

**Gregor Schneider**

Interviewed by Gilda Williams

# Art

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# Doubling

Gregor Schneider  
400 Metre Dead Black End 2006  
Fondazione Morra Greco  
Napoli



**Gilda Williams:** *The spaces you create seem to invite secret activities, taboo occurrences not meant for the public eye – kidnapping, illicit sexual encounters, murders, imprisonments, torture. This kind of violent secrecy then seems weirdly connected in your work with the secret or forbidden places of childhood, and childhood's own set of fears. And then the act of art-viewing itself seems in your work to become another of these secret, perhaps shameful moments.*

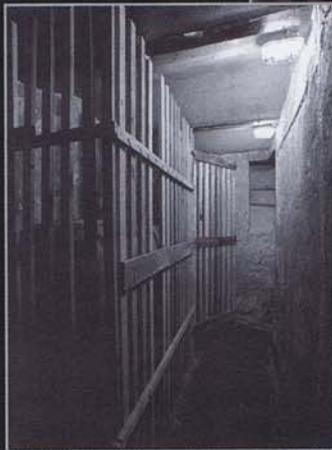
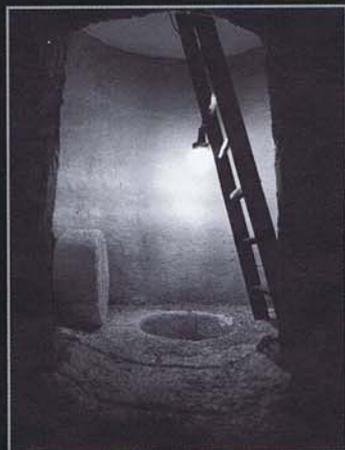
**Gregor Schneider:** Anything is possible in a child's playroom. Usually a secret is based on the fact that there is no secret. I have created rooms which are literally secret and inaccessible, but the question is not whether my rooms are secret, but whether you recognise yourself in them. In my work it is as though I'm wandering through the layers and enclosures of my own brain, following the mechanisms of perception and knowledge.

I'll explain how I work – my work is easy to describe – I place a wall in front of a wall, a room inside a room. It's as if parts of rooms are replayed. While an unsuspecting visitor sits on a sofa before a coffee table, the whole ceiling slowly rises and falls by 5cm well above his head – so slowly as to be unnoticeable.

My working method is always one of doubling. A double just in front, just underneath or just inside what already exists, or a plausible double placed at another site. So there is no invention. What little I invent is barely noticeable and unobtrusive. Doubling is a gesture which confirms what already exists in the present, not in the form of a statement or proof but like evidence in a court of law.

I'm interested in free-wheeling action. My work is an addition – something extra or superfluous in the

sense that it does not state, or express, or refer to anything new. On occasion I have remade a room within another identical room, but always I make an exact duplicate or double of an original room that exists elsewhere – I've just transported it, exactly as it existed, to another place. My working method has not really changed over the years. Most of my rooms may seem imaginary or unreal in a museum or gallery



Gregor Schneider  
*Haus u r* 2001  
 installation views  
 German pavilion  
 Venice Biennale

space, but they are just normal, real rooms, or parts of real rooms. And my figures are cast from family members or from my own body, so the figures duplicate an original too.

*Why is it so important to you that there is an original? This need for an original that you describe seems surprisingly to connect with the traditional role of art-making as mimesis, of traditional art setting out to mimic reality in detail and as faithfully as possible.*

In the end you don't have the question any more – why build a duplicate room? In the end you cannot recognise the built room any more. I once visited a psychiatrist, and he said he couldn't help me understand this need of mine to build a duplicate room. I choose to rebuild a room in order to really analyse the structure of it. By rebuilding a room, I truly understand the room. What is exciting for me is that from the moment I rebuild a room, the original room that lies behind it becomes hidden, and the newly built room is accepted as a room that has always existed. For me, this emptiness is a part of the work. The more one continues to rebuild the same room, the more inexplicable the layers between the original and the copy become. When movement is then introduced into the process – whole rooms begin to turn, or ceilings move up or down – one finds oneself imperceptibly within a completely alienated time frame. I am sitting in an ordinary-looking room that happens to be built inside another room, and I can no longer remember the original. For this reason *Haus u r*, begun in 1985 and ongoing, the recreation of my childhood home, today has great significance for me as a long-term work. I have actually built room-sculptures in this house that I can no longer access, and therefore can no longer

photograph or measure. All that remains is a room number – and a feeling – but you can't really talk about the rooms as if they still existed normally.

