier romanticized age to the same degree that it would if it had sat there for hundreds of years. However this doesn't mean that La Tourette cannot carry historical remnants of another kind within its very structure: for its presence obviously testifies to Le Corbusier's unrelentingly confident modernist ideals in a cold and brutal concrete permanency (even despite the buildings' apparent physical decay). "Haunting" and "numinous" might therefore also be alluding to a sense of La Tourette as alien,[7] yet definite and permanent with its stark grey mass. This in itself would easily compare to a sterile space, yet with a brooding inhumanity.[8]

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[6] Here I should note two relevant points initiated by Nathaniel Coleman. One is that La Tourette exists between the possibility of the idealism of the past, and projectively as an embodiment of future ideals. In this mode of presence, it facilitates 'social imagination' in respect to the ongoing creative effect on its occupants and visitors. Coleman describes this as a sense of 'liminality', in which La Tourette then "circumscribes a container ever ready to be filled anew by life". In this sense, even while concrete is usually characterized as cold dead matter, La Tourette is alive, teeming with suggestive power in its properties and form. The second point is an elucidation of the first via a reference to utopianism as defined by sociologist Karl Mannheim. Here Coleman refers to Mannheim's observation of the 'utopian state of mind', where, "incongruence [...] is always evident in the fact that such a state of mind in experience, in thought, in practice, is oriented toward objects which do not exist in the actual situation". In other words, the utopian mind is an imaginative mind that fills empty spaces, of which it could be said that there is a 'pathological' aspect to this imagination, less in terms of a hard-line totalitarian approach to utopian ideals, but in terms of a disease; a lack that yearns to break away from its underlying disposition of *dystopia*, similarly framing the stage of the human condition. Nathaniel Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture* (2005), 34, 154.

[7] In *The Monastery of Sainte Marie de la Tourette*, Philippe Potie notes similarly in regards to the exterior of La Tourette's church; "[i]t might be a modern megalith or a descendant of structures built by early civilizations". Philippe Potie, *Le Corbusier: Le Couvent Sainte Marie de La Tourette / The Monastery of Sainte Marie de la Tourette,* trans., Sarah Parsons (Basel: Birkhauser, 2001), 50.

[8] Comparable to La Tourette on multiple levels (already mentioned) are the not-so-distant remains of the Atlantic Wall constructed in WWII, and in particular, the bunkers and fortified batteries, of which Paul Virilio eloquently documents in *Bunker Archeology* (1975). Built by the Germans to fortify the Western coast of Europe from allied forces coming from the British mainland, the primary material necessarily used for their construction was reinforced cast concrete. Rediscovered by Virilio in their abandoned state, a reading of 'mystery' similar to La Tourette is offered, with a 'modernness of architecture countered by their decrepit state'. This leads to the identification of an anxious relationship between "the urban habitat and the shelter", which is further noticed in respect to functional aspects such as 'crypts' - for munitions storage - and 'air vents', reminiscent of 'ovens' as opposed to dwellings. Summarizing these qualities and their affect, Virilio accordingly states: "Slowed down in his physical activity but attentive, anxious over the catastrophic probabilities of his environment, the visitor in this perilous place is beset with a singular heaviness; in fact he is already in the grips of that cadaveric rigidity from which the shelter was designed to protect him". However, what is perhaps most interesting in regard to the visual and conceptual concerns of the body of artwork emerging as a result of this thesis, is Virilio's located analogy "between the funeral archetype and military architecture". Set as they are to "face the void of the oceanic horizon", the bunkers are described as 'concrete altars', where a bunker's casemate - in correspondence to both entrance and embrasure - is likened to an "…empty ark or little temple minus the cult". Such descriptive, analogical language simply seduces a sculptoral imagination. Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archeology*, trans., George Collins (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1975, 1994, 2009), 11-16.

However La Tourette *is* functionally designed for human use. As architecture, a basic and inherent human trace will always be evident through the corresponding proportions of doorways, stairwells, rooms, passageways, etc. This would stand as evidence for the building firstly being inhabited, or at least being inhabitable. But part of Le Corbusier's own puritan aesthetic, meant that there was a limiting of functionality to its barest, evidenced by a lack of ornamental feature despite Le Corbusier's sculptural and material considerations (which accordingly suggests a sculptural minimalism). In this case, in the supposed functional familiarity of La Tourette's intended use, there is an idealized absence of the more intimate and 'homely' human traces. Thus also, one can appreciate "haunting" and "numinous" as a description of an encounter with a framed absence; an absence possibly equally hewn within oneself, through an inflected sense of uncertainty towards the very lack (of ideal-ness) encountered. Hence there is a brooding sense of the uncanny contained in the image of 'La Tourette'.

This absence in and of La Tourette is multidimensional. Having not experienced Le Corbusier's monastery myself, there is a fundamental absence of first hand experience, of which La Tourette, as articulated from this context, is for me effectively mythical. Yet through an invoked encounter, there is still a sensed affect created and retained, somewhat needing to be grasped.

Figure 56. Individual cell, Couvent Sainte Marie de la Tourette.

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Six years after La Tourette was built, Anselm Kiefer placed himself here in a cell for a few weeks before initiating his career as an artist. For anyone knowing Kiefer's work, this immediately begs speculation on the formative nature of his experience, and even evokes a passing comparison to Christ's time in the desert. There are pertinent resonances with empty architectural interiors and deserted landscapes flowing through Kiefer's work, which either way, reveals a consistent sense of a brooding solitary passage. While the viewer of Kiefer's work may sense this passage, there is unlike reference to Christ in the little or no suggestion of an anticipated return from an analogous desert, or of an unambiguously redemptive teaching born from it.

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As intimated already, a cold and lonely image appears regularly in Kiefer's practice. Earlier paintings often included an actual lone figure surrounded by a deep receding landscape or an engulfing blurry mist. This can be visually comparable to the melancholic landscapes of Casper David Friedrich painted in Germany in the previous century.[9] However, the human figure didn't last, or at least not in literal or un-disfigured representation. Looking through the decades of Kiefer's work, it's almost like the terrain (as a pictorial field within the frame) grew so thick and dark that there was little room left for a figure. Much of Kiefer's iconic work then maintains a distinct element of absence through the vast landscapes and empty architectural interiors.

From this observation, one might think that the 'human' figure had been accordingly removed and replaced by either an enclosing or expanding absence. However, in the materially dense application and condition of Kiefer's painted scenery (which evidently increases throughout the first 10-20 years of Kiefer's practice), there is an additional layer of representation that retains a visceral bodily presence. This is the thick and heavy presence of the physical painting itself. The imagery within the frame - projected through the presence of the painting - reads as scenes or places somehow altered through human (or mass human) existence, which contributes to its thickening staging of absence.

While there is an increasing absence of the human in Kiefer's work, this is partially replaced or reconfigured by associative, usually singular but sometimes doubled or tripled metaphoric figures: chairs, palettes, tubs, snakes, ships, propellers, etc. These are either painted, as in earlier works, or are interwoven with the painted surface as a sculptural counterpart, which are more common in his later works. In addition to the human figure being replaced, textual inscriptions regularly appear over the surface of the image. These are written interceptions, usually implemented as titles for the works, as well as a reference to further allegorical content through the use of names pertaining to figures from a revived mythological past. While giving a decisive name which the painting 'illustrates', these inscriptions also become a memorializing gesture in that they inscribe the imagery with
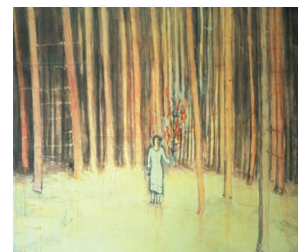
Figure 57. Anselm Kiefer, **Man in a Forest**, 1971, oil on canvas. 174 x 189 cm.

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[9] Some pertinent examples are: *Man in the Forest,* 1971 (see figure 57.), *Stefan!* (1975), *Brunhilde Sleeps* (1980). His early photographic series *Occupations* (1969), in which Kiefer is the actual subject in the landscape, also gives an indication of Kiefer's interest in an isolated figure linking back to a romantic trope, yet one that equally, quickly, dissolves into the landscape much like a lost Adam.

a sense of actual history. At the same time, the memorializing inscription indicates that what is illustrated is a representational replacement of an inaccessible past: a particular loss of the present in the first place.[10] This is the kind of underlying displacement that Kiefer's written inscriptions reiterate, whilst also beginning to outline a critical connection with my own work, i.e. that of attempting to represent loss through the memorial.

However, as a layering of memorial fragments, it is Kiefer's actual materials that seem to fuse (and claim) both figurative and non-figurative subject matter into the one frame through their all-embracing and brutal substance. It seems it is this tactile matter, like Le Corbusier's bare concrete, which operates as a more potent, symbolic, overbearing, and ubiquitous *presence* in Kiefer's works. Likewise, such a thick and ominous mode of presence translates from a similarly layered sense of absence. This is the 'absent subject'[11] in need of some gesture of representation; the absence that tactile matter attempts to negotiate and even overwhelm via its unapologetic physicality.

Figures 58 and 59. Anselm Kiefer, *Melancholia,* 2004, oil, acrylic, emulsion on canvas, glass polyhedron. 281 x 382 cm; Anselm Kiefer, *Sulamith,* 1983, oil emulsion, wood-cut, shellac, acrylic, straw on canvas. 290 x 370 cm.

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[10] Observing primarily from a well-known painting of Kiefer's, *Sulamith* (1983)(a dark architectural interior likened to a crematorium; see figure 59), Lisa Saltzman notes that its "name", inscribed into the top left-hand corner of the frame (incidentally the architrave of the building depicted), "becomes an epitaph, the painting a sepulcher". While being a gesture of memorializing, it is this aspect that alternatively indicates "an atemporal netherworld that is neither fully past nor fully present", an aspect, which grants the image a characteristic of being imbued with the mythological. This is not, as it might seem, a means of denying a past its own history, but to acknowledge that the 'scene of representation' is haunted, of which Kiefer's "painterly crypt, his visual sepulcher, become[ing] a space for preserving […is] that which is never fully there, as that which is never fully visualized". Lisa Saltzman, "Lost in Translation," in Barbie Zelizer, ed., *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 85.

[11] Ibid., 85. With regard to Kiefer's *Sulamith* at least, the 'absent subject' is the Jew, of which it is the larger time/space event of the Holocaust that had all but erased them. However, as indicated later, one can read an even larger mode of absence in need of being negotiated; the seeming absence of a God in respect to no apparent intervention in the midst of the Holocaust.

When viewing a survey of his paintings from throughout the last few decades, a distinct and increasing materiality in Kiefer's work is obvious. Often on monumentally sized frames, materials used for painting have become more like ingredients, physically protruding out from a flat surface in the tactile qualities of sand, clay, plant matter, ash, found or recreated objects, photographic fragments, cement, lead, glass and many other unconventional mediums. Any combination of these can be found configured with paints or emulsions, much of which is expressively spread over most of the painting's surface or its entirety. While Kiefer almost always alludes to an expressive depiction of perspectival space as part of the pictorial content, the thick application and amalgamation of materials in the painting amounts to a harsh and sculpturally conflated formation of an image. This in itself effectively clogs an efficient pictorial and perspectival reading. [12]

A recent and more extreme example of this clogging would be *The drums in the river came alive, beaten by the lost ones, who were not supported by faith,* 2005 (see figure 60), a painting, which incorporated an actual cast concrete staircase jutting out from its surface.[13] As a viewer standing close to this work, one has to contend with a naked physicality of presence that is suspended on a large frame, which in this case, is fraught with the hazardous tonnage of concrete encountered overhead. Because of its immense size, it can only be pictorially initiated as a whole, by stepping back a certain distance. Yet *as* a whole, which necessarily includes recognition of an ominous sense of the monumental in its physical weight and material presence, this still renders the *image* (as presented in the modality of painting) almost unreadable within its material obdurateness.

Through the example of this painting, it seems that for Kiefer's viewer, a *clear* and consolidated *vision* is precisely inaccessible even while the work is encountered on a tactile level. Any reading of a remaining image is always hazy, as if it were attempting to depict a partly apprehensible memory or dreamscape, or even an *envisioning* of, a mythical past or future.

But of course the image in Kiefer's work is simply inseparable from its incorporated materials, which by its intentional application always describes a rudimentary and heavy-laden image stained with layers of medium and metaphor. Such definite and defining materiality then seems to be just the point of access needed in order to enter and encounter the visual *and* symbolic content materially embodied. However, this means that an ambiguity between painting and sculpture ensues. This in effect, is a clogging between representation within a pictorial frame, and the world of matter experienced within reality.

As such, there is an unavoidable encounter with materiality and its *implication* in Kiefer's painting. This creates a feeling of ambivalence not only from the haziness in the visual reading of the painting's apparent image, but also as the viewer's spatial reality is both driven back and consumed by both the

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[12] Ibid., 80-84. Saltzman notes that a 'crucial detail' in Kiefer's practice is the use of "[s]urfaces […] at once obdurate and illusionistic, materials at once literal and insistently referential", a detail easy to miss if only viewing 2D reproductions of his work. "That is, even as the painting establishes an illusionistic recession into the depths [again, in this case of - but not limited to - the architectural form that *Sulamith* refers to][…] the painting also establishes a countering force. Namely, the movement toward the murky vanishing point of the empty chamber is destabilized, blocked, by the intense materiality of the surface of the painting […]. That is, just as the spectatorial eye recedes into the depths of the chamber [of the subject and the frame of the painting itself], it is pulled back to the texture of the surface".

[13] This painting, otherwise known as *Von den verlorenen gerührt, die der Glaube nicht trug, erwachen die Trommeln im Fluss* (2005), was accompanied by an additional installation of the same title, originally shown at the White Cube gallery in London, and later shown in 2007 at the Art Gallery of NSW where it is now a permanent acquisition.

looming and dwarfing size of the work, towering as an architectural monument in itself. In this sense, while the viewer is invited to gaze *into* the 'painting' - thus likening their own presence to the return or incidental embodiment of Kiefer's earlier solitary figure - the viewer is also rejected and displaced, just as the human figure seemed to have been previously ousted, replaced or dissolved. The viewer is always standing *outside* the painting.[14]

Figure 60. Anselm Kiefer, ***The drums in the river came alive, beaten by the lost ones, who were not supported by faith,*** 2004. Oil, emulsion, acrylic and sand on canvas with concrete staircase. 380 x 560 cm.

Landscape with Head, 1973 (see figure 61), is a comparatively clear image that is most suggestive of a transition between a figure inside and a figure stepping back outside of the picture in order to take up both the privilege and implication, of a perceiving viewer. This transition denotes an obvious juxtaposition between the viewer and the subject, though almost and somewhat paradoxically like a reflection of the viewer, *inside*; much like a mirror reflecting the viewer's own material obdurateness. *Landscape with Head* describes both a viewer's gaze into a dark abyssal landscape as well as a disclosed framed interior that hints at architectural space. The figure seems to witness either what has since been dissolved, or what

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[14] Regarding Kiefer's practice, Anna Brailovsky similarly identifies "the beholder's *physical* distance from the fictive space of representation", which is evidenced in the fact that Kiefer's paintings "emphatically […] take account of the position of the viewer in front of the picture plane". However for Brailovsky, the distance between the viewer and the picture plane is more than just physical. It is a "historical distance […] enacted in pictorial terms"; a distance further propelled in terms of the mythical subject matter that Kiefer often employs alongside his references to the past. Anna Brailovsky, "The Epic Tableau: Verfremdungseffekte in Anselm Kiefer's Varus," *New German Critique*, No. 71, Memories of Germany (Spring – Summer, 1997), 115, 116.

is yet to emerge out of the darkness; what is imaged is analogous to a process of scrying.[15] As with a haziness of materials used, the encounter with a reflection of self is likely to be thick with parallel uncertainties of vision.

Figure 61. Anselm Kiefer, *Landscape with Head*, 1973, Oil, distemper and charcoal on burlap, with charcoal on cardboard. 210 x 240 cm.

Standing as an isolated figure before such elements in Kiefer's works, the viewer becomes an implicated and affected witness confronted by the desolation of Kiefer's harsh terrain, a terrain that is both vertiginous and repelling. As both a framed vision of pictorial presence, and as a designated space of absence, this terrain is either an architectural interior disfigured in some capacity according to its process of creation, or it is a broader disfigured landscape: a vacant, supposed homeland littered with humanity only in the form of remains. Hence the viewer, *as a witness*, is not just alone; he/she is both placed and displaced as a lone survivor, disfigured by the weight of the work *and* its loaded imagery, while suspended within and beneath its (usually) towering frame. Within this vast, dense image (as far as it can be engaged pictorially, for it is equally a vast and dense psychological space), there is a kind of merging with its physicality as a means of entering it, visually and imaginatively. As the spectatorial eye of the viewer hovers over and throughout, perhaps in this sense he/she is rather hovering amongst Kiefer's 'absent subject', i.e., the dead: the specters of humanity that reside in the painting's own 'ashen' sedimentation. Like a 'limbo' land of unrest, this terrain seems quite clearly to be "a kind of purgatory", of which Kiefer is well versed in rendering.[16]

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[15] Mark Rosenthal notes Kiefer's own comments in regard to *Landscape with head*, which is that the figure in the picture (which happens to be his Grandmother), is "in a certain sense [looking…] into the future"; the "open" space that is clearly designated by the unknown quality of the darkness. Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, exh. cat. (USA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987), 26.

[16] According to Auping, "a kind of purgatory" is where Kiefer, the artist, "invariably finds himself" - broadly speaking - in "the boundary between reason and metaphysics", and similarly on the "thin edge between hope and despair". Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth* (2005), 34. It is also theologian Ronald Goetz who admits almost as much in his essay for *Christian Century*, titled "Anselm Kiefer: Art as Atonement", coinciding with Kiefer's 1998 exhibition touring America. Here, Goetz notes Kiefer's overall pessimism due to the 'residues of guilt' within the German nation. It is therefore only indicative of Kiefer's "passionate internalization of his subject", that he explores every door of possible hope "for its potential to symbolize despair". In this landscape, "nothing remains except scorched-earthed, dead gods and the shattered ruins of the

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As is well known, Kiefer was born in Germany just prior to the end of WWII, and therefore born into a nation decimated by the aftermath of its own failed ideals of nationalism. This means he was also born into a divided homeland and a society haunted by the recent fate of its own citizens, as well as by the absence of a certain people group, namely, the Jews. Without doubt, this is a primary image (underwriting a broader definition of landscape and ruined architecture) that Kiefer has for decades relayed onto the viewer.

My perception is that Kiefer's landscape builds layers of uneasiness that stirs a familiar uncertainty pertaining to a general lack of resolution with simply being human. In viewing his work within a whole practice, I find myself wanting to somehow secretly envision, project, or just believe in a supplementary narrative: one that would unlock a lighter and transfigured ending.[17] Yet in relation to the weight of WWII and the reverberations that the Holocaust in particular brought, such a reflexive regurgitation of idealism must first contend with the damage of its own failure. Likewise, this trait of failed idealism haunts my means of envisioning *beyond* Kiefer's relayed image and its objectified gravitas in the first place.[18] Either way, the *absence* or *lack* of a determined redemptive meaning, within a thick, brooding, and incessant presence or *corporeality* of Kiefer's subject matter itself, both obvious and underlying, harbours an inevitable, returning confrontation. Its woven canvas net of a substructure, almost always in some way pertaining to the problematic of representation, threatens to pull any proximate viewer, including his or her own appeals to representation, into the work's larger embodiment of forlorn hopelessness unanswered in the broader human condition. Indicative of being trapped *inside* a purgatorial crypt, Kiefer's work can in this way be compared to the ubiquitous image of a dead messiah on a cross, or rather – as Holbein portrayed - a dead Christ in the tomb. This is obviously not a visual comparison based on direct representation, but on Kiefer's broader and more expansive terrain of a framed absence - an abstracted representation - where hope and redemption is similarly suspended. As resolution is not offered through

Third Reich". This is a brutally realist interpretation of purgatorial suffering, effectively a "less terminal form of hell", without a clear hope or vision of a 'reality of God', by which one might look to for amelioration. Ronald Goetz, "Anselm Kiefer: Art as Atonement," *Christian Century*, March 23-30 (1988). http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=941 (accessed 9th March 2009); see also Anthony Kelly, "Purgatory: the Realism of Hope," in *Touching on the Infinite: Explorations in Christian Hope* (Blackburn: Collins Dove, 1991), 154-177.

17 Admittedly, this statement reveals a personal desire for what Andreas Huyssen essentially charges as a "stereotype-driven appreciation" (of Kiefer's work), linked not only to a universalizing gesture where the "power of art" can "give expression to the spiritual plight of humanity", but where Kiefer's categorized 'Germanness' is assumed to be the authority from which Germany's history (as with its national identity) can be 'dealt with' and transformed. Furthermore, it is this kind of reading, always seeking a redemptive/Salvationist outcome, that leads Huyssen to remark that "[t]his is art theology, not art criticism". Andreas Huyssen, "Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth," *October*, Vol. 48, Spring (The MIT Press, 1989), 25-26, 29.

18 Ibid., 25-27. Besides the confrontation inaugurated by acknowledging the failure of my own idealist mode of appreciating Kiefer's works, it seems to me that it is the actual desire for transformation, from – and fuelled by - a generalized human condition, which haunts my own vision, especially when confronted by Kiefer's problematizing forms, materials and subject matter. In other words, it is the 'ghosts of the ideal', my ideals, as much as the "ghosts of the past", which cannot easily be laid to rest. This is a notion reiterating Huyssen's assertion that Kiefer's work, 'energized' by its subject matter sitting ambiguously between myth and history, points to a "longing [that] will not, cannot be fulfilled".

the means of the image, the viewer is left with a residing catharsis in the failure of ideals. In this sense, it seems that the only way an idealism can persist is for it to exist outside the image, i.e. beyond (if possible) the limitations of representation. Thus a confrontation with these limitations - including the corresponding limitations of corporeality in the viewer drawn into the image - is importantly what triggers (or re-instigates) a search for resolution. In this negotiation between a desire to transcend an obdurate materiality and a corporealization of spiritual concerns, this is where, I believe, a fundamental value – and challenge - in Kiefer's work is to be found.

According to the influence that these values have on my own practice, my hope (ideal as it must be) is that I can both extend this challenge of impressing a search for resolution onto the viewer, while at the same time rising to it. That is, as an artist, I am challenged to go further (again if possible) than Kiefer's drawn limitations; I am compelled to clear a path through his obdurate materiality, to open a door in order to provide a space for hope to return (and perhaps even for a hope in humanity to return). This is a kind of wedge: a conceptual consideration or feature that still upholds an important challenge to the viewer's immediate ideals (whether of aesthetic tastes, easily accessible meaning or that representation doesn't entail some form of loss). Yet this is a space, an interjecting component that also pivots on a quiet quality, which then nurtures an intelligible - meditative - appreciation, as a counteroffer to what is visually depicted or physically rendered. Though moreover, as I see it, this space for hope still remains outside the limitations of representation; it is actually not a discernable part of an image's composition. Rather, it is like an underlying desire that finds an outlet in the creative process itself, and so it naturally – perhaps even unconsciously - finds its way *into* the artwork as a *creative* gesture of hope, which the image then carries. It seems to me that this is a common trait of any artist working with the limits of representation, which is why there is a return to image-making as part of a creative process/practice, even while the same repetition of image-making signals that no single image ever completes, fulfills or *resolves*, an artist's need to negotiate ideas through images. In any case, this 'space for hope' is only implicit - or sometimes awkwardly obvious - in an artist's work or methodology (including, importantly, my own). It does not make perceptible to the viewer - through an image - that the limitations of representation have been resolved.

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With regard to there being little else on offer *within* Kiefer's framed image (apart from a brute materiality and its own allegorical associations), if some kind of transfiguration or sense of transcendence were here accessible, it would - as far as I can rationally conceive - necessarily have to incorporate a transformation of these actual materials. With respect to the obvious materiality of the work corresponding to a viewer's own corporeality and following the law of human condition (like Kiefer's inscriptions written into the compositional structure of the painted matter itself), the only viable physical or analogous transformation

available might then simply be that of matter firstly *lowered* to its most elemental state. As far as the human body is concerned - inscribed with its mortality - this would be the bare elemental material remaining from a process of decomposition, which might also include 'ash' as the result of a parallel process. Even so, this kind of 'base' matter - like most things substantially deteriorated - is still only a fragile tangible material and is hardly a desired outcome that would speak of a transformation of or into hope. This is an entropic transformation, certainly not utopian.

However, based on this conjecture of a lowered state of elemental matter, as well as the fact that matter can and does change through varying states of flux, a creative analogous kind of transformation is still plausible. If matter cannot go any lower, it might just be the precise state and means by which something new can rise, just like the fertile humus of healthy soil,[19] or the rich ruddy dirt from which humankind arose. This would be the *prima materia*, the essentially formless substance in which "any form whatsoever may [potentially] be assumed".[20] Fittingly, this is where new life, in a general organic sense, begins, dies and is reborn.[21] Continuing within the ongoing cycle of life and death, one can at least understand the underlying principles at work behind the belief in *resurrection*, whether of mind, or body, each being incorporated as a new spiritual body.[22]

As a resurrected ideal, victoriously declared according to the doctrine of the risen Christ and the promise of a new earth to come, the very notion of resurrection is always a vision of the future. Apart from its role in terms of giving birth to the Church (the 'bride of Christ'), resurrection, by way of some kind of actual embodied existence after death, is always a projected outcome. Being a projected outcome, it offers hope *amidst* the present earthly conditions of dis-ease and despair.[23] Within this context, resurrection is

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[19] Rosenthal similarly indicates that some of Kiefer's inspiration did come from seeing a field of peat moss, observing also that peat is "formed of decomposed and carbonized plant matter, [which] signifies a major transformation in material". Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, (1987), 127.

[20] As a critical term within alchemy, Carl Jung admits that the *prima materia* is difficult to explain on account of its many "half chemical, half mythological definitions", and by the fact that it represents an "unknown substance" carrying "the projection of [...an individual's] psychic content". Though what needs to be said is that it is the "basis of the *opus*": the creation to which it gives birth. C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 12*, trans., R. F. C. Hull, ed., Sir Herbert Read (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 317-320.

[21] According to Christian doctrine, as interpreted by French theologian Pere Durrwell, death and resurrection are "not so much two separate events as one mystery with two [complimentary] facets" (cited from J. Huby, *Mystiques paulinienne et johannique* (Paris, 1926), 21). This single mystery refers of course to the whole event of the Incarnation. Though to elucidate further, Durrwell writes that this single conjoined mystery of death and resurrection is an upside-down arc: "[t]he arc described by our Lord in moving from the right to divine glory which was his down to the annihilation of death, having come to its lowest point, sweeps up again, and demands glory from the Father in proportion to the humiliation that has been accepted." In this regard, "death", is "the consummation of life according to the flesh". "The *kenosis*, while being an acceptance of the flesh, was at the same time a complete negation of it." Thus stands the Christian revelation that sees Christ being humiliatingly 'lifted up' on a cross, as part of the same movement being 'raised up' and exalted in heavenly ascension. The greater the contrast, the greater the revelation; a concept that is dialectically complex yet, in a strange sense, seems to level-out an inherent dualism. F.X. Durrwell, *The Resurrection: A Biblical Study*, trans., Rosemary Sheed (London: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 36-38, 54-55.

[22] Thomas P. Rausch sums up the Christian definition of resurrection as meaning, "a kind of existence that is beyond the limitations of space and time but at the same time is much more than the survival of our soul". Rausch also quotes St. Paul, noting that it is the resurrected Christ who "will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body" (Phil 3:21). Thomas P. Rausch, "The Fullness of Christian Hope," in *Catholicism at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1996), 189.

[23] Kiefer's well-known painting, *Resurrexit* (1973)(see figure 62), is one of his earlier images incorporating the staircase as a component standing outside the picture frame. Though in terms of its title, *Resurrexit*; Latin for 'resurrection', the term suggests much more than 'rising from the dead'. *Resurrexit* then looks up towards a potential escape from earth, and possibly death, while at the same time suggesting an escapism from the work's pictorial content and the bounds of the picture frame in general.

restrained by the present and yet also suspended within the obscuring shroud of history's own crypt. In this regard, both the resurrection of Christ as well as the anticipation of Christ's return (which would inaugurate the resurrection of his followers) always depends on faith: this being *belief* that something has occurred in history's past, as well as being a form of *assurance* itself that something will yet happen. In each case, resurrection is practically unverifiable in lieu of an ahistorical or even 'transhistorical' trait.[24] In context with the material planet earth, the language of faith is difficult to 'reconcile in its dualism' against an evident materiality. Within a creative exploration contained by the evident obdurateness of materiality, the metaphysical character in the idea of resurrection fundamentally outlines an abstract and hence oppositional concept. In the very least, the hope beyond such materiality appeals to a corresponding semiotics by which symbolic attributes of materials run parallel. With similar gestures of hope brought about by an appeal to material and/or symbolic, and even psychological transformation, this would appropriately belong to the realm of alchemy.[25]

Figure 62. Anselm Kiefer, **Resurrexit**, 1973, oil, acrylic, charcoal on burlap. 290 x 180 cm.

One of Kiefer's recurring mediums is lead. Like concrete, and with a material analogy of dead-weight, lead is heavy, cold, toxic and grey. As a base metal, the idea of using its malleability and stressing it under heat in order to purge it of its impurities, holds clear allegorical undertones for visions of

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[24] Rausch notes that the resurrection of Jesus is a "transhistorical event," by the fact that it "takes place on the other side of death, […] something that lies outside the conditions of space and time". According to Rausch, and as far as language goes - common for describing events of 'this world' - the resurrection is not 'historical', nor historically verifiable. Thomas P. Rausch, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003), 119, 120.

Similarly, the resurrected body then incorporates a different kind of embodiment, which theologian Walter Kasper defines as a "post-Resurrection corporeality"; a "body characterized [not by substance, but] by the *pneuma*" […] in which the body is: it is in the divine dimension". Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (London: Burns & Oates, 1976), 150, 151.

[25] Auping's catalogue essay in the already cited *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth*, is one of several biographically oriented accounts that specifically emphasize the relation between Kiefer's practice and alchemy. Within this, Auping articulates a concise definition, being that it is the alchemist's goal as 'artisan', to "reconcile dualism, which divided matter from spirit, by seeking the spirit within matter through extreme heat and subsequent purification". Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth* (2005), 37. Though more than simply trying to separate and extract spirit from matter, in *Psychology and Alchemy,* Jung notes that the alchemists "projected the unconscious" *into* matter; "into the darkness of matter in order to illuminate it", which is essentially an *ideal projected* as an attempt to *find* a sense of 'mystery' held within matter; within nature. In this case, the alchemist perceived that what he experienced, in terms of a returning projection offering symbolic and psychic illuminations (within pseudo-scientific chemical experiments), was a 'property of matter'. In other words, what is experienced as though appearing within matter, is rather, a kind of manifest reflection of ones projected unconscious. C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 12* (1968), 244-45. Following this line of thought further, alchemy can at the outset be seen as idealist and pious in its desire for a projected purification. Such idealism then also harbours a dark parallel within ideals of purification by burning, which the Nazis, in context with Kiefer's "aesthetic explorations of German national identity" (Lisa Saltzman, "Lost in Translation," (2001), 80), physically projected and enacted as racial purging. This suggests the real potential of a type of *manifest darkness*, from which even purely symbolic ideals of transformation, are not immune to being stained by its darker associations in the example of Germany's past.

human transformation through the 'transmutation' of the material.[26] Thus 'lead' is commonly recognized for its relations with alchemy.[27]

When heated, lead sweats with white and gold colour.[28] This indicates not an actual transformation into gold but just a teasing out of the impurities bubbling at the surface. However this is still an elemental transformation all the same, and analogously – hence alchemically - refers to the *possibility* of, or 'potential' for change, in our own conditioning. To me this is an intriguing concept and certainly lends itself to the artistic process, whereby materials can themselves be analogously explored as opposed to more literal or pictorial representations concerning transformation.

Figure 63. Anselm Kiefer, ***Nigredo***, 1984, oil, acrylic, emulsion, shellac, straw on canvas. 330 x 555 cm.

Nigredo, 1984 (see figure 63), is one of Kiefer's paintings whose title comes directly from a moment in the alchemical process. It describes "a critical, first plateau of achievement" towards transformation.[29]

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[26] Applicable for clarifying the meaning of transmutation, Mircea Eliade writes, that, "…the essence of initiation into the Mysteries [of matter through alchemical processes] consisted of participation in the passion, death and resurrection of a God. […] [O]ne can conjecture that the sufferings, death and resurrection of the God, already known to the neophyte as a myth or as authentic history, were communicated to him during initiations, in an 'experimental' manner. The meaning and finality of the Mysteries were the *transmutation* of man [my italics]. By experience of initiatory death and resurrection, the initiate changed his mode of being (he became immortal)." This description can be taken synonymously with the workings of Christian faith after the example of Christ. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, trans., Stephen Corrin (London: Rider & Company, 1962), 149.

