

THE FIRST IMPRESSION of *Die Familie Schneider* is the fear that Gregor Schneider may have stumbled over the line into the theatrical. Although his previous works were every bit as much stages as they were sculptures, the actor on those stages was always the viewer alone (to a sometimes frightening degree). *Die Familie Schneider*, on the other hand, is populated with professional actors whose presence nudges the project perilously close to a carnival house of horrors or, worse, 'living theatre.'

Anyone familiar with Schneider's oeuvre, however, knows that what he's seeking in his art is not a set piece or a stock motif ('the grotesque,' 'the Gothic,' or even 'the uncanny') but something deeper. This 'something' exists on a level that's hard to isolate but, in *Die Familie Schneider*, is quite easy to feel, just beneath one's skin. And whatever it is, Schneider will go to great lengths to conjure it, from replicating entire rooms (down to the hairline fractures in the ceiling plaster) to hiring an actor to sit motionless inside a plastic garbage bag in a stifling bedroom for eight hours at a time.

In his youth, Schneider was fond of experiments: capturing traces of impending disaster by filming objects before they fell, or photographing the site of a murder to detect some residue of the act. The quite palpable dread that suffuses *Die Familie Schneider* is a mix of the two: a looming dread (of whatever may lurk behind the closet door) and a lingering dread (of the horrors that may have taken place in the moldy basement).

According to recent English history, this extraordinary fear of a very ordinary domestic space is not unfounded. In 1994 police began excavating a different house, this one at 25 Cromwell Street in Gloucester, where they eventually dug up the dismembered remains of ten girls and young women who, over a period of several years, had been tortured to death by Fred West and his wife Rosemary. Police found several shallow graves beneath the garden patio and more under the floor of the children's basement playroom (which Fred had recently renovated). The police had the house demolished as soon as they finished collecting evidence. Apparently whatever residue was there — be it psychic, spiritual, or unnamable — was too persistent simply to cover up with a new basement floor and a fresh patio.

Schneider has devoted his life to synthesizing a similar residue. In his monumental *Totes Haus III* (1985-97) he undertook a long-term project to fabricate it with ordinary building materials, and in *Die Familie Schneider* he has pulled off some of his best tricks — adding walls, doubling rooms, regulating light sources, channeling air currents and odors, and conjuring new spaces seemingly from nowhere.

And then there are the paid actors — who, it should be noted, never acknowledge the viewer, making them (for all intents) just another material in this grandly unnerving composition. With them, though, Schneider has hit upon a new state of discomfort, previously explored by Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, and, more recently, Santiago Sierra: namely, the horror triggered by the unexpected proximity of another human body.

*Die Familie Schneider* was commissioned and produced by Artangel in association with Kunststiftung Nordrhein-Westphalia. It will be on view in the Whitechapel district of London until the end of December. (Photo: Thierry Bal)



SPOTLIGHT

## DIE FAMILIE SCHNEIDER

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