



The feeling is mutual

You don't have to enter the building projects of reclusive German artist Gregor Schneider to feel trapped, depressed or disorientated, says **Ossian Ward**. After all, everybody can empathise with the fear of ending up in a box. Photography by **Tim O'Sullivan**

Images flash up of a dank basement, a window bricked up from the outside, a lead-lined, plaster- and foam-insulated box room, and a low-lit, dead end corridor that confronts the viewer with a mirror. Simply taking a slide-show tour through Gregor Schneider's previous and ongoing building projects – actually dismembered, altered or rebuilt rooms – is a harrowing enough experience. Not to mention the claustrophobia, a sensation shared with the artist in his personal video diaries filmed behind the scenes of his installations, as he huffs and groans to gain access to the crawl spaces and interstices that no one else sees between the pre-existing structural walls and his additional false ones. Most rooms are numbered sequentially as Schneider builds or modifies them, but some have their own names – including the *Total isolierter toter*

Raum ('Totally Insulated Death Space') and the *Puff* ('Brothel'), as well as the rooms reserved for *Das kleinste Wicksen* ('The Smallest Wank') and *Das grosse Wicksen* ('The Large Wank'). So when Iwona Blazwick, now director of London's Whitechapel Gallery, described in a review how Schneider's award-winning German pavilion of rickety walls and dark cul-de-sacs in the 2001 Venice Biennale 'insisted on the viewer engaging in an intense, one-to-one confrontation with the artist's own psyche', she wasn't kidding.

Confusingly, much of Schneider's output is part of one continuously changing work called *Haus u r*, which is actually his outwardly unprepossessing, three-storey teenage home on Unterheydener Strasse in the town of Rheydt, west-central Germany. Schneider has been living and working

there by himself on and off since 1986, but it bears little resemblance to the former Schneider family residence. The names of the street and town provide the abbreviated initials 'u r' in the work's title, while the space between the two letters is a literal representation of the gaps between successive reconstructions in the house. Each time a few rooms, passageways or stairwells are removed for exhibition – as when large sections were floated down the canals for the Venice pavilion, or flown to LA MoCA's Geffen Contemporary space earlier this year – the work becomes *Totes Haus u r* ('Dead House u r'). It's as though, detached from its maternal life-support machine, the smaller work stops living until reunited with its siblings in the family unit.

Family is clearly part of Schneider's story. Not only does it provide the title for his ▶

◀ first major UK exhibition, 'Die Familie Schneider' – a project shrouded in secrecy by the ever-inventive commissioning agency Artangel – but it is also the origin of his 20-year self-build magnum opus. Number 12 Unterheydener Strasse is next door to Schneider Productions, an enormous lead smelting plant, one of only two industrial producers of the toxic, dull grey metal in Germany. 'My father didn't use the house, but couldn't knock it down or rent it to anyone outside of the company.' At the age of 16, Gregor, the angst-ridden young artist who painted naked, Giacometti-thin virgins, moved into this unloved house and began to build walls in front of walls and rooms within rooms as if to stifle his new-found freedom and space. 'I only paid a little rent; my father wasn't interested in what I was doing.'

The impressionable youth turned away from painting towards radical proponents of 'action art', as he terms it, such as blood-letting Austrian performer Hermann Nitsch and self-mutilating American artist John Fare. In 1986, Schneider shaved himself from head to toe, buried himself, hung himself up between trees, fossilised himself in a mixture of flour and water and bathed in paint, 'only to find that the paint wouldn't come off, so I had to go into the shower and the whole family scrubbed away at me'. After failing school and army entrance requirements at 17, he barricaded himself in *Haus u r*. His eccentric project wasn't discovered by the art world for almost 10 years, but his family stuck by him. 'I tried to get far away from the things that my father did. At first I didn't want to use this material [lead] and then I did and I became much closer to my father than I thought I ever would.'