[27] As observed by John Hallmark Neff in a 1988 MoMA catalogue essay for Kiefer's work, lead is also considered to be a material "most inert, dense and resistant to change", a quality that enables it to offer protection from radiation. Being resistant to change, lead was also "believed to be the substance most able to contain and preserve energy and power". Lead is furthermore, "the material of reliquaries and caskets… [and is then] associated with preservation and destruction, a metal of supreme paradox." John Hallmark Neff, "Anselm Kiefer: Reading Kiefer: The Meaning of Lead," *MoMA*, no. 49 (Autumn, 1988), 8.

[28] Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth* (2005), 37, 39.

[29] Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, exh. cat. (1987), 127.

In this process, a subject of transformation is placed in a furnace or closed vessel, where a symbolic interaction is said to occur between opposite forces.[30] The result is that these opposites within the matter of the subject turn into liquid. It is basically dissolution of matter into its lowest state while still contained within the vessel, meaning it is unable to escape as vapour. This state precedes any kind of 'rebirth'.[31]

Nigredo, otherwise referring to a 'blackening',[32] is the name given to this very stasis preceding transmutation. It is said to be a "darkness darker than darkness, … [a] black of blacks",[33] which denotes a necessary death for any true rebirth. The majority of Kiefer's materials, which are largely rudimentary ingredients to begin with, are worked and willed through a similar process in the creation of the work and its image. In light of this, it's not difficult to see Kiefer's works as a chaotic emission born from a process of searching and purging, of attempting to extract or grasp something greater, both out of the materials and the image being transposed through them. The results however, are not pure gold of course but a display of the muck or dross that is left behind when the full transformation intended or desired has not taken place, or similarly when a coagulated state becomes all too apparent. This ultimately also re-invokes the failed ideal of 'purification' evident in Germany's recent past.[34] Thus what (by now predictably) remains after Kiefer's own process of creation, is a kind of *festation,* as an incomplete manifestation: a putrid, wilting, dismembered subject, a disenchanted longing. Emerging from Kiefer's broader creative furnace, the subject needing to be purified in this way seems to become fused with the ideals that reiterate an imperfect standpoint. Though in short, whatever remains in terms of what is embodied or represented, is still defined by failure; it carries an ideal of which its fulfillment is always 'beyond recognition'.[35]

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[30] Ibid., 127. To be more specific, these 'opposing' forces are 'hot (male)' and 'cold (female)'. In this case, despite the heating of matter, which enacts a process of 'separation' or dissolution, its symbolic interaction then proceeds to a 'union of opposites', paradoxically suggesting a male/female act of creation (of separateness and union; 'irreconcilable union'), thus reinforcing the idea that death is a means of creation and that death takes place before creation can begin again. See also C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 12* (1968), 230-32.

[31] Gleaning corresponding psychological concepts from a text by the 5th Century alchemist Olympiodoros, Marie-Louise von Franz, compares a mode of 'suffocation' in the alchemical process of heating, to a form of intentional containment whereby psychoanalytic treatment 'intensifies the psychological process', so that one cannot 'project' or see their troubles outside of oneself. As if one is unrelentingly forced upon a mirror, the alchemical fire enables the initiate to be "roasted, roasted in what one is". Or more dramatically speaking, one encounter's in this process the inside of their own tomb; themselves: "the person in the tomb and the tomb itself are the same thing". This is analogous to the alchemist's vessel, or body, the contents of course figuratively being oneself. Marie-Louise von Franz, *Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1980), 86, 87.

[32] C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 12* (1968), 229.

[33] Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, exh. cat. (1987), 127. (Cited from DeRola, *Alchemy,* 11.)

[34] Kiefer's work in this sense is akin to a very unpleasant, heavy presence of the mortified, half-transformed – hence un-transformed – subject. As Lisa Saltzman suggests, one of Kiefer's overarching subjects is "the very site of history, the concrete trace and vestige of the Nazi regime", yet while 'withholding the human (Jewish) subject'. In his work, this essentially translates as an absence, a disembodied and yet visceral subject, let alone a successfully transfigured, re-membered or purified one. Saltzman also intimates that this outcome is a "failure of the painting", of representation. Lisa Saltzman, "Lost in Translation," (2001), 83. Reading further, this is a *failing of the ideal* of transformation and/or a failing of the attempted grasping of the subject as a means of a projected purification or even of a returning atonement, transferred (almost by default) from the (absent) subject to the (present, substitutive) viewer. In this sense, the absence of a clear subject, as with a clear representation, seems to again transfer implications of loss, death, and 'no coming back', onto the viewer. Kiefer's work stirs on the other side of representation, as a dismembering remembering - an invocation that haunts - which threatens the person remembering (the viewer of the image) much more than it actually consoles loss. Here Kiefer shows a capacity to trap the viewer inside the image - to apprehend the 'viewer' in the very act of viewing (a means of apprehending) itself - yet doing so much more powerfully and affectingly than one can usually anticipate or expect from pictorial painting within the picture frame.

[35] 'Beyond recognition' recalls the 'Suffering servant', from Isaiah 52:14, whose "appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness", the context being generally understood in orthodox theology as a

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In 1993 at the Marian Goodman Gallery, Manhattan, Kiefer presented a work titled *20 Years of Solitude*, 1971-91. It was an installation consisting of a number of piles of lead sheets on which semen stained books were laid. Given the title and a basic physical description, it would seem the outlining picture is unapologetically realist, being that of a solitary man and an unreserved melancholia with nothing else but these books, these words, as consolation. For '20 years' at least, these books have been some kind of receiving figure, catching and holding the outpouring of an inner, yet very bodily humanness, which equally and essentially confesses a revealed kind of impotence.

Here, as suggested in this installation, is 20 years of a longing, lingering presence. To be sure, it's now an absent presence of the artist, felt by the build up of staining, which still emanates from the 'soiled' pages. Then with these pages of evidence left wide open, there is a disclosure, not so much of an embarrassing solitude, but a disclosure of the viewer's own resonance with Kiefer's melancholic confession of humanness. The viewer is here left to discover, examine, witness and even recognize this trace as narrating a familiar dialogue (or rather monologue), one that is primal, non-lingual, one that overwrites the existing text (akin to the Law) in Kiefer's books. In this sense, the viewer again becomes a replacement for Kiefer's solitary presence; he/she picks it up and carries that which Kiefer left. The deeper symbol of yearning then translates as a collective one, presented as an ongoing narrative on the already layered substrata of lead sheeting.

Integrated as a series of platforms on which this narration is presented, these seemingly make-do plinths and the heavy and toxic substance they are made from, is but a variation of Kiefer's continual use of lead. It is also worth noting that these sheets were among a stockpile apparently collected from the roof of the old Cologne Cathedral, which had been damaged during WWII.[36] Given the origins of the lead, Kiefer's *20 Years of Solitude* further paints a very dichotic image of raising and of lowering, of longing for heavenly ascension, while again sinking through the depths of corporeality. Here, this image is like a rooftop glory descended, offering a kind of long awaited dialogue with a divinity that lives beyond reach and beyond the ruined idealized architecture of the 'Church'. Yet this same image is also akin to a vile prayer, postmarked with a purged and defiled 'sacredness'[37] that the next generation will inherit, i.e. the

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prophecy of Christ's crucifixion, and is therefore theologically analogous as a representative for the (human) subject in want/need of purification and redemption.

[36] Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth* (2005), 39.

[37] This dialectical complication, which clearly defers distinctness of meaning, recalls what Pierre Nora sees as "[t]he sacred […] invested in the trace that is at the same time its negation". In this case, the profundity of Kiefer's *20 Years of Solitude*, is not evident in an earnest 'purity' of his represented search or of a skillful rhetoric as a form of didactic support, which might amount to a stereotypical 'sacredness'. It is much more evident in the "humble testimony, the most modest vestige" that his bodily humanness can give. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire", in *Representations*, No. 26, Special issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, Spring (University of California Press, 1989), 13-14. This also plays on the binary meaning of sacredness, which is to note that within the Judeo-Christian tradition, 'sperm', is obviously seen as being 'sacred' as a seed for future generations, as well as being considered a defiling act if such potential is wasted; a notion that traces back to Genesis 38:9-10 where the meaning of *onanism* is derived.

viewer. Furthermore, this metaphoric movement of raising and lowering, reeks of the symbolism of the Church's roof and Christ as the elevated 'capstone', here sent crashing down to the earth under its fallen, heavy laden and evidently war ravaged load.[38]

Figure 64. Anselm Kiefer, ***20 Years of Solitude***, 1993 (again in 1998), lead, pallets, and semen stained books. Dimensions variable.

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[38] A critical parallel can here be drawn to what Hans urs von Balthasar, within the context of an analysis of *kenosis*, describes as a "(messianic) theology of the stone" (cited from G. Stahlin, *Skandalon: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte eines biblischen Begriffs*, Beitr. Z. Ford. Chr Theol., 2nd series 24 (1930), 196), which above all, indicates a kind of scandal on multiple levels. Of primary note is the observation that "[a] crucified Messiah is a contradiction in terms for the Jews (1 Cor 1:23), and therefore he himself [Jesus] provokes them to reject him". In this sense, Christ is seen as a 'stumbling stone'; a 'snare' (Isaiah 8:14), as well as a "testing stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation" (Isaiah 28:16), yet also as a stone that is 'rejected' on account of the 'offence' it causes (Ps 118:22; *cf*. Rom 9:33; 1 Peter 2:6-8). All these readings allow one to continue to compile a metaphoric language of raising and lowering and vice versa, interpreted within a formal play of materials, including Kiefer's lead plinths standing in like heavy stone platforms. Also, citing Luke 20:18 ("Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken in pieces: but when it falls on anyone, it will crush him"), Balthasar initiates a pertinent visual language by recognizing that "horizontal' stumbling is replaced by the momentum of the 'vertical' collision", a description applicable to a downwards force of Incarnation through *kenosis*, as well as inaugurating the desire for a reverse gesture of transcendence akin to Christ's resurrection and ascension. Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Vol. VII, trans., Brian McNeil, ed., John Riches (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 221-222.

TERMINAL SPACE (cont.)

After such an extended (though certainly not comprehensive) analysis of Kiefer's work, it is important to speak directly to the influence that it brings to my own creative practice. Accordingly, there are two distinct traits that recur within Kiefer's practice, and of which I can clearly recognize as being indicative of a parallel interest with my own work. These are, a heavily imbued tactility and a displacement of the human subject. Underlying these qualities, there is also a third binding principle: a recognition and confession of human failure that is somewhat proportionate to the ideals which seek to transcend human limits.

Placed within the context of this exploration, these qualities also serve to exemplify a pertinent trait concerning the notion of Incarnation. They identify and express a conditional element of the materiality of the embodied, into which an ideal non-corporeal subject is either placed or displaced.[39] That is, shown within these prominent traits in Kiefer's work, issues of embodiment that surface in relation to Christ – as a manifestation of God in the flesh – are also raised and negotiated in relation to issues of representation in art, each responding to a paradoxical desire to transcend the material *through* materiality. Consequently, common themes perpetually haunt: mortality, corporeality, failure and loss, and in turn, the meaning of *embodiment* as a conditioned, containment of form, incorporating these associated themes into its definition. This is similarly apparent in the meaning of representation, particularly in respect to its limitations and synonymy with embodiment. And yet through Incarnation, it is the *ideal of embodiment* (transposing an *ideal of representation*), which essentially corresponds to a paradoxically *incarnate* abstraction of these haunting themes. In other words, the *ideal of embodiment* purports to incorporate a manifest negation of its conditioning, whereby it is not considered to be a containment or limitation of what it embodies. This effectively signals a union of opposites (the ideal of embodiment and the limitations of embodiment amounting to a unified, perhaps balanced, subject), which like the dual divine and human attributes of Christ, brings immateriality to the material (inclusive of immortality to the mortal, non-corporeality to the corporeal, success to failure etc). While this union essentially purports *transcendence* from the limitations of embodiment (mortality, corporeality, failure and loss), it is a transcendence made *in the flesh*. Hence complex underlying issues abound.

By recognizing these qualities and potential meanings as a viewer and maker of art, I can strategically put them to use, and into play. This is not only in order to further investigate them, but also to see

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[39] The concept of Incarnation relates directly to the Ideal of art in Hegel's aesthetics, since it is "…the task of presenting the Idea [i.e. 'God', or '*pure* spirituality' whose "medium of existence" is "not external natural form"] to immediate perception in a sensuous shape", as well as doing so by means of a "correspondence and unity of both sides". Summarizing this, Hegel notes, "it follows that the loftiness and excellence of art in attaining a reality adequate to its Concept will depend on the degree of inwardness and unity in which the Idea and shape appear fused into one." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vol 1*, trans., T.M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 72. However, more implicative than this simple 'Ideal' of unity, it is the metaphysically impossible condition of such 'unity', which harbours a displacement of the Idea as pure spirit in its material embodiment. This is a point of complication and non-resolution, which for me is perpetually interesting as a subject for artistic exploration, because it epitomizes the paradoxical nature of Incarnation.

if they can be more concisely articulated, both conceptually and visually. The corresponding ideals and limitations of representation and embodiment can in turn be questioned through my own creative practice, while knowing that they tap into a greater legacy – both in terms of Christian theology/belief and contemporary art history.

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It was in the process of following such qualities, as well as an extended dialogue made possible through them, that another sculptural installment of my own had been forming, both conceptually and physically. Following the developing body of artwork, this particular work helped to identify and confirm that what I had been making thus far was a series of containers.

Extending a play between containment and non-containment, this new work became one of several works exhibited under the name of *Uncontained* (Part 1 and Part 2). Part 1 of this exhibition actually featured *Container for the Absent Body*, or, the 'Pod', which I documented in the first chapter. In this regard, it was when initially seeking suitable exhibition space to showcase the 'Pod', that a site for *Uncontained* was first realized. This was a good-sized and well-established artist-run space in Fitzroy, within the Northern part of the Melbourne metropolitan area.[40] However the concrete stairway access into the particular gallery (being situated on the first floor) was far too small to physically get the 'Pod' into the space. Therefore, after discussions with the gallery committee, negotiations with my idea and materials then developed into the two part series (Part 1 and Part 2), the first of which would show the 'Pod' on its own at another more suitable gallery, while the second would be the new work (as well as another relating sculptural piece) adapted specifically for the space in Fitzroy.

In this work, the primary material considered was the brutal tactile nature of cast concrete, while the general form and presence of the work was made to more actively encourage the reading of an implied, semi-contained human figure. In turn, my exploration would lead to the consideration of an important work by the Minimal artist Robert Morris, in which his figure is contained - physically and photographically - inside a rudimentary box. This would also enable me to trace a linkage between, Kiefer's work, the Minimalists, and back once again to Holbein's *Dead Christ*.

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[40] Conical Inc. Upstairs, 3 Rochester Street, North Fitzroy.
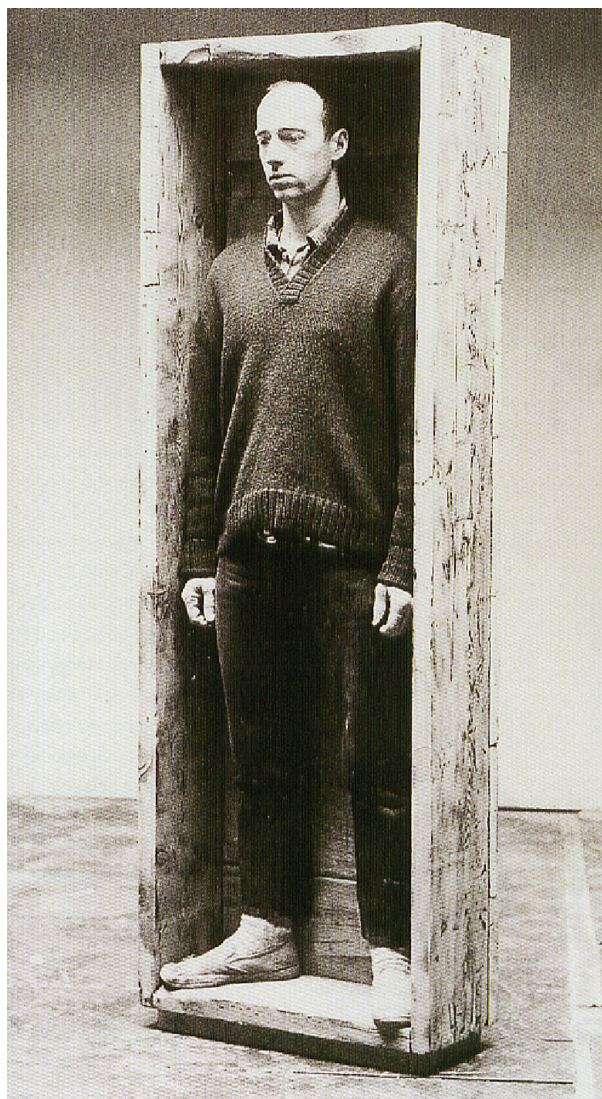
Figure 65. Robert Morris, **Untitled (Box for Standing)**, 1961,
fir. 188 x 63.5 x 27 cm.

Works from Robert Morris's early practice carried an actual or implied sense of alternate purpose, utilizing the body through the trace of a simplified performative interaction with them. For *Untitled (Box for Standing),* 1961 (see figure 65), this included standing inside (in a vertical box), which defined the integral part of the work and its intended reading. In this context, the 'work' thereafter basically no longer exists, and the box is merely a remnant. Yet from this point, as a viewer of this documented work, the box is also never exactly empty, even long after Morris has stepped out.[41] With the inscription of the image on the viewer's mind as well as its somewhat modest entitlement (denoting meager functionality 'for standing' and simply being *once present*), Morris's simple box carries the spectre of his own bodily presence marked in time. So also, the premise of his work *Column* (see figure 66), from the same year, and in which he intended to "stand inside the sculpture and allow the weight of his body to topple the column", anticipated an echo of bodily presence as an echo of 'stature' in the fallen column.[42] While

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[41] *Untitled (Pine Portals,* 1961)(two empty boxes - one lined with mirrors inside), are effectively empty versions of *Box for Standing,* and so invoke an absence of Morris (and a further play of absence and presence) in lieu of his presence recorded in *Box for Standing.*

[42] James Meyer, ed., *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 66.

existing as seemingly simple gestures of presence, these works incorporate a more complex effect of lingering beyond their intended *moment* of existence or encounter. Viewed and considered in retrospect, this appears to be their sole, muted narrative.

The absented 'stature' of the figure implied in Morris's later 'toppled' *Column* (pictured here in its standing position) also obviously suggests more than a momentary gesture or movement of presence. One could easily interpret this, as Morris himself has even alluded, to being analogous of ones life and death.[43] This presents the human narrative reduced to its basic components. Similarly, as Morris's *Untitled (Box for Standing)* is for containing his own body, it declares his own presence as upright and alive, yet equally prefigures a moment in the future when his body will again remain contained as a motionless figure, perhaps in a very similar wooden box. This signals a mode of future absence that depends on the evidence of a former presence. Not unlike the kind of presence afforded by a death mask, his full-length image in this work stands as a pre-cast effigy; his body is a death double akin to the image that is reflected back to the viewer as a kind of 'co-existent corporeality'. A functionally containing box such as this, carries an underhanded element of threat; as a more literal and foreboding reminder of corporeality and within the seemingly simple presentation of the body defined as a momentary presence. In this context, it is plausible that a sense of foreboding corporeality is even more apparent where a *closed* box is concerned, where an interior (or its occupant, or state of its occupant) is withheld (such as in Morris's later toppled *Column*).

Figure 66. Robert Morris, *Column*, 1961, painted plywood. 244 x 61 x 61 cm.

Here in the singularity of these particular works, Morris emphasizes (in the viewer) an experience of perception as an isolated self. Whether this kind of work is suggestive of a single *generic* figure or whether it is specific and personal, or both, it is hard *not* to see a singularized subject of death carried in these works.

Subsequently, my new work - already developing in relation to key traits identified in Kiefer's work - utilized a repeated gesture of the singularized work formed around bodily dimensions. As a 'body container', this work also inadvertently purported to test my reading of these early works by Morris, particularly in relation to an emphasis on death. Incorporated into an exhibition titled *Uncontained*, this work would end up both pushing and questioning the assumption of a contained and conditioned subject of embodiment.

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43 Of *Two Columns,* 1961 (one standing column and one horizontal), Morris himself stated that these columns "insistently *remind* [my italics] the viewer of the embeddedness of his corporeal self in the world and demand a simultaneous reflexive confrontation with the object and his own body". Robert Morris, "Professional Rules," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 313. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343985 (accessed 16th June 2008)

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The new work's closest derivative in terms of a physical description was noticeably that of the preliminary 'casket' made at the beginning of this research and described briefly in the Introduction. As such, physically and conceptually, the making of the new work was effectively a re-visitation of the form which expressed some of my earliest thoughts towards the concept of Incarnation, as was considered through my own creative practice at the time.[44] The making process entailed the construction of a 'form-ply' box in order for a concrete version to be cast *inside* it. It was then this outer wooden form-ply shell, coloured black like a shadow, that distinctly echoed its predecessor. This outer box was in this way basically the means of re-making the original casket, and also the preliminary means of 'walling', or containment by which the new – concrete - work was formed. The whole process indicated an embodiment of re-examined ideas.

Figures 67 and 68. Form-ply casing; the new work as revealed after casting, 2007.

When made, with its continued proportion to the human body, this work effectively became a concrete casket. Although, with its exterior surface openly displaying the physical qualities of concreteness, this is not a quality attributed to a contemporary portable casket, and an initial point of ambiguity was in turn signaled. In addition to this, there was also another non-likeness to the original casket in lieu of a slight reconsideration of its formal shape and allusion of function. This was a tapered base at one end where a single hatch was discreetly positioned instead of a lid. Nevertheless, as viewed from its other end, it looked just like a single, solid block of concrete. Its non-likeness to a casket was then also apparent in that the new work presented as being minimal and unassuming like a low-lying plinth. Yet again, it was equally not quite a plinth: for being anchored to the ground as a concrete coffin (unable to be moved by a single person) and with its cold, grey, 'cemetery' quality, this work seemed to take on the qualities of an individual *crypt* or *vault* rather than a plinth or casket. At this point, and even while leaning towards a

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[44] See pages 3 - 5.

distinction as a 'crypt', the attempted definition of the new work became simultaneously enmeshed within the question: 'What *is* a crypt?'[45] Inevitably, this question immediately aligned with an earlier interest concerning the role of the crypt raised in relation to my grandfather's grave, and from which the 'Pod' was born in response.[46]

Figure 69. Michael Needham, Sketch for the new work, 2007.

This *cryptic* object, while overshadowed by a previous visual reference of a crypt, accordingly incorporated the other visual references of a casket and a plinth. As such, the new work was underpinned by an awkwardly 'literalist' identification as a 'casket/plinth/crypt'. This became an inherent acknowledgement that the new work characterized a resistance to definition, even while its actual form, as a formal structure, was relatively simple.[47] Because of this resistance, the work never really inherited a name of its own, apart from incorporating the overall installation title (*Uncontained*) under which it was presented.

To me as an artist and a viewer, an object without a name seems to pose an additional conceptual dilemma arising from its lack of a determinable categorization. Consequently, with the absence of a specific name for my new work, which would ordinarily offer or ascribe some representational intention, this new work became an elusive and 'uncertain' object. This uncertainty seemed further apparent because of a comparatively clear *functional* aspect, allowing the work to be read as a closed container. While this made way for an elementary categorization of its form, a darker connotation was also inherent, as its size and volume was already indicative of a bodily purpose, in turn implying bodily containment. This suggested that it could be read as being a real crypt in a non-representational/found-

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[45] While a 'crypt' refers to an architectural space, "an underground room or vault beneath a church, [and] used as a chapel or burial place", its origins from the Greek *krupte* 'a vault' and *kruptos* 'hidden', suggest that it *could* possibly be a small bodily enclosure held within a smaller containing device (*The New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition,* 2005). A crypt might then plausibly be characterized as an object with an internal space, like a coffin or sarcophagi; such an object has the same function as a vault that hides. Also, an object that protrudes from the surface of the ground yet hugs the ground closely so as to give an impression of hiding what is underneath, could signal that a spatial 'crypt' lies beneath. This type of object is then the visible component designating an imagined enclosure, but of course *it* (as an object) is not an actual space receding beneath, and so is still not quite or correctly a crypt. See "Crypt" for more discussion on the crypt.

[46] See "Memorial" for my earlier reading of the crypt.

[47] Under-girding a larger point of reference to follow shortly, as an artist, I can easily relate such a resistance to definition to that of a parallel preceded by Minimal Art in the early 1960's. As noted by curator Daniel Marzona (among others), Minimal Art's initial reception by critics and the public alike, took on a variety of terms in an attempt to define the nature of its work. These "new works" were initially labeled 'ABC Art,' 'Cool Art,' 'Rejective Art,' 'Primary Structures' and 'Literalist Art'. Being generally very simple and reduced in form or arrangement, and specifically avoiding any pictorially representative content, it was these "seemingly unassuming objects", which exemplified that the definition of these works defaulted to a perceived 'objecthood'. Thus warranted is Robert Morris' quote, that such seeming "simplicity of form is not necessarily simplicity of experience". Concerning my 'casket/plinth/crypt', one can further recall critic Michael Fried's initial apprehension towards such forms, where "…the literalist position evinces a sensibility not simply alien but antithetical to its own: as though, from that perspective, the demands of art and the conditions of objecthood are in direct conflict." Daniel Marzona, *Minimal Art*, ed., Uta Grosenick (Cologne: Taschen, 2004), 6-7, 10, 78; Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part 1," *Artforum*, 4: 6 (February 1966); reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed., Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1968), 222-28; Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," Artforum (June 1967); reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed., Gregory Battcock (1968), 116-147.

object sense. In this way, any representational intentions were tied in, yet also somewhat muted by its associative reading as a 'readymade'. However, even in an assumption of its basic function and near categorization, an underlying question of the work's *hidden* contents signaled still further uncertainty of definition. That is, its *un-disclosed* state served to suspend clear definition. This meant that the dilemma extending from a resistance of definition, fundamentally outlined a subtle displacement or undermining of the viewer's privilege in objectifying the work.

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The trait of an undermined privilege of the viewer (stemming specifically from a resistance to definition) seems to subtly correspond with a 'fundamental reorientation' of viewer/subject relations inaugurated by Minimalism in the 1960's.[48] A crucial part of this reorientation according to key artist and critical proponent Robert Morris (already introduced above) was a shift towards a bodily interaction with the artwork within its whole spatial context and recognition of 'shape'. In this regard, the Minimal artwork was considered as more of an experience of perception of all its unified properties rather than an object identifiable by its individual components.[49] This also meant that divisible aesthetic qualities as with any language of representation, either indicating or setting up 'relationships *within* the work', were avoided (or rather 'ordered') in order to make way for the formation of a *Gestalt*.[50] In effect then, when

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[48] A quote by Hal Foster surmises this crucial point of Minimal Art as such: "In short, with Minimalism sculpture no longer stands apart, on a pedestal or as pure art, but is repositioned among objects and redefined in terms of place. In this transformation the viewer, refused the safe, sovereign space of formal art, is cast back on the here and now; and rather than scan the surface of a work for a topographical mapping of the properties of its medium, he or she is prompted to explore the perceptual consequences of a particular intervention in a given site. This is the fundamental reorientation that Minimalism inaugurates". Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in James Meyer, *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 270-274. Originally published in *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art 1945-1986* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 162-183.

[49] Morris initially defined the Minimalist's "simple regular and irregular polyhedrons", as 'unitary forms', which gave at least some indication of identifiable form as apprehended via its 'shape'. Later however, he referred to the Minimal object as "but one of the terms of the new aesthetic". This was a new aesthetic that "takes [internal] relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light and the viewer's field of vision". Alternatively, it was another key Minimal artist Donald Judd's term, 'specific objects', that proposed a more definable object than Morris's. However contrary to its suggestion, Judd's 'specific object/s' were only as specific as "three-dimensional works", "neither painting nor sculpture", its 'common aspects' being 'too general', while its 'differences' being "greater than the similarities". Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part 1," *Artforum* (February 1966); Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part II," *Artforum*, 5: 2 (October 1966); reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed., Gregory Battcock (1968), 228-35; Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook*, 8 (1965); reprinted in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; New York University Press, 1975), 181-89.

[50] The main definition of a Gestalt, upheld by Morris, is of a quality that is "over and above anything determined in the array of individual sensations", of which it is also believed that "higher-level cognitive processes (rememberings, interpretations) are responsible for the nature of experience". Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 157. See also Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part 1," *Artforum* (February 1966). Also, in respect to the avoidance of a representational language, Annette Michelson writes that a common strategy of the Minimal artists was to elicit a quality of immediacy in the conditions of experience, and that this was to "…dispel or to attenuate the persistent implication of the 'referent'", as an intentional move away from criticism that assumed meaning by interpreting art in a representational sense, all operating from within a 'language of metaphysics'. In other words, Minimal art that made no apparent statement of meaning encouraged a fresh approach to experiencing the work, existing not as a sign but simply as itself. While this was also said to be, strictly speaking, 'unrelational'; in terms of the parts of the work, the immediate

considering an undermined privilege of the viewer, what was essentially challenged was one's ability to harness the Minimal object through discourse or to objectify it with assumed meaning. Such work was simply meant to be *perceived*, and was supposedly 'beyond recognition' or 'analysis'.[51]

Figure 70. Anne Truitt, **Sea Garden**, 1964, painted metal. 244 x 84 cm.

It was in this regard that critic Michael Fried (as noted by the later critic Hal Foster), pinpointed such work as a "threat to formalist Modernism" and its means of apprehending and appreciating art.[52] Here, Minimalism proposed that 'objecthood', 'discovered and projected', was more important than its 'suspension or defeat', which for late Modernism was an 'imperative' means of critical engagement between the artwork and the viewer.[53] In other words (and reiterating a quality of being 'beyond recognition' or 'analysis'), conceptual engagement was stunted, and cognized meaning was displaced. Seemingly simple works were 'rendered complex', and being with the work perceived in this way was a 'conceptual provocation' in itself, challenging the usual way of reading the work as a definable object.[54]

Another position held by the Minimalists, and argued by Morris in particular, was that a shift away from the artwork and its relational components, was a shift made towards a critical awareness of simply being present with the work. This meant that a kind of 'distance' was framed 'between the object and subject', and thus facilitated an "awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work".[55] Of itself, this transposed into a sensed bodily experience, one of Modernism's pursuits for 'absolute presentness', which also led to a 'sharpening' of the "definition of the nature of the sculptural experience" for contemporary art in general.[56] Though more specific to

experience as perceived through the viewer's own bodily senses opened the way for the viewer's own relation with the work as an entity or 'body' in space. Annette Michelson, "Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression," in James Meyer, ed., *Minimalism* (2000), 247. Originally published in *Robert Morris* (Washington: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969).

[51] Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part 1," *Artforum* (February 1966).

[52] Foster further outlined Fried's critique of Minimal art as "an attempt to displace late Modernist art by means of a literal reading that confuses the transcendental 'presentness' of art with the mundane 'presence' of things". The ideology of a transcendental presentness, and meaning therein, is therefore rejected or denied. Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in James Meyer, *Minimalism* (2000), 272.

[53] Fried argues that "…literalist art stakes everything on shape as a given property of objects, if not, indeed, as a kind of object in its own right. It aspires, not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project as such." More specifically, this comment referred to painting rather than sculpture. However, it can just as easily be attributed to sculpture. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (June 1967); reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed., Gregory Battcock (1968), 120,125.

[54] Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in James Meyer, *Minimalism* (2000), 270.

[55] Speaking of Morris's contributions to Minimalism, Michelson noted his commitment to offering a particular mode of viewer experience with a sculptural form, as "inextricably involved with the sense of self and of that space which is that common dwelling…[a recognition] in which our seeing is linked to our sense of ourselves as being bodies in space, knowing space through the body." Annette Michelson, "Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression," in James Meyer, ed., *Minimalism* (2000), 249; "Notes on Sculpture: Part II," *Artforum* (October 1966).

