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Houses of horror

Gregor Schneider has taken two identical homes, put three sets of identical twins inside and asked them to do identical, unspeakable things. This might be his most sinister work yet, says Gordon Burn

Gordon Burn
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Some scenes from the early life of Gregor Schneider, which show him to be death-bothered and indicate an incontrovertible disposition, well in advance of the usual childhood fascination with bogeymen and creepy-crawlies, towards the black-hearted macabre. Schneider grew up in a landscape of dust and fumes and dirty heavy industry. Rheydt, his home town on the outskirts of Monchengladbach in Germany, where he still lives, has traditionally been a centre for open-cast mining, although many of the mining villages are now shut down and deserted. The house he grew up in was part of the lead-making factory that has been in his family for five generations. That house - now known to gallery-goers internationally as Totes Haus ur [Dead House] - acted as a kind of baffle between the factory and the Schneiders' Unterheydener Strasse neighbours, who have always taken exception to the unsightliness and the noxious gases Factory Schneider still emits. Schneider's father used to run the business; two of his brothers have taken over since their father's death.

Little Gregor (he was born in 1969) must have been a worry to his mother. He was not like other children. None of his friends, for example, lay in bed at night working out how to completely isolate themselves - from noise, from evidence of any other living presence - by lining their rooms with 4ft-thick layers of lead, glass fibre, soundproofing materials and other stuff. (Completely Insulated Death Room would be finished in 1991.) None of them coated their faces and naked bodies in a doughy mixture of meal and water and cycled through the cold to school; or if they did, they certainly didn't refer to the end result as "body art". Gregor was an avid admirer of a Canadian called John Fare who removed various bits of his body in a slow and bloody process of auto-amputation.

Home alone, Gregor filled a coffin-shaped box with wet cement and lay face down in it, with a chisel at hand in case things went kerflooey. The original idea had been to make a second impression of his back and, unaided, flip the first entombing slab on top of himself, but this proved impractical.

Around this time he was earning pocket money working as an altar boy at the local Catholic cemetery, where he learned many things. One of these was never to take the position at the front-left corner of the coffin, because that was where you caught the worst of the death smell. Today, as he explains it - his English is sometimes not so good - he mimes bending to take the handle of the coffin; he shows you how they lowered the ropes into the grave. Three funerals a day. In between, he got a lot of reading done. He smiles broadly.

When he was 16, Schneider's parents moved to the suburbs, leaving him in the house overlooking the factory yard in Rheydt on his own. When his father paid him a visit, he hurt his leg in one of the several traps Gregor had set in the floor. There was a B&Q megastore conveniently situated on the other side of Unterheydener Strasse, and Schneider started making day-long visits. He bought industrial quantities of plastic sheeting, cement, piping and ventilation grilles. The lead, whose lethal molten condition and psychedelically coloured drying surface had always absorbed him, came free.

Without knowing exactly what he was doing, or where it was leading, he set to work. Walls were built in front of walls, windows in front of windows, ceilings were rigged to rise and fall unseen. Love Nest is a narrow cell with a bed, a bath and a hot-plate. The idea was that it contained all that was necessary for human existence and the person inside need never leave; it was entered by a crawl space under the sink. His Coffee Room rotates 360 degrees on its own axis, so slowly as to be imperceptible: leaving by the door through which they arrived, visitors risk stepping into a void.

It goes without saying, perhaps, that Schneider has a lifelong interest in scenes of crime and what he calls "places charged with a strong past event, but from which the event itself is absent". As a schoolboy, he obsessively photographed a place in the woods where a female art student had been murdered. He has been interested to discover "whether a scream would stay behind in a room after you had left it". Under the floors, there is a birdcage, dead animals, inflatable dolls. "I'd love to stop someone getting away one time," Schneider has said, "but I have never dared to yet. I'm one of those people who live double lives and go out into the park at night and sift through the litter bins and secretly take something home with me ... I assume that there are others working at it and I will probably never meet the best ones."

