

## Venice Biennale 2005

## Art in the age of global terrorism

The story of Gregor Schneider's installation for St Mark's Square

VENICE. The German artist Gregor Schneider is claiming that an installation commissioned for the Venice Biennale, which opened in June and runs until 6 November, has been censored "for political reasons". Although biennale officials have now admitted this, a number of senior curators questioned by The Art Newspaper have questioned the project's viability.

City authorities in Venice, backed by the Ministry of Culture in Rome, denied Schneider permission to erect his *Cube Venice 2005* in the middle of St Mark's Square to coincide with the exhibition's opening.

The work, commissioned by Rosa Martinez, one of the Biennale's co-curators, is a 50-foot cube made of scaffolding covered in black fabric. It is inspired by the Ka'ba in Mecca, the central holy site of Islam.

A short video documenting the project is being screened in the Arsenal, the city's former shipyard which houses one half of the Biennale. According to a scrolling text on the screen written by the artist himself, the work was rejected for "political reasons". The text also states that the project was rejected "against the wishes of the curator".

Not so, said the Biennale's president, Davide Croff, speaking at a press conference in Venice in June. Replying to a question put to him by The Art Newspaper, Mr Croff said: "the decision [to block the erection of the Cube] was taken by city authorities and not by the Biennale. It was not a political decision. It was to do with health and safety issues".

But Mr Schneider insists the proposed installation was safe. Speaking to The Art Newspaper in Venice he said: "I built a house inside the German pavilion [referring to his award-winning installation at the 2001 Biennale]. I know how to make a structure that is safe". Furthermore, says Schneider, his team was in discussions with city authorities and he was ready to revise all aspects of his *Cube Venice 2005*, its size, materials, and even its location. "I was ready to erect it in any public square in Venice," he says. So, why was the project blocked?

## Political realities

Following pressure from the press, the Biennale organisers have now revised their position and acknowledged that city authorities in Venice rejected the installation because "they were afraid it could harm the religious feelings of the Islamic community and block

the view of part of the square", said Alessandra Santerini, press officer for the Biennale. A spokesman for the office of the Superintendent for Architecture in Venice reportedly said permission was denied for fear that it might make Venice vulnerable to terrorist attacks.

Reacting to these comments, Schneider said: "We are at war, we can't even discuss Islam anymore. Everyone is afraid. It's not the Muslims that are stopping this project, it's the Christians. If we can't build an abstract cube anymore, what can we do?"

## The background

Schneider has been working on his Cube for the last two years. He says he was initially inspired by a friend and collaborator of several years, the Tunisian engineer, Helmi Ben Boubaker Helal, who is a practicing Muslim. "I was fascinated by the power Helmi gets from his religion", says Schneider. "I was also fascinated by this building, the Ka'ba in Mecca, the inside of which is not documented".