[56] An additional point of interest noted by Michelson (and not irrelevant in the larger context) is that 'absolute presentness' is an attribute of Divinity, meaning that a Minimalist appeal for a comparable presentness with the work as a viewer, is a continuance of a most ideal form of metaphysics, and carried by Modernism in its claim for the 'autonomous nature of sculpture'. This means that underneath the 'simple perception of forms in space', there is a residual desire to comprehend the Divine, even if only through secularized discourses. Annette Michelson, "Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression," in

this reflection, as part of a heightened bodily encounter with the work, a sense of 'co-presence' with the work - even as something of a *corporeal equivalence* - was made apparent. This concurred with Morris's articulation of the 'constant' of the human body, against which the size of the work was measured, and which (as he claimed) ultimately established engagement with the viewer on a level of familiarity with the body.[57] In turn, 'perception was made reflexive' in several ways.[58] This indicated that with ones own bodily presence emphasized in the very act of perception and with this bodily presence then also reflected as being part of 'the work' in its spatial 'situation', a subtle, or rather 'hidden' form of anthropomorphism was somewhat inherently part of the equation in the engagement with Minimal art.[59]

Taking up this point of an underlying anthropomorphism, Michael Fried wrote in his essay "Art and Objecthood" (1967), that a "kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, lies at the core of literalist theory and practice".[60] Before arguing the case, outlining several traits within Minimal art,[61] he even went as far as saying that the Minimal object is not unlike "the silent presence of another person".[62] This was not so obvious in terms of emotive, human characteristics identifiable within the work itself (although this was identifiable in peripheral artists such as Michael Steiner, Anthony Caro and Gary Kuehn, and to a degree also the works of Robert Morris later on in the 60's), but was more of a 'single' reference to the body, through seeing the Minimal object as another 'body in space'. Such a reading essentially paved the way for seeing the human figure *reflected* in the presence of the Minimal object.

Figure 71. Sol Lewitt, ***Standing Open Structure, Black***, 1964, paint, wood, steel. 244 x 65 x 65 cm.

James Meyer, ed., *Minimalism* (2000), 247-48; Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in James Meyer, *Minimalism* (2000), 272.

[57] In the relation of human presence implied through bodily dimensions, it was 'Minimal Art' that had outlined this as a fundamental characteristic with which to compose artwork/viewer relations around the physicality of the body. Primary examples of Minimalist work that was intentionally made to echo the dimensions and even "stature" of the human body would be Sol LeWitt's *Standing Open Structure, Black* (1964)(see figure 71), many of Anne Truitt's works from the early 1960's till mid 1970's such as *One* (1962), *Sea Garden* (1964)(see figure 70), *Pith* (1969), and *Morning Child* (1973), and more pertinently, Robert Morris's *Column* (1961)(see figure 66), *Untitled (Pine Portals,* 1961), and their figurative counterpart *Untitled (Box for Standing,* 1961)(see figure 65), and *I-Box* (1962).

[58] Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in James Meyer, ed., *Minimalism* (2000), 270.

[59] It was Donald Judd who was most vocal about the claim that the 'new work' of Minimal Art actually *rejected* any form of anthropomorphism. However, Judd still admitted that, "…if there is a reference [to 'ordinary anthropomorphic imagery'] it is single and explicit." Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook*, 8 (1965); reprinted in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; New York University Press, 1975), 181-89.

[60] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (June 1967); reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed., Gregory Battcock (1968), 128.

[61] Ibid., 128. Fried made three observations on which his conclusion of anthropomorphism was based. The first used Tony Smith's work's *Die* (1962) (a six-foot cube), and *The Black Box* (1962), as an example of a "surrogate person". The second outlined the literalist ideals of 'non-relational', 'unitary', 'wholistic', together with 'symmetry' and 'order', as characteristics that in fact can closely resemble those of "other persons". Thirdly, it was the critique of Minimal art's 'hollowness', a "quality of having an *inside*", which Fried remarked as being "blatantly anthropomorphic".

[62] Ibid., 128.

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Returning to an implied figure in the 'casket/plinth/crypt' (inclusive of the larger body of works developed for this thesis), my own underlying interest with Minimal art has become increasingly obvious. However, not only does this reading of the Minimalist object allow for the suggestion of a generic figure held within this particular work, but it is also indicative of a perceived presence that depends on a kind of self-projection.

To me the concept of self-projection seems to outline two rather interesting points of conjecture in terms of artwork/viewer relations, which are not necessarily restricted to Minimalist works. For one, such a conceptual positioning of the viewing experience, which elicits a basic anthropomorphic projection from one's own body to another, can be seen to describe the action of looking into a mirror.[63] In fact the idea of the work of art mirroring the viewer can also be seen as the underlying privilege of the viewer enacted; it is like a physical and psychological assertion/insertion of one's own presence when in the presence of another object.

The second point of conjecture underpins the main issue with this privilege: for what is reflected within the artwork (as exemplified by the Minimal object) is the viewer's own human-centric thinking, in which the limitations of one's assumed meanings are discovered. Here, if one's own presence is reflected back via a bodily relation, it is through the physical qualities and exterior components of the work as perceived from its outside that this occurs. In the basic sculptural form akin to those of the Minimalist's, these qualities are mostly cool, crisp and often inanimate in character according to the rudimentary or sterile state of the whole work. If 'co-presence' between the viewer and the artwork is then established and described even remotely as something of a corporeal equivalence, this suggests that any privilege of one's own presence - together with any concealed meaning of presence – is to return via the austerity of the artwork, as a negation, a sense of disappointment or displacement, to a less-than-privileged reminder of one's corporeal situation.

To apply these points in relation to the 'casket/plinth/*crypt*', what is returned or reflected back to the viewer is a simplified gesture of bodily presence, contained and sealed. The physicality that engages the viewer and mirrors, in this case, its rather blunt *non-meaning,* is achieved through its heavy horizontal mass and impenetrable surface. In this regard, it's own presence and 'object-hood' fundamentally displays a kind of compression, i.e. a submission to gravity and a muting of the body through its containment, as opposed to the live vertical stance of the viewer. Through an additional bodily relation and 'simply

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[63] An analogy that is by no means original, this recourse to the work of art as a mirror refers to an apparatus that allows and encourages and in turn receives and reflects an element of imaginative self-projection. In this regard, the analogy I am describing interprets such art as a simple 'looking glass', for the viewer or artist, as opposed to (insofar as this is possible) the Platonic emphasis that would use the analogy to decry the imitative characteristics of art as a deviation from truth. In other words, my use of the term is not about any quality of representation, or 'reflection of nature', in relation to pictorial resemblance inside the work of art, but about the analogy itself acknowledging a basic suspended relation between the artwork and its spectator in its moment of encounter. Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 30-35.

being present' with the work, the new work's existence can also be said to reflect a subject contained and conditioned within its simple mode of 'being' or *embodiment*. This is reflective of the onlooker's own physicality and 'condition of experience' like a premonition and parallel presentation of the body's ultimate limitations in death. Such a *bodily relation* is again indicative of the viewer's privilege undermined: for the new work perceived exists as a harbinger of mortality, something not necessarily anticipated or wanted by the viewer.

Yet while the 'casket/plinth/crypt' is a compressed object implying a solidified bodily presence through its exterior form, its implied figure *inside*, or withheld 'body' – suggestive of an unseen cadaver - is left entirely to one's imagination. Un-figured in its 'virtual' inside, the 'closed' container is still a framing device, which allocates space for the viewer's own potential projection of self within it. This further corresponds to an underlying gesture of anticipation in the viewing experience; whether of a disclosure of its interior, or of ones own future containment.

As far as my own intentions were concerned with respect to an implied human presence in the new work (the 'casket/plinth/crypt'), this Minimalist model re-examined, seemed to be a clear way of referencing the human body through simple sculptural form. This meant that I translated works of art as 'bodies in themselves' in a more literal sense for the very sake of extending and heightening a bodily relation between the work and the viewer. More specifically, within the new work I had already importantly employed a means of implying a human presence without actually representing one, and that this was suggested through the *hidden* figure in the 'crypt'-like object. In this regard, it was of course the noticeable bodily dimensions of the work, which were crucial for prompting such a reading.

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As *Uncontained* (Part 1 and Part 2) presented several works across two separate locations, this extended its theme as one that recurred and migrated through the development and display of its incorporated work. Not only was this observable in the corresponding physical manifestations of each work, but also in the negotiations with the structure of the gallery space as a repeated form of the container housed within architecture. In one semi-incidental though poignant example of this, the space in which the new work of the 'casket/plinth/crypt' was to be displayed was a smaller room within the gallery itself. This was aptly named The Enclosure. The new work, as a container itself, then echoed the Enclosure's own structure and architectural functionality of housing the body, and the play between containment and non-containment unfolded agreeably. Another example of negotiating the very structure of the gallery was made particularly apparent, as each work in the *Uncontained* series, required considerable effort to physically move into the gallery space. The new work was no exception. Being cast as a whole and thereby weighing approximately 300 kilograms, this work required the use of a forklift to lift it up and through a window located on the first floor. In this case, windowpanes were removed to allow the

work to enter from outside the building from the street below. Each work, once inside the space, and having negotiated the various available orifices of the gallery's structure – within millimetres of physical impossibility - was individually assembled and positioned accordingly. *Uncontained* thus became a series of 'container' works based on a heavily composed physicality, each bearing witness to their weight of presence within the space they claimed.

Figures 72, 73 and 74. Installation progress for **Uncontained**, 2007.

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Figure 75. Michael Needham. The new work as installed in the Enclosure, 2007.
Concrete, steel, fibre cement, concrete lined pit.

From the outset, as a simple geometric structure in the vein of much minimalist sculpture, the noncomplex formal exterior of the new work was fundamental to how the work asserted its presence within the gallery space. As was intended, this was to draw the experience of its presence back to a basic phenomenology of a sensed aesthetic experience. Though by this same token of being read only through its visual exterior qualities, the new work encouraged an imaginative reading of its closed interior.[64] Being closed yet suggestive in this way, an additional and critical component of the sculpture was incorporated. Positioned almost immediately below where the tapered base of the work hovered slightly off the ground, and where this merged with its closed trapdoor, a square hole was cut directly

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[64] Regarding exterior qualities intentionally acknowledged for encouraging the imaginative reading of a closed interior, see "Crypt" for further articulation.

into the gallery floor. Within this hole, a small self-contained concrete pit was also installed. Covering this, a heavy steel grate sat flush with the floor and effectively rendered the hole as a drain.[65]

While physically separate to the actual structure of the new work, the drain's aesthetic qualities, consistent with the main sculptural body, meant that it was essentially read as an extension of the new work's sculptural presence. Being an inverted interior counterpart,[66] this also directed the viewer's gaze towards its own inner detail, here positioned as a suggestive point of entry/access inside the main structure.

Figure 76. Michael Needham, ***Uncontained*** (detail of drain) as viewed from above, 2007. Concrete, steel, fibre cement, concrete lined pit.

This hole was of course indicative of a kind of disclosure of the work's closed exterior; what was *hidden* (or encrypted) in the main body was here revealed (or at least in part revealed). Within this hole however, disclosure was largely a tease. Besides the heavy steel grate at floor level, which disallowed physical access, its interior was only limited to a shallow two-foot depth. Even this, as indicated earlier, was rendered with yet more concrete. This was a pit leading somewhere else – encouraging the viewer to look beyond the architectural boundary of the floor - yet ultimately it led nowhere. This climax of detail revealed the hole to be as much of an enclosed dead-end as the main work was a simple closed container.

Nevertheless, what the viewer did discover in the new work was a subtle interchanging between containment and non-containment. If nothing – no body or other trace - was found in this space of anticipation, then a suggestiveness could then still be said to remain in terms of what is not-yet-

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[65] With the incorporation of a drain, which also evidently breaches architectural boundaries, an acknowledgement of American artist Robert Gober is critical. In regard to the sculptural intervention of the hole however, and in what directly develops into a poignant positioning of my own work in the current body of research, a mere reference is not appropriate. Thus a lengthier discussion of Gober's practice in relation to this thesis is included in the following chapter.

[66] Even though this hole was an inversion of the main object/sculpture, it was not in itself a departure from earlier Minimalist concerns. It was still, after all, a 'cubic rectangular form' determined by the efficiency of its 'rigid industrial materials', when made according to the 'right angle' and the 'well-built'. However the hole does anticipate the swing within Minimalism, also championed by Morris, from the rigid structural object to 'softer' materials revealing 'process' and 'chance' within its configuration. 'Anti-Form', as this was called, can then at least align the Minimalist's play of opposites (rigid/loose, cool/soft, well-built/slumped etc.) with the dialectical relation between a positive 'object' and its inversion as a hole. Robert Morris, "Anti-Form," *ArtForum* 6: 8 (April 1968), 33-35.

contained, or rather, what is no longer contained. Likewise, what is previously or imaginably withheld is also (or even at the same time) released. In this sense, while the conditions of containment are still rendered, any implied figure (bodily or otherwise) is only semi-contained - projectively contained - in the container as a figurative gesture of embodiment. An *empty* cavity is then still an opening.

Figure 77. View of hole in the Enclosure, Conical, prior to being resealed, 2007.

OPENINGS

In an ambitious installation at the Geffen Museum of Modern Art in Los Angeles, 1997, American artist Robert Gober built an extensive underground sewer. Having excavated well below the existing foundations of the museum, and leaving a few strategic openings, he then resealed the concrete flooring as if it were returned to normal.[1] To the sides of the space, two open and oversized suitcases were positioned to face each other. At the rear and disappearing into the back wall, a central staircase was installed. In the middle, standing on top of a grate the size of a cattle grid was a life-sized statue of a Madonna. 'Her' head was tilted slightly down and her arms came forward as if extending a reserved invitation for embrace.

Such a symmetrically concentrated and visually striking image was then funneled further towards the Madonna by the movement of water evident in her belly. Here, there was a large threaded bronze pipe piercing her clean through the middle. As an aptly termed *conduit*, this pipe allowed one to see right through her womb to the staircase behind her, and where a constant stream of water came cascading down before pooling up in front of its base and disappearing beneath the gallery floor.

As the water from the staircase flowed down behind the central figure of the Madonna, it also continued to flow in an underground sewer beneath her, as was seen through the grate upon which she stood. This grate was then not just an opening for drainage, but was an opening into another world, allowing one to see into an expansive, illuminated rock pool teeming with seaweed and barnacles. A number of oversized coins also gleamed back as if it were equally some kind of wishing well.

Above this animated cavity, the Madonna stood still. Despite her impalement, her appearance was very calm, which was further suggested because of her weathered condition and neutral grey exterior. With an extended look however, and feeding off her central iconic import, it would be more accurate to say that she was simply surrendered. Above this cavity, she 'obeyed a tenuous gravity'.[2]

Figure 78. Robert Gober, ***Untitled*** (detail), 1995-97, cast concrete, bronze, steel, copper, nickel silver, brick, fiberglass, urethene, cast plastics, paint, lead, motors, water, 178 x 178x 178 cm.

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[1] This gesture in itself can easily be compared with Claes Oldenburg's *Placid Civic Monument* (1967), which was an excavation in New York's Central Park as part of a curated exhibition called *Sculpture in Environment* held by the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art that same year. In this case, Oldenburg's 'Hole', was dug and then refilled; the work being the happening together with its evidence after the event. Oldenburg's hole is further discussed in chapter 6 in relation to its size indicative of a grave.

[2] I'd like to acknowledge Ross Moore for this comment regarding the Madonna and her perceived state above the drain.

Allowing the viewer further visual access into an underworld, were the 'empty' suitcases flanking the Virgin, and in which smaller bronze grates were also installed. Through each of these, other parts of the same interconnected sewer were revealed. As much as could be seen from outside the grate, what was here discovered were the legs of a male figure standing in the water. Furthermore, this figure was found to be holding a baby wearing a nappy, and like the man, only the legs were visible.

Read as a whole, the plausible narrative knitting Gober's total installation together became a particularly loaded one: a virgin punctured, surrendered; a recurring man and baby hidden below; a surreal world above and beneath activated by an 'ordinary' staircase[3] yet with a constant waterfall flowing down from it. Foremost in my own mind however, and with a basic awareness of the significance of the Virgin in Catholicism, it is the centrally positioned, dramatic violation of the Virgin Mary that is most shocking.[4] Positioned as if she were an altarpiece - not unlike how one would expect her to be found ordinarily in an orthodox Catholic church - she is at once familiar and violently altered, both an enshrined symbol of holiness and a desecrated icon. So much of her position within an existing cultural and religiously charged iconography, is utterly affected. In other words, as a symbol, the Madonna is open and vulnerable.[5]

Each reading of the whole installation, pivoting around the Virgin's central presence, then feeds off, re-interprets and challenges a complex systematizing of meaning in relation to cultural sentimentality and belief.[6] In this sense, the Madonna is arguably much more powerful in her violated state, as a provocation, than if she were presented as expected in her more ordinary 'graceful' composure. Most poignant and indicative of this power, her state is directly akin to the violated image of God that the crucified Christ presents, and which has long since been deemed sacred in its ultimate symbol of divine intervention within Christianity. When compared with Christ, the more immediate reaction of the viewer, which might assume the perception of blasphemous defilement, is less able to be sustained. In effect, her violation serves to activate her, despite her grey weathered condition and ghostly appearance. She is therefore somewhat awakened from her commoditized position outside the gallery.[7] One might suggest

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[3] As noted by Paul Schimmel, curator of the installation, Gober's staircase (with water flowing down it) was a central feature that remained from his original idea of constructing an entire house. In this regard, 'ordinary' and even 'domestic' was an intentional characteristic of the staircase as an architectural element, and from which its transformation into a waterfall becomes more theatrical, the more ordinary it is perceived to have been. Paul Schimmel, ed., *Robert Gober* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997) 44-45, 49.

[4] Ibid., 45. Quoting Schimmel on the significance of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic tradition, "[s]he is simultaneously human and divine – a mortal woman and the Queen of Heaven [or 'Mother of God' as 'Godbearer']… [I]n her infinite mercy, she intercedes with Christ on behalf of sinful humanity".

[5] Written largely in response to a debate predictably circling around Gober's installation at the time, i.e. between art critics and conservative Catholics, Linda Ekstrom noted that such work serves a pertinent use (for religion) "…when it is free to reconsider and rethink symbols… [or] where religious symbol can be taken out of context, examined and re-presented to expand the symbol's traditional meaning". Linda Ekstrom, "Gober's Mary fires debate on art, religion", *National Catholic Reporter*, December 5 (1997), 18.

[6] As can already be observed within this reflection on Gober's Madonna, my own description - defaulting to the use of 'her' and 'she'- indicates that I have already assumed 'she' is more than a statue. This is not to suggest that 'she' is alive, or that 'it' is not an inanimate effigy cast in a rudimentary material. But it does exemplify that the Madonna has an iconic importance, and that because of this (and even while I am not a Catholic) she carries/embodies a religio-cultural value which any representation of the Madonna necessarily inherits. A symbol of the Madonna - even before any intervention – is firstly (and arguably lastly) a representation of what she stands for. And as a symbol – perpetually re-iconized in its repetition, this also serves to protect it from violation in terms of genuinely subverting its existing meaning. 'She', the symbol, is in this sense impervious to actual desacralization, and any attempt to subvert an existing meaning, still depends-on and extends its existing significance.

[7] It should be noted that Gober modeled this Virgin from a small statuette like the ones commonly sold in Catholic bookshops. Though more pertinent, one only has to visit a Catholic cemetery to see the countless carved and pre-cast Mary's adorning

that she is even made more accessible,[8] evidenced in part by the personalization of the statue, which has been taking place in this reading.

The imaginative potential in terms of what is born from a virgin's womb, awards further profundity to Gober's Mary. With the culvert pipe "penetrat[ing] the body bloodlessly", as curator Paul Schimmel noted, this "…evokes the Immaculate Conception by which the Virgin Mary was conceived …without the violent stain of original sin, …[preceding] the miraculous conception of Christ himself".[9] Similarly, the flow of water that 'fills the void of her womb',[10] can in this respect, be fittingly attributed to the symbolism of Christ – born from her womb - who was described as the 'Living Water'.[11] Yet these or other more positive interpretations still do not mature without the violent gesture of a large phallic section of pipe, embedded perversely in the Virgin's womb. In this sense, Gober suggests that she is 'obviously' far from being 'virgin'. Her womb is also empty; its contents are absent (unless of course she is waiting for the annunciation or, she has already given birth to the Christ-child, which she has then surrendered to both the glory and pain of his calling).[12] If Gober proposes anything by these 'conflicting elements', it is perhaps largely the proposition itself, i.e. of a kind of union of opposites presented in a central and iconized image, combined with an inadvertent "queering" of its relations[13] of assumed opposites, namely, *Virgin* 'mother', allegedly 'exalted by *divine* grace' *and* 'human'. When present with this kind of tensive image, one is not only drawn into a strategic visual engagement, but a highly imaginative and conceptual encounter with the Virgin as a kind of threshold.[14] Again, this is not necessarily a hard

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the graves, which clearly declares her existence as one that has long since accommodated to a commercial market.

[8] Ekstrom similarly reads into the violent gesture of Mary's punctured womb, recalling that "she would ultimately be torn open as she witnessed the persecution and death of her son…[and as such] Mary is a figure very much pierced through and opened, gaining for the church a certain access to God". Linda Ekstrom, "Gober's Mary fires debate on art, religion," (1997), 18.

[9] Paul Schimmel, ed., *Robert Gober* (1997), 48-49.

[10] Ibid., 45.

[11] John 4:14, Revelation 22:17. Schimmel also quotes the correlating attribute by which Mary is called "the aqueduct along which divine grace flows to earth". Paul Schimmel, ed., *Robert Gober* (1997), 45. (Quoted from Richard P. McBrian, ed., *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 34.)

[12] With respect to the 'eviscerated womb' of Gober's Mary, art historian David Joselit similarly observed that an "empty pipe […] blasts a hole in the place where the Son would have gestated. [Hence] [t]he object of grief, the dead Son, is absent." David Joselit, "Poetics of the drain – Robert Gober, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California," *Art in America*, vol 85, no.12. Dec (1997), 66.

[13] It should be noted that Gober's work – and certainly no less for the installation under discussion - cannot be read without an acknowledgement of his homosexuality, and the way in which his work carries clear biographical references. A brief read on Gober through almost any source also quickly uncovers his Catholic upbringing, and that in one way or another, his work manifests a kind of conflict and negotiation between his sexuality and Catholic ideology. However in this regard, my interest concerns Gober's imagery insofar as it perpetually highlights ambiguity and misrecognition within unions/relations that are based on binary opposites. The classic binary opposite, recurrently called into question in Gober's work and fundamentally attached to the question of human nature, is in this case the apparent 'hegemony of heterosexual culture'. Though as Joselit importantly noted, "Gober's project seeks not to create an "other" nature, but to denaturalize both heterosexuality and homosexuality". In this way, Gober's "queering" of "the terms of masculinity, femininity and sexual desire", is a queering of an assumed 'human nature'. This makes one aware of the *strangeness* of human nature in general as much as it repositions our own gender/sexual-biased identification of human nature as equally strange: 'queer' in the sense of being unusual, peculiar, mystifying etc. David Joselit, "Poetics of the drain," (1997), 68.

[14] On the motif of the drain, particularly in its parallel attributions to the body, it was Joselit who outlined Gober's work as opening up a kind of threshold: "What I find arresting about the image of the drain is its paradoxical mixture of embodiment and disembodiment. The drain recalls the most visceral of bodily sites – the anus, the vagina, the mouth, the lesion – but it also suggests the status of the body as a threshold rather than an object: a membrane through which liquids and gases pass". While Joselit stresses the *body* as a threshold, it is important to note that the sculptural *object* of the Virgin is not a visceral body. However, Gober's virgin incorporates the motif of the drain within it, meaning this drain is an extension of that which Joselit refers back to the body (including the once-lived body of Mary that the statue refers to). On the other hand, the statue of the Madonna, is an alternate threshold in terms of being an icon, a physical and symbolic intercessor between the human

scrutinization of existing sentiments or belief, but it does certainly allow for new interrelations between forms and symbols to be made and speculated upon. Such work has a clear power to permeate, and to reveal what lies beneath one's own boundaries of meaning and/or limitations of reality.

But alas, the Virgin is not alone and she cannot be read apart from her position in relation to the whole installation. The reading of this work evokes a larger multilayered narrative, or 'psychodrama', interweaving elements of an earthly and underworld paradise.[15] Here, Mary is akin to a supplementary embodiment of Eve, not unlike Christ is to Adam. As she returns to and from the past, she is like a gatekeeper or "emblem of passage".[16] However, she is also a memorial, a representation bound in concrete, a mute, passive "garden ornament".[17]

The imagination is plunged into a myriad of symbolic allusions, yet all of which are conveyed within materiality and the manifestation of its making. Gober is after all, an artist, a craftsman who weaves imagination and 'material' reality into a strange, alluring and unsettling proposition.

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It is clear that in the interchanging apparatus of disclosing and withholding, using both protruding and inverted focal points (in the object and the hole respectively), and restaging what is real, ordinary or artificial, Gober offers and encourages a fresh sense of discovery. In Gober's example, which breaches architectural boundaries (by plumbing that intervenes within the existing gallery structure), and arguably inferred bodily boundaries (via the hole in the figurative statue of Mary), there also seems to be a clear allegorizing of discovery in terms of what is revealed to lie beneath. One might then consider this kind of work as being concerned with a kind of revelation, even in the manner of a spiritual search, looking for what lies beyond the surface of the seen or known material world.[18] Such an ideal however, is still quickly challenged as much as it is sustained.

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and the divine, the 'fallen' (or impure) and the 'holy' ('divine by grace') as well as through the *wound* in her represented womb, which becomes an opening for reflection on the human/divine binary. This observation of the womb in relation to the wound is a concept I return to in more detail later on in the chapter. David Joselit, "Poetics of the drain," (1997), 70.

[15] Art historian Libby Lumpkin attributed Gober's installation to a "psychodrama… [in the "tradition of the grand narrative summation"] in the form of a simple quasi-biblical story of redemption". Libby Lumpkin, "Robert Gober: Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles," *ArtForum* 36, no. 4, Dec (1997), 106-108.

[16] Writing in conjunction with Gober's 1997 installation, Hal Foster noted that Mary "seems to be an emblem of passage, the central conduit in this system of flows, the main medium of faith at these different stations of life – of life everlasting (the stairway to heaven,…), human in its generations (father and child in the water), and primal marine (the tidal pool)". Hal Foster, "The Art of the Missing Part," in Paul Schimmel, ed., *Robert Gober* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 62.

[17] Ibid., 63.

[18] Ekstrom asserts as much in the following quote about the 'encounter' with Gober's work (and others like it) as well as in the 'response' it inaugurates: "Art creates connections and associations between what we see and what we sense. This experience of encounter, reception and response is akin to the experience within religious ritual with its treatment of symbol. Both ritual and art must challenge us if they are to take us beyond the immediate". This note however, is largely underpinned by the use of overt religious imagery, and does not necessarily translate as clearly without it. Linda Ekstrom, "Gober's Mary

From the outset, any discovery in Gober's work takes place within the immediate identification of certain aspects; there is a drain, a suitcase, a statue. When so readily identifiable and often ordinarily encountered outside the gallery setting, these are rather banal objects in themselves. As a viewer, one can expect more to be disclosed even when these objects are revealed to be found objects (or 'readymades'). However, it is well known in relation to Gober's practice, that appearance can never be taken for granted. A suitcase for example, turns out to be meticulously handmade; its individual components are worked, stitched, forged or cast specifically to *look like* an ordinary commoditized suitcase. This creates a kind of intensity around its materiality and carries forward an implicit questioning of the object. Even though this same attention to detail 'sets a devotional tone',[19] on this level, discovery is (firstly) a discovery of Gober's consistent, illusory and aesthetically 'deceitful' mimicry.

On this level at least, one can easily see how any appeal for a hopeful or revelatory discovery akin to a spiritual search is both encouraged yet challenged. Such an idea of spirituality is particularly challenged when it correlates directly with a metaphysical search for 'underlying' truth. Learning that the object has been meticulously handmade is an initial point of revelation, and the object is accordingly distanced from the readymade (as a 'real' found object). There is also an undeniably distinct sense of 'enigma'[20] inaugurated and carried by Gober's re-crafted object and its context. Furthermore, its possible 'meaning' has been thickened, at the same time as being opened up for reflection within its proposition as an object mimicking another object. Within this, a complex cerebral and sensory engagement with Gober's work seems to always return to a focus on the technical *physicality* of the object, which disallows an easy flight from its immediate qualities of materiality. Gober in this regard, is a very clever craftsman and his handiwork can most certainly be admired on this level alone. Yet this returning focus on the material suggests that there is both an underlying and obvious complexity produced in the very handmade quality of Gober's work, which is of central importance to his practice. As an artist, I can certainly appreciate this 'authenticity' of the handmade, a commitment to the act of making.

This act of making, physically and contemplatively, acknowledges what already exists in a tactile, material sense: the 'things' of nature. The act of making, then seems to be a means of reflecting, questioning, grasping, and re-proposing a material world (as an effigy of the material world) that invites – even compels – *rethinking*. For Gober, this is an act of appropriating what is considered to be real by appropriating what signifies the real. In this respect, Gober's work entails a physical engagement with what constitutes the 'real' in an immediate sense, i.e. its (apparently recognizable) qualities of materiality. This makes his work curiously unsettling. It is an act of (re)creation: a (re)incarnation of what is signified. But what is made or presented is not the imitated object or a simple copy; it is an object made significant by the trace of the artist's hand. In turn, the 'signifier' is in conflict with its signification, and the object in question is in a category of its own.[21] As such, the object's meaning is likely to be indistinct from what is 'faux' or

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fires debate on art, religion," (1997), 18.

[19] Libby Lumpkin, "Robert Gober: Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles," (1997), 106-108.

[20] Foster noted that the 'work' of Gober's work, is "*to sustain enigma*". In this regard, Foster argues (through psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche) that enigma is tied to a three-tiered riddle of seduction, in which desire *for* the other and desire *of* the other, constitutes one's identity. Hal Foster, "The Art of the Missing Part," (1997), 58-59.

[21] This kind of object, can be described in relation to Jean Baudrillard's often quoted statement: "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, [...]" Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* trans., Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.

'original' and is therefore camouflaged in spuriousness. In other words, what is 'real' becomes indistinct from what is faux. In this way, Gober's handmade object cannot be assumed to mean anything *precise* or absolute, because a 'prior meaning' of the real is undercut, having been irreversibly meddled with and hence made complicated to the point where its once immediate identification seems irresolvable. While Gober's object (and its prior referent) is suspended - or displaced - in this way, enabling a creation of new meaning, there is an inability to *transcend* its suspended state in a manner that would actually allow a new meaning to be fully attained. But then again, and because a prior 'meaning' has been suspended – displaced – by the imitating object, there is a kind of transcendence, as an *evacuation of ontological presence*, from a metaphysically defined system of meaning. In other words, Gober's world is a world of matter, a world where what matters is 'matter', and where any displaced residues of meaning ('beyond' matter) are analyzed (and only seemingly retrieved) through the language of art. It is then helpful to further consider Gober's strategic utilization of matter. While this in part concerns material trickery of surface quality, it is certainly not limited to it: for Gober's handmade objects compress 'superficial' values of surface quality, whereby the 'banal', at the same time, becomes densely loaded with a sense of meaning and presence that would often otherwise be considered absent or meaningless.

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Back in 1987, Gober carefully prepared and glued layer-by-layer, several wood veneers and called it *Plywood*. The object became exactly that: a plain sheet of plywood "devoid of expectation".[22] But it was of course also much more (allegorically, the layering of veneers already suggests this). For in a stark simplicity echoing a minimalist trait of reduction, Gober's handcrafted object again mimics a 'real' and 'ordinary' piece of plywood, while materially being just that: plywood.[23] Held in the presence of this humble object, a thickened, layered sense of presence stirs.

Clearly the only difference between Gober's *Plywood* and another standard sheet of plywood bought from the hardware store, is in the artist's hand (though one could still ponder which – if any - is 'the' original). Given that this is the only difference (a largely hidden difference), its value as a 'work of art' is accorded to the handmade version. It is worth noting that this is essentially a reversal of Minimalism's own efforts to rid the artist's touch from the work of art being fabricated[24] (and so identifies a crucial difference

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[22] Press Release (of an exhibition in which Gober's *Plywood*, 1987, was recently re-shown), Lath Picture Show: Group Show, June 2007, Friedrich Petzel Gallery, http://www.petzel.com/exhibitions/2007-06-29_lath-picture-show/ (accessed 3rd June 2009).

[23] In the vein of Minimalism, simplicity of presence such as *Plywood* is necessary for prompting the "perceptual consequences" in the experience of its hidden complexity, here "operating with[in] fundamental everyday materials", and "produc[ing] something and nothing… something from nothing". Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in James Meyer, ed., *Minimalism* (2000). 270. Originally published in *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art 1945-1986* (Los Angeles and New York: Museum of Contemporary Art and Abbeville Press, 1986), 162-83; Press Release, Lath Picture Show: Group Show, June 2007, Friedrich Petzel Gallery, http://www.petzel.com/exhibitions/2007-06-29_lath-picture-show/ (viewed 3rd June 2009).

