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Gregor Schneider. Ten Years After

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by *ulrich loock*

In 2001 Gregor Schneider received the Golden Lion for the work installed in the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Ten years later it is time to consider his complete oeuvre, which ultimately entails asking if it even makes sense to rely on the problematic and much contested notion of an oeuvre in discussing the pieces,

installations, and exhibitions that have been presented under the artist's name over the years. Indeed, the notion of the oeuvre has been problematic for a long time, as it implies the idea of an artist who stands at the origin of artefacts that he or she produces and places in the world, as objects submitted to his or her own reflection, and to a public who would recognize them as that creator's achievements and ultimately read them as exemplary expressions of his or her mind, desires, and concerns.

The presentation of *Haus u r* in Venice ten years ago certainly supported the comprehension of the installation as specifically being Gregor Schneider's work, as a particular artwork that originated with the person who was consequently awarded the prestigious prize. The work invited members of the public inside a house, which had been inserted in the pavilion building and presented them with the disturbing experience of moving like an explorer or intruder through different rooms which clearly evoked the ordinary spaces of a house, and at the same time implemented a deviation from such spaces, reflected in their respective names, e. g. *Liebeslaube* [Love Nest] for a clinically white chamber with a bed, a bathtub and a sink. The specific organization of the rooms, the carefully prepared atmosphere of neglect, frustrated male sexuality, and unspecified disaster suggested an uncanny reality that was addressed consequently through the notion of the haunted house. The decisive issue here is the notion of an experience that made the visitors aware of themselves and which was inevitably associated with the artist who initiated the installation in question, as a kind of stage. The only question really left then was if this work was to be considered a one-liner, if the artist had exhausted his potential with this major achievement, or if it was possible for him to develop the work further.

I would like to argue against the common perception of the *Haus u r* project, that precisely by giving the work over to public experience Schneider helped to identify something as an artwork that had not originally been one. Initially he had conceived the making of *Haus u r* as a process of non-production: "I was interested in freewheeling actions. [...] I am always making. I have always to make things. That is my personal problem. [...] I don't just forget myself, even the work becomes forgettable."¹ The freewheeling actions are achieved through making

without recognizing. In fact the notion of a waste of time was epitomized in 2007 in the work *19 – 20:30 Uhr 31.5.2007* where visitors were made to queue for an event at the Staatsoper Berlin which consisted of nothing actually happening. In order to maintain a permanent waiting line Schneider paid 100 actors to ensure exactly that. Building windows in front of windows, walls in front of walls, floors on top of floors, and ceilings below ceilings meant not only to suspend any practice of transformation and creation in favour of a rigorous execution of mindless reproduction. It also meant to envisage two modes of immediate perception, highlighted by the artist fantasizing that someone might visit him at the house, stay for a cup of coffee, and leave after half an hour without having noticed that the *Kaffeezimmer* [Coffee Room] in the meantime had revolved by 360°, coupled with a complementary fantasy, that someone might open the wrong door at the wrong moment to disappear without being seen again into an abyss created by the duplication of the architecture inside the architecture itself.

Certainly there is someone called Gregor Schneider who has related most of what is known about the initial Haus u r but he has assumed the role of a narrator who breaks the silence Haus u r keeps in regard to its own production and perception. It is a tricky business to try to assign to the name “Gregor Schneider” both the function of an artist whose production is designed to consume itself, its producer and perceiver, and the function of a witness who reports what cannot be seen and said. Schneider seems to be aware of this contradiction: “I was interested in heading for some neutral point that I myself cannot know.”² At the same time he has made *Amateur Videos* which record laborious visits to the hidden gaps and voids of Haus u r. Here he seems committed to experiencing that which is excluded from experience – as if he were someone other than the person who had built the *Haus u r*, as if, effectively, he were someone other than himself. Consequently he has not only created new entrances to exhibition buildings that were occupied by his installations (MOCA, Los Angeles, 2004, and Museu Serralves, Porto, 2005), but has also made the entrance the specific topic of different works, namely when he built a huge cubic tunnel painted black that narrowed from a height of 14 metres to 1.20 metre at the point where a new entrance to the Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, Germany, was opened in 2008.