The doubling of what already exists legitimates the work in the simplest possible way. This resolves the question of legitimation, or your question about 'what my art does', for example, without giving it great importance. My work is focused in on itself. I don't think much of psychologising artworks. Visitors' reactions are always very different – an example for me would be the 2007 black cube *Cube Hamburg*, which is actually just a simple wooden black box made with a steel structure inside, cloaked in black fabric on the outside. Censored for political reasons in Venice and in Berlin before it was realised in Hamburg, *Cube Hamburg* provoked fears of terrorism in people. But when it was finally built in 2007 everyone just thought it was beautiful – psychological reactions to art could not be more diverse.

As human beings we carry ourselves and our repressed or forgotten memories. I carry my whole house on my back like a snail. Artistically, what my work has done is to shift so-called installation art into recreating actual rooms.

*I'm interested in the history of museum access and entrances, and how the transition from everyday life ('the street') to an institutionalised encounter with art ('the museum') has literally been shaped by artists and architects across history. This varies from, say, Schinkel's post-Enlightenment Altes Museum in Berlin of 1823-30, where visitors first pass through a domed, church-like space to be elevated to art-viewing, to Maurizio Cattelan's performance in 1998 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where an immense Disneyland-style Picasso figure – a literal embodiment of modern art – actually breaks out of the museum to greet you in person and usher you off the street and into the museum. Your extraordinary 2008 work E N D turns the museum entry into a long, black, disorienting canal – a kind of hellish descent into art, rather than Schinkel's elevating entrance.*

*E N D*, which is sited in front of the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach, is for me an alternative design for a museum – it is not bright, light and white but dark and black. For me, black represents nothingness. Black describes the absence of light. The black funnel was built so that it would absorb the light like a vacuum, from there death

can flow. *E N D* developed out of the desire to enter the black cube. It is a pedestrian path which at first goes nowhere, like a wedge shoved into the museum. The gallery rooms housing the collection inside the museum were also painted black, so Hans Hollein's architecture for the building became invisible. In these rooms a different architectural context could be glimpsed, independent from that created by the architect. The blackened rooms in the exhibition made the existing architecture invisible, so I could be free to position rooms, or parts of rooms, outside the frame of the original museum structure.

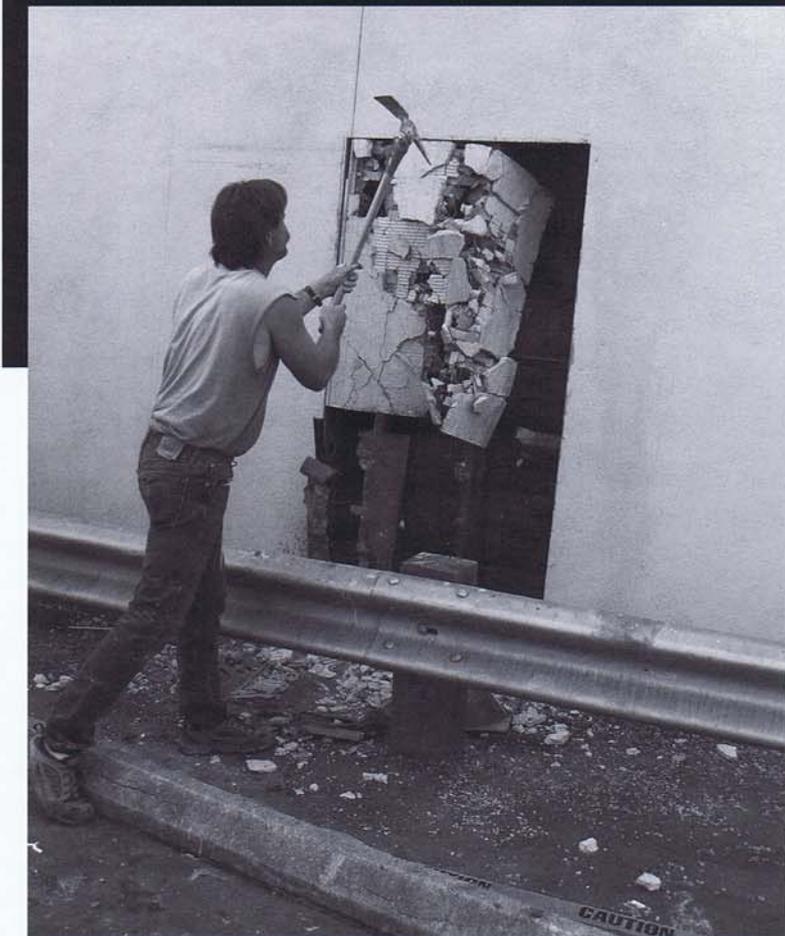
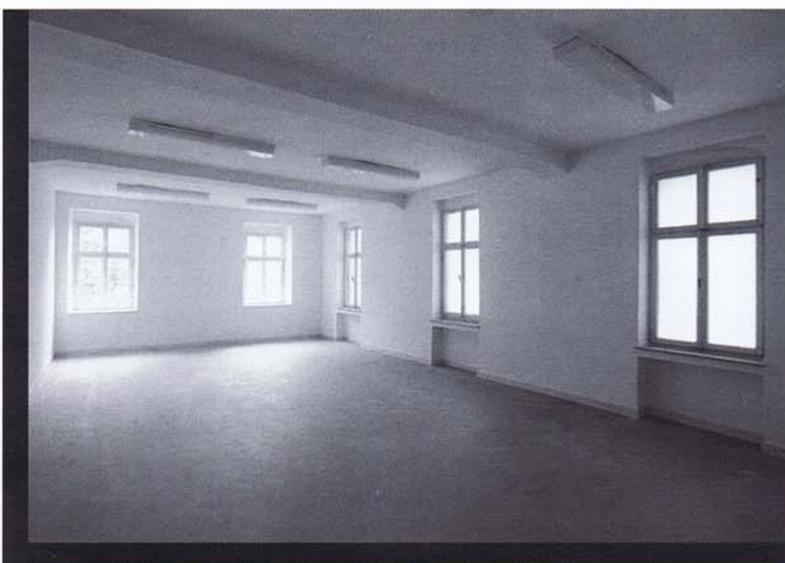
How a visitor reaches my rooms and how the rooms are built within the museum have varied over time depending on the specific gallery space. *Haus u r* was for me a counter-move to the museum – a compromise, or a refuge, or an alternative to the museum. In 1992 I made an exhibition of empty rooms in a gallery – which puts into question whether it could even be considered an exhibition at all. It took three months to rebuild the whole gallery in replica inside the first. Visitors stood inside an empty room measuring 10 x 5.7 x 3.25m without having any idea that they were standing in a room which existed inside another room, and which was identical to it. On one hand you were completely immersed in this double construction, but at the same time you had no sense that you were in anything other than an ordinary, empty room. Later on, other artists had exhibitions there, but still you could not recognise the real nature of the space you were in.