[24] The reductive Minimalist aesthetic that abandoned the artist's hand was one that intentionally expressed 'impersonality'

between Gober's practice and the Minimalists). This example then shows a 'language of reduction' being recreated not through a machine-made aesthetic, but through fastidious attention to the craft of the counterfeit. In doing so, this actually subverts the viewer's perception as framed within recent art history in respect to the Minimalists. In such attentiveness to the material, the object of *Plywood*, actually becomes what it represents. Standing as a found object claimed for the gallery space, the viewer has to negotiate it yet again in context to preceding art history, which further denies the artist's handiwork, i.e. within the already mentioned tradition of the readymade.[25]

Figure 79. Robert Gober, ***Plywood***, 1987, laminated fir. 243 x 118 x 2 cm.

As was noted by art historian Jean-Christophe Bailly, the readymade, primarily enacted an 'iconoclastic purpose' of 'stripping the object' of its "original meaning and function", therefore rendering the object 'unclassifiable'.[26] However, Gober's work shows that 'original meaning and function' is not actually 'stripped'. As indicated by Gober's Mary, a mode of 'classification' *depends* on a former and still evident meaning and function, which has been *appropriated* rather than stripped. In turn, this carries additional implications in respect to the *reading* of its meaning and function. It is clear that Gober then utilizes implication as an underlying purpose within his own work, although not without the additional trait of allowing the object, as Bailly also articulated of the readymade, to "acquire an intensity, an aura of significance – like a symbol in a universe of tautologies".[27] This fundamentally explains

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and 'detachment', and was accordingly made to render such forms as more objective in their common, standardized state. This also came with a "…concomitant elevation of conceptual power" in line with the readymade and the artist's work as a 'decision', as opposed to a skillful manipulation of materials. See Barbara Rose, "ABC Art," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology,* Gregory Battock, ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1968), 274-297; Hilton Kramer, "Primary Structures": The New Anonymity,' *New York Times* (1 May 1966), 23; Mel Bochner, "Primary Structures," *Arts Magazine*, 40: 8 (June 1966), 32-35.

25 As indicated above, the original purpose for the 'readymade' (the ordinary object, taken from its 'everyday' context and repositioned as a work of art) was to deny "both the uniqueness of the art object and necessity for the artist's hand". Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Duchamp*, trans., Jane Brenton (England: Art Data, 1986), 7. Hal Foster has noted, however, that in Gober's case, he actually resists the idea of the readymade as far as one which "queries the relation between art work and commodity." Yet in distinct reference to Duchamp's legacy of the readymade, Gober again inverts its mechanism through meticulous craftsmanship; the main difference resulting in an artwork that only poses as a readymade. This in turn carries and propels its underlying mechanism by presenting an inherently ready-fetishized (given the extent of care and dedication taken in mimicking a machined/found-object aesthetic) and ready-commoditized (given it is then presented to the public through the commercial relations of a gallery space) assimilation of a banal object (here an everyday item of industry). Hal Foster, "The Art of the Missing Part," (1997), 63.

26 Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Duchamp* (1986), 54.

27 Ibid., 54. In respect to Bailly's use of the term 'aura', for an object that is at least half positioned to reject 'uniqueness', one can here locate an oppositional reading to that given by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". For Benjamin, the 'aura' of an artwork exists only in its 'singularity', 'once-offness', and 'uniqueness'. The fact that the readymade is recognized by its nature of commonness, a sense of a bland 'universal equality' and prior mass reproduction, would in this case serve to "destroy its aura". However the differing positions of both Bailly and Benjamin can be brought together under Benjamin's acknowledgement that "the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual… [h]owever remote [this "ritualistic basis" and "original use value"] is still recognizable as secularized ritual" in the cult of beauty'. In other words, with "the transformation of the ritual function of art to a secular aesthetic" as critic Robert Nelson succinctly put, the 'aura' of art remains; cult value is *appropriated* by the value given to art offered by the relations of the contemporary gallery (not of course without its marketing strategies). Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed., Hannah Arendt, trans., Harry Zohn (London: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1970), 219-244; Robert Nelson, *The Spirit of Secular Art: A History of the Sacramental Roots of Contemporary Artistic Values* (Clayton: Monash University ePress, 2007), 01.9-01.13.

where a sense of thickened meaning arises in Gober's work (whether this is *Plywood* or other works based on 'banal/common' objects), especially in the knowledge that any 'common' object encountered (in a Gober installation) is both a kind of fake, and a 'unique' double.

What this indicates, is that by both using and inverting the prior Minimalist and readymade traditions, Gober recognizes an important relation between identification and mis-recognition. Furthermore, it appears that this relation is effectively activated through emphasizing a very minimal and unapologetically common gesture and *materiality* of an object's presence. Like the readymade, this depends on different ways of seeing inside and outside the context of the modern gallery space, where inside is generally acknowledged to be a kind of sacralized space, whereas outside, the commonness and banality experienced everyday, outlines an underlying disposition of the *in*significant.[28] Again, like the readymade, the 'object' (immediately identifiable by its 'low' commonness) brought into the privileged space of the gallery, is nothing without its prior context from which it is then, apparently, 'set apart'. So in this sense, a piece of plywood, either in or destined for the gallery, is never just a piece of plywood. Any unpolished and banal materiality would simply *be* the recognizable trait upon which a new reading relies. This includes any inference of meaning sanctioned by the gallery space. Certainly, this observation has long since been a given as far as the ideals of Modern art is concerned.[29] However, because an object in a gallery looks familiar and ordinary, this becomes the incentive to look for 'otherness' within its *face* value.[30] It is this otherness of the effigy that outlines a persistent form of layering in Gober's work.

The implication of the viewer's reading in Gober's work continues, not only by the immediate categorization of the apparent 'readymade' (having this easy identification of 'plywood' predetermined for the viewer in its title), but also by inverting this categorical confidence, thus removing the rational ground by which the object is disclosed as *not* (actually) readymade. In other words, despite the presence of what seems a simple, humbly objectified and familiarly commoditized sheet of plywood, the 'real' (signified) thing is actually missing.[31] Gober's work is then a kind of replacement or substitute, and around such objects there is state of concentrated solemnity in the sense that they stand in as a kind of blunt, 'dry' memorial. Such 'wit' is 'further compounded as plywood is already a kind of fake timber', inadvertently 'memorializing the wood' that it replaces.[32]

In this respect, the seeming simplicity of the act of looking, common to your average subjective human experience, is not only far from able to grasp and properly identify Gober's object, but 'seeing' itself is thickened in the growing complexity of the combined perceptual/conceptual experience. At the same

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[28] This description of inside and outside the gallery space is not necessarily meant to be taken literally, but is meant to apply to the institution set up around the art object, which incorporates both a physical and conceptual space that equally sanctions its privileged position.

[29] In respect to art's 'privileged' status, Nelson provides a succinct summary of the attitude that Modern society has towards it: "art lays claim to the transcendental, for it is not merely a material object nor even a confection of codes but a symbol of deeper qualities, often cryptic and fugitive but fundamentally reflecting what is widely understood as a spirit". Robert Nelson, *The Spirit of Secular Art* (2007), 01.8-01.9.

[30] For *Plywood*, as mentioned earlier, it is essentially all *face*; it is all 'veneer', which constituted its form. It is all outwardly conveyed sign, which begs inquiry into *what* it then signifies.

[31] Jean Baudrillard remarks, "…it is dangerous to unmask [and of course *to make*] images [representations], since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them". Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), 5.

[32] I am grateful to Ross Moore for helping to point out this compounded 'joke' in Gober's Plywood, and for which Moore's apt statement applies: "There is no ontological origin in Gober but a feint of one constantly proliferating".

time, viewing - as a fundamental means of determining and acquiring identification - is left wanting. Gober's viewer sees a *representation*, which is a permanent visual reminder that a re-presentation as such, both hides and holds, a signified object that is not present. At this point, an attempt to look 'deeper' into the object that *is* present, is underscored by an attempt to revert back to an impossibly simple semiotics. A signification *beyond* the present object of the artwork is made potent, even while it is disallowed.

Figure 80. Robert Gober, **Untitled**, 2005, Plaster and bronze, 179 x 21 x 12.7 cm.

Once aware of the depth of Gober's multi-layered intent, an analogous interplay can be located with respect to a Platonic logic concerning the deceptive function of representation and the 'nature of imitation' in general. The example given in *The Republic of Plato* is also not dissimilar to the banality of Gober's *Plywood*. This is a 'bed', described in three variations: one made by God, one made by a carpenter and another by a painter. The first is the 'original reality' or 'nature'; the second is manufactured and considered 'secondary' to the true Form; the last is described as "three removes from being" (which in turn is considered 'perverse' and 'beggarly'). In relation to *Plywood*, Gober's work has a justifiable correspondence to all three versions via its name, construction and imitation of 'plywood', and in fact his work in this example is more like an implicative joining of the second and the third.[33] This plurality of Gober's *Plywood*, as an imitation that inaugurates an ambiguity (as a remove-from or abstraction) of the allegedly 'real' thing, seems to be what makes the present object a conundrum. This also renders the 'original' somewhat mythical. In this respect, Plato's confession can be recalled, whereby the 'secondary'

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[33] A.D.Lindsay, trans., *The Republic of Plato* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., n.d.), Book X. 596 – 598, 602, 603 (pages 297-300, 305-306).

'manufactured article', which is located in between the original and the imitation, is from the outset "somewhat indistinct" from the real.[34] In this analogy, Gober's *Plywood* is both true and deceitful, and his commitment to *making* is spurred on by the effect that it produces in the viewing/reflecting experience.

As Plato's own rhetoric sought to differentiate truth from imitation, Gober's work indicates that such a strategy of attempted objectification and strict identification remains a limited, even shallow practice, even as it attempts (or rather pretends) so insistently to penetrate into a 'deeper' aspect of an object in question. With attention to detail, which makes surface quality and form directly recognizable, yet contrasted against an overall, problematically classifiable status, it would seem that Gober actually depends on this initial shallowness from the viewer. In terms of what he chooses to mimic (in *Plywood* and other seemingly banal objects; a plank of wood, a piece of foam, a box of cereal, a bowl of fruit; to name a few simpler examples), he then has something obvious and predictable to subvert. Hence, when through the employment and encouragement of such 'looking' these objects become *less* classifiable in an unambiguous taxonomic sense ('plywood' that is not ordinary plywood), they then reveal a different realism, which is set apart from what is perceived to be everyday visual reality.

Figure 81. Robert Gober, **Untitled**, 2004-2005. Bronze, beeswax, lead crystal, oil paint. 48 x 117 x 63.5 cm.

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[34] Ibid., 597 (page 298). While Plato's logic strains to mark out a moral distinction between these examples and their relation to truth/nature, appearance and imitation: an admittance of an indistinctness from the start means the intended argument begins on its own foreclosure, which is a confusion between them. This directly correlates with Derrida's examination of the *pharmakon*, a term which embodies a kind of 'undecidability' at the heart of language and the play of opposites which enable language to have its meaning. See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans., with intro by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; London: The Althone Press, 1981), 95-117; Peggy Kamuf, ed., Introduction to "Plato's Pharmacy," in Jacques Derrida, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 112-113. For a concise account, see also "From Plato's Pharmacy," following Kamuf's introduction in *A Derrida Reader* (1991), 114-139.

However, with these types of commonplace – and often domestic - objects, an inert sameness inevitably remains. The common subject matter, skillfully 'life-like' in its replication, is still 'inanimate' or effigious. In this sense, they fittingly adopt an "intrinsic ambiguity of the still life",[35] which is a reading further confirmed in lieu of Gober's intentional, consistent and complex play on their symbolic allusions.[36] Here, a kind of underlying subversion seems to persist in the fact that the *appearance* of these objects are reified, while the *nature* of their *material presence* is precisely dead: *morte*. As a symbolic trait closely related to that of the 'still life', it is here also that the 'beauty' of Gober's mimicry is indicative of the *memento mori*.[37]

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A counterpoint with which to explore an underside of Gober's confounding surfaces is his recurring motif of the drain, already exemplified by his 'Virgin Mary' installation at the Geffen. The drain also exists within the context of familiar visual reality, and as such, is a type of common 'object' or utility that can offer a pertinent physical and metaphoric means of engaging the viewer beyond the realm of immediate and/or limited identifications. In particular, the drain can designate an apparent end (it is used to flush things away) as well as being like a humble opening into another world, an underworld operating literally and largely unnoticed beneath our own. It is accordingly the drain *cover*, or grate, that marks the boundary or threshold between our surface lives and an unseen place of possibility and imagination.

A sink-hole in a wall, a drain in a floor or cavities built off the side or beneath a given space: all these are extended examples of Gober's reworking of the drain as an opening into another space. These also demonstrate that the drain is an *inverted* object; it is an interiorized focal point that hones vision while restricting one's visual power to objectify. In this regard, definition of what this inverted object is, is limited in the very least by the fact that one can only peer into these spaces from outside. With a grate, grill or plughole obstructing access, an unspecified *inner* space is emphasized and is arguably all the more desired and anticipated by being only partly revealed. This is also like a kind of opening into a psychological space, activated by the extent of one's inner vision. Framed within the lowly, symbolic object of the grate, this 'internal object' is therefore suspended as an ambiguous space. In this kind of

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35 Hal Foster, "American Gothic," *ArtForum International* (May 2005), 223-225.

36 A very literal example is Gober's fruit bowls, a classic subject of the 'still life' known-to-be used throughout history for its allegorical purposes. Where 'still life' pertains in general to "…the conditions of creaturality, of eating and drinking and domestic life", the fruit bowl can refer more specifically to 'the abundance of the cornucopia' in the overflowing bowl, or 'immortality' or conversely 'transience', in the cyclic nature of its growth or vulnerability to decay respectively, or the 'fruits' as gifts of the Holy Spirit within Christian teaching. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 13-14; Brenda Richardson, *A Robert Gober Lexicon, Vol. 1* (Gottingen: Steidl Publishers, 2005), 92-94.

37 In relation to Gober's fruit, yet equally applicable to other works comparable by their common, inanimate nature (in which a "subtle ambivalence is created in every object, image, and space"), Foster recalls a "…*nature* that is precisely *morte*, a *vanitas* whose beauty stings with a reminder of death". Hal Foster, "American Gothic," (2005), 225.

object – equally as a space - discovery is perpetually possible yet always incomplete.

When considering the piece of culvert pipe in 'Mary's' womb - an image that is too bold and scandalous to ignore - this kind of displaced and repositioned drain, is clearly a way of opening up another world. As noted previously, violating 'her' (in the iconicity of the statue) in this manner, reopens a certain type of symbolic power that may have become inaccessible or locked away, that is, within religious conventions that have either intentionally, or perhaps unwittingly, restricted its meaning. If a system of meaning is open and wounded in this way, then it is also threatened and the charge of blasphemy is never far away.[38] Thus stands the Virgin's power, not simply to unsettle, but to disclose the limits of a fixed definition, which is further emphasized when a new realized meaning is not immediately present to replace it. She stands as the cusp of a new revelation. In this, Gober's wounded Virgin - the Madonna with her evacuated womb - is precisely sympathetic to the Christian revelation of the *pathos* of God;[39] a God who suffers with humanity (and at the hands of it), thus revealing a more expansive yet approachable concept of God's divine nature, through the movement between divine glory and humiliation via human death.[40]

Figure 82. Robert Gober, ***Untitled,*** 1998 - 2004. Cast pewter, 7cm.

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[38] In an additional parallel between Gober's Virgin Mary and Christ, it is worth noting that the charge laid on Christ by the religious authorities (as opposed to the political charge of being a 'rebel, a Zealot') resulting in his crucifixion, was that of blasphemy. Not only was this evident in Jesus' self-deification as a corporeal subject, but his claim to forgive sins (and not *judge* them as the Messiah was supposed to) actually subverted the basis of Messianic hope based on the Law and the redemption of the 'righteous'. This was blasphemy against the order of the Law and the 'God' who was represented by it. This was picked up by Kazantzakis as a poignant articulation of the threat that Jesus posed to the religious order of the time, with Jesus declaring, "I am Saint Blasphemer, and don't forget it". Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation*, trans., P.A. Bien, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1975), 366. For further analysis of Christ's blasphemy, see Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 128-137; Oscar Cullmann, *Jesus and the Revolutionaries*, trans., G. Putnam (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 47; Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus*, ed. T.A. Burkill, Geza Vermes (Berlin; New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1974), 68-69.

[39] In *The Crucified God*, theologian Jurgen Moltmann, describes the pathos of God as "…the way in which God is affected by events and human actions and human suffering in history. He is affected by them because he is interested in his creation… to the history of his covenant people". Recalling that enacted by incarnation, both specific to Christ and to a more general *Shekinah* or "indwelling" of God's presence in creation, Moltmann adds, that "God transfers his being into the history of his relationship and his covenant with man. God takes man so seriously that he suffers under the actions of man and can be injured by them". "Divine suffering", is in this light, an "injured love", a "sorrow which goes through his opened heart". Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (1993), 270-274.

[40] In contrast to the 'immutability of God', theologian Paul Althaus remarked that "the full and undiminished deity of God is to be found in the complete helplessness, in the final agony of the crucified Jesus, at the point where no 'divine nature' is to be seen". Paul Althaus, 'Kenosis,' *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Vol 3 (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1913), 1243; Cited in Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (1993), 206.

So far, my own reflection on Gober's work, through practical description of a couple of works and attempted explication, has only sketched out a few fragmentary assertions and a recurring theme of challenged discovery. There is much more left unexplored, i.e. discovered body parts, which is another major theme setting the tone for other kinds of melancholic implications created and perceived in the context of Gober's whole practice. While there is consistent evidence of material transformation, riddled with endless semiotic interplay - and thus whole installations standing as manifestations of the imagination, or of the unconscious - the physicality of *representation* is ever-present. Whether of banal objects or disturbing transmutations of the figure, both the limits and wonders of representation stand to be encountered side by side. Yet Gober's base-point of the counterfeit, the memorializing gesture of an *effigy*, harbours an underlying signification of mortality, which is perhaps the clearest indication of an end-point of meaning. Sculpturally, each object (or representation) is held in a 'cadaverous', "frozen, immobile likeness".[41] While representation at its limits, effaces and erases the 'real', the decay of the real is also staved off in the sense that an effigy stands in its place. The existence of the representative object, withstands a determined, signified end-point, by continuing to offer possible signification beyond it. In essence, this is a simple concept as far as art (and its plurality of interpretation) is concerned. However, it is still one that is easy to overlook, and thus one that is inevitably a pertinent consideration for Gober.

In this light, what appears to be most clear of all in Gober's work, is its *haunting* nature. This is its ability to affect and to impress an image into the viewer's mind, so that it lingers long after it is out of actual sight. Such haunting, incorporating duplicity of meaning/s (which is by now to be expected), also harbours the ability to speak to what is hidden in the mind, even revealing a potential to extract and manifest what has perhaps long been repressed.[42] The *memento mori* of Gober's work, in this case, is like a wound from which all kinds of reminders arise, each challenging the ideals, conceits or straight-out vanity, which appeals to a superficial reality or blanket metaphors of human transformation.

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Hauntingly impressed in my own mind is a crucifix, a dead figure on a cross. This is potentially more disturbing on account of its commonness. A question that persists, outside of its well-known symbolism in Christianity is: What kind of emblem is this? Where in this age can such a symbol go, apart from its darker reminder of human nature coupled with its obscure claim for redemption; obscure in that it is still

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41 Maurice Blanchot's cadaverousness of the image can be recalled in relation to Gober's own imagery. See "Memorial".

42 Foster has noted that for Gober, his work 'begins as an image, a memory or a fantasy'. This is further described as a 'living', 'haunting' image of which Gober is the "host". It is then in "nursing" this image, and for 'want of objectifying it' – "to get it into form" and share it with the viewer - that Gober proceeds to make his work. This kind of interior image or 'scene' is what is manifested or 'staged', and so (as Foster continues to articulate) "seem both internal and external, past and present, fantasmatic and real", which indicates another perceivable level of ambiguity in Gober's 'surrealist' work. This outlines a clear account of the uncanny in Gober's work, specifically recalling Schelling's definition (as quoted by Freud): "when something that should have remained hidden…has come into the open". Hal Foster, "The Art of the Missing Part," (1997), 58-59; Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (2003), 132, 148.

an image of a dead and brutalized figure hanging on an archaic execution apparatus? Alternatively, as an image of ultimate sacrifice, can it really hold, especially in a contemporary context, a meaning that is not bound in tradition or overly commoditized within its religious framework?[43] From a secular standpoint, it is easy to see how such an image suffocates under the strain of so many layers: years of sentiment and piety, horror and grace, guilt and lowest-of-the-low humility. Although simply put, all this is ordinarily easy to ignore. That the standard and overlooked crucifix could actually repel engagement, possibly even more than its brutal subject matter, this suggests that a radical repositioning is warranted.

Sure enough, Gober (with his own Catholic background) doesn't leave such an image unquestioned, and this is one reason why a crucifix is impressed on my mind. Positioned as a central element within a more recent installation in New York, and framed as a memorial gesture in lieu of 9/11, Gober presented a remembered yet dismembered Christ (see figure 83).[44] Shocking in an uncommon though similarly violent way (according to primitive forms of execution), this Christ was decapitated. So as an image of a half-naked, acephalous man, arms outstretched and wounds displayed, this essentially enacts violence against an iconic – somewhat sanitized, ossified – crucifix. Worth noting, is that a *headless* Christ is precisely "disfigured beyond that of any man" (Isaiah 52:14), and it would seem that Gober effectively reinterprets what is defined by these terms in their prophetic context.[45] Such an image is also precisely an image that effaces, literally *de*faces, the claim for a representation of God, and so epitomizes its more blasphemous and iconoclastic implications concerning the claim of Christ as the image of the un-representable God. But at the same time, it has been said that the 'crucified Jesus is the "image of the invisible God".[46] God has abandoned Christ and so God is invisible, *here*, like the hidden head of Christ that would complete him as the whole "man of sorrows".[47] In this way, with no face in which to see and confirm a likeness to our own, and in his "dehumanized" state, this Christ could be described, perhaps pertinently, as *other than human*.[48] "He becomes open to what is other and new".[49]

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[43] Thomas J. J. Altizer prompts a similar line of enquiry when he asks: "What can the name of Jesus mean to the Christian today or, for that matter, to any man living outside of Christendom?" Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), 55.

[44] There were many other components to this installation, each relating back to the central positioning of the crucifix, however the present reflection only focuses on this particular image of Christ, similar to my prioritized treatment of the Virgin Mary in Gober's 1997 installation. For a detailed analysis of this whole installation, see Brenda Richardson's *A Robert Gober Lexicon,* Vol 1 & 2, (Gottingen: Steidl Publishers, 2005), and Hal Foster's review, "American Gothic," *ArtForum International*, (May 2005), 223-225.

[45] Isaiah 52:14. "…his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man, and his form marred beyond human likeness". Another note to make in this context is that a headless Christ contradicts and so challenges another prophetic text saying, that "…not one of [his bones] will be broken", a statement that is supposed to be a kind of consolation in the Lord's deliverance; a concept that seems almost perverse in relation to the crucified Jesus' cry of abandonment. See John 19:33-36, Psalm 34:19-20.

[46] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II 2 (T. & T. Clark, 1957), 123.

[47] Isaiah 53:3

[48] In relation to the kenotic trait in the 'dehumanized Christ', Moltmann notes that such christology "…cannot seek to maintain only a dialectical relationship between the divine being and human being, leaving each of these unaffected; in its own way the divine being must encompass the human being and vice versa". While this is stated for the purposes of outlining the 'trinitarian and personal terms' of God, "in contrast to the traditional doctrine of the two natures in the person of Christ", what this does indicate is that there is a *language of distinction between the two natures of God and man*, which is also opened up for questioning in lieu of God's humanized and then *de*humanized state on the cross. Here, one might even remark on the similarities between the dehumanized Christ and the strangeness of the cadaver, which as previously noted (in chapter 2), enables a relation to be drawn between deities and corpses in the sense that they omit a presence that is 'other' than human. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (1993), 205-206.

[49] Ibid., 303. Similarly, this aligns with what theologian Karl Rahner attributes to a "death of God in his being and becoming in what is other than himself". Karl Rahner, ed., *Sacramentum Mundi* II (London: Burns and Oates, 1969), 207.

Figure 83. Robert Gober, 2005 installation (detail) at the Matthew Marks gallery, New York. Fibreglass, beeswax, human hair, nickel plated bronze, wood, enamel paint, photolithography on paper, graphite, water, recycling pumps. 244 x 357 x 159 cm.

Furthermore, Gober's headless crucifix is a visual depiction of a "crucified God [who] renounces the privileges of an idol".[50] It is an image whose head has already been knocked off as if it has been the victim of an iconoclastic act, as well as being an iconoclastic image in the first place (in the sense that it replaces the 'Lord Jesus' with a headless body: a signification only of the corporeal). Hence the idol of the crucifix, and Christ's own 'image' found therein, is a reduction of God-hood, deprecated further by its headless-ness. As a kind of double negation, any devaluation of meaning in Gober's crucifix, in effect makes way for gaining a present recollection of analogous types of humiliating circumstances in

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[50] Continuing on from this quote, Moltmann adds: "In becoming weak, impotent, vulnerable and mortal, he [Christ] frees man from the quest for powerful idols and protective compulsions and makes him ready to accept his humanity, his freedom and his mortality". Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (1993), 303.

the original crucifixion. Here in the headless Christ, the 'immutable' God "did not open his mouth",[51] his power has been stripped, broken, erased, the 'Lord' has been de-crowned, "cut off from the land of the living",[52] reduced to the *body* in which mortality was undertaken. Even as water spurts from his nipples like an irreverent ornamental water fountain, 'his life is poured out unto death'.[53]

In these indicators of humility (and the dire limitations of human nature) this beheaded Christ – without a face - is still importantly allowed the function of weeping, i.e. through his nipples. Like wounds, or even eyes (if read as replacements for the eyes of his missing head), these nipples incessantly pour out water towards the viewer, a reference back to Christ ('the Rock') that is 'struck' in order to make 'living water' flow out from it (Exodus 17:6-7, 1 Cor 10:4). This is again an image of the God of pathos, yet also as a maternal provider being born in the process, where Christ's mammaries are triggered, even 'tapped'. Such a play of references embedded in Gober's crucifix, denote *liquidity* and animation, even as it remains an (inanimate) statue. It is not a dead symbol but one that is riddled with, and so activates, a chain of ambiguous and enigmatic associations. Gober's Christ is clearly alive with significance.

Nevertheless, if this crucified Christ is the image of the invisible God, it is an image not of a powerful, dominant, Father-God of Christianity. It is a 'God' who is 'other than' this figure of power, a son who in a human sense expresses a debt to his mother Mary as a maternal provider, and so feeds his 'children' with life-flowing water born from his body-of-death turned spring-of-life. However, again, an unambiguous closure is forestalled. Under the condition of gravity, this water reaches only as far as another hole in the floor of the gallery. This is a kind of well, a depository, perhaps even a tomb: a kind of end-point. Or, it is a symbolic portal opening a boundary between the world of the living and the 'under'-world, the inanimate and the (re)animated. A resurrection is subsequently suspended.

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[51] Isaiah 53:7

[52] Ibid. 53:8

[53] Ibid. 53:12

OPENINGS (cont.)

In the book, *After the death of God* (2007), John D. Caputo comments on a critical attitude towards contemporary deconstruction: "…insofar as we can be honest – if we could really be honest and explain or admit to ourselves the utter contingency and deconstructibility of the things we believe – that would be the beginning".[54] The 'confession of being wounded', "shipwrecked" - as Caputo put it in regard to the limits of knowledge, reason and belief - is an image of helplessness, but also of a powerful position from which to 'think' or see things anew.[55] This is a darkness that is also a beginning, not unlike dawn. Akin to a 'self-emptying' of one's own knowledge, as if one has been reduced to a bare yet fresh state of existence, this is a worthy *image* to hold onto and to explore in artistic terms.

As a concept, this image importantly expresses a positive standpoint with regard to a condition of authentic humility allowing space for the new. However a foreseeable and formulaic 'hope' of the new - akin to a sense of foreknowledge waiting to refill this space - would surely need to be withheld. Holding onto this image would then entail a negotiation between both openness and defeat, thus allowing for an important contemplative encounter to be realized, not unlike a revealed sense of the *sublime*.[56] If Caputo's remarks were to be applied to the central Christian revelation, hope in the *risen* Christ would be withheld - suspended - in the hiatus between the cross and resurrection. With "nothing to hold on to" (as Martin Heidegger said of the trait of 'anxiety'), one would have to sit with the cross and its indeterminate picture of a kind of nothingness.[57] This in turn, demonstrates how 'the cross' of the

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54 John D. Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, *After the death of God*, ed., Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 128.

55 To this position, and as a 'grounding' on which to begin to think, one could just as easily apply the Heideggerian term *Da-sein*: of 'being-there', and 'Being-in-the-world'. In regards to a basic state of existence and its acknowledging of an attitude of limited knowledge (as a base-point of a 'primordial thinking'), it is also a 'grounding' of being human; "immersed, implanted, rooted in the earth ["the concrete, literal, actual, daily world"]". Recognizing that any "meaning of being" has to be found *within* this 'world' and the "everyday-ness of the everyday", as George Steiner noted, *Da-sein* is therefore a kind of over-arching reality from which to consider things differently, specifically as an alternative to metaphysics, which is a way of reasoning itself that dualistically distinguishes a worldly, bodily, finite reality from a reality *beyond*, and to which the human spirit belongs. However to clarify, my own interest more closely follows Caputo's lead, which carries a kind of anticipation around the "limits of metaphysical reason" that still retains and reveals a hope that looks for something beyond a reality that *is* the grounding world in which we find ourselves, in temporary lived existence. This is to acknowledge, that, "we live in the space between what is possible and impossible", aligning with a revealed "space between philosophy and religion" through their opposing and complimentary ways of questioning the meaning of humankind. George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 83-84; John D. Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, *After the death of God*, (2007), 114-120. See also John D. Caputo, *The mystical element in Heidegger's thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 1-9; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., John Maquarrie, Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 78-86.

56 As Immanuel Kant described, the sublime can be characterized in three kinds of feelings: the 'terrifying', the 'noble' and the 'splendid', which are "sometimes accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy". These combined traits are exemplified in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,* in a footnote ruminating on an article, titled "Carazan's dream" (cited from *Bremen Magazine*, Vol IV, 539). In this dream, Carazan is cast away from creation and into a "boundless void". "[L]ooking ahead into the infinite abyss of darkness", with "mortal terrors of despair […] and] without any help or hope of any return", Carazan then wakes and turns to an appreciation of "the objects of reality" and to a 'communion' with creation which he had previously ignored. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans., John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1960), 48-49.

57 In his essay "What is Metaphysics?" and in connection with a reflection on 'the nothing', Heidegger articulated on 'anxiety' as a type of 'attunement', "in which man is brought before the nothing itself". "More precisely…", he says "…anxiety leaves us

'*crucified* (and hence 'unsuccessful') Messiah', becomes a 'stumbling-block' to faith.[58] In this regard, what is suspended is not the resurrection or one's faith, but the actual hiatus or eclipse, which is stretched out to the point that it discloses an "essence of nothing: nihilation".[59] At this crucial point, what this image frames and so asks to be negotiated, is a kind of post-religious and post-secular abyss in the potential of the present experience of the confessed wound. One would then stand at the cusp of new possibilities beyond prior limits of faith or reason. One might even say that the curse of 'expectation' is cancelled, erased or at least confounded.

As an artist seeking to engage with this kind of standpoint, my questioning stirs about how it can be manifested as an image: How can I frame this image as one that is presented recognizably alongside my own limitations? Can it be materially presented, suspended in either a sculptural form or as a materially designated space and so become physically and/or conceptually *encounter-able*?

These questions, along with the formulations that give rise to them, bring me to the need to articulate or express further, specifically through sculptural form. As far as I can conceive, what is needed is to harness the abyssal nature of an end-point that somehow corresponds to a specific, body-sized encounter. Further to this, the work would extend an invitation to *enter*, to forfeit or self-empty a sense of security and to stay with it long enough to see one's own being, encompassed within a designated kind of nothingness.

<p style="text-align:center">✳</p>

As mentioned in the fourth chapter, two of my own artworks were brought together under a two-part exhibition titled *Uncontained* (Part 1 and Part 2). In the second part, which displayed the 'casket/plinth/crypt' in the Enclosure at Conical, a third work was also incorporated.