Linguistically, Schneider inverted the meaning of this work by calling it END. Consequently any visit to the museum would take place after the “end”. In contrast to Schneider’s visits to *Haus u r* the question becomes one over if he were ever able to leave the house.

One could ruminate that if it makes sense to consider such a thing as an oeuvre, with regard to Schneider, it must be one that is in limbo between an object and a totalized situation, between something that is recognizable and a condition of complete immersion, something that confers an experience and something else that remains invisible and unspeakable. Put the other way around it seems that Schneider’s building of an oeuvre – if there is such a thing – is nothing but the relentless negotiation between the devouring closure of the initial *Haus u r* and the availability of its Venice installation for public experience.

At one point Gregor Schneider, as the builder of *Haus u r*, in an effort to test options of self-recognition, started to interact in a relation of desire and devotion with an elderly woman by the name of Hannelore Reuen.³ Before that he had already constructed a parallelism between the architectural layers of *Haus u r* and different generations of his own family which, however, curiously omitted the artist himself. He is digging in the ground, surrounded by dead bodies and a woman continuously procreating. Before the relation to Hannelore Reuen can however lead to a resolution of the condition of the bachelor who is dumbly repeating his actions, she is embodied by an immobile female lying on her stomach and dubbed the *Alte Hausschlampe* [Old Slut] (Galeria Foksal, Warsaw, 2000). And before Schneider comes to recognize himself he appears duplicated by a male by the name of N. Schmidt who must be dead and of whom nothing is visible but the lower part of his legs on the floor (Kabinett für aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven, 2001). Later, more figures of human beings make their appearance, and finally the human body is dismembered: alongside other parts there is a hand (the hand of the masturbator), and a hair-covered penis in a bucket.

If an effort can be traced involving the creation of the figures and bodies of the Other, it has to be realized that all attempts at reflexive recognition are drowned in the stalemate of duplication and placed under the sign of onanism and death. Death

is isolated as an explicit subject in the publicly much-debated plan to present in an exhibition the dying of a human being which is then inverted by another work, a container used to deep-freeze a person until the moment of his ultimate release to eternal life.

The entropic duplication of figures which might have been expected to place the subject, Gregor Schneider, in a social context, is pushed furthest in the eerie staging of *Die Familie Schneider* [The Schneider Family] (Artangel, London, 2004), which comprises the unendingly dish-washing mother, the naked father masturbating behind a shower curtain, and the child under a black plastic bag covering his or her head, set in a British terrace house which is detailed to the last frightening degree. The truly unsettling reality of this piece however is not the devastating *tableau* of the nuclear family carrying the artist's name, but rather the fact that this family and its actions are presented twice in an identical form in adjacent buildings – Schneider went so far as to recruit twins to enact the work. For the spectator this meant to be confronted with an interchangeability that deprived them of all reliable clues as to where exactly he or she as spectator was and with whom they were relating. This loss of a sense of identity is what is really uncanny; not, primarily, the shape of the oppressive performance itself.

Duplication, applied to figures and objects – as has been initially implemented in the building of *Haus u r* –, is indeed Schneider's strategic means to stage an intense artistic production which at the same time is annihilated through identical repetition.

The most explicit implementation of this non-generative mode of production is the 2005 exhibition *Porto Cubes* (Museu Serralves, Porto), which comprised 22 identical cubicles housing, in a labyrinthine arrangement, two identical copies of various different objects and pictures. In opposition to Marcel Duchamp's practice of subtracting each time one item from the abundance of mass-produced objects, Schneider, following the paradigm of industrial production, increases the number of identical artefacts with the effect of completely dissolving individual identity; a proposed experience