With *Dead House u r* at Portikus, Frankfurt, in 1997, I completely ignored the usual workings of the interior space. I took possession of the entranceway directly inside the main entrance, where visitors usually walked past the information desk and the toilets to get to the gallery. Instead, visitors found themselves inside *Dead House u r* as soon as they passed through the main glass doors at the front.

In *Haus u r* at the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2001, the modest front door which you might find in an ordinary suburban rented house was framed by the pavilion's threatening Nazi architecture and formed a new entranceway to the pavilion. In 2003, in the old and treasured rotunda of the Hamburger Kunsthalle, I made a replica of Strasse Steindamm in Hamburg, the street infamous for child prostitution and also the site of a mosque said to be frequented by sympathisers of al-Qaeda. 24-hour access to the work was available through a new passageway created by breaking through the Kunsthalle walls; inside, authentic, uncontrolled street life went on round the clock.

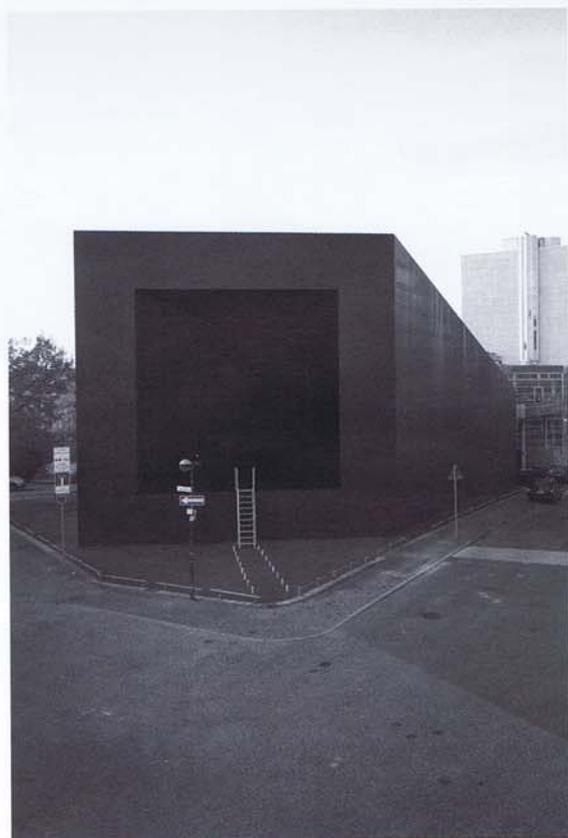
Another example would be *517 West 24th Street* of 2003. The title describes an address in Chelsea, Manhattan, but at the time that particular street number was not used as an address, and again I built a room that could be accessed 24 hours a day. The space looked as though it had always been there, like the garages or empty buildings that existed in Chelsea before the galleries arrived. Nothing could remind you that this was once the Barbara Gladstone Gallery. Again, the work was an open, uncontrolled space. In 2003 my *Dead House u r* was constructed for MOCA in Los Angeles and was on view there for a whole year. For this project a new entrance into the museum was knocked through the existing walls, making the artwork accessible from the outside for the whole year.