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hanging". In connection to a "…receding of beings as a whole…we humans who are in being… slip away from ourselves", as we are 'robbed of speech' and "…all utterence of the "is" falls silent in the face of the nothing". This also reiterates the note made above in connection the concept of *Da-sein*, for as Heidegger noted: "Da-sein means: being held out into the nothing". Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" trans., David Farrell Krell, in *Pathmarks*, ed., William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 82-96. See also John Macquarrie, *Heidegger and Christianity: The Hensley Henson Lectures 1993-94* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 48-49.

58 Reiterating Paul's 1 Corinthians 1: 22-23 ("Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles"), and much other Christian apologetics since, Michael Goulder wrote that "[t]he term *Christos* means the anointed king of the line of David, and the function of kings is to reign. When Messiah came [sic], he would lead Israel to victory… Crucified Messiahs are paradoxes, and hard to sell". Michael Goulder, "The Two Roots of the Christian Myth," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 74.

59 Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" (1998), 90. In respect to the word 'nihilation', a difficult term to articulate, Heidegger describes it as being like a "repelling gesture" causing a "shrinking back" or "slipping away" of beings, in order to bring 'the nothing' to the fore, and then Da-sein before *it.* Though as I understand it (a poor reduction of Heidegger's concept no doubt), the nothing is like a negation of present self-identity; like an absence of a conceived ground of presence in the self. 'Nihilation' (the "essence of nothing"), is then like the negation of self-presence brought to the fore, brought to realization.

I envisioned this additional work as one that would show a relationship with the 'casket/plinth/crypt', by installing it just outside the Enclosure adjacent to the entrance. This was conceived as a subtle form of spillage, or overflow, out from the room in which the 'casket/plinth/crypt' was contained. Yet it was also a sculptural object of its own, *opening-out* from the formal mode of containment for which the 'casket/plinth/crypt' stood. In this way, the arrangement served to suggest a kind of underplayed dialogue between the two sculptures, as if each work had somehow been born from the other. While this third work had similar considerations to the second in terms of its human-scaled dimension and formal angular features, it also had a differing quality of structure and surface in that it was made of medium gauge steel, rendered in satin black enamel. A more immediate trait of difference however - emphasized and embodied in relation to the 'casket/plinth/crypt' – was that its very structure housed and displayed an open gaping interior.

Again, like the 'casket/plinth/crypt', the first part of the additional work, which was encountered upon entering the gallery space, was its rear. This immediate viewpoint introduced the viewer to a dense sculptural presence, here as a "complex irregular polyhedron" akin to that of the Minimalist works of Anne Truitt, Tony Smith or Robert Morris.[60] From this rear section (in lieu of a 'front' being later established), the clear profile of a beveled pointed arch was made obvious. Being at waist height, this end vaguely resembled the profile of a sharply cut tombstone. Continuing along its form, this profile also essentially prescribed the overall shape, which was carried throughout the rest of the work as a sculptural feature. With this back end closed and the whole form reaching over three metres in length, it was anticipated that the viewer would walk alongside its length before finally arriving at its front. What was revealed here was an opening; a mouth into a deep inner chasm, which incorporated a depth proportionate to the work's exterior length.

The opening into the work's interior was framed by thick steel edges and was approximately two metres tall. Yet with a forty-five degree lean from the horizontal of the floor, the actual height of the opening was lowered without affecting its evident size. As such, this opening was indicative of an entrance, half rising half sinking, which was utilized to formally suggest that its interior descended beneath the gallery floor. A prominent feature itself, the angled positioning of this entrance was designed to engage the viewer with a reading of its whole distinct shape, while also setting up a central, frontal location for which one could gaze directly into its interior.
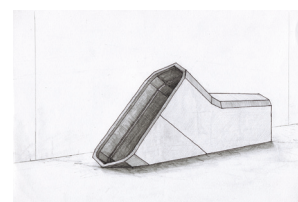

Figure 84. Michael Needham. Sketch for the third work (for **Uncontained**), 2007.
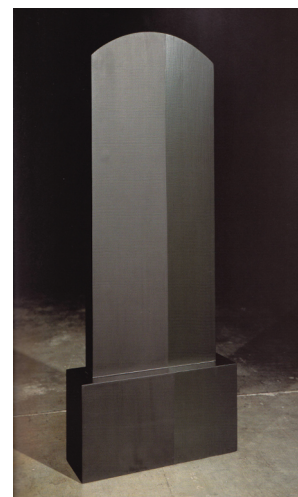
Figure 85. Anne Truitt, **Southern Elegy**, 1962. Painted wood, 119 x 53 x 18 cm.

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[60] Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part 1," *Artforum*, 4: 6 (February 1966)

Viewing from this central position, a further distinctive feature was its beveled Gothic arch. Not only did this frame its entrance and designate an important 'thickness' of the whole object via its steel edges (much like 'The Pod'), but it also suggested an imaginative resonance to the entrance of an underground tomb.

Figures 86 and 87. Michael Needham. Untitled third piece (for **Uncontained** Part 2) as taken in studio, Sept 2007; as taken at Conical, Oct 2007. Painted steel, fibre cement, ink, ash, 330 x 150 x 75 cm

Further emphasizing the feature of this work's entrance, was a formal repetition of its frame. On peering inside this opening, ribs of rusted steel were clearly visible, while stained cement sheeting lined the spaces in between. These ribs gradually receded back through the work's interior until they were drowned out by the lack of light therein. With the mirrored/inverted Gothic arch as an entrance, and a ribbed column then articulating its inner space, this became a prominent attribute suggesting a human-sized and tomb-like vaginal shape and cavity.

Standing back from the entrance, this deep-black *inner space* stood in clear contrast against its starkly shaped aperture and thick, firmly stated walls. In this regard, its interior space was rendered dense, voluminous, and somewhat limitless, while the work's overall blackness and volume of presence then seemed to exist as a thick ominous shadow against the stark (white-walled) interior of the gallery. As a 'tomb', 'womb' or even 'wound', all of these readings were primarily informed by its *entrance*, which clearly played a critical role in marking a threshold between the austere sculptural qualities of its exterior and the detail of its inner space or sanctum (here as the central contemplative focus of the work). It was thus inside the work, within its form as a *vessel*, that these resonances were both conceptually and sculpturally

carried. It was then also within this vessel that the central proposition of the work was outlined: that of a 'tomb/womb/wound' bound into the one physical form.

Practically speaking, the artwork came together within a couple of months of designing and fabricating and it generally turned out as planned. In its construction however, it was necessary to produce it in four main sections and about twenty other smaller (though accumulatively heavy) pieces. This allowed it to be taken into the gallery by hand through the tight stairway access before it was (re)bolted together. Once reconstructed in the space and with its interior lining appropriately attached, it sat as a single form, heavy and immovable.

✳

Besides the singular shape of the work, a subtle ambiguity between womb and tomb became further apparent through a perceivable dialectical relation with the bare concrete monument (the 'casket/plinth/crypt') in the adjacent room. The concrete sculpture was like a singular column carrying a muted symbolism of the phallus (relating dialectically to the womb), but now failed and fallen as a horizontal coffin (indicative of a tomb). In my own reading, a dialectical relation was then more fundamentally pronounced, wherein both works could be interpreted firstly as a receiving place for the departed and secondly as a conceiving place for the reborn. This identified a related ambiguity within the already recurring theme of the *crypt*, which when considered in context with a Christianized view on death, appeals to death not as a final endpoint but as a beginning of life beyond the limitations of corporeality.

In considering this bi-fold relation/ambiguity of the crypt as a single sculptural image, this also gives rise to rethinking 'the crypt' as a kind of 'womb of the earth': the material place from which humankind was born. This quickly enables additional dialectical speculation concerning the tomb of Christ, where the image of Christ receding back *into* the earth after his death is like a 'consummation' of his corporeality.[61] Yet in death, 'corporeality' equally *ends* at this moment; the 'body' is no longer
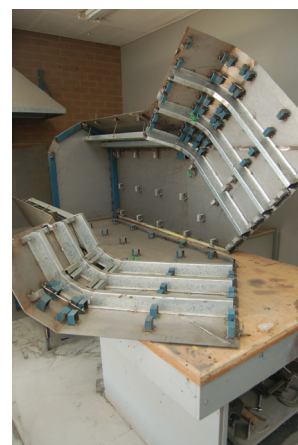
Figures 88 and 89. Untitled third work (for **Uncontained** Part 2) under construction. Artist's studio, 2007.

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[61] Or 'consummation' could at least be said in relation to Christ's 'mission', his completed submission to the 'will of God', i.e. in the words of Christ on the cross, "It is finished".

'embodied'. Nevertheless, death (or rather the dead body) is the final authentication of a lived life. According to the very Christianized dualism between the mortal body and the eternal soul, this infers that as Christ's *body* recedes back into the earth, his *spirit/soul* comparably also 'returns' to a place/state of the immaterial. And perhaps where Christ 'returns' in death, is into an *abyss*, akin to the 'formless and empty darkness' preceding the earth's creation: the void from which 'creation' (including humankind) was allegedly conceived via the 'fleshing-out' of God's spoken Word? [62] Such imagery paints the death of Christ and the burial of his body as a symbolic reversal of Adam being created *out* of the earth, or of Creation being made from nothing. In turn, the womb/tomb of death is a *portal*, a 'passage between'[63] life and death, between death and what possibly takes place thereafter. The crypt in this light evokes not only a space, but a combined movement as a single, recurring motif: one that is still indelibly tied to the materiality of creation as a kernel of existence. Here, Christ's entry into the world, which forecloses his entry into the tomb, is also a re-entry into the womb of the earth, the place from which a profound inauguration of a new beginning occurs.

As far as the exhibition *Uncontained* was concerned, a sculptural/conceptual body-sized vaginal space in dialogue with a closed concrete coffin, also presented the recurring motif of the crypt in a variety of basic, dualistically opposite ways, i.e. as open or closed, empty or occupied, waiting or exhumed, entering or exiting. Beyond these more immediately recognizable associations - yet still emanating primarily from the work's formal qualities - there was also the echo of the gallery's own doorway and stairwell. This indirectly located both works as existing within the crypt-like conduit/container of the gallery's architecture itself. Thus the pair of works subtly fed off the space in which they were installed, and to a degree, cross-infected it with their own recurring play of the container and the crypt. What was played out was a kind of threshold between the concealed and the disclosed.

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[62] Genesis 1:2. Also, a theology of the pre-existence of Christ – based largely on the opening of John's Gospel, which evidently revisits Genesis – claims that Christ was present with God (as the Word) at the beginning of Creation.

[63] In respect to Luce Irigaray's feminist re-reading of Plato's Cave – a shrewd analysis which identifies that a dominant metaphysical portrayal of the 'womb' or "*hystera*" (through the Allegory of the Cave and its mode of representing truth) has long been unquestioned – the womb, as a space, is also "forgotten path" or 'neglected passage', of which its reclaimed significance certainly helps to outline the transitional and transformational place/space of the womb being positively analogous to the tomb/crypt. Quoting Irigaray: "The entrance to the cave takes the form of a long passage, corridor, neck, conduit, leading upward, toward the light of the sight of day, and the whole of the cave is oriented in relation to the opening" (Irigaray goes on to say that once having entered the cave and its 'function of representation', one's 'bearings are lost': the *passage* leading into or out of the cave is in turn forgotten, in the one-directional movement and gaze towards the back screen of the cave. One is then trapped – enclosed – within the cave's limiting representational operation). "[…]But there is also a path… the path *in between* [the light of day and the back of the cave] the "go-between" path that links two "worlds," two modes, two methods, two measures of replicating, representing, viewing… This is a key passage… for when the passage is forgotten… it will found, subtend, sustain the hardening of all dichotomies, categorical differences, clear-cut distinctions, absolute discontinuities, all the confrontations of irreconcilable representations. Between the "world outside" and the "world inside," between the "world above" and the "world below."…Between truth and shadow… Between the intelligible and the sensible… All oppositions that assume the *leap* from a worse to a better. An ascent… upward… But what has been forgotten in all these oppositions… is how to pass through the passage, how to negotiate it – the forgotten transition. The corridor, the narrow pass, the neck". Irigaray's re-reading of the cave – emphasizing the metaphorical *passage* of the womb - makes way for seeing 'in-between-ness' in the crypt, a positive deferral of death rather than an endpoint or dichotomous delineator of difference, whether of an embodied life or of representation and its limitations. In much simpler though still metaphorical words, the womb-like crypt is an *entrance*, not a dead-end cave. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans., Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 243-47.

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In ruminating about holes and thresholds in relation to the divine in art, it would be amiss not to acknowledge the work of the well-known, Indian-born, British artist Anish Kapoor. Encountering his work and reading about its context, one can easily see how multiple dualisms can be attributed to it.[64] This is made clear when considering that the majority of Kapoor's work generally entails some form of orifice or protrusion (or both), which allows for the indexing of a number of immediate binarisms, namely; exterior/interior, positive/negative, empty/full, open/closed, known/unknown, male/female etc. As art historian Germano Celant has observed, these oppositions, particularly in regard to Kapoor's sustained interest in them, effectively reveal a kind of driving force behind the work. Through ascribing the Latin term *sacerdos* to the artist (meaning 'priest', as "giver of the sacred"), Celant notes how the artist seeks to 'rediscover lost meaning', to rediscover "the lost image" by 'giving unitary form' to what has been "scattered and spent".[65] In this regard, the driving force behind Kapoor's work is to 'reunite' complimentary oppositions and thus to 'consecrate the materials, forms and spaces', which make visible a "magnetism of the dialogue" occurring within them.[66] One of the key recurring oppositions then attributed to Kapoor's work, is that of the human and the divine.[67]

In the 'uniting' or 'reuniting' of such binarisms, there is a returning, underlying question of what this proposition actually means, for this can suggest that there is a joining of opposites, even of a canceling-out of the difference between them. What this then infers is a kind of leveling, or flattening of a dialogic energy. However, bringing opposites together is merely stabilizing their push-pull relationship in order to reconsider their tensive partnership. For example, a question to ask is: How is it possible to know the creative force of 'life' without 'death'? Similarly, how is it possible to know the bounds of the 'finite' without the 'infinite' as its defining binary? Clearly these relationships hold their meaning through the dialectical framework that they perpetuate. That is, an opposite is perpetually born from its complimentary partner, upon which its meaning depends. They are in this sense already joined *and* separated and so cannot merge to the point of being nullified or rendered wholly inactive. In Kapoor's case, he doesn't simply join or merge oppositions: he 'reunites' them in the sense of recognizing their close proximity to one another. This is where their tension and further *possibility* of meaning lies, even in an actual deferral of fixed meaning. Hence Kapoor's drive as an artist seeks to play with the nature of meaning - and its experience - in dualistically defined symbolism, right where it occurs; "[an] opening requires a closing, a fullness wants a void, the limitless demands a limit".[68] As far as a 'divinity requires a humanity' (or

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[64] Germano Celant's essay "Artist as Sacerdos" (trans., Stephen Sartarelli, in *Anish Kapoor*, Milan: Charta), 1998, is an unwavering example of a reading of a play of opposites in Kapoor's practice.

[65] Ibid., XI.

[66] Ibid., XI-XII.

[67] Ibid., XII. Writing on Kapoor's work *1000 Names* (1979-80), Celant notes that Kapoor "…builds towers and pyramids to unite the heavenly and earthly, the human and the divine", an idea that effectively seeks to suspend a "…transit or passage (*in-betweenness*) from one dimension to another".

[68] Ibid., XIX.

a humanity calls for a divinity), Kapoor's play on the uniting of opposites, closely corresponds to the movement of Incarnation and its claimed *union* of dual natures.[69]

✳

A pertinent concept in Kapoor's work that continues to give a means of opening-up both possibilities of meaning and an alignment with my own work, is that of the 'womb'. What has been said to characterize the womb in particular, is Kapoor's 'voids', a recurring motif of the cavity or excavation, which is either carved into sculptural form or intervenes within architectural space so as to elicit (or give birth to) a whole phenomenological encounter with the viewer.[70] As these voids are often internally rendered with raw pigment to absorb a maximum amount of light, each of these cavities commonly appear as a kind of limitless black hole (even though these are not always black, but monotone nonetheless).

A poignant though understated work to consider is Kapoor's *The Healing of St. Thomas*, 1989 (see figure 90). In this piece, a small (twelve-inch) slit is cut directly into a clean white wall. The inner space of this 'gash' is lined with intense red pigment and one accordingly reads it as a kind of wound or vagina. Obviously through the title, there is a direct reference to the account of Thomas, one of Jesus' disciples who (according to the Gospel of John), did not believe in Christ's resurrection prior to seeing

Figure 90. Anish Kapoor, *The Healing of St. Thomas*, 1989. Fibreglass, plaster, pigment, gouache. 35 x 18 x 2 cm.

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[69] With a similar union of opposites claimed in the doctrine of the dual nature of Christ (conceived to bridge a 'lost meaning' or 'union' between God and humankind), one can recall prominent 'Death of God' theologian Thomas J.J. Altizer's structural formulation of the whole event of the Incarnation, together with its somewhat unintentional allowance for ambiguity in its paradoxical nature. In the words of Mark C. Taylor, Altizer says that "[t]he Incarnation [here designating a broader kenotic *process* of the 'self-emptying' of God in creation, not just in the bodily form of Christ] is the negation of original unity, and the Crucifixion is the negation of this negation, which resurrects lost unity". In short, this formulaic definition still lends itself an ambiguity by which it is also opened up for a much broader reflection of meaning both within and outside a metaphysically prescriptive Christian orthodoxy. Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 202; see also Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

[70] As early as Kapoor's work *1000 Names* (1979-80), Celant comments on the "womb of the floor" (an "antimonumental logic") from which Kapoor's sculptural form emerges, as well as a 'womb' as a '*cavea*', "serving as a centre of gravity", which anticipates "the convergence" or creative flux between certain binaries. Implicit here is an ongoing symbolism and acknowledgement of fertility, which is then made more explicit in the recurring shapes of slits, ovals, domes etc, each evocative of the female body or its reproductive organs. As Celant articulated, Kapoor's "works present the dome as an absolute symbol of the whole as sacred enclosure and uterus, locus of the feminine and the Great Mother, inexhaustible reservoir of psychic and erotic energy, source and origin of all becoming, all evolution". Extending from this and drawing back to the relation between the womb and the void, is the womb of Kali, the Mother goddess of Hinduism and symbolized as 'black' in Sanscrit. Germano Celant, "Artist as Sacerdos," in *Anish Kapoor* (1998), XIV-XXIII, XXVII; Anthony Bond: Publications, "Imagining the Void: an article for *Linq Magazine,* University of Northern Queensland," Art Gallery of NSW, http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/staff/anthonybond/articles/2004/imagining_void (accessed 27th August 2008)

and touching his wounds.[71] In this respect, it can be assumed that Kapoor metaphorically offers to the viewer a sense of grasping Christ's wound/s, along with his *carn*ality, via its visual and physical/fleshly qualities. Allegorically, a healing of the wound of doubt is then also evoked.[72] However, despite being an observable, physical intervention - apparent through sight or touch - this work is effectively made less tactile through its use of pigment, which as mentioned earlier, absorbs light and so presents what is almost pure colour as opposed to recognizable surface quality. In other words, the intensity of colour renders its internal crevice piercingly infinite as the work's tactility is 'dematerialized'. The symbolic positioning of the work is then emphasized, as a withholding or muting of materially tactile values take place. With a sensed kind of 'immateriality', 'there in the wall,' this in turn perplexes the whole experience of 'grasping' the work. The viewer is pushed into the realm of the conceptual, abstract and enigmatic. Put into effect by the use of this pigment, Kapoor's work is then not just a wound but an opening in which a sense of the sublime is both enclosed and disclosed.[73] This accordingly adds a further play on the term '*wound*' as understood from a prophetic understanding of Christ, for Kapoor's work quite sensitively evokes a 'wound by which we are healed'.[74] As with the Christian understanding of the 'work' of the cross, this suggests that such a wound is like a threshold to transcendence.

Figure 91. Anish Kapoor, *Memory*, 2008. Installation view at the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin. Cor-Ten steel. 14.5 x 8.97 x 4.48 m.

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[71] John 20:24-28. This also indicates that Thomas' own expectations, from within the 'void' of Jesus' death, were confounded. Christ returning from the dead was an unexpected scenario.

[72] "Homi Bhabha and Anish Kapoor, in Conversation," in *Anish Kapoor*, exh. cat. (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1993), 62; cited in Germano Celant, "Artist as Sacerdos," (1998), XXXIV.

[73] It is worth mentioning that Kapoor's well known series *1000 Names* (1979-1980), was an extended exploration of covering various sculptural shapes – protruding from the floor and wall – with raw pigment, thus giving them an intense, vibrant quality of form whilst also subduing the tactility of their surface detail. This references a widespread practice within Hinduism and Buddhism, whereby statues of deities are covered with coloured pigment as part of daily worship, and in order to acknowledge the presence of the deity that dwells there.

[74] Isaiah 53: 5 "…he was pierced for our transgressions,…by his wounds we are healed".

A more recent work of Kapoor's, which has also been said to evoke unambiguous associations to the womb,[75] is *Memory* (2008), a work commissioned by the Deutsche Bank and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Guggenheim. This work is a large, ominous, cocoon-like chamber constructed with Cor-Ten steel (weighing twenty-four-tonnes), which openly confesses the rusty patina of its exoskeleton. On this level, one's encounter immediately begins with an undeniable measure of tactility, particularly as contrasted against the small clean cut in the wall of *The Healing of St. Thomas*. Lying on its side and occupying floor-to-ceiling and wall-to-wall space, its absurd presence is a reminder of the oversized apple as pictured in Rene Magritte's *The Listening Room* (1952).

Figure 92. Anish Kapoor, ***Memory***, 2008. Installation view at the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin. Cor-Ten steel. 14.5 x 8.97 x 4.48 m.

As part of its size and monumental presence, one of Kapoor's key considerations in this work is that it is to be encountered from different positions; from one view is an end, from another view its opposite end is seen (from an alternative entrance into the space), and the last view is from another room altogether, which allows one to peer into its belly through a square window (see figure 92). With all these views on offer, viewers are encouraged to 'circumambulate' the space, so that they can peruse the spatial context of the work while looking at the same object from different angles. This effectively allows the viewer to discover existing details as well as additional qualities or components of the work's formal/ structural presence. This is a quality with which I can certainly identify in regard to my own practice, for it allows the viewer their own space – their own bodily experience – with which to intuitively explore the physical proposition of the work in its display context. Inviting other additional details to be discovered simply as part of the work's presence, allows the viewer to engage, to negotiate, to consider and reconsider the work from all angles, which accumulatively helps to *extend* the experience of becoming familiar with it. Similarly, for Kapoor's *Memory*, once the viewer has circumnavigated its raw, towering exterior, the work's dark contrasting interior is opened up to the viewer gaze. As an artist, I can see this as an expedient strategy for keeping a particular detail – such as an inner space (or outer exterior) - charged for contemplative attention. In other words, by emphasizing a material *exterior*, a more 'immaterial' quality of an *interior* finds its counterpoint (and vice-versa).[76] In this example, a 'dematerialized interiority' must "clash" with the hard, sculptural qualities of the edges that frame it.[77]
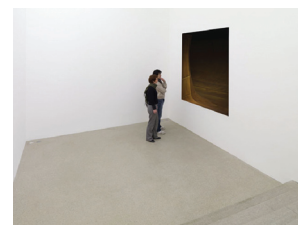
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75 Ossian Ward, "It's about memory and sculpture" A Studio Visit with Anish Kapoor," *Deutsche Bank ArtMag,* 52, Feature. http://www.db-artmag.com/en/52/feature/memory-and-sculpture---a-studio-visit-with-anish-kapoor/ (accessed 18th June 2009)

76 Ibid.

77 Germano Celant, "Artist as Sacerdos," (1998), XXVIII.

In returning once again to the theme of womb, it is important to acknowledge a more explicit relation between Kapoor's practice, and my own sculptural work conceived as a tomb, womb and wound. Celant astutely noted that "[a]t the centre of all Kapoor's art lies the pregnancy of the absent body – shadow, aura and void. …he seeks a mirror-state in which the artist becomes a nomad, the protagonist of "mnemic migrations" among the formal and material languages with which he asserts a presence in the world".[78] Of this, the concept of the womb seems to be clearly present in a metaphorical sense, indicating that sculptural form can designate an 'infinite' space of blackness, combined with a creative potential to conceive what might seems to come from nothing, as perceived from a basic state of 'being'.[79] Speaking to these concepts, it is through my own work that I have sought to sculpturally manifest, to 'capture' and to carry a void-like space: something like a "zero point of creation". Likewise, the womb in Kapoor's work is positioned as a kind of physical and conceptual "vessel": creative, mysterious and sacred in its immaculate presentation of form. This allows for the *new*, the non-familiar (or previous unknown), to actuate out of an enclosed space that opens up. At the same time, a fundamental binary is maintained - and played - which outlines the limitations of the human condition, a framework that denotes a correspondence between the nature of corporeality and the physicality of sculpture.[80] By creating an interior focal space – nurturing contemplation in its enclosed physical frame (a kind of alternative "mind/body space") - together with an emphasized frontal encounter (with the viewer's own mirrored-absent body encompassed in materiality), Kapoor frames an "emptiness of metaphysical vertigo".[81] This is the space, like a psychological vacuum, that the viewer is given to enter. 'The *vessel* therefore holds a kind of absolute/other space where the wonders and secrets of metamorphosis converge'.[82] I.e. one's sense of self, or rather a sense of one's body, is strangely evacuated. It is a personal "shrine",[83] where the embodied life is momentarily left behind.

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As far as my own work is concerned (in this chapter and in regard to the series of works for this thesis) I have attempted to both grasp and present, through sculptural means, an 'internal' space like that of Kapoor's. As has been shown, this is essentially a 'device' that can be used for reconsidering sculpture, not simply as an object featuring a physically internal space, but importantly as an intervention *in* physical

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[78] Ibid. XVII.

[79] Kapoor notes; "One of the things that has always had a very strong pull for me has been what I might call a matriarchal view of creativity, of energy. It seems to me that that is towards darkness, perhaps toward the womb… Darkness is formless". Anish Kapoor, quoted in Constance Lewallen, "Anish Kapoor," interview, View VII no. 4, San Francisco (1991). 16; cited in Germano Celant, "Artist as Sacerdos," (1998), XXIX.

[80] Ibid., XXIV, XXVII.

[81] Ibid., XVIII, XXIX.

[82] Ibid., XXVII.

[83] Ibid., XXIX.

space, which *opens* a means of engagement or reflection with a corresponding interior space of the mind. It designates a space for contemplation, framed by physical components. In this respect, such a device is equally applicable to Gober's work in both a physical and conceptual sense according to different examples of work in his practice. While this concept and function (of a designated space for reflection) is certainly not new as far as its use in sculpture (or artwork) in general, it is nevertheless important to articulate that it remains a significant feature in contemporary art and appreciation. Furthermore, and extending beyond a physically composed internal space, such a strategic device outlines that a sculptural form is a manifestation, of which its physical proposition - in its immediate physical qualities accessed through the perceptual senses of the body – fundamentally *causes* one to negotiate and to question its presence, its 'being there'. What is it? How can it be categorized? For example: Is it a tomb? A womb? A deep, dark body-space? Depending on what categorization a sculptural form (or any object or image) falls between, if such default questions cannot find an easy answer, it will encourage (and perhaps even sustain) a more abstract mode of thinking. To then think outside it, inside it or through to an indeterminate psychological space, this is where the concepts (in this example) of the 'tomb', the 'womb', or, the 'passage', the 'portal' etc, can be either redefined in context to what the sculptural form appears to represent, or they can define (or redefine) or endlessly defer the categorization of the object and its material/psychological proposition. Or indeed *both* the object and its relating concepts can be redefined or deferred, and amalgamated into the work's whole implicative proposition. In this way, both the object and its concepts become inseparable in the viewing experience and its attempted categorization. In short, the object seems to fall outside its physically determinate matter, even though it is through its material and formal properties that an 'interior' experience is produced and upheld. Such is the 'vessel' of sculptural form to which I aspire, and no less with any incorporation of an open interior space.

CRYPT

When Claes Oldenburg dug a grave in New York's City's Central Park back in 1967, he took the idea of sculpture into a whole new direction. He inverted it in a stark anti-monumental gesture.[1] This was achieved not only by erasing the physical stature of sculpture in its usually positive and claimed 'self-referential' presence, but also in the excavation of a "recessed box" akin to an inversion of a plinth: a sculpture's foundation for supporting and announcing its presence.[2] Furthermore, its temporal nature - given that it was filled in almost as soon as it was dug - only reified a kind of counter-statement of non-permanence', which opposes what large public sculptures and their materials such as metal, stone or concrete usually suggest.

However, Oldenburg's *Hole*, or *Placid Civic Monument*, was not a negation of presence. It was a different kind of presence utilizing the permanence/impermanence of dirt; of the ground displaced, as well as the proposition of a temporarily opened hole, a disclosed-enclosure where a new space was created 'in the present'. If left as a hole in its public setting, it would have certainly been quite a provocative work to encounter, like a waiting *womb* in the earth.[3] Yet perhaps more fundamental than this was the political context of the work's timing, for in October of 1967, the rising body count from the Vietnam War was a subject and source of increasing protest against America's involvement (and nature of involvement). In this regard, Oldenburg's counter-monument of the *Hole* was precisely an open grave; brought to New York City's Central Park as a reference to the deadly nature of war, carved into American soil. It was a 'counter-monument' to the common memorials of war, in that it didn't valorize sacrifice and at the same

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[1] Art historian Suzaan Boettger noted that Oldenburg's *Hole* (otherwise known as *Placid Civic Monument*) was effectively "…a condensation of new sculptural ideas of both large size and loose natural materials then being investigated in the United States and Europe", as well as being an "almost apocryphal predecessor", a "pioneer" of 'making a work of art go unnoticed' (in its applied ephemerality), and so "encapsulating the fundamentals of a genre of contemporary sculpture" (namely, that of Earthworks). Despite this however, in terms of taking sculpture into a whole new direction, was that according to Boettger, "Oldenburg's Hole was the first contemporary sculpture made directly in the ground." In this regard, and by the fact that the exhibition in which the work was made (*Sculpture in Environment,* Oct 1967) was explicitly 'large-scale sculptures' - loudly making their presence known within public space - this indicates that Oldenburg's *Placid Civic Monument* was positioned precisely as a 'countermonument'. Such a counter-monument can not only be seen in relation to the usual large scale and presence of public sculpture, but also (as indicated in the main text shortly), specifically in relation to the very common sculptural monument of war, usually erected to stand as a visual structure of power, despite its actual role in memorializing the loss of life in war. In this case, *Hole* was a clear act of protest to the loss of life occurring at the time in Vietnam. It is also interesting to note that this work was part of a group of sculptural interventions by Oldenburg, conceived as "fantasy monuments", and that this was the first to be realized. Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1-2, 6, 8.

[2] Ibid. 6-9. Boettger similarly observed that Oldenburg excavated a hole "to create a sculpture that consisted of a recession into the ground instead of a projection upward from it", with 'inversion' thus being a primary intention, characteristic of Oldenburg's "pop satire". Suzaan Boettger, "A Found Weekend, 1967; Public Sculpture and Anti-Monuments," in *Art in America*, Jan, 2001. In regard to this subsequent negative space, akin to an inverted plinth, Sergiusz Michalski also noted that it was Oldenburg's intention for his hole "…to serve as a negative of a prospective socle" ('socle' being a plinth, in anticipation that memorials for the Vietnam war would later be erected). Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage 1870-1997* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), 175.

[3] Boettger clarifies that Oldenburg saw the links between *Hole* and female genitalia, not only by references in his notes to "Virgin ground", "wound" and "Inside the body of the Earth", but also in respect to the hole's polar opposition to the nearby monument known as Cleopatra's Needle, a well known phallic symbol on the American landscape, against which his work was quite obviously anti-monumental. Suzaan Boettger, "A Found Weekend, 1967; Public Sculpture and Anti-Monuments," *Art in America*, Jan (2001).

time subdue the loss of life that war entails. It opened up a *grave*-space as one might open up an existing (or deepening) wound.[4]

Oldenburg's work thereafter, filled in by the dirt and leaving behind only ephemeral scarring in the ground, humbly yet provocatively - and psychologically for the American public - marked the spot where this space/wound opened up. Its action of digging and then re-burying was as much a case of hiding as it was revealing what lay buried. Its gesture of an event-erased – a kind of mythical happening - recalls the previous lives of the soldiers, whose deaths now render them long-since missing; scattered, buried or forgotten in distant graves, or displaced thereafter, only knowable as names inscribed into plaques. As the actual ground subsequently healed over, its mode of absence remains part of what transpired. In this sense, physically and psychologically, a 'presence of an absence' can still be said to resonate at the Central Park site, insofar as it is at least recalled through art history.