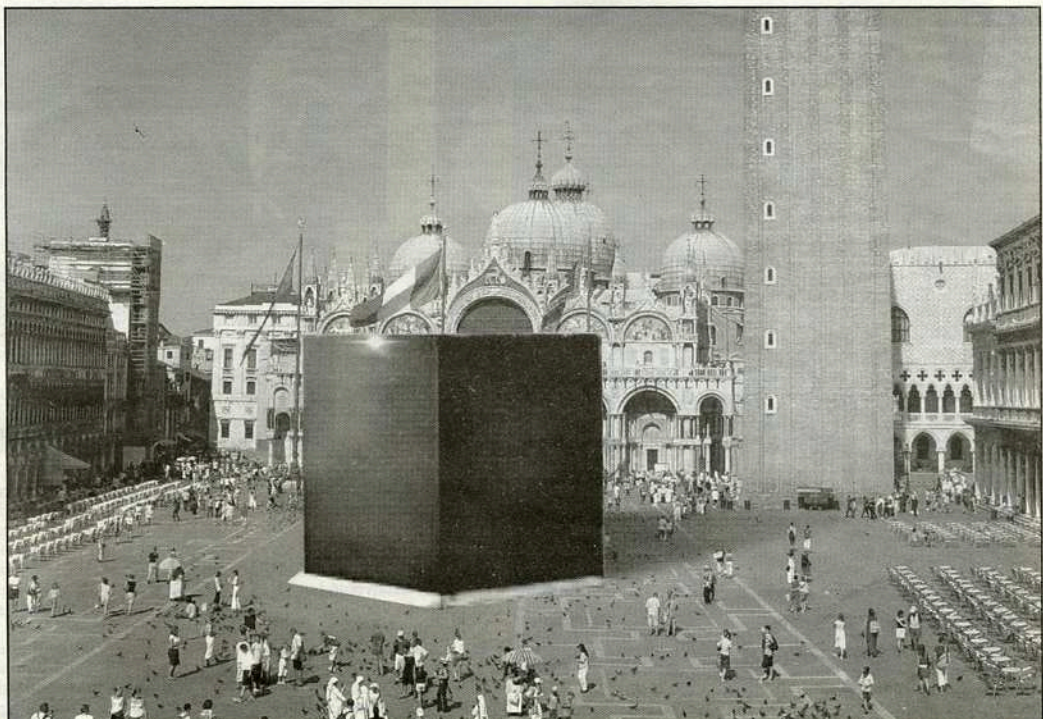


Gregor Schneider and Rosa Martinez

Schneider and Helal embarked on a lengthy research process for the project. "We spoke with the Islam Rat, the largest Muslim organisation in Germany; Helmi travelled to Saudi Arabia to meet muftis and imams; they all said the same thing: to reconstruct the Ka'ba is not offensive to Muslims; there is nothing in the Koran that forbids it". An original idea to reconstruct the Ka'ba to scale in Germany was revised precisely to avoid offence and Schneider began to work on an "abstract" cube, an idea he refined when Ms Martinez invited him to build the work for the Biennale.

Schneider says *Cube Venice 2005* "is about dialogue between religions; if it had been erected, it would have enabled Christians to see a structure inspired by a site they are not able to visit".

This is hopelessly naive, says a senior US curator who spoke to The Art Newspaper

Digital rendering of Gregor Schneider's *Cube Venice 2005* inspired by the ka'ba in St Mark's Square

on condition of anonymity. "Schneider's intention may have been to encourage dialogue, but there's no accounting for the reactions of radical Muslims. This project was never going to happen". He added that Ms Martinez should never have expected to get the project off the ground.

Jens Hoffmann, director of exhibitions at the ICA in London, concurs: "Using the Ka'ba, the most holy site of



Islam, as an inspiration for a work of art is definitely thought-provoking. Schneider obviously saw it as a possibility for a meeting and dialogue between Occident and Orient in a time of conflict. Yet, I wonder if the Islamic world would see it that way too?"

## The discussions

The discussions for Schneider's project provide a fascinating insight into the workings of the Biennale. What is most surprising is that Ms Martinez was not permitted

to argue her case directly with the city authorities and later with the Ministry of Culture in Rome. These discussions were held by Mr Croff.

Ms Martinez commissioned Schneider's project in January, just six months before the opening of the Biennale, but permission for the installation was denied by Renata Codello, Superintendent for Architecture in Venice, shortly after a meeting in February between Schneider, Ms Martinez and Biennale officials.

According to Ms Codello "we made a technical analysis of the project... and concluded with the police director that it was not possible to authorise it. The Ministry [of Culture] was informed, the usual procedure with such cases".

Mr Croff then sought permission to show Schneider's work directly from the Ministry of Culture in Rome. Permission was, once again, denied.

Renato Quaglia, managing director of the Biennale, then suggested installing the sculpture on a floating platform in front of St Mark's Square. The Venice port authority granted permission, but this proposal was rejected by city officials in May on the grounds that it was a threat to "public order".

## The catalogue

While the scale of the project may have made it difficult to realise in just six months, it is less clear why details of the

work were not included in the Biennale catalogue. Instead of documenting *Cube Venice 2005* as Schneider originally intended, his catalogue entry consists simply of six entirely black pages.

Schneider says he sent all project details to a catalogue editor several months ago. He was then asked by the editor to submit a "short text" for publication after both the local authorities and the Ministry of Culture had denied permission for the project.

"political censorship" stamped over them. This again was rejected by the organisers. "From the Biennale point of view, that stamp did not reflect the logistic and security difficulties involved in the realisation of the project" says Ms Martinez. The six black pages were a final compromise.

Ms Santerini denies that the catalogue was censored: "It is not true that Mr Schneider was not allowed to publish the project details in the Biennale catalogue. He wanted to pub-

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—Senior US curator

Schneider says he felt the catalogue would not be complete unless it reproduced an e-mail sent by Mr Croff to Ms Martinez in March which states that the Ministry of Culture in Rome had rejected the project for "political reasons".

The artist was told by the catalogue editor that this correspondence could not be published for "privacy reasons"; he was, however, told that he could publish a "critical text or an artist's statement" instead.

Schneider then requested that images of the Cube be published in the catalogue with

only the private correspondence".

## Will it happen?

Ms Martinez describes *Cube Venice 2005* as "a landmark in contemporary art, both in aesthetic and conceptual terms". She believes emphatically that the project should be realised. She would not, however, speculate as to possible locations. For his part, Schneider remains committed to finding a city that will host his Cube.

Gareth Harris

For a report on the Venice Biennale see p.34