Significantly, Schneider's father died two weeks before we meet, just six weeks before the opening of 'Die Familie Schneider'. 'He helped me in so many ways – not in making art, he wasn't interested in art – but he was interested that I develop myself.' One of Schneider's two brothers, an engineer, has also been involved in *Haus u r*, creating powerful machines able to make a false ceiling rise and fall at an incredibly slow speed, and a turntable strong enough to spin a whole room on its axis.

This central rotating space in *Haus u r*, the *Kaffeezimmer* ('Coffee Room'), acts as a meeting point for the artist and his sporadic visitors. The room rotates through 360

degrees over the course of half an hour, but the occupants remain completely unaware of the movement because the false daylight and fan-generated wind blowing through the curtains never varies. This beguiling meeting room is reminiscent of the magnificent John Soane house and museum in London, which also contains an ever-collapsing architectural universe of shutters, mirrors and enfilades beyond a seemingly tame coffee room (albeit in an elegant neo-classical style).

Schneider's career has recently developed beyond *Haus u r* – indeed, it's not clear how much more work could be done to the house, such is the decreasing scale of its Kafka-esque cells and the weight of the extraneous walls and doubled ceilings that threatens to implode the whole structure. Instead, Schneider has gone back through his internalised M C Escher world of rooms to his former life as a performance artist.

All of Gregor Schneider's work could be considered performance art, because everything revolves around the artist's tireless activity

'For a long time now,' he begins slowly, with thoughtful, almost pained deliberations between each statement, 'I have wanted to show a dead person in a museum... in a natural way and just for a few hours.' While drawing up a legal document that might one day permit someone to donate their body to this artistic purpose, Schneider has been substituting his own body by 'lying on the ground without moving – not sleeping – for hours on end. Very, very difficult.' An equally disturbing work, first shown in 1997, involved an encounter with an old woman, slumped face-down in a gallery corner as though left for dead. 'That is Hannelore Reuen,' says Schneider matter-of-factly, pointing at the black-and-white projection of what turns out to be a lifelike doll. This fictitious elderly lady suddenly arrived at *Haus u r* in 1996 when her nameplate appeared above the doorbell, and she has been making works of art ever since. 'It is easier to work with different names, because then you are completely free and nobody

expects or compares anything you do.'

Despite Schneider's reluctance to reveal what he plans for the two ordinary houses in a London street that he will occupy for his Artangel project, I can't help feeling that Ms Hannelore Reuen might make an appearance alongside other members of the family, fictional and non-fictional alike.

What is certain is that Schneider's UK debut will concentrate on confounding us through performance and scene-setting, not dramatic structural alterations. All of Schneider's work could potentially be considered performance art (even *Haus u r*, which is normally discussed as sculpture or installation) because the artist is the only constant – everything else revolves around his tireless activity. Moreover, much of his production is temporal, existing only in photographic documentation like any other fleeting art 'happening'.

There are two schools of thought on performance art. One side views the mental or conceptual visualisation of an action as enough to constitute the work; the other believes that you cannot consider such a piece as art unless you are physically present. I would argue another level of engagement with the kind of performance art that Schneider creates, which is a psychological appreciation of his situations. Schneider is able to create atmospheres that arouse emotions as varied as dread, depression and disorientation, all the more heightened because the spectator is often alone. Without entering his environments, it is possible to psychologically empathise with a Schneider work – everyone can relate to the basic fear of feeling imprisoned within a small space.

This empathetic aspect of his practice explains the silence surrounding Schneider's new work: once the secret is out it will spoil the surprise, or as the artist says, 'the best way to visit the work is without any expectations'. He adds enigmatically, 'we will be there, but you won't see us'. Perhaps the family Schneider will be secreted behind a false wall; perhaps we will never know. Maybe Schneider's works are all meditations on the room as a box within which life is lived and expended – because after all, we all end up in boxes of one kind or another.

'Die Familie Schneider', from 2 Oct, by appointment only (+44 (0)7981 578754 or +44 (0)7981 578755, www.artangel.org.uk)