Figure 93. Claes Oldenburg (kneeling) and ***Placid Civic Monument*** in Central Park, October 1, 1967.

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[4] Historian Keith Beattie writes: "The divisive impact of the war in Vietnam upon American culture has commonly been defined as a "wound" (also as a disabling', 'condition of impotence'). Elucidating this, he also points out that "to wound" is fundamentally the "object of war". However, even more poignant is his statement that "the war in Vietnam did not cause the "wound." Rather, the war exposed the existence of "wounds" already present within American culture", and where "healing" becomes ideologically positioned to unite an already ruptured culture. Keith Beattie, *The Scar that Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 7, 11-15, 17.

As Oldenburg's grave-hole was instantly delegated to the past (or to memory), it also clearly engages with another corresponding idea of the memorial,[5] a role usually assigned to the monument.[6] But in doing so, the work in its temporary presentation of negative space and subsequent 'rectification', and in its anti-monumental gesture anyway, eludes a major critique of the physicality of the sculptural monument. As Robert Musil is renown for saying, "[t]here is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument".[7] Or, as James E. Young further articulated:

> "… a monument turns pliant memory into stone… it is this "finish" that repels our attention, that makes a monument invisible. It is as if a monument's life in the communal mind grows as hard and polished as its exterior form, its significance fixed as its place in the landscape. For monuments at rest like this – in stasis – seem to present themselves as eternal parts of the landscape, as naturally arranged as nearby trees of rock formations."[8]

Accordingly, if the obverse of Musil's critique and Young's clarifications can be applied, the anti-monumental gesture of negative space in Oldenburg's work, would suggest that *Placid Civic Monument* potentially and somewhat contradictorily, *activates* the memorial more than the cold and static permanence of a classical monument. Confirming this notion would be the fact that one's image of it - processed in the *interior* of the mind - is *not* blocked by materialization or allayed by an external physical object (apart from perhaps its photographic reproduction serving to confirm what occurred in the first place). This means that Oldenburg's work arguably facilitates memory in a way that is sympathetic to a further corresponding critique of the monument by Pierre Nora: "Modern memory… relies entirely on the materiality of the trace […]. The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding of outward signs".[9] What this seems to articulate is the importance of allocating a *space* for remembrance, a space for invoking: for imaginative contemplation. As has been implied or reframed a number of times over in this thesis, this is a space for invoking and considering what is (or has become) immaterial; meaning that what is remembered remains as a psychological trace (as opposed to a trace that is reliant on materiality). This concept encourages reserving and utilizing a designated retrieval space in the mind, which is not unlike the idea of faith and how it produces and appeals to a valued sense of presence amidst a kind of material absence.

But of course, Oldenburg's work exists in the past and so its present *invisibility* means that it has already quite literally blended in with 'the landscape'. Its actual absence fundamentally carries a failing trait of the monument as a corresponding *physical* limitation to memory. That is, those future generations who fall outside a knowledge of political and/or art history, specifically in New York City during the

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[5] Even if only in respect to art history, a 'site of reading as memorial space' can be taken from the Yizkor Bikher memorial books, of which James E. Young makes the point that these were the first form of media employed to remember the stories of the Holocaust, and so serve as "symbolic tombstones" for those that were lost. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 7.

[6] Ibid., 3-4. Young defines the monument as "…always a kind of memorial", even while it/they are assumed to be "celebratory markers of triumphs and heroic individuals". They "commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings".

[7] Robert Musil, "Monuments", in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans., Peter Wortsman (New York: Penguin Books, 1987, 1995), 61.

[8] James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (1993), 13-14.

[9] Nora further states that "[m]emory has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstitution. Its new vocation is to record; delegating to the archive the responsibility of remembering". Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," trans. Marc Rousebush, *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory. (University of California Press, Spring 1989), 13.

Vietnam War, are unable to remember Oldenburg's *Hole*, or consider its meaningful space. It appears that in this more immediate limitation, the anti-monumental characteristics of *Placid Civic Monument* are sustained; they are propelled by the action of self-abnegation, i.e. of physically canceling-out its action of opening through its reburial.[10] At this point, one could also say that there was never any criterion for retaining a 'materialized' memory in Oldenburg's opened and closed hole. Like that of a hidden crypt, an inaccessible tomb, or the monument of the tombstone that designates it, it "keeps its own past a tightly held secret".[11] However, in accordance with this very reflection – itself as a means of remembrance and hence re-opening a closure - any seeming annulment of the event or its significance, based on a remaining material artifact, begs to be revisited. It is the *underlying subject*, humbly *and* overtly contained within Oldenburg's *Placid Civic Monument*, which has always remained open. Though in a sense, this subject could only be practically accessed by digging it up (physically and psychologically). This is the counter-monument/memorial of the grave-hole itself, as opposed to the protruding (yet condemned to be 'invisible') material form of the monument.

The grave-hole is a negative space. It is a strange container of death; a space that swallows me when I depart/die. For me, Oldenburg's *Hole* remains one more image recurring among many - as a premonition - of a waiting grave. This is far from being a morbid, fearful take on such a space. Nor does this indicate that the 'grave' itself should be dreaded. On the contrary, it is a space that intrinsically cultivates curiosity, haunting more from a sense of intrigue than from a paralyzing anxiety of death. In this sense, I can certainly appreciate the desire to go there: to actually dig into the dirt, to simply lie there in a musty hole and listen to the inner workings of the earth. In this regard, Oldenburg's version of the grave-hole (akin to a symbolic action of opening and closing the negative of 'death') seems to re-open a kind of kenotic language of lowering – of digging down - in order to possibly cancel out (or at least undercut) some other – perhaps petrified - overarching figure of power. Whether this annulment refers to a power of death or the power 'announced' by the (often phallic) sculptural monument, digging a hole as such is an action that takes place on the ground, in the ground. It is a relinquishment of power (of divine or humanistic heights) and of a curious anxiety of mortality, within the materially grounding and homely site of the earth.

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In considering Oldenburg's grave-hole, there is a poignant return to the reflection that began at my grandfather's funeral. Here, I find myself looking into the past and looking into a hole as I stand beside

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[10] Michalski noted that the logic of Oldenburg's hole was 'to annihilate both the negative form and the grave'; a concept that might be assumed to commemorate nothing, while at the same time positively drawing critical attention to the work's doubled negative, akin to the body-spaces of Whiteread or Nauman. Sergiusz Michalski *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage 1870-1997* (1998), 175.

[11] James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (1993), 14.

a coffin. In my own mind, what seems to stand out is not a memory of this particular funeral event as such, but a lingering *image* of the hole, which frames something much more than an isolated event of the past. Confidently calling to a dark and unknown place, this image seems to define an inevitability that is out of my control like an estranged homecoming. It gives shape to the funeral event that will re-occur many times over and to which I will undoubtedly bear witness in gradually burying family and friends (or else not bear witness, and be buried by family and friends). Such reoccurrence seems not apparent with a more permanent visible image of a tombstone, because in comparison to the grave-hole, the image of a tombstone seems to carry little premonitory weight. In this way, the image of the empty grave-hole harbours ominous undertones of impending re-encounter, even though the space of the hole itself is only ever a temporary physical thing. In this light, it seems that where the monument attempts to re-invoke the past in the service of memory, the counter-monument of the hole has an ability to invoke something possibly more inevitable, something more pervasive, in that it is both repeatedly encountered in the present historical context and foreshadows the future. Though only a temporary hole in the context of a funeral, its sense of lingering suggests that it predominantly exists outside history and can't be tangibly grasped. For me, I perceive such a trait of intangibility not because I outlive *it* (as a memory that fades into the past), but because its all-pervasiveness, certainly *outlives me*. In other words, with an increasing quality of 'otherness' i.e. of living apart from me, this image of a grave-hole also harbours the sense that I am subservient to it, rather than it being subservient to me, as would be the case if it were just a visual memory. Ultimately then, this image signals an *other* that is the 'shadow of death'. This *other* signals a death in my *self* through the realization of my corporeal condition, especially as it arises in connection to standing alongside a coffin or grave-hole.[12]

This image, together with the reflection it carries, leads me to think of some of the under-workings behind what has been described as a 'specular relation' or 'mirror play' between self and other.[13] In particular, this is the concept of seeing oneself *in* the *other*, seeing oneself *as* the *other* and consequently the feeling that one can have of 'standing outside oneself', which generates a peculiar objectification and rumination upon the human condition.

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[12] Extrapolating on the idea of 'death as other/master', Mark C. Taylor observes how humanistic atheism - in seeking a 'death of God' and presuming to supplant God in the process - ends up experiencing God (wholly other) as death. Here, the limitations of 'self-deified' humankind meet 'death as absolute master'. What this suggests is that the humanist-atheist effort to supplant God is ultimately an effort to deny death, and this being only more evident because the confrontation with oneself is a confrontation with one's own mortality, for "…the death of God is at the same time the death of self". Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 20-25.

[13] Ibid., 23-25. According to the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, there is a "primordial Discord" revealed through the relationship one initially develops with their image, as reflected through the mirror. What is here defined as the "mirror stage" (primarily concerning the early development of a child), when a reflection of oneself is identified, a realization takes place where one's own image is seen, 'captured' in the mirror. This inaugurates a "split", effectively between self and the image in the mirror, and therefore is a "split" between the self and the image that is consequently reflected in the gaze of the other. In a sense, the perception of self is 'doubled', fragmented. The analysis then proposes that the self thereafter is destined to attempt to 'resolve this discordance with his/her own reality'. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed In Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits, The First Complete Edition in English*, trans., Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 76-79. .

Helping to illustrate another shadowy other is not a hole in the dirt but a strange black objectified space all the same, which features in Stanley Kubrick's film, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). This is the monolith, a rectangular block of black, which encountered in its cinematic medium sings with a haunting and numinous presence. In my own mind, the monolith remains a vivid and enigmatic image of a specific (yet repeated) entity, as well as importantly, a deep – abyssal - inner space contained within it. As a viewer, there is a sense of the monolith living both outside as an external object, and within, as something existing within the interior of the mind. Either way, the narrative, rendered in an enigmatic display of sight and sound, sets up a kind of servile disposition towards it. No doubt owing to Kubrick's directorial magic combined with his strategy of feeding the viewer's imagination, while fictional, the monolith continues to haunt long after one has left the screen.[14]

Figure 94. Scene from "Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite," in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968.

Reflecting recently on my first encounter with *2001*, I was struck by an uncertainty between my memory and imagination concerning the nature and presence of the monolith as an image in my mind. In my mind it floats through the void of space. It is nomadic, mysteriously traveling from somewhere and arriving somewhere else.

Adding to the allusiveness of this image and re-watching the film to seek clarification, what stood out immediately was the cinematic screen itself prior to any register of visual imagery. This was a prolonged black 'empty' screen, which combined with the musical score, was clearly used to build anticipation in the audience. This *screen* seems to have left - perhaps more unconsciously - an impression in my mind of it being an object *and* a creative spatial void, into which I had projected my imagination, and into which the 'monolith' embodied later on in the film.[15] The image of the monolith, together with the haunting sound of its mysterious appearance or reappearance, arrival or discovery (as both burial and exhumation), is certainly worth further consideration. This is especially intriguing as far as
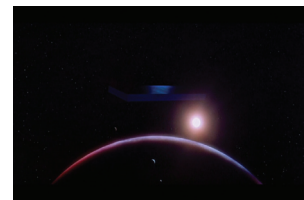
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14 Kubrick's strategy of encouraging the viewer's imagination, and leaving much alluded meaning unexplained is reflected in his often quoted statement "You are free to speculate as you wish about the philosophical and allegorical meaning of the film - and such speculation is one indication that it has succeeded in gripping the audience at a deep level". While originally quoted in an interview with Kubrick by Eric Norden in *Playboy Magazine* (September 1968), it is here sourced from its most accessible rendition in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, which can be taken as reflective of its degree of influence in lieu of its continued speculation across wider popular culture. Interpretations of 2001: A Space Odyssey, "Openness to Interpretation," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interpretations_of_2001:_A_Space_Odyssey#cite_note-0 (accessed 26th August 2008)

15 This is essentially a very similar observation as what film reviewer Rob Ager has referred to in his own analysis of *2001*. Here, Ager argues, "the monolith is a representation of the actual wideframe cinema screen, rotated 90 degrees… It refers to the spatial relationship between the screen, the audience and the audience's surroundings. So in the films opening and during the intermission, we are not looking at an empty black screen at all. We are looking directly at the surface of the monolith! …This widescreen two and a half hour presentation of sight and sound is in itself the stargate and we are its subjects'. Kubrick and Beyond the Cinema Frame, "The Meaning of the Monolith Revealed," Collativelearning.com http://www.collativelearning.com/2001%20chapter%202.html (accessed 26th August 2008)

the type of psychological encounter it proposes, and arguably foretells. I will briefly outline this as it is presented in the rest of the film.

When the monolith first appears on the screen, as a visually identifiable object, it just appears. In saying this, there was no floating or arriving or any context whatsoever in regards to how it came to exist. However, with this appearance came its announcing soundtrack, as if its auric presence similarly radiated sound: singing and humming in a chaotic yet harmonic spell. With its sound the monolith just appears one morning in prehistoric times near a tribe of apes. Prior to this, there is a strange close-up of an ape's face with rather distinctive and knowing human eyes looking from side to side. After the apes encounter the object, with much fear and brooding curiosity, it just as soon disappears in terms of its role in the screenplay. Though the narrative reference soon afterwards suggests that it has at least been remembered and become incorporated into the early evolutionary development of humankind.

The second time a monolith appears, is at a remote location on the moon. The scene in which it is staged, is no less strange than the slick alien geometry of the object itself, and where a large excavation site with lights and huge retaining walls designate the location. There in the bottom of a big pit, again with its auric presence humming, is the monolith unearthed. This one was apparently "deliberately buried".

On a mission to Jupiter two years later, a saga unfolds involving an artificially intelligent computer. Following this saga, 'Dave Bowman', a surviving crew member, is left to resume the real mission, which is to investigate a signal being sent from a third monolith near Jupiter's moon. With the soundtrack once again emanating, the monolith appears, and it is (for the first time) floating through space. It is orbiting, aligning between moons, planets and preparing for something akin to an eclipse. It is here that a strange morphing takes place, not only with the black object itself, but in what takes place as an apparent 'interior' of the monolith is entered. It seems this encounter between man and the monolith is an arrival, which is the beginning of yet another journey "beyond the infinite".
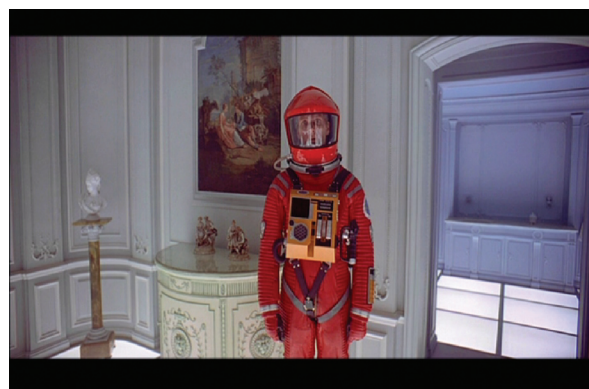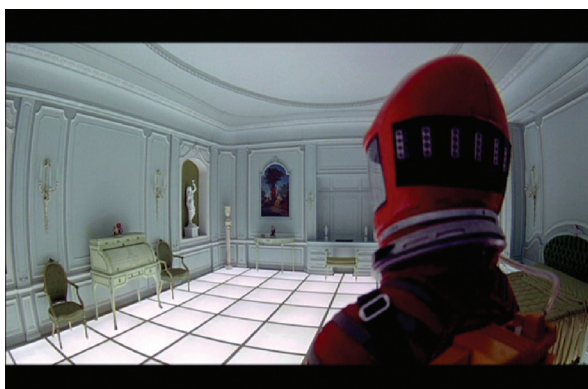
Figure 95 and 96. Scenes from "Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite," in *2001:A Space Odyssey*, 1968.

When the space/mind traveling comes to a halt, it is an arrival of an end and of what I can only interpret as a portrayal of some kind of 'out of body' experience, a kind of weird disembodiment represented through the surviving crewmember, Dave. In what looks like a strangely familiar French/Renaissance hotel room, is a mesmerizing scene of man seeing himself and of encountering his own death. All this

presumably still occurs *inside* the uncanny object-space of the monolith, even though a final monolith also appears, and from which Dave, the 'star-child', is born.

2001: A Space Odyssey contains and releases such grandness, offering a multifaceted allegory of the journey of humankind. From beginning to end, to beginning again, it is profoundly religious in its search for the infinite, and yet equally grim and antitheist in its reflection of an endless void reflected-in and characterized-by a drab picture of humanity without the guidance of the monolith. What is striking in this, is that it presents the idea of a deep and silent mysteriousness being embodied by a single and rather plain object; the kind of object in fact that one could have expected to encounter in a Minimalist exhibition during the same decade as the production of the film, particularly that of the black, painted steel sculptures by the artist Tony Smith.[16] In addition to this, the monolith's minimal box-like yet 'alien' form is obviously meant to represent some kind of gauge by which the limits of 'evolved' humanity are defined and/or measured. However, its signification of these limits (ultimately as death) is not solidified, for the allegory in which it appears suggests that the transcendence of these limits can only be discovered through the *facing* of one's mortality.

Figure 97. Tony Smith, **Wall** AP of 3, 1964. Steel, painted black, 243.8 x 548.6 x 61 cm.

As a box-shaped portal, the monolith exemplifies a theme that has been recurring thus far in relation to my series of containers: it is both an object and a space. This identifies a consistent trait of indeterminacy, which also highlights the corresponding theme of a liminal zone existing between life and death, and similarly between death and transcendence. It proposes (within its narrative) an encounter - with a 'material' object (the monolith/cinema screen) – in/through which seemingly ultimate boundaries are blurred; hence the mystery and sense of profundity recognizable in the monolith. Certainly the existence of the monolith remains part of the fictional narrative of a film, but this *trait* of blurred boundaries, composed as a material object, is a worthy insight into how mystery is both produced and invoked through a contemporary artistic medium. Such an insight is further extended, and perhaps historically grounded, when it finds a parallel with The Incarnation and its own proposition of blurred boundaries

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16 Obvious comparison's between Tony Smith's work and the monolith are *The Elevens Are Up* (1963), *Wall* (1964)(see figure 97), *New Piece* (1966), and arguably, the more well known earlier work *Die* (1962).

or united opposites in a materialized focal object. A trait of haunting seems to be the way they are both identified; their meaning – incorporated into an image - cannot easily settle.

✳

Carrying a strong resonance to the proposition of an encounter with the monolith is a rather esoteric musing that Maurice Blanchot offers in his essay "Two Versions of the Imaginary" (1955). After launching into a reflection - inaugurated by the question "But what is the image?" - Blanchot's 'image' takes on a figurative and physically applicable resemblance to that of an interior cavity, as seen by an inner vision, as well as that of an object seen from outside, akin to the reflective surface of a mirror. The 'image' then becomes ambiguously suggestive of an inner psychological space reflected back to whoever is encountering it:

> "The image speaks to us, and it seems to speak intimately to us about ourselves… in connection with each thing, it speaks to us less than the thing, but of us, and in connection with us, of less than us, of that less than nothing which remains when there is nothing."[17]

While being repetitive (and not necessarily less indecipherable), the 'image' Blanchot invokes seems to be a kind of conduit, which above all, articulates a reflected mortality. It is as if 'the image', by default, is a revealer of 'our' mortal condition.[18] It is like a *vision* by which one approaches a greater "void", or "remove" beyond life as well as death, yet one that is always framed within an intimate reflection – like a returning projection - that incorporates this greater void into ourselves.[19] In other words, in 'the image' one senses a much larger 'inaccessible' void, but through a kind of defaulting anthropomorphic adaptation, the *conduit* of 'the image' also enables one to see this void personally as one's own. This is illustrated, or at least no less designated, by the corresponding concept of the *crypt*: a physical and psychological space like that which the grave-hole symbolizes. As a kind of *locator* of our mortal condition, it could in this respect be said that 'the image' itself, as characterized by Blanchot, is born out of this indeterminate and shadowy unknown of the crypt. Furthermore, 'the image' also *frames* this shadowy unknown, making it a recurring focal subject, as if this 'unknown' of the crypt is a 'place', a 'thing' that can be *accessed through the image* – through contemplation of the image - and out of a desire to grasp it because it marks the sensed limits of known human existence. Complex and abstract as it appears, the 'image' is like a sign of death,[20] referring to the site of death that is the crypt.

17 Maurice Blanchot, "Two Versions of the Imaginary" in, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Essays and Literary Fiction,* trans., Lydia Davis, Paul Auster, Robert Lamberton (New York: Barrytown Ltd, 1999), 417.

18 Blanchot later describes 'the image' in its 'strange resemblance to the cadaver', and shortly afterwards, he refers to 'the image in which man is made', which is then redefined as 'an image according to which he is unmade', each variations of 'the image' in comparison to the "mortal remains". Ibid., 419-23.

19 Ibid., 417.

20 In a similar sense, and referring back to the image as a 'sign', a 'supplement', Derrida notes that the sign 'procures an absence of presence' (where "presence is absence": 'presence is endlessly deferred'; failed). Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans.,

This notion of the 'crypt', corresponding to Blanchot's 'image', brings me around full-circle (not unlike an *arc*) to the concept of the crypt in association with Incarnation. For in attempting to articulate the indeterminate and/or implicative nature of a specifically *human* (mortal) image of the (unknown) divine, my exploration on Incarnation has either implicitly or explicitly returned to the idea, and the site, of the crypt. In the same way, the 'image' of God proposed in The Incarnation, leads directly to the cross of Christ, where its significance as the central revelation of Christianity pivots around the tomb of Jesus and what occurs therein. While this movement towards the crypt has been identifiable from the start - in the sense that the first object I constructed closely followed the form of a casket - this has nevertheless been an important point to come back to and to clarify. Such clarification has only been possible after undertaking the practical body of research: in making 'my own crypt' and constructing it as a physically accessible site that can facilitate contemplation on its meaning. In its manifested repetition of the 'container', based on the dimensions of the human body, this is the body of work that practically illustrates my own journey of understanding and articulation of this concept, which includes this broader cryptal 'image' of The Incarnation. Accordingly, this body of work is (and has always been proposed as) a means to possibly encounter and perhaps even to grasp, the indeterminate and haunting nature of the *crux* that takes place at the site of the crypt: this place that offers a possible merger between the human and divine, mortal and immortal.[21] It seems that it is the mystery of The Incarnation itself that has always brought me back to reconsider this defining yet pivotal place of the crypt.

Within and despite the ambiguity in Blanchot's language (concerning the 'image'), the concept of the crypt continues to strongly resonate, while at the same time opening up the possibilities of what the 'image' – as a crypt - inherently (or covertly) reveals:

> "When it wakes or when we wake it, it can very well represent an object to us in a luminous *formal* halo; it has sided with the *depth*, with elemental materiality, the still undetermined absence of form… before sinking into the unformed prolixity of indetermination. This is the reason for its characteristic passivity: a passivity that makes us submit to it, even when we are summoning it, and causes its fleeting transparency to arise from the obscurity of destiny returned to its essence, which is that of a shadow.
>
> But when we confront things themselves… we abandon ourselves to what we see, that we are at its mercy, powerless before this presence that is suddenly strangely mute and passive…[W]hat has happened is that the thing we are staring at has sunk into its image, that the image has returned to that

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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 154-55. Such negation of presence could then correspond to the 'ultimate' nature of death – in its metaphysical framework - as 'absence' of being or a ceasing of existence. Though speculating further, if 'the image,' as I have posited in light of Blanchot's words, is a 'sign' of death, then surely death too is deferred by its image, its sign? Unless 'the image' – known by its limits and its failure – reveals a death in itself (a death which is perhaps also incorporated into the ego's assumption of *self presence*, thereby inducing a kind of melancholia) by never giving itself to 'presence', thereby only ever being known as lack or an indicator of lack. The 'image' Blanchot refers to, and recalling the 'vision' of the child described in "Une scene primitive" (1978), is more like the larger system, condition or space of 'absence' in which the image/sign/supplement operates. This corresponds to a space, a "sky" that is "ordinary" and yet "open, absolutely black and absolutely empty… an absence that all has since always and forever more been lost therein – so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond". Maurice Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, trans., Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 72; quoted from Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 51-52. This particular image of Blanchot's further clarifies Derrida's statement that "[w] e are dispossessed of the longed-for *presence* [my italics] in the gesture of language [signs] by which we attempt to seize it", a "dispossession" that "operates as a power of death". Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1997), 141.

21 The 'coming-together' or merging of opposites is pertinently coined by the Latin phrase *coincidentia oppositorium*, a dichotomy that as Altizer notes, is ultimately expressed/enacted/found in the "kenotically apocalyptic," crucified Jesus'. Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), xiv-xxvii.

depth of impotence into which every thing falls back. The "real" is that with which our relationship is always alive and which always leaves us the initiative [like the image, the means to imagination as an access point], addressing that power we have to begin, that free communication with the beginning that is ourselves".[22]

As this text 'speaks to me', it gnaws at three developments in the current reflection. For one, it points back to the 'crypt' as a *place*, which begs to be re-opened: to look inside and look at what takes place there. Again, this place could be either physical or psychological, or identify a strange liminal correspondence between them. In this regard, the 'image' of the crypt continues to be a strong subject worthy of exploration through sculptural means, and so possibly allows a tangible grasp of the crypt's haunting nature and a disclosure of its usually hidden contents. Secondly, the text makes several coinciding observations about a 'thing' or 'object'. This produces an ambiguity that characterizes the crypt as both an object and a space (an ambiguity that parallels the place of this crypt as being physical and/or psychological). Thirdly, it also appears that this kind of 'dual nature' is not a conundrum or limitation, but rather, as Blanchot implies, this is where an opening begins via the 'power' of 'the image' as an access point: a cipher. This corresponds with what Hans Belting sharply observed as the reason why images – in late antiquity – originally came about, i.e. to stand-in as a "visible intercessor" for an absent yet sensed divine subject.[23]

Figures 98 and 99. Entrance into an early Christian tomb. Image under the name of *Gallery 5 cubiculum*; Stone/concrete object beneath stairwell in St Mary's Cathedral crypt, Sydney.

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[22] Ibid., 418.

[23] Belting refers to the social role of the earliest images in late antiquity, wherein they served a need to represent a subject of adoration and/or veneration. The simplicity in such an idea itself speaks of a profound situation: a condition of both absence/void and a kind of pre-existing loss, followed by abatement and suppression respectively. This can perhaps only be compared with the inner creative drive and projective imagination of the artist as image-maker. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans., Edmund Jephcott (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 42.

Similarly, the power of 'the image' corresponds directly with the power of the imagination, which is triggered where a seeming limitation is approached, by interpreting limitation not as a filled space, but as a gap to be filled,[24] an abstraction to be replaced with a quality of tangibility. One might then ask/propose: If this 'crypt' is an object and a space/place, what makes it sit and stir in the mind other than the fact that its ambiguity and sense of hidden-ness fuels the imagination? Precisely what kind of object-space is the crypt? Even if one finds a suitable 'image' to describe or render or even reproduce this crypt, the question is certain to stay open, and an un-representable quality is bound to remain, perhaps even to be encountered if explored through sculptural means.

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[24] Ibid., 44.

CRYPT (cont.)

A pertinent returning question: What *is* a crypt? In asking this question, I need to pay tribute to Jacques Derrida's text "*Fors*", which he opens with the same question.[25] As with much of Derrida's work, it is highly complex and cryptic (please excuse the pun), though more so because the subject of the crypt (as he proceeds to show) *is* cryptic, especially under the analysis that is offered, according to its particular context. This analysis precedes a discussion (in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok) about Freud's famous case of the 'Wolf Man', a discussion that accordingly concerns itself with psychoanalytic conjecture of the unconscious.

As my question, as a sculptor, is here primarily asking after more determinate sculptural/architectural qualities of the physical place of the crypt, this is where relevance with this text is partially limited. But given that the very question has 'arisen' in my own discussion - thus demonstrating that there is a lack of a precise definition of the crypt even while it is a recurring presence in the mind - its significance in this thesis is certainly not limited to its designation of some actual, physical place. In fact, its indeterminate definition indicates that its *symbolism* is potent, hauntingly mysterious, and resistant to penetration from the outside. As such, this is a fundamental reason why a physicality of the crypt is a concern to me as an artist in the first place. Outside of the mind, a 'physical' crypt implies a tangible manifestation, through which its otherwise elusive or abstract qualities *might* be deciphered. Yet equally limited by bodily senses, a physical crypt harbours an inaccessible interior, either physical and/or psychological. In this regard, the crypt's cryptic qualities are pertinent to acknowledge. Similarly, the examination of the crypt in Derrida's text, comparable to Blanchot's 'image', remains relevantly obscure. The desire to impossibly 'grasp' the crypt is fuelled by the fact that it remains mysteriously veiled, preserved – in a sense – from intellectual and/or archaeological looting. Thus ironically, as Derrida uses a very physically descriptive language, the crypt seems to become all the more abstract and elusive, yet evocatively engaging:

> "No crypt presents itself. The grounds are so disposed as to disguise and to hide: something, always a body in some way. But also to disguise the act of hiding and to hide the disguise: the crypt hides as it holds… A crypt is never natural through and through, and if, as is well known, *physis* has a tendency to encrypt (itself), that is because it overflows its own bounds and encloses, naturally, its other, all others. The crypt is thus not a natural place, but the striking history of an artifice, an *architecture*, an artifact: of a place *comprehended* within another but rigorously separated from it, isolated from general space by partitions, an enclosure, an enclave. So as to purloin *the thing* from the rest. Constructing a system of partitions, with their inner and outer surfaces, the cryptic enclave produces a cleft in space, in the assembled system of various places, in the architectonics of the open square within space".[26]

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25 Jacques Derrida, "*Fors*: The Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok," trans., Barbara Johnson, in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonomy*, Theory and History of Literature, vol 37, trans., Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xi – xlviii.

26 Ibid., xiv.

That 'the crypt' may contain something that is ultimately 'nonsymbolizable',[27] this is what makes it -somewhat paradoxically - pregnant with meaning. And the desire to access this meaning – whether it is the desire of an artist or psychoanalyst – only perpetuates the crypt's significance.

Figure 100. Ransacked tomb with image of *The raising of Lazarus from the dead*.

✳

A dictionary definition states that a crypt is a "room", a '*vault* in or beneath a church', which is used as either a 'burial chamber' or even as a "chapel".[28] Derived from the Greek *kruptos*, a crypt, by definition, is "hidden",[29] and its purpose is ultimately for hiding and safekeeping. In this way it also appears that a crypt is more than simply a tomb or burial 'hole', in that it is not just a place for depositing the dead, but for respectfully 'housing' them. As such, a crypt is a spatial cavity defined more by internal parameters than by closed external surfaces, which one immediately associates with sculptural form. It is these internal qualities that effectively correspond to the crypt's trait of being hidden. For my own purposes in considering sculptural objects inside a crypt as being representative of and/or extending the function of a crypt, a further (and returning) question is begged: How could an *object* in itself come to be identified

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[27] To clarify, the case of the Wolf Man, here re-examined by Abraham and Torok, involves much deliberation on the nature of repression. This is not just about a burial or suppression of certain experiences or desires, but about their 'incorporation' into the self for the purposes of hiding and safekeeping. This is what underpins the concept of the crypt, here as a kind of 'place' (yet 'no-place') of something interiorized, yet excluded from access by either the 'interior' conscience, or outside world. Thus the crypt is a "fortress", a "kind of pocket of resistance, the hard cyst of an "artificial unconscious". Furthermore, this crypt entails a strategy of disguising itself by its "partitions", which reveal a "fractured", or "splintered" symbol. Accordingly, this renders the incorporated *safe* and undisclosed, even while it signifies that it is there: entombed. Ibid., xiv-xx.

[28] *The New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition* (2005).

[29] Ibid.

as a crypt? Accordingly, a clear and precise definition of the crypt – or its object – will still carry a trait of ambiguity.[30]

It is in this examination of the crypt (ongoing from the outset, yet consolidated here with some greater clarity) that a sixth addition to my series of sculptural works is formulated. Although it is important to continue to outline the context on which a sixth artwork is strategically considered.