*You are literally breaking down walls between the museum and its public – accessing art becomes an almost criminal act of breaking*



Gregor Schneider  
*u r g*, Large Room Galerie Löhrl  
Mönchengladbach 1992

Gregor Schneider  
*Dead House u r* 2003  
work-in-progress at MOCA, LA



Gregor Schneider  
*Cube Hamburg* 2007  
 Hamburger Kunsthalle

Gregor Schneider  
*END* 2008  
 Museum Abteiberg  
 Mönchengladbach

and entering. Again, you seem to be equating art-viewing with some kind of secretive or criminal activity.

Since 2002 I have been concerning myself more and more with socially relevant topics. But now, as always, I am concerned with rooms that I cannot physically access, which are unknown to me. An example was *4538km* in Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Duerle, a replica of the high-security complex of Camp V of Guantanamo Bay. Rebuilding it myself was the only way I could physically come close to the place.

I see you adopting and updating a lot of the ideas from the gothic and horror traditions, such as ideas of doubling, labyrinths, prisons and haunted spaces, which were important in the 19th-century writings of Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley and others, to conjure similar reactions of fear. Your work is especially extraordinary to me in its ability to stage horror in modern spaces – not the usual spooky old house, but the bright lights and clean spaces of modernity, as in your work *4538km* from 2006.

The exhibition *4538km* is about 'white torture', cruel practices endured by prisoners which do not leave any physical marks. The rooms in *4538km* show no traces. Everything is highly designed, glossy and homogeneous. The sleek and self-mirroring aesthetic of the bright chambers enhances their destructive, self-referential existence. The metaphors of bright light and clarity, which became a commonplace in the presentation of art in the 20th century, turns in *4538km* to the very opposite. The clarity of the museum room turns to weirdness. It becomes an expression of terror itself. The beloved clean and bright qualities of the museum space, of the white cell or white cube, are transformed into a critical résumé of conventions of cognition. I haven't discharged myself from the history of art, as it were, I have just transferred installation art into real, rebuilt, rooms.

We are thrown back to our own feelings when we enter completely darkened rooms and we become aware of ourselves. We enter dark rooms like the 2010 installation at Sadie Coles gallery very carefully, slowly, unsteadily – we charge the room with powerful emotions ourselves. Every visitor brings with him his own being and his own feelings. I don't think the rooms cause visitors to recall actual personal memories, but each room is so strongly loaded that the visitor believes that he is remembering his own experiences. When we are confronted with our own unknown inner life, we become frightened, we slip into a frightening underworld.

For the twin houses in *Die Familie Schneider* in London in 2004, visitors were instructed to visit the twin East End houses all by themselves, and visit them one after the other. The experience of visiting these two identical houses – with rooms occupied by identical twins, behaving identically in each room – caused unpredictable and extreme responses. Visitors found it especially awful to encounter what seemed the very same room, with the very same people, a second time in the second house, and to re-experience the very same uneasy feelings again. The experience of visiting the first house was deadened when visitors had to go through the second house and live the experience a second time. The twin houses of *Die Familie Schneider* showed how imprecisely we remember the details of places and the singular events that took place there. Some visitors actually ran screaming from certain rooms, even though nothing terrifying had ever actually happened in the house. In the first and in the second house, visitors met identical-looking rooms and people, and they couldn't recognise a difference. This was what was terrifying them.

I recall some early performance works of yours which were quite wonderful, though not as well known as your installation work – for example one performance in particular where you rode a bicycle through the city streets at night, covered in plaster and looking quite monstrous. I also make amateur films, but I never go to the cinema. Given the choice between a cinema or a pub, I'll always choose the pub. ■

**Gregor Schneider** is showing at Sadie Coles HQ, London from 1 September to 2 October and **More is more** at the Centre of Contemporary Art, Torun, Poland until 24 October.

**Gilda Williams** is an art critic and lecturer on the MA curating programme, Goldsmiths College, London.