

## Where angels fear to tread

Gregor Schneider's eerie transformation of two East End houses has amazed and disturbed the critics. Sukhdev Sandhu met the artist to find out how he did it

The German artist Gregor Schneider left high school in 1987 expecting to spend the next couple of years doing military service. However, as he later recalled, his initial interview was far from routine: "I was registered as having a perceptual disorder and as being mentally ill, but I had only told them what I was doing at the time. I told them that I build rooms, that I look at a wall and am interested in an unevenness on its surface: the tiniest hole, the slightest protuberance. And so they didn't let me into the Army."

The officials who quizzed Schneider back then are not alone in being puzzled and a little disturbed by this singular artist who was born and brought up in Rheydt, in Mönchengladbach. Here, for the best part of 20 years, he has been working on a building called *Dead House u r*. Inside it, he creates rooms within rooms, secret chambers, tiny corridors, blind windows, all of them cut off from natural light. This insulation from the outside world, far from offering safety or homeliness, engenders fear. Over and over again, he returns to this one extended interior space, working and reworking its proportions and parameters, transforming familiarity into spooky unfamiliarity.

His new project, entitled with misleading politesse *Die Familie Schneider in London*, is his first major work outside of Rheydt. As with most work funded by pioneering commissioners Artangel, it travels far beyond the formal boundaries that continue to confine a good deal of contemporary art, and fuses elements of installation, architectural makeover and performance into something unclassifiable: a species of sculpture whose primary material is space itself.

Located in a quiet street behind the Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel, *Die Familie Schneider* consists of two adjacent terraced houses which have been cleared of the stacked chairs that previously filled them and redesigned as grotesque peepshows, ghostly mausoleums to a series of unspeakable crimes. In them lurk voiceless figures, reminiscent of the hooded dwarf in Nic Roeg's film *Don't Look Now* (1973). Fetid smells leak from many of the rooms. Ceilings have been lowered, hidden pens carved out, escape routes cut off.

The effect is asphyxiating. The house becomes a pressure chamber, mutating into a concrete version of a half-remembered image from 25 Cromwell Street or 10 Rillington Place. It is scary, nauseating, a construction in which angels would fear to tread. By the time I had closed the door and fled the houses, I was beside myself with barely concealed hysteria. I was also strangely and repellently elated by the boldness with which Schneider had realised his bleak vision of unhomeliness.

Schneider's art is increasingly well known – it won the Golden Lion at the 2001 Venice Biennale – but the lexicon used to describe it is relatively small: the most common words are obsessive, autistic, disturbed. It's hard to demur too forcefully, especially when the artist himself, despite his excellent English, finds it hard or perhaps vacuous to spend time articulating an artistic worldview that

draws its power precisely from its ability to evoke an ineffable darkness. His sentences are punctuated with pauses and delays as painful and lingering as the emptiness of many of the interiors he fashions.

It's partly playfulness. Schneider is hardly unconvivial. Shortly after he arrived in the East End to begin work on his new houses, I went with him to a nearby pub where I learned that he likes his beer, and that as soon as the conversation turns from the philosophical and aesthetic intricacies of his work and moves on to issues such as local strip-clubs, sex gangs and international porn trafficking, he could become surprisingly eloquent.