✳

In considering the definition of a crypt, I am lead to reflect on the kinds of objects or apparatus that are found *inside* a crypt, i.e. the objects or furnishings that physically hide/contain the relics of the dead - entailing a function of encrypting - while yet having a more *externally* defined presence. These are objects and/or monuments, which house and represent the remains of a person buried inside or underneath. In this respect, 'the crypt' can be partially defined as a space that is structurally designed or utilized to house and encrypt these particular objects/monuments, which subsequently, house and encrypt the actual remains. As such, and by the previous working description of my 'casket/plinth/crypt',[31] the sculptural object can become defined as a crypt, by at least appearing to belong to it and by suggesting an extension of its purpose in terms of both containing and withholding a space for human remains. This identifies a split between a place-crypt, being more 'architectural', and a monument/object-crypt (often but not always *within* the 'architectural' crypt), being singular and more 'sculptural' in terms of its external form.

The object/monument in the space of a medieval church crypt for example, can be an individual tomb or coffin like a sarcophagus.[32] This may be freestanding and occupying a central space or be pushed up against a wall. It may be plain or decorated, even adorned by ornate relief sculpture and framed within its own canopy or architrave (see figures 17 and 103). In some cases, particularly where important people's remains are placed, an effigy adorns such an object, which is a sculptural representation of the dead, carved in either wood or stone and commonly laid on top of the tomb.[33] There are even multi-tiered

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[30] There is another conceptual reason why this definition of the crypt – or any of its contents or related 'objects' – will remain ambiguous. This is because if the function – or at least part-function - of the crypt is 'to hide', then to see, envision or define what is inside, is to only see, envision or define what has been violated, disclosed, or in sense evaporated. It is *not* that which *remains* hidden and hence that which would truly define or encapsulate its cryptal function. Erwin Panofsky alludes to this dilemma of understanding, when he states that 'funerary art', is only "revealed to us by archaeological grave robbing, […it was] never destined to be seen by human eyes". Thus any visual definition or interpretation built around a disclosed/ruptured or *unhidden* crypt, is somewhat undercut by this inconsistency of hidden verses unhidden, sacralized verses desacralized, 'encrypted' verses 'deciphered', and by any later *reconstructed* account concerning what the crypt entailed when originally sealed. Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture* (1992), 16.

[31] See "Terminal Space (cont)".

[32] Such burial objects are obviously not confined to 'medieval church crypts', and can be found in many other burial places/ structures across multiple other cultures throughout history. However, I've posited this example in order to frame this discussion 'primarily' in relation to the more Western 'definition' of a crypt, which has been outlined above.

[33] Not all effigies are made to lie down on top of the tomb. Some are carved in a kneeling position and others are presented

structures with multiple sculptural representations of the deceased. These are known as *transi* tombs, and where each representation of the entombed person depicts a particular stage of transition according to the belief in resurrection or of an afterlife (from decaying bones to ascending glory).[34]

Interestingly, an effigy (as a sculptural image) is also the form by which the earliest known representations of deities were depicted, a form that remains common today among many religious cultures. This kind of effigy is certainly not confined within a cryptal space or tomb (though as indicated earlier in "Ark/Arc", the 'shrine' still operates as a framing device for housing – or awaiting - its representative object). Similarly, a public figurative statue is another more common type of effigy, which doesn't necessarily entail either a religious function or a purpose in representing the deceased. Instead, in a public figurative sculpture, the role of the effigy is more social/political, though often with a memorial function, which can then be used to represent the deceased or their values. This is seen with important political figures like Vladimir Lenin in the Soviet Union after the WWI, where his image – inclusive of the 'effigy' of his embalmed body - was widely used to preserve communist values throughout the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the multiple functions of the figurative sculptural image can further exemplify a comparison between deities and the dead, or in Lenin's case, the valorized (or effectively 'deified') and the dead.[35]
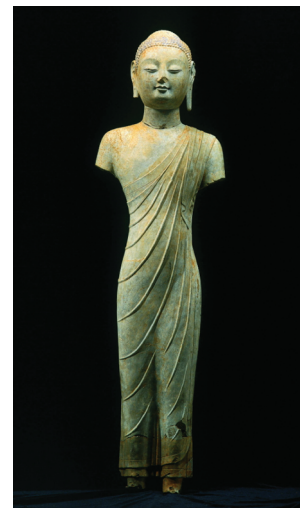
Figures 101. Standing Buddha, Northern Qi Dynsasty (550-77).

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standing. Also, not all funereal effigies are so obviously sculptural, for besides there being other kinds of lower relief effigies such as those found carved into tomb slabs (known as 'effigial slabs'/'semi-effigial slabs'), there are also brass etchings ('memorial brasses'), which serve the same purpose as representing the dead. These incorporated a usually full-sized figure drawn into a large plate of brass with deeply incised lines. Often drawn into the brass were also 'architectural and/or heraldic embellishments and inscriptions', that framed the figure as if representing (or doubling – in a 'domatomorphic' sense) an ornate cryptal structure in which the deceased were placed. Caryl Coleman, "Memorial Brasses," *The Catholic Encyclopedia,* Vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907). http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02742b.htm (accessed 23rd Jan 2010). For further reading, see F. A. Greenhill, *Incised Effigial Slabs: a study of engraved stone memorials in Latin Christendom, c.1100 to c.1700* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976).

[34] According to Panofsky, such a function of illustrating the anticipated afterlife would be defined as being "prospective", as opposed to "retrospective", which entails a more commemorative function. Though as will be discussed shortly, effigial monuments can entail both these functions at the same time. And on this note, it is interesting that Panofsky's own identification of a "fusion between the "prospective" and the "retrospective" points of view" is very clearly exemplified by a famous tomb from which the term "mausoleum" is derived. This is (was) the tomb of Mausolus, the ruler of Caria, erected at Halicarnassus (or Bodrum in modern-day Turkey), its construction completed at around 351 B. C. The fact that "mausoleum" today means "house tomb" should not be unconsidered in relation to the 'housing' function of the crypt upon which this discussion is broadly based. This is where a merging between "prospective" and "retrospective" representative functions assigned to the effigial tomb paves the way for seeing a common link between aspirations of 'immortality' in both religious and secular cultures. Yet this is signaled, moreover, through a more general 'domatomorphic' trait of the tomb/crypt/monument *combined with* the 'anthropomorphic' trait that the figural 'effigy' obviously carries. Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture* (1992), 16, 23-24.

[35] Readers will be aware that an effigy in the social/political realm (as it is most commonly presented in the contemporary media) also refers to an image used as a kind of scapegoat. Continuing with the example of Lenin, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many images/statues of Lenin were either destroyed or taken down, in order to *invert* his previous valorization and its corresponding attempt to uphold what his image stood for. With many more examples of this occurrence of inverted or reneged power throughout history, symbolized through the actions taken towards an effigy - including the more recent images of the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square (in 2003 after the US invasion of Iraq) - this shows that the honour/power bestowed upon or invested in an image (particularly a statue/effigy) is often an indicator that they are also vulnerable, liable to be subjected to public acts of anti-sentiment. In effect, this is *iconoclasm*, a term often associated with "the rejection or destruction of *religious* [my italics] images" (*The New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition*, 2005). Although these examples show is that iconoclasm is more succinctly (inclusive

In returning to the kinds of objects/monuments found *inside,* or designating the space of a crypt, effigies (as indicated above) only feature in/on the tombs of the privileged.[36] This means that most entombing apparatus, such as chests, coffins, sarcophagi, sepulchers, urns, ossuaries, etc., were limited to their more basic utilitarian function: housing the bodies of the dead. In fact many of these are hardly representative of an individual's tomb at all. It may be just a slab on the ground, which covers a deeper cavity beneath it. It might even be just a floor space with a variant section, hardly definable as an 'object' and visible only by tile layout or scarring in the ground. In any case, there can be a substantial variation between these kinds of entombing objects/monuments, a difference that importantly outlines alternative functional purposes: to contain and hide, as well as to memorialize and to represent.

Given that there are such elaborate *and* minimal efforts in either designating individual tombs, or in the actual sculptural representation of the individuals who are buried, the announcing 'presence' or 'lack of presence' of the object/monument inside the crypt is worth noting. This is because the function of these objects/monuments can *encrypt* in more ways than just hiding and containing, especially where representation is involved. The crypt then requires deciphering. One way that seems only fitting is to consider what is inside these objects, compared to what is presented on the outside.

As can be seen with respect to figurative sculptural adornment of a tomb, an effigy most commonly casts an image of dignity; that of a nobly-dressed figure lying recumbent and displayed frontally as if merely asleep. Usually life size, it stands-in for the deceased, just like a death mask. The presence of the deceased can't be physically presented because they are dead and decayed, hence they are more 'appropriately' contained inside or underneath the effigy (the exception being when the dead is beatified and placed on

Figure 102. William Torel (1275-1300) *Effigy of Queen Eleanor of Castile*, 1290, Bronze, Westminster Abbey, London.

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of secular cultures) "the action of attacking or assertively rejecting cherished beliefs and institutions or established values and practices" (Ibid). Furthermore, this shows that a reflection on the effigy - originally considering representations of the dead – quickly uncovers a very old dualistic conflict between sculptural form as either an honoured representation (worthy of respect and/or worship) or a realized limitation ('calling for' its devaluation – its rejection or damnation - in its outdated significance or its charge of being regarded as an 'idol'). Likewise, such implication of the image (as a lifeless/lifelike effigy) also quickly finds its way to the failing cadaverousness of the mortal body and its representation. For an extensive and insightful exploration of this dualism with regard to iconoclasm, see Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel, eds. *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (Karlsruhe, ZKM: Centre for Art and Media, and Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002). For a very interesting read on the theory of the scapegoat, specifically in regard to the vulnerabilities associated with figures endowed with social/religious honour, see Rene Girard's, *The Scapegoat*, trans., Yvonne Freccero (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), and *Violence and the Sacred*, New Ed. trans., Patrick Gregory (London: Continuum, 2005).

36 In his study on (secular) English effigies in the 13th Century (the time when the burial of important religious figures in churches also began to be more commonplace), H. A. Tummers lists the types of figures for which effigies are known to commemorate: kings/queens, dukes, knights, bishops/archbishops, saints, abbots, deacons/priests, honoured laymen, noble civilians, and notable ladies; in short, those belonging to a differentiated social class (whether ecclesiastical or secular). H. A. Tummers, *Early Secular Effigies in England: The Thirteenth Century* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1980), 4, 20, 26.

display). In this sense, this type of funereal effigy is a glorified portrait of who the deceased was when alive, which importantly retains an identified social status. Whether accurate or not, it is meant to present a worthy image by which to commemorate the person.

As an exterior guise, an effigy is a sculptural, tangible image, a monument that lives on. In ecclesiastical effigies that testify to a person's holy life, this monument also serves a soteriological function in that they lie waiting for resurrection. While a contrast between the memorial effigy and the actual decayed remains of the deceased is obvious, this is surely a 'sensitive' way to leave an image of the dead. However, there is an interesting revelation in the history of the effigy, which disrupts its more pleasant image of the 'sleeping' dead, and which certainly confounds more modern ideas of appropriate memorial representation.

Figure 103. Bernardo Rossellino, Tomb of Leonardo Bruni, 1444-47, Santa Croce, Florence.

As was common practice throughout Europe in the middle ages, the bodies of particular noble people, were actually physically disfigured and divided after death. This means that in the effigy-adorned memorial, there was a concerted effort to represent a permanent, tangible and ideal image, while the actual site of the memorial contained only some or part of the body. In the case of the effigy of Queen Eleanor of Castile (1290) in Westminster Abbey (see figure 102), for example, it was only her bones that lay beneath it. Her viscera and her heart were buried at separate locations. She officially had two *other* burial sites with two other tombs and two other effigies.[37] This was in order to both preserve her memory, and to essentially multiply the memorial means of doing so. It was a larger declaration of importance reserved only for those considered most worthy of remembrance.[38] In the case of Cardinal, Jean de la Grange, Bishop of Amiens, who had a very elaborate monument made for his tomb in the church of St. Martin, Avignon, his bones were buried here only after his flesh was removed and buried at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Amiens.[39]

With a mutilated and dispersed corpse being hidden and yet 'reassembled' via the representative means of a whole full size effigy, there is an underlying interplay at work concerning what is both represented and encrypted. The very idea of the effigy, in both these cases, is about retaining an image

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[37] Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World* (London: Calmann and King Ltd, 1996), 163.

[38] As a practice common to ecclesiastical figures, this 'disfiguring' of the actual body – reserved only for the most important/ holy people – begs speculation as to the possible influence that the image of the crucified Christ may have had, especially as 'bearing one's own cross' in Christ's footsteps, suggests that a corresponding martyrdom entails a certain renunciation of the body. Carving up the body of the deceased is then like a final, physical act of distain for the body. Though in a more general sense (i.e. not limited to important/holy people), Panofsky notes that dismemberment of the body after death (and equally the act of 'sealing them in tightly closed vessels'), can also be seen as an attempt to 'render the dead powerless', "to prevent them from harming us". Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture* (1992), 9-10.

[39] Michael Camille, *Gothic Art* (1996), 163.

(or multiple images), by re-presenting and reconstituting a 'body' that is not only de-composed but is unnaturally broken up and divided. The rationale behind this is that duplication is a kind of safeguard for being remembered, and having more than one effigy is a guarantor against the impermanence of mortality. Similarly in regard to the bodies of Saints, where their remains may be carved-up into any number of holy miracle-working relics (standing-in as representations of their holiness) the significance or 'work' of their life is clearly extended in the process. However despite this more noble purpose, the effigy can be seen as a kind of vainly beautified keepsake of the status gained in the earthly life, perhaps even as a sort of draw-card for savouring the life once lived, or the 'works' attained therein. Such a concept of 'preserving' the efforts and ensuring the legacy of the earthly life, flies in the face of what mortality signifies, particularly in regard to the more ascetic lines of belief in the Judeo-Christian tradition, i.e. as a precept by which 'all men' are leveled, upon standing before 'God' in death. This aptly illustrates that the duplicating efforts of the effigy is in many ways a 'narcissistic', "defense against annihilation".[40] This is a notion that can equally apply to the single effigy as it masks the horror of disembodiment.

As death in the Christian tradition is believed to be merely a death of the 'earthly' body, the spirit is believed to be eternal and thereby surpasses the fixed limits of the body. In the case of *transi* tombs – incorporating an effigy or effigies that intentionally depict a decaying cadaver - one could say that the memorial effigy importantly acknowledges death while also appealing to belief that the entombed person's spirit lives on. Likewise, the transient nature of the body of 'flesh' is clearly pronounced when the actual corpse is defaced and dispersed. Yet its inherent contradiction is still carried within the narrative that illustrates the glory inherited-by or reserved-for the deceased in the 'afterlife'. In a sense, it is the ideal of the afterlife itself – a symbol of doubling via the ideal of the eternal soul[41] - that perpetuates the gesture of doubling in the funereal monument. In this way, the effigy – ideal as it is in signaling the desires of immortality in both worlds - is like an anchor, weighing down the aspiration for ascension with its effigial, stone (or wood) rendered emphasis on the body. In short, the effigy's purpose of doubling the deceased, suggests a kind of insecurity in the face of death and disembodiment. The bigger the effort to memorialize, the more this insecurity seems to haunt.[42]

In a non-figurative sense, perhaps this persistent uncertainty towards death - expressed in the memorial/monument - partially explains why a more modern graveyard is attributed with a haunting quality. For as a field of pronounced funereal monuments, inclusive of the more humble gravestone or brass plaque, a graveyard is a multitudinous field of tombs; of cryptal spaces concealed by monuments erected in the guise of duplicating the unseen dead.

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[40] For a brief psychoanalytical account of 'doubling' used as a defense against death, see footnote 19 in chapter 1.

[41] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (2003), 142.

[42] This is poignantly identified in Panofsky's statement: "it is one of the great paradoxes of human existence that we desire repose after death yet balk somehow at the idea of a repose so complete that it amounts to an extinction of consciousness and thereby to a loss of identity". Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture* (1992), 27.

As noted earlier, if the crypt is to hide and hold the bodily remains of the deceased, it is inherently also for their safekeeping. In turn, the crypt is essentially utilized in the service of acknowledging a sacredness of these remains; a cadaver is not merely regarded as being constituted with ordinary matter (despite it also being regarded as just 'transient', 'flesh and bones'). As these remains are found embedded within or located beneath the objects/monuments in the crypt, that which houses them announces and intensifies this attribution of sacredness. In other words, these objects/monuments are used as a kind of demarcating barrier, which physically and symbolically declares a crucial 'set-apart-ness' between what is kept inside and what is left outside. In fact, as a secondary barrier to the actual hidden-ness of the crypt, an object/monument *inside* the crypt is an additional declaration of being set apart from the ordinary.

In returning to this practical and symbolic function of both the tomb and its exterior form, and reading it according to its seemingly simple operation, a sort of decryption has taken place. Within this, while the crypt designates a quite specific and somewhat impenetrable barrier, thus designating a sense of sacredness therein, it seems that a sense of sacredness residing *inside* is only perceived because it is at the same time allowed to filter through the crypt's hard exterior via its representative function. One might say that this kind of semiotic 'porosity' is further heightened when there are visual or sculptural indicators pertaining to the life of the person that lies entombed. That is, when the external *representative* components allow symbolic access to what is inside – even if partially abstracted in the process - the *sacred* religious and cultural beliefs are revealed.

More interestingly, this fundamental mechanism of safekeeping the sacred, implicitly suggests that what is declared sacred is at the same time vulnerable; hence the hard exterior employed to protect and preserve it. If what is represented (and duplicated) through such an exterior are the religious beliefs, cultural values or social status of the deceased, then surely this is an indicator of their common underlying anxieties about death, of which their beliefs/values attempt to alleviate or compensate. In any case, these objects draw speculative attention to their internal space, physically and psychologically, and thus become a mediating device for what cannot be seen. In this regard, external, formal qualities all point back to an interior. It could then be said that a sacred value is transferred to these objects because of what they are perceived to contain and incorporate in their whole physical presence. Like the altar or the plinth is to the object on it, this is all part of a defined sacredness, both encrypted *and* revealed.

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In a more immediate response to the object/monument inside the crypt, and specifically addressing this exploration on the *effigy*, this is where I return to address my own work. Yet importantly, it is here that I also take a critical departure. This departure is far from new, and in fact it has already taken place since the very start of this research, wherein the 'casket' was utilized as an implied body-space as opposed to

using a figurative sculptural element as a direct representation of the body (another 'arc' indeed).[43] It is here, after working through a body of practical work as a primary mode of research – and identifying a distinct area of consistency - that I can more clearly articulate this departure. The reason, apart from its strategy of abstraction in a purely formal sense, is because ironically, my central subject of investigation is about the human figure and its representative use. This of course is The Incarnation, a representation (in *human* form) and a claimed embodiment of the divine. To address this departure, and before moving on to discuss my next artwork – which continues to utilize an absence of the figure as a central concern - the following consideration is given.

…

The extent to which the human figure has been used throughout the history of art is clearly an indication of its immediate and ongoing significance. It is also its primary use that epitomizes our naturally human-centric culture; our preoccupation with the body and our attempt to understand it, transcend it, preserve it, worship it, loathe it, accept it, etc, of which the effigy is but a pertinent example. In this light, The Incarnation, expressed in the form of a historical human figure, could be seen as simply an anthropomorphic manifestation of this culture. Yet at the same time in defense of its claim, to have any true bearing or grounding on this earth, surely an abstract 'divine' being must have required none other than an embodied - human - form in order to understand and to be understood by its (human) culture.

As explored continually in this thesis, the corporeality of the body is its fundamental limitation. It is also this corporeal condition in which God is claimed to have been paradoxically/implicatively/extraordinarily made manifest in Christ. The *representation* of the body clearly also carries this condition as a corresponding limitation. The uncountable number of sculptural representations lost to acts of iconoclasm throughout history, are a testament to this recognized limitation, while their production in the first place equally testifies to the aspirations invested in their representation (which in turn provokes the iconoclast's suspicion). As a sculptor, what this amounts to in my own mind, is a complex predicament in which the concept of The Incarnation is certainly entwined. It is for this reason that the funereal effigy, as an example of the represented body, the represented *dead* body moreover, is a key sculptural motif to examine in terms of physically and symbolically illustrating the certainty of these limitations associated with the body and its representation. Similarly, it is the place of the crypt in which the limitations of the body is epitomized; the crypt is the place where effigies are found, representing (or declaring), these limitations. Furthermore, as the preceding examination has just shown, in the effigy the limitations of representation are heightened by their revealed function and circumstances pertaining to the entombed body. Aspirations of 'immortality' – both religious and secular (or "prospective" and "retrospective")[44] – are what they are invested with, even while they disclose a subtle, underlying insecurity in respect to mortality. What they seem to carry more than anything else is their actual and represented, returning and incessant limitations of their material form, corresponding to the limitations of corporeality.

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[43] See figure 1 and the following discussion in the Introduction.

[44] See footnote 32 above. Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture* (1992), 16.

In relation to The Incarnation, these limitations appear to reach their height when they *delimit* the *sacredness* attributed to the most holy and 'set-apart' subject/concept/being of all: God, the Divine. Under this premise, if the body is employed to represent the sacredness of God, it will surely fail; its limitations according to this rhetoric are 'obvious'. If the *represented* body is employed to represent the sacredness of God, its failure will be even more obvious (perhaps 'doubly' so). Thus, like the effigy, encrypting yet revealing an underlying vulnerability of its subject in its signifying pose, the dead, effigial body of Christ (always foreseen in regard to his mortal nature), displays its inbuilt limitations in distinct (ultimate) contrast to the claim of divine indwelling/transcendence, made within its very embodiment.[45] The appeal that this is *not* an utter failure, but rather a most profound and most sacred 'work' of God, is where the majority of its mystery is most certainly derived.

The claim of The Incarnation is a claim that such limitations have been surpassed. If not actually surpassed - in the sense that after Christ, the failure of representation remains, and that embodiment still entails death - it fuels the *hope* ('in Christ') that one day it will indeed be realized (actuated), even *in the face of* mortality and failure. While acknowledging this claim, it is in realizing the sheer complexity in this binarism – both maintained and irreversibly stifled in its paradox – that brings me to the reason for departing from 'the body' in its figurative means of representation. This is to both conceptually and formally *abstract* the direct relation between representation and the body, which is a means to tackle its complexity, both logically and physically. That is, my *response* as an artist, a sculptor, is to pry the body away – if possible – from the clutches of representation (or to pry representation from the clutches of the human figure), including its inherent limitations as can be more generally observed throughout the history of art. This is basically in order to create some distance or space between the body's 'obvious' *limitations*, and the persistently expressed *possibilities*, according to which figurative representation is infused with aspirations seeking to go beyond limitation. Practically speaking, this would suggest that an artwork (adapted according to this theory) must essentially erase the literal image of the body (an iconoclastic gesture), while still maintaining a crucial reference to it through identifiable qualities such as scale, presence of form, tactility of surface, and overall accessibility in the engagement it allows with a given viewer. By 'erasing' the figure in this way, yet effectively leaving the signs of its 'prior' presence to be discovered, the figure has undergone an abstraction that maintains a material sense of presence in and despite its absence.[46] This means that such an abstraction of the figure does not render the figure – as a

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[45] In his essay *Corpus* (2006), Jean-Luc Nancy initiates a heavily layered investigation into 'the body', incorporating a mode of *divine presence* claimed, despite the *corporeality* that the body dualistically harbours against the idea of divine presence. It is here in regard to the Eucharistic Latin phrase *Hoc est enim corpus meum* ("this is my body"), that this the 'body of Christ' is positioned as an 'assurance' against "the Absentee par excellence" of God, i.e. of a current state of absence of God in bodily form. In other words, it is this Eucharistic phrase that identifies an 'obsession' of ours in the Christianized West to procure an 'assurance' of a "presentified" *corpus* of this God as a means of *representative* access. Like Belting's observation on the role of the image in filling a gap (of divine presence), Nancy's own reflection signals a comparable position of a desired representation, in lieu of a preexisting non-presence or hidden-ness. More precisely, this underscores the belief that the divine presence is somehow 'hidden' (perhaps it its unseen-ness or apparent absence) within the human figure; the 'image of God' is hidden *by* the very mortality of humankind. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans., Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 3-5.

[46] In further interpreting Nancy, as a sacramental form of (wanted) representation, the Eucharist - central to Christian practice - is itself a means of remembering a bodily presence of 'God' that has come and gone. One can then also recognize that Christianity is an insistent belief in the *residues* of this presence. It is a faith of remembrance, or even rather of *suspension*, that "[t]he anxiety, the desire to see, touch, and eat the body of God", is a form of "Western (un)reason" that disallows a bodily presence or manifestation because its mode of practice is a mode of recalling, 'convoking', which ultimately *sacrifices* the 'body' in a capacity of the present. In this sense, a 'preexisting non-presence' of God is equally sustained. Ibid., 3-5.

subject - wholly intangible. It is a means of 'spiritualizing what is corporeal', which essentially gives it a value that is not dependent on its physicality.[47]

Abstracting the human figure in this way seems at least one way to approach and sustain a rigorous exploration (in relation to Incarnation) in the art making process, as well as to invite corresponding reflection/examination from viewers. While grounded in Western thinking, this reflection is not on or about reinforced binarisms, such as life/death, represent-able/un-represent-able, sensible/intelligible, presence/absence, human/divine etc, but on the space that opens in between them, through them, deferring them, both mystifying and de-encrypting their assumed ground. For my own methodological purposes, this importantly means acknowledging *both* the dualism of The Incarnation and the metaphysically positioned deferrence of its 'inbuilt' binary structure. Furthermore, as an artist, both haunted and inspired by its complex structure, this means not only acknowledging, but *employing* this mysteriously affirmed *and* negated dualism, and seeing if it can be carried over into sculptural form, whereby it can provoke ongoing reflection on a parallel mystery within the limitations of materiality. This is why the next addition to my series of containers needed to implicitly reference yet erase the human figure through its external form. It thus clarifies, retrospectively, the evidently erased figure in the preceding works.

<div align="center">✳</div>

As a sixth addition to my series of containers, what called to be made was a physically proposed 'image' of the crypt. This was a crypt that was a box: an object with an undisclosed and emphasized *interior*, yet viewed through a tangible exterior. In a similar gesture to Oldenburg's *Hole* and the grave hole for my grandfather's coffin – including the extended reflection taken in between - this work was conceived and proposed for an outdoor setting. In this way, my intervention with sculptural form would not be so tightly limited by an interior architectural space that I didn't own (the obligations involved in renting gallery space can be a substantial limitation to a sculptor's practice). Thus as part of the work, I was importantly – and practically - able to consider incorporating an actual excavation beneath the surface of the ground (extending what I had done in the floor of the gallery with regard to my 'casket/plinth/ crypt'). In other words, I was able to construct (excavate) my own interior, cryptal space. Accordingly, this 'crypt' effectively became a box that sat above a large hole beneath it: a hole that was only discovered by peering down into the box through an opening in its top section.

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[47] To clarify, this 'abstraction' is not 'etherealizing' what is physical, but is a way of imparting and extracting a symbolic order on/from the materially limited aspect of the subject - the human figure - and so appeal to a significance that extends beyond its physical form. Similarly, as is noted by Robert Nelson, it is the process of *abstraction* - which fundamentally includes any process of representation – that allows the "workings of the sacramental order" to establish its distance from a pre-ceding 'sacrificial event'. Nelson argues that this is what secular contemporary art inherits as a strategy for instilling its art objects with a value corresponding to sacredness or 'spiritualization': a value that is removed from a previous relationship with a (perceived-to-be-limited) sacrificial ('religious') order. Robert Nelson, *The Spirit of Secular Art* (2007), 01.4-01.9.

Like most of the container-works already made, the interior of this crypt was always going to be a focal point. Yet this focus was only going to be activated as a continuation of the encounter with its exterior. This meant that the initial appearance of the work for the approaching viewer was to be unembellished and unassuming, so as to make way for the discovery of its 'opening'. This allowed for an intuitive discovery of its components, akin to the kind of 'circumambulation' encouraged in respect to the minimalistic-interactive works of Kapoor and similarly in Gober. In this way, the 'journey towards the interior' was subtly emphasized; being allowed space to occur, just as its play between exterior/interior was drawn-out and foreshown.

Figure 104. Michael Needham. Sketch for *Substratum*: a hollow plinth on top of a hidden 8ft x 9ft x 4ft pit, 2006-2007.

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For the outdoor sculpture park that was to grant me a site for the work's display, the most appropriately unassuming appearance I could think of was a blank/empty plinth.[48] This, in turn, signaled the need to return to the basic physicality and formal simplicity associated with cast concrete, and of which outdoor plinth's are often made because of the efficacy of concrete as an on-site material. Accordingly, it was the work's inconspicuous plinth-like and concrete presence, which was opened up to reveal a much denser and voluminous *interior* sense of presence. It was this 'presence' of an interior that was still contained, focalized and effectively funneled, by its basic exterior.

What this resulted in was the creation of a substantial cavity (8ft deep, 9ft long and 4ft wide) beneath the plinth and visible only through a long welded-steel grate inset into the plinth's top surface. This vented and rudimentary concrete form then resembled an access point for some kind of sewer or bunker.

The creation of this sizable yet contained hole required that a large, heavy-duty, steel frame be fabricated, which was then caged and lined with galvanized steel sheeting before the whole thing was lowered down into a
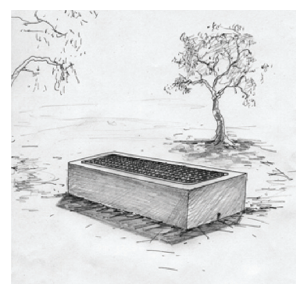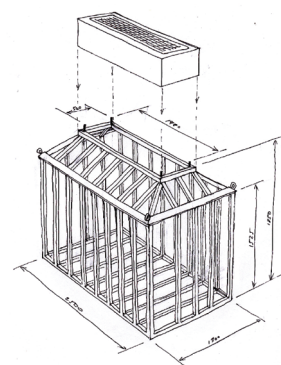

Figure 105. Michael Needham. Sketch for whole of Substratum installation, 2007.

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[48] On a side note, with the lack of adorning features in this plain concrete plinth, yet importantly *as* a plinth – a functional device for announcing the presence of an object placed on it – this meant that its purpose was arguably, purely ornamental, even in its simplicity. At the time of designing/conceiving this work, it was this mode of crude simplicity *and* pure ornament which I considered to be a complimentary yet covertly challenging response to Kevin Maginnis' very modernistic assertion that "[o]rnament makes no claim at transcendence". Kevin Maginnis, "Concerning the Non-Spiritual in Contemporary Art," in *The Non-Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1985-????,* exh. cat. (Chicago: Maginnis Graphics Inc., 1987), 9.

larger hole prepared for it. Such a frame was necessary in order to support the weight of the concrete box from above (resting at ground level), while acting as a self-supporting structure for retaining the sides of the hole. It also prevented the whole excavation from caving in right where the viewer would stand as they looked down through the plinth into the hole beneath them.

The way I conceptualized this new work, was that initially, it only differed slightly from the other sculptures installed throughout the park.[49] This was because, like the other permanent or temporary works, each mounted on a concrete slab (either slightly protruding or poured so as to be level with the ground), my own sculpture incorporated a not-*too*-dissimilar concrete footing as its supporting device. Similarly with my own work, it was this foundational plinth-like structure that was employed to physically present a sculpturally (and spatially) materialized idea. The difference of course was that my 'object' – the interior framed-by and seen-through the concrete box - was a *negative* form, placed not on top of the plinth, but located *inside* what was then an *exposed* footing rather than just a concealed or understated slab.

As I considered at the time, this work was also an attempt to take 'sculpture' only a little further down a path of reduction comparable with the minimalist's, who, effectively turned the plinth itself into sculptural form. Subsequently, this work entailed an additional paring-back of sculpture via the erasure of its main focal form, through the making of a negative space beneath it. However, my general aim was to create an encounter that was 'layered' with both surprise and uncertainty. It was then based upon the secondary (though more dominant) aspect of an 'absence of ground', that the simple, slickly cast, yet raw tactility of the concrete's own stratified form, was to present as though it were something akin to an underlying displacement of its own ground of presence.[50] As such, it was part exhumed and part buried, being presented *at* and *below* the ground level upon which the viewer stood. This was an encounter not with the sculptural object in its simple physical form, but rather with the object that in turn 'became' a device for revealing an uncanny groundlessness beneath it. Hence with these 'layers' of reading, together with the 'layers' of exhumed earth associatively compacted into the cast box protruding from the ground, the work was labeled *Substratum*.

After *Substratum* was installed and all the disturbed ground around it was re-leveled, its visible exterior was rigid, yet with a hollowness that was disproportionate to its sturdy facade. It also seemed to simply fit right into its surrounding environment, which being in the back (un-landscaped) quarters of the sculpture park, incorporated slightly undulating terrain filtered with sunlight through an eerie canopy of tea-trees. Amidst this landscape, the work appeared as if it had existed there for quite some time serving a purpose other than that of an outdoor sculpture. This 'other function' effectively helped to veil its proposition as an artwork, while together with its dual physical qualities (rigid but hollow), a primary trait of indistinctiveness was initiated in terms of what the object actually was. Was it a forgotten sewer or

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[49] I should briefly point out that this work was included in the 2007 survey of contemporary Australian sculpture at the McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park in Langwarrin, south of Melbourne (known as the biennial McClelland Sculpture Survey and Award). In this larger exhibition context, this meant that my own work featured alongside 34 outdoor sculptures (within the survey), as well as many other permanent works in their collection. See http://www.mcclellandgallery.com/ (last accessed 22nd Jan 2010)

[50] As noted by Mark C. Taylor, an 'absence of ground' (the 'ultimate' ground defaulted as God) is an abyss. And pertinently, "abyss – *Abgrund* – originally means the soil and ground toward which, because it is undermost, a thing [that] tends downward". Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (1992), 290.

bunker? Was it a vent, a drain, a tomb, a well? Judging by the consistent response that the work elicited from viewers, these were the guiding questions that it seemed to provoke.

Figure 106. Michael Needham, **Substratum**, 2007. As installed in the grounds of McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park.

The reading of the work was importantly accessed via the work's simple, though ambiguous physical presence, incorporated within its display context. This identified a reading that was not solely in direct association to its 'sculpturally representative' function. In other words, its reading as something other than a sculpture in a sculpture park, seemed to greatly influence the way the viewer's interacted with it. Interestingly enough, this meant that some people literally just walked past it, as if it really had – to recall Musil and Young's observations on the public monument - 'invisibly blended into its environment'.[51] However, in what I perceived as being the main response from other viewer's, this also meant that people really were able to *discover* it, as if they were enticed to take a detour away from the 'sculpture trail', and

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[51] See footnotes 7 and 8 in this chapter, and the earlier discussion following the introduction of Oldenburg's *Hole*.

where something 'other than' a sculpture in a sculpture park could be approached. Yet pertinently, this very positive response seemed to occur with the kind of privileged contemplative attention reserved for art. In this sense, it could be said that the positioning of the work as an implied functional object merged with its representative role as art. The question of 'what it actually was', as opposed to the stock-standard question of 'what it was supposed to represent', was a critical part of activating the encounter that it offered. In this way, what it 'was', for the purposes of the viewing experience, was at least part *embodied*, rather than simply represented according to the work's definition as art. It *was* an excavated crypt-like space, an exterior form - containing and revealing, raised and buried, hidden and disclosed. It marked a threshold between the physical and the unseen, here framing a bodily space: framed in bodily dimensions. It *was* positioned for the viewer's encounter with an absence of ground beneath them.

The indistinctiveness of the work obviously occurred most when its deep shadowy interior was realized. In turn, it was in this 'realization' of a physically framed interiority, perhaps previously unseen or unconsidered, that a meditative pause for questions was offered. However, this also evidently provoked the viewer's imagination in a way that was unexpected, owing to its indistinctness of form and its interpretation as a 'well'. Consequently, the work attracted the token offerings of many who considered the work more as a wishing well than a dark and waiting crypt, and there was certainly a substantial pile of coins glistening from the bottom of the hole by the time the exhibition was due to close (approximately ninety-eight dollars worth counted out later on). As such, in providing this specified meditative space, thus identifying and allocating a 'receptacle into which people could *project* their own imagination', an irony existed from the outset.[52] In other words, the work *became* a 'wishing well' because it allowed for the imaginative/projective interpretation of the viewer, where it was not only deemed to be a wishing well but also treated as such.

In many ways, the result of the work being interpreted and interacted with as a wishing well, was disappointing. On a practical level, after the first coin was thrown, the bottom of the hole – as deep as it was - was easily located.[53] This effectively demarcated a sense of the hole's physical and metaphorical depth, while designating the work and its space as primarily, a well. If not a well, it was a kind of donation box, meaning this 'grave' space only turned into a place for throwing spare change. In this way, subsequent viewers were not able to see the work in its intended state, as a dark, dank and brooding cavity to stare into with an uncertainty and indistinctness. Nevertheless, on another level, it was still interesting to note that people interacted with it in a gesture that could inadvertently be attributed to superstition, and a corresponding ritual of offering coins (to the shrine-like character of the well) while making a wish. Even if such a gesture is only indicative of a ritualistic or customary attitude – of one person following the other (or perhaps even imaginably like taking part in a commemorative action upon visiting a gravesite) – it still suggests that what viewers projected into this space was a kind of *optimism*: a means of 'lightening the gravity' of the dark black hole and 'filling the emptiness' found therein. My

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52 This irony was virtually foretold in Robert Lindsay's comments regarding the work in his catalogue essay: "In the absence of visible content [inside the hole] and only a dark dank aura,… Needham's rationale is to create receptacles or frameworks into which the viewer projects their own reality". Robert Lindsay, "The Third Organon," in *The McClelland Sculpture Survey & Award 2007*, exh. cat. (Langwarrin: McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park, 2007), 12.

53 Looking down into the hole and seeing all these coins, also recalled the (oversized) coins glistening from the underground rock pools of Gober's Virgin Mary installation at the Geffen in Los Angeles (see chapter 5). Though a clear difference is in their intentionality.

intentions for the work were to offer no 'immediate' *hope* within the waiting emptiness of the space itself, yet in light of a waiting emptiness being quickly and 'positively' interpreted and subsequently dispelled in the process, this for me prompted a line of questioning as to what an optimistic participation from the viewer reveals. What was there ('embodied?') within *Substratum* that required dispelling – or perhaps exploring - in the first place? Was it its presented *lack*, i.e. its lack of an unambiguous sculptural object? Was it a 'lack', more generally, that required the *addition* of physical participation? Was it a 'groundlessness' or vertiginous cavity, towards which a viewer's curiosity was compelled to explore and measure, to ascertain how far its boundaries go in the most immediate and accessible way?
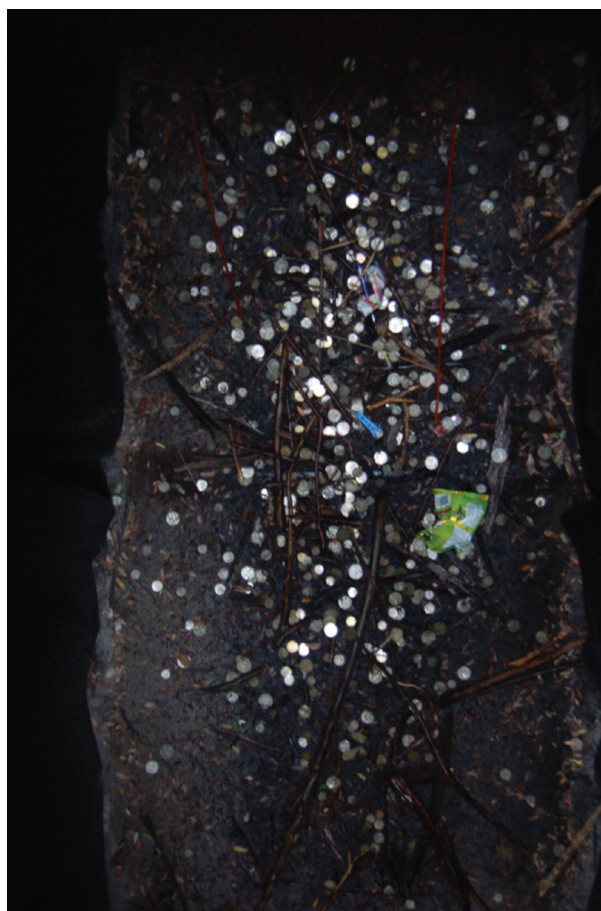

Figure 107. Interior detail of **Substratum,** 2008 (taken during de-installation, with top removed for photographic access).

Other conclusions can of course be drawn, like the failure of the work thereafter because it ultimately allowed a single interpretation to supplant and dominate my original intentions. Alternatively (yet similarly acknowledging its failure), one might be inclined to say that it revealed a shallowness in the viewer, as they were compelled to throw small money at it rather than consider the space of the crypt and/or 'beyond'. However my own hope as an artist remains renewed and challenged. This is to conceive and to hold, and so continue to make and explore, the enigmatic multivalent image that is the 'crypt'. This is necessarily my own crypt, for it is an image that to me seems transcendent precisely because it eludes my own means to materialize it.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this research, I have explored how the proposition of Incarnation might be conveyed through a box. In its material structure and consistent human scale, this is a box that 'enfigures' while invoking an absent body, and so encapsulates a kind of metamorphic space of embodiment/disembodiment. However, in its material proposition the box is complex, fraught, and semiotically overburdened, which, when empty, is also self-evacuating. In this way, it is the box and its own limitations that have haunted this thesis from the outset.

Incorporated into the box through its containing function is a correspondence with the crypt. As a sensed 'image' or place, part imagined and conceptualized, part encountered and scrutinized, part remembered and theorized; the crypt is an ambiguous thing/entity that has equally haunted this investigation into Incarnation. In this sense, it is also part material and immaterial, meaning its own kind of 'dual nature' has kept much of this exploration suspended between making and conceptualizing: making *in order to* understand and vice versa. Nevertheless, it is within a recurring 'cryptal box' – importantly manifesting its own gesture of a 'containment of *human* form' - that a relation between the human condition and the nature of embodiment has been explored. This is where the box has been used to both examine and articulate the inherent conditions set forth within the proposition of an embodiment of 'God'.

Can I make art that proposes the manifestation of 'God' as a material proposition? Ultimately no. It is within the analysis of the conditions of embodiment that the fraught nature of this preliminary research question has been reinforced. Yet in saying this, it is the *ideal* of the 'question' in itself, following the ideal and the *possibility* of The Incarnation, which has importantly allowed a creative investigation and discussion to take place. In this way, the idea of divine embodiment fundamentally engages the imagination in the desire to access the 'ineffable' God through material means. It speaks to this primary religious pursuit being answered in the positive, even while predicating its impossibility upon which an ineffable nature of God is upheld. It is here in the face of this conundrum, within the question, that a creative idealism has been moved, provoked, challenged and ultimately sustained. Taking this dual impossible/possibility of The Incarnation as a forerunning proposition is the contextual paradigm out of which my series of boxes, like containers of embodiment, has arisen. In turn, they stand as a cumulatively apposite response to my more immediate research objective: that is, to investigate whether a meaningful parallelism can be established between the Christian concept of The Incarnation and an art process conceived as a creative experience made manifest.

Through the limited language and medium of a practical, sculptural body of work, I have tried to capture a mystery of the divine. This is not any generalized mystery of the divine, but the paradoxical and haunting mystery that is attributed to the divine, when it is claimed in the Christian sense to be present in the limitations of bodily form. In this case, I have aspired to creatively understand and express a mystery that corresponds to the 'mystery of Christ's body'. As it is in the *human* Christ ('Jesus' Christ) that an 'image' of the eternal, unrepresentable God is implicatively claimed, it is here that The Incarnation finds its closest parallel to the ideals and limitations of representation. Where abstract propositions

and concepts are sought through means of representation, this underlines a corresponding trope of idealism in art. At the same time, such idealism is subsequently always bound by its own failure, because representation essentially indicates a corruption or displacement of what is signified. That said, in a post-humous (or 'post-mortal') context, Christ's own human body is literally not present. With evident historical distance from the time of Christ, together with innumerable representations that repeat a kind of signified absence, this is partially where a divine presence is preserved, if not made even more mystifying.

In the context of having no 'body' to examine, I have instead reconsidered the *site* of Christ's body, or rather, the site of *the* body in which corporeality is predisposed. According to Incarnation, it is this site that signals where a broader mystery lies in terms of identifying correlating qualities *within* material form. In effect, it is the site of the body's limitation - that which represents a liminal zone between presence and absence, life and death, embodiment and its trace – that qualifies as a mystery of the body. Translated into sculptural form, this becomes a material site that creates, enshrines and perpetuates, interplay between either *pre-existing,* possibly *incoming* or even *transcendent*, bodily presence. This is the reason why my sculptural exploration, erasing and abstracting the body's presence as such, has resulted in a series of 'body-spaces'. They are not simply boxes, but vessels – *ciphers* - for considering and reconsidering the nature of embodiment, and wherein a sense of mystery can be found. Accordingly, these works are not only qualified within a Christocentric framework, theological examination or even any other broader religious enquiry. They speak to a broad yet familiarly human experience, which above all, recognizes its own embodied nature and the limitations of corporeality. In this regard, as 'body-spaces', the significance of the works exist in so far as they materially designate a space *for* the body, for imagining and projecting the body within. The aesthetic experience I offer through these works is of a part-sensed, part-projected quality of an indeterminately divine/sacred mystery. But in this case, the experience is framed within a raw sculptural presence, through which its own failure, importantly acknowledged, staves off any determinate apprehension of mystery.

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Ultimately, *embodiment* is defined by the mortal nature of corporeality. This means that 'the crypt' - as the physical and psychological 'place of death' - signals the endpoint of the mortal life; it is both a 'tangible' and intangible place where one goes when they die. As The Incarnation claims that the divine is miraculously, transcendentally, embodied within human form, it is the mortal life into which the divine is paradoxically cast in the process. Thus it is the tomb (of Christ), verifying the *kenotic* process of divine qualities forfeited, which foreshadows his embodied life. In this way, and in its kenotic extreme, it is as much the crypt that mysteriously embodies the divine as much as the divine is embodied within human form.

As noted in the last chapter and implicitly referred-to throughout this document, the crypt is also the 'place' of the central Christian revelation. It is the *site* of a claimed resurrection of Christ, where the embodied mortality of his human nature is both consummated *and* transcended. It is through 'the

crypt' - this *pivotal* place of death - that the mysterious image of Incarnation can be seen as being almost synonymous with the condition of mortality and the haunting concept of death. Of course the soteriological scope of The Incarnation deems that death is only one half of the picture: the other half consolidating the whole through resurrection. This is in regards to Christ as much as it is for believers. This other side of the picture, however, is only envisioned by hope, meaning that any *realization* beyond death fundamentally lies suspended in anticipation. It cannot be known or 'materialized' while the remaining condition of corporeality dictates that the body is still a harbinger of its own mortality. In this way, the hope that 'completes the story' is haunted by death, and indicates a melancholic undercurrent. Correspondingly, death mysteriously haunts by the indeterminate proposition that it is but a passage leading beyond the known limitations of embodiment. This idea that the crypt is not an end-point is profoundly mysterious indeed.

It is in making this space of the crypt in sculptural form, repeatedly, that I have been able to approach - necessarily unsuccessfully - a mystery that lies inside. In this sense, I trust that viewers/readers will have found this space to be illuminating as opposed to the common assumption that the subject of death is morbid. In light of these findings, the crypt can be seen as haunting but hopeful, empty and waiting. If it is dark, it is only so because it is unknown.

I must return to a question proposed at the beginning: Can this thesis ever be complete? Can the concept of Incarnation be resolved through artistic – or indeed any - means, or can its mystery be materially apprehended and left behind? I have argued that it can never be actualized in any single manifestation, and the 'result' of a *series* of works implicitly discloses that a suspension of this question simply continues. As such, for me this body of work signals both an end and a beginning. Though perhaps this reverberates into the essential heart of Christian eschatology, thus inviting further reflection and/or creative research.

POSTSCRIPT

As an afterthought, and as an exploration as to where this body of work may go 'after the crypt', another sculptural work has been made. In a sense, this work is a play on *after* the divine, or *after* the 'Word of God' in a less than ideal sense: having allegedly been 'written', corporealized, and transcended, yet then interpreted, translated into sculptural form, and so being encrypted, somewhat decrypted, and even recrypted in the process. Hence the immediate pun, *postcrypt*: the name by which this new work is subsequently identified.

With *Postcrypt*, I have returned to an apparatus, a functional artwork/object that had almost been left behind. This was a little domestic wood furnace, of which its tall flue defined the vertical counterpart to a dominant horizontality. Such a play was already occurring as early as *Vestiges* (including the 'casket'), the first public exhibition of work I had as part of this research in mid 2005. Accordingly, *Postcrypt* is also a furnace: cylindrical in shape and this time resembling a human-sized crucible or perhaps a personal purification chamber. This work is designed and constructed, somewhat ironically, as a 'standing' crypt, mirroring the posture of a live figure. As such, it also structurally utilizes a vertical element in order to formally offset the consistent horizontality in the preceding series. At the time of making, I hoped this formal design element would mark a turning point, where a designated mortality might be raised off the ground, and so entail a less entropic gesture whilst still remaining cryptal in its containing function.

According to its current installation (see figures 108, 113 and 114), the verticality of *Postcrypt* is further extended via its own exhaust pipe or 'chimney'. Here in a covered alcove in the grounds of a disused school (now an art studio complex with public gallery), its flue slots into a bracket where it is bolted in place at the ceiling. The end of this chimney is effectively concealed, meaning that as far as a viewer is able to perceive, its exhaust pipe extends right through the ceiling and protrudes through the roof. Down at ground level, a drainage outlet features at its rear, where a further drainage apparatus is inset into the kerbed concrete footing on which the furnace is mounted. With the work's dimly lit rear, the extent to which the drain punctures the ground similarly echoes the indeterminate height of the chimney. In this way, the bi-fold plumbing of the chamber, hemming the whole structure within its enclosure from top to bottom, accentuates a function of both ventilation and drainage. In the central shape of its main component, constructed using industrial-sized, decommissioned gas
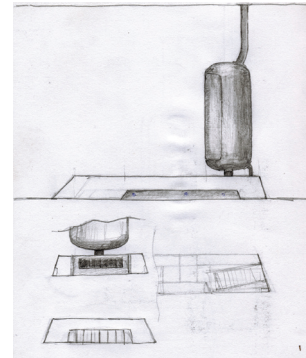
Figures 108 and 109. Sketch for *Postcrypt*; rear section of *Postcrypt* under construction.

cylinders, it becomes much like an industrial boiler that is firmly and safely lodged within its own architectural housing bay.

Adding to the work's firm lodgement within its enclosure is a long, cast concrete footing. This extends out in front along the concrete floor and acts as a ramp or bridge to the standing vertical presence of the steel chamber. In this regard, the footing is evidently employed to both complement and emphasize the main chamber. According to this purpose, this is where a central doorway is located, and so the ramp is implicitly proposed as a means of entry into the chamber. While this doorway is *closed* - flush with the chamber's cylindrical form - the 'ramp' still anticipates a plausible opening of this door via a fold-down action, and where the door itself would double as a ramp. In this imaginative inter-action, explored through a psychological and phenomenological engagement with the work, this is the object – both outside and inside - that I invite the viewer to consider.

Following on from the increasingly site-specific adaptation of the preceding artworks, *Postcrypt* creates and feeds off its immediate environment. It also goes further than the more minimalistic disposition of the earlier works and creates a 'post-industrial' setting. That is, it is positioned as if it really were a piece of machinery, though derelict: left here as a remnant from a modern industrial age. This is not only for the purpose of reinforcing a functional reading, but to facilitate an encounter with something that is 'other than' a sculpture. In this regard, *Postcrypt* stands to be 'discovered' – stumbled across (and stumbled-on) - rather than simply being viewed under the premise of an artwork. What is discovered is a dormant machine, its function being indeterminate apart from the inference that it is meant to *process* that which is placed inside it. At the same time it is a machine that is active. It activates the mind in its anticipated use, a use that is made all the more *uncertain* in its reference to the body. Its remaining physical presence is apocalyptic, serving to announce an immanent destination as a threat that is directed towards the body of the viewer. While a precise nature of this threat is unclear, the residues of its cryptal function remain clear. It is in this respect that *Postcrypt* becomes animated by its foreclosed, yet lurking, leaking doom; it creates certain ambivalence towards it.

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In light of the above description and initial evaluation of *Postcrypt*, it seems all the more ironic, if not absurd, that it comes after an appeal to designate a space in which divine embodiment might take place. Imaginatively and

Figure 110. Main body of ***Postcrypt*** under construction.

allegorically, this premise would anticipate that a divine spirit might descend from a heavenly ether through the chamber's vertical axis. As such, the wacky idealism in this proposition is strikingly similar to Wilhelm Reich's human-sized Orgone Accumulators. These were a kind of insulated box, through which "orgone", a 'primordial cosmic energy' (otherwise regarded as 'God'), could be gathered and channelled through to a person sitting inside.[1] Accordingly, *Postcrypt* at least allows for an allegorical possibility of an *incoming* energy or presence, which would maintains an immaterial, non-corporeal quality through the framing of an unseen embodiment. At the same time, such an imaginative function of the chamber can anticipate a respective transcendence from/via the body placed inside. This would suggest that the entrant into this container might be transformed, purified, maybe even purged of their body: vaporized - or perhaps divinely etherealized - and only leaving unwanted dross behind.

Figure 111. A modern "Full-Sized, Sit-in Orgone Accumulator" (5 Ply *ORAC*), marketed by US based company Orgonics.

However, such thoughts are quite unrealistic and even naive and/or conceited in the face of its darkly insinuated function of processing the body. To say that such a work is underpinned by paradox might even amount to contempt in lieu of its more overt *lack* of salvation, akin to that experienced by Holocaust victims. Viewers might similarly, yet more simply ask: How can a human-sized crucible, a 'purifying' chamber (one that happens to be constructed from recycled gas cylinders), *not* be associated with the horror of Auschwitz? Surely there is no paradox in this work.

With the repercussion of this dark historical reminder, the negotiation that is required in regard to *Postcrypt* obviously moves in a very different – or at least parallel - direction to that concerning more ideal notions of a transcendent divine, or of a divine *other*, in art. This is a negotiation of expansive questions raised about the responsibilities of humanity, and demands vigilant attention from a wider culture, whether religious or secular. In my own context, in post-colonial Australia, there is a similar need to consider such questions in regard to our own 'holocaust'[2] of the indigenous population, still a sore issue for many.

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[1] According to Reich's theory, *orgone energy* is a kind of "negatively entropic" force of by which matter is created and organized. Orgone energy 'units', 'acquire energy from the environment' as well as storing it. Under this theory, the Orgone Accumulator was effectively a means to channel orgone energy through the body, and so entailing therapeutic benefits. However, I should note that this notion of orgone energy is quite different from the kenotic, or 'entropic' proposition of divine embodiment concerning *Postcrypt* or the preceding works. Orgone itself doesn't congeal into form. "Orgonomy – Glossary of Terms," http://www.wilhelmreichmuseum.org/biography.html#glossary (accessed 10th Feb 2010). See also Charles R. Kelley, "What is Orgone Energy?" *Galactic Orgonomy Exchange*, 60-62. http://www.orgone.org/articles/ax9kelley1a.htm (accessed 10th Feb 2010).

[2] Gary Foley, "Australia and The Holocaust: A Koori Perspective," *The Koori History Website* (1997). http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_8.html (last accessed 9th February 2010). See also Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians since 1788*, 3rd Ed. (Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 2003).

Yet as a possible reprieve from this identification between *Postcrypt* and the Holocaust, there is crucial difference carried over from this whole body of work. *Postcrypt* is an *individual* container/crypt. Even as a crypt – a space of anticipated death - it is a *singular* space. Unlike the Holocaust, *Postcrypt* does not 'deny a dignity of individual death'. Nevertheless, while it (or any other work in the preceding series) is not an attempted representation of the Holocaust, it still begs a larger question about the responsibilities and appropriateness of representation, especially when it concerns an absent (or erased) body. As such, *Postcrypt* must still take a detour through the likes of Theodor Adorno's "irresolvable impasse" concerning the 'barbarity of art after Auschwitz',[3] a consideration that in many ways mimetically parallels the implications pertaining to representations of God.[4] This only confirms that an appeal for divine embodiment/representation quickly makes way for realizing loss embedded within the human condition.

Figure 112. *Postcrypt* under construction.

Another implication signalled through *Postcrypt* is that a nihilistic lack of redemption might be deemed as contempt – or rather heresy - in regards to the central Christian revelation: the 'divine plan' undertaken for granting a means of salvation. But then again, this 'plan' – of Incarnation - did entail the very horrific and torturous execution of the innocent Christ. A disturbing, challenging question ensues: In the name of Christ, what horror must occur in order for transcendence to be accessed? Or extending this to the legacy of Christendom, what macabre procedure is covertly carried through history, enacted onto the bodies of the unsaved; what horror must be unleashed in order for transcendence to be proclaimed? Must the utopic ideals of leaving corporeality behind always carry such a trace of inhumanity?

What I tentatively propose is that *Postcrypt*, along with the preceding body-containers, provides a means to cautiously approach, and so begin to negotiate, an invocation of the sacred: both human *and* divine. In this sense, *Postcrypt* builds on a further correspondence between the memorial and the shrine, where identified sacredness urges the respect of remembrance and honour, which if possible, is aided by whatever material

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[3] As Elaine Martin has succinctly said, Adorno's famous – and commonly misinterpreted - 'dictum' is not declaring or inducing a simple ban on art or even of Holocaust representation, but signals "the imperative to represent… [in regards to the Holocaust: "the egregious crimes"] and the impossibility of doing so". Elaine Martin, "Re-reading Adorno: The 'after-Auschwitz' Aporia." In *Forum*, 2 (Spring 2006). Fear and Terror, 2. http://forum.llc.ed.ac.uk/archive/02/martin.pdf (accessed 9th February 2010).

[4] The 'ban on images' - or *Bilderverbot* - foremost proscribing any representation of God (as outlined in the Ten Commandments), is clearly a principle carried through into Adorno's (mis)interpreted 'dictum' of an "after Auschwitz" ban on art. It is that which *has become* immaterial, and not solely 'the divine', which carries a quality of being *unrepresentable*. Consequently, the challenge to represent the divine can be compared to the difficult or impossible task of appropriately representing loss.

and/or representative means to do so. However, it can only do this in full admission of a fundamentally human failure.

As such, *Postcrypt* is still an object, towards which I am provoked to seek out reconciliation; it challenges any notion of an attainable resolution in and of itself.

Figure 113. Michael Needham, **Postcrypt** (rear view), 2009. J-studios Artist Community, Melbourne. Steel, concrete, fibreglass, enamel.

Figure 114. Michael Needham, ***Postcrypt***, 2009. J-studios Artist Community. Steel, concrete, fibreglass, enamel.

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APPENDIXES

The following pages contain selected images from the production, installation and presentation of artworks made for this thesis which have been discussed in the preceding chapters. Beginning with a separate title page, there is an appendix for each chapter according to their order as presented in this exegesis. Similarly, each appendix will also be identified by its corresponding name of chapter at the top right hand corner of the page.
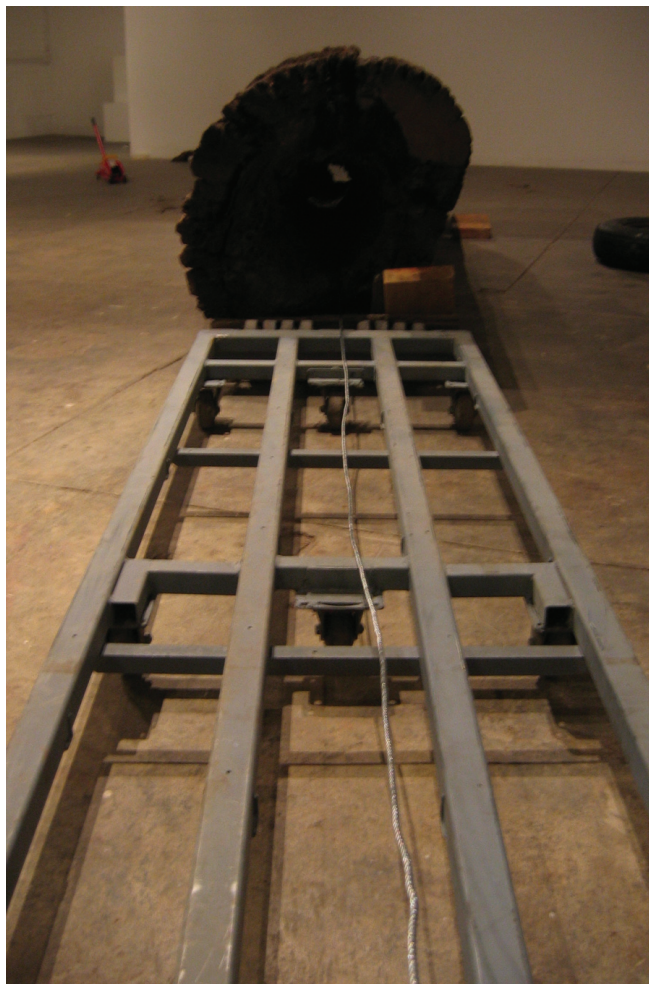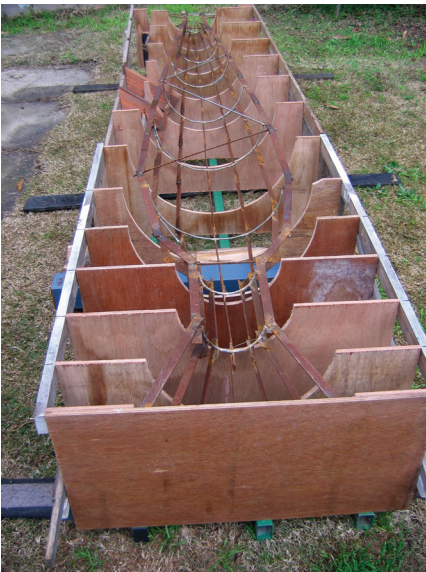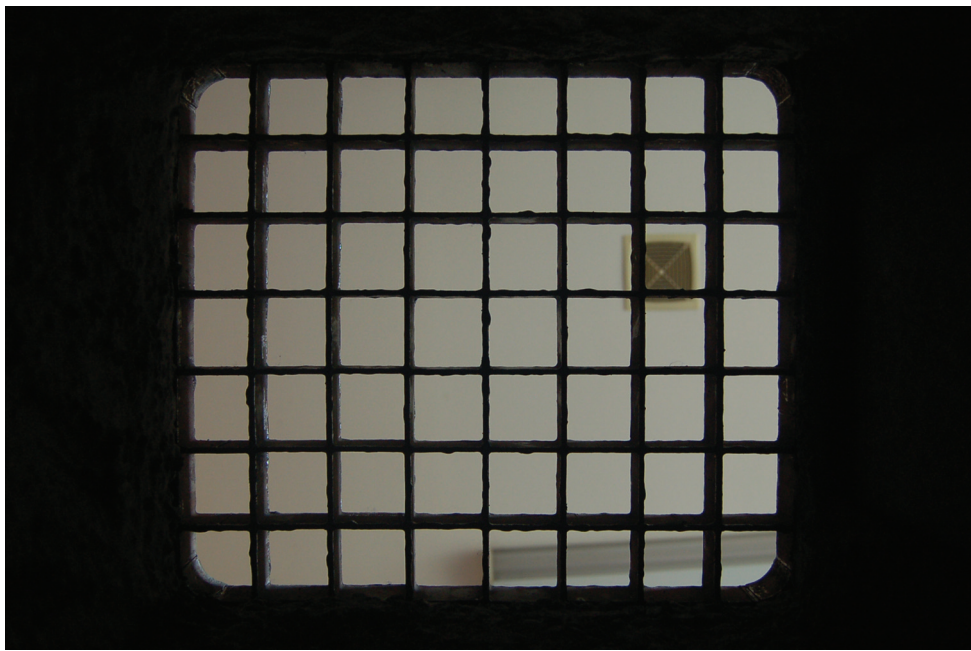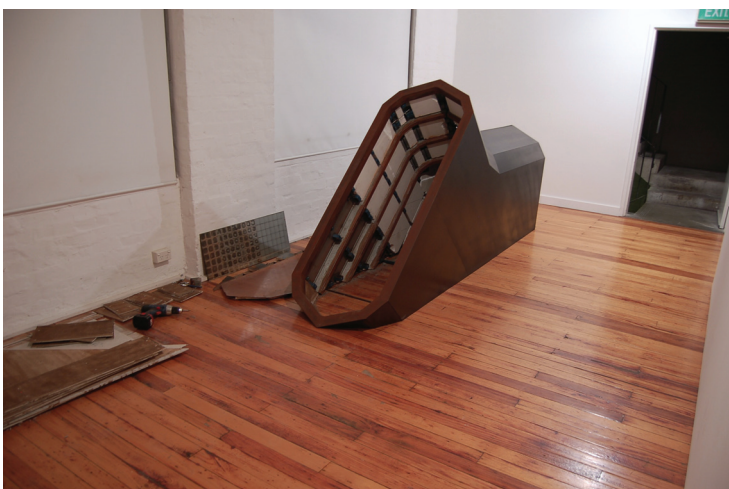
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