Schneider's work, like the work of many of the artists he showed with in Apocalypse at the Royal Academy in London in 2000, represents a kind of anti-sublime; what Jake Chapman has called, only half-jokingly, a "degenerate sublime". It takes art about as far from the pleasure principle as it can be taken. But maybe this is inevitable. Good art sucks in the psyche of its time, and disorder, fear, Bacon's "smell of death" continue to be the central 21st-century experiences. In a way, Schneider is part of a tradition in German art dating back to Otto Dix and George Grosz who, in the period between the wars, produced numerous gruesome images of the lustmord - sexual murder.

He was awarded the Golden Lion at the 2001 Venice Biennale for an installation that consisted of 100 tons of rooms from the Rheydt house shipped to Italy and reassembled in the German pavilion. Bits of the house have been touring the world ever since. They have made Schneider one of the most sought-after artists in Europe. He is certainly the most famous person in Rheydt after Goebbels, who grew up one street away. But there is a sense that Schneider is wearying of the notoriety of his crazy house and local curiosity about the oddball loner who lives in it.

A couple of years ago he started working with human "collaborators". In N. Schmidt (2001-2003),

Schneider's probably fictitious "lodger" had to lie on a gallery floor playing dead. In *Old House-Slut* (2000-2003), a woman had to lie on a gallery floor looking raped and dead. For *Rubbish Bag* in *Wanking Corner* (1999), Schneider himself crouched in the bag of the title for seven hours, all-seeing but invisible, and nobody ever knew he was there.

Die Familie Schneider, his new show in London, features living, breathing, wanking people and represents a startling, and hugely risky, change of direction. It has been made possible by Artangel, an organisation Schneider has long admired for its determination to "think outside the museum". Adjacent houses in a Victorian terrace in Whitechapel in east London have been acquired. The houses have been decorated and "distressed" to the artist's exact specifications. Down to the tiniest wallpaper tear and ceiling stain, they are identical. For the duration of the show they will be occupied by two "families" of identical twins, one in each house, whose movements throughout a seven-hour day will be co-ordinated precisely. Only one visitor will be admitted at a time. Nobody under the age of 16 will get in. The address is available only on application.

I talked to Schneider in one of the upstairs bedrooms at number 14. It had been given a kind of seedy, cheap glamour: cream "boudoir" carpet, cream vanity units, what Schneider calls "porno" mirrors. There was no natural light; a wall had been erected in front of the window; we were in a room-within-a-room. From the street, though, it looks as if the window and the room behind it are still as they were - "normal". Both houses are, in fact, sealed off from the outside world. They are floored, dado-railed tombs.

Schneider had just been back to Rheydt to make a decision about a headstone for his father, who died recently. As the artist of family Schneider, this responsibility fell to him. In his role as altar boy, he attended the ceremony when the new Catholic cemetery opened. "It was empty. Now my father's in," he says. "Now it spreads and spreads."

It grew late. It had been raining. We walked in the direction of the main road via the London Hospital. Outside the hospital, a young woman was screaming into a mobile; she was sobbing, her body shaking. An IV patch showed in the space between her top and her trousers. "I'm fucking cracking up! I can't fucking take it!" We sought help from two paramedics who were having a smoke by their ambulance. They shrugged. "We don't work here. We just bring them in." But they went over to the woman, who was spasming now and had slumped to the pavement.

We were headed for the Blind Beggar pub, scene of one of the Krays' most notorious slayings. The twins' portraits grace the walls. There are posters advertising Kray walks and Jack the Ripper tours, something I thought Schneider would be interested to see. But he stopped suddenly. He felt tired, he said. He thought he should go home.

I suspected that he wanted to see what had happened with the young woman - not in a voyeuristic way but to reacquaint himself with that kind of abjectness and human misery. To look at it and remember and take it back to the houses, where in the morning work would be continuing with the mildewing and bruising and the calling-back of things that might or might not have happened inside those walls.

"Anything bad ever happen in this house, Frank?" a house-hunter asks the narrator of Richard Ford's novel *Independence Day*.

"Nothing I know about," Frank Bascombe, a realtor, replies. "I guess all houses have pasts. The ones I lived in all sure did. Somebody's bound to have died in some room here sometime. I just don't know who."

• *Die Familie Schneider*, in London E1, can be viewed by appointment only from October 2. Details: 07981 578754 and 07981 578755.