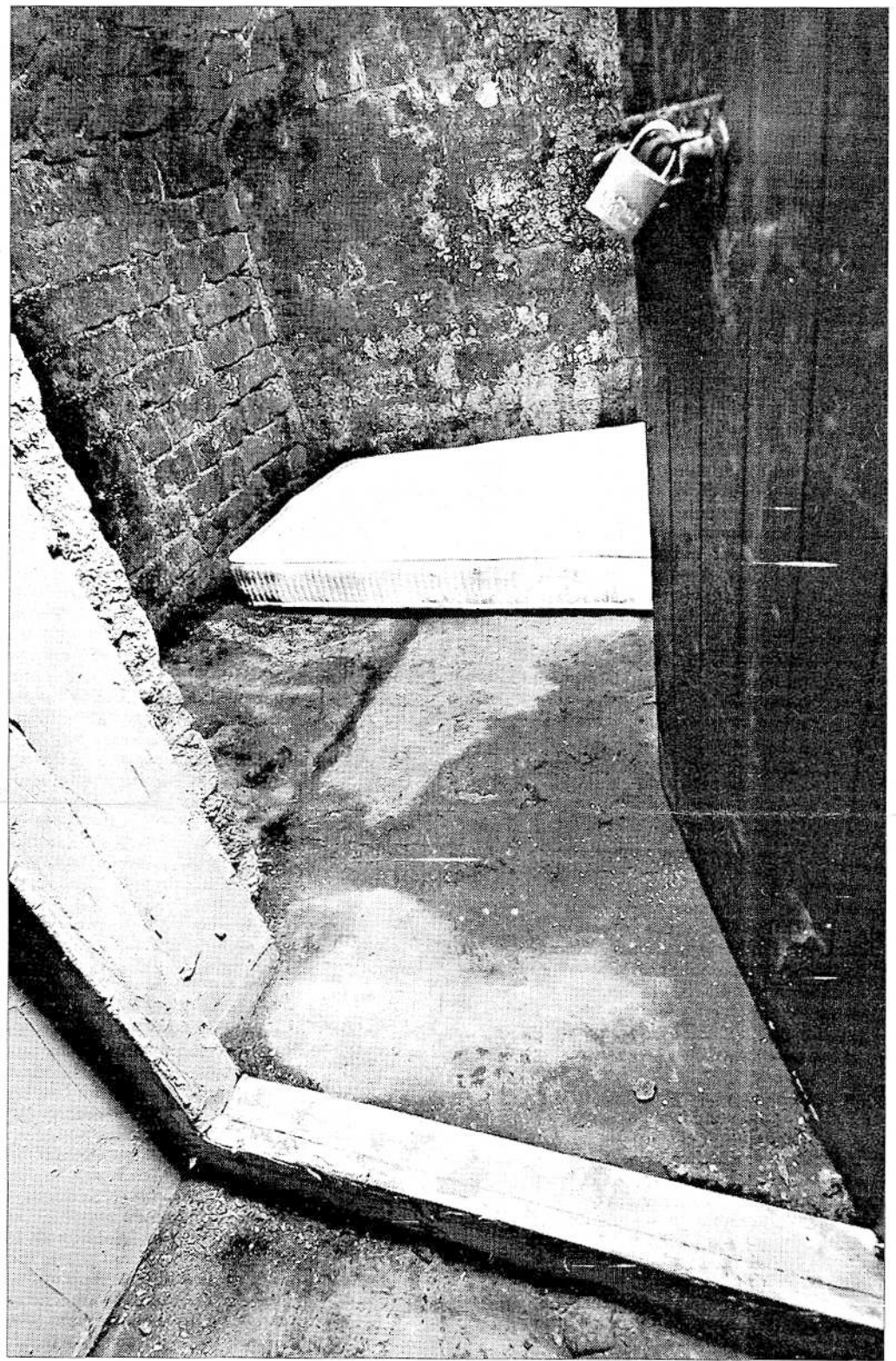
I shouldn't have been surprised. In the past he has adopted the alter-ego of a sexually harassed elderly lady called Hannelore Reuen who he claims is an artistic collaborator. *Old House-Slut* (2000-2003) featured a woman lying on a gallery floor looking as if she had been raped. Photographs of him as a teenager show him naked, smeared in flour and water, howling dementedly. In other pictures he can be seen hacking off his hair or trussing his face as if it were a hunk of meat. The influence of Edvard Munch and Francis Bacon is clearly present here; the walls of his later buildings seem to reverberate with the unheard howls and screams that are evident in their paintings.

It's hard not to speculate on the sources of Schneider's artistic preoccupations. He grew up a few streets away from where Goebbels used to live. Rheydt is a relatively new city where entire streets and boroughs have had the houses in them demolished so that the rich coal reserves on which they lie can be mined. Instantly, decades of human endeavour and local history are razed. "The fate of individuals has never interested me," Schneider told the art writer Ben Lewis in a BBC4 documentary about his work. It's a sentiment with which local politicians would agree. It also finds expression in the living rooms at Whitechapel which are bereft of photos, ornaments, traces of personality.

If Schneider's art emerges from the violent desertification of his home city, it also assumes a special resonance when displayed in the East End of London, a poor area that flourishes its grim archives like a family heirloom: the Ripper murders; John Merrick, the Elephant Man, incarcerated at a nearby hospital; the Kray murders at the Blind Beggar pub; the Brick Lane bomb in 1999; the gang rapes at Tower House, better known to readers of Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* as the Monster Doss House.

Now it, too, is being gutted and slicked up. Even on the street where the Schneider houses stand, real-estate developers are coining it by emulsifying the grimness and the remnants of Whitechapel's haunted, monstrous past and converting the terraced buildings into bijou apartments. Gentrification is itself a kind of violence. It's also a lie, promising as it does a world without darkness, home life without horrors. We may wish for those things; but, as Schneider knows, they are the biggest fabrications of all.

To book a tour, call Artangel on 07981 578754



PICTURES: LINDA NYLIND

Asphyxiating: a corner of *Die Familie Schneider in London*, Gregor Schneider's fusion of installation, architecture and performance

### SCHNEIDER THE HOMEMAKER

**1969** Gregor Schneider born in Rheydt, Germany. Grows up in a house attached to his father's lead-making factory (now run by his two brothers).

**1981** Makes his first artworks at the age of 12: drawings of naked women. Brought up a Catholic, he works for a period as an altar boy, carrying coffins for a local cemetery.

**1985** Parents move to the suburbs while he remains alone in the family home, which he begins transforming into the labyrinthine artwork *Dead House u r*. He still lives there, working on the project. Has his first solo exhibition. Begins exhibiting parts of *Dead House u r*.

**1989-94** Attends art colleges in Münster, Düsseldorf and Hamburg.

**1999** Shows *Rubbish Bag in Wanking Corner* in an art gallery in Bremerhaven, Germany, which features the artist hiding in a refuse sack for seven hours at a time.

**2000** Comes to the attention of the British public when the cellar of *Dead House u r* is shown in the Royal

Academy's *Apocalypse* exhibition. Critics find the experience genuinely creepy, save for one who complains of "Hammer effects".

**2000-3** Schneider's installation *Old House-Slut* heralds the first of his collaborations with humans. A



woman has to lie on a gallery floor pretending she's raped and dead. **2001** Receives the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for an installation of *Dead House u r*, brought over from Germany. Sections of the house have been on tour around the world ever since. **2004** *Die Familie Schneider* opens in Whitechapel, his first major project in 20 years.

‘He has redesigned the houses as grotesque peepshows, ghostly mausoleums to terrible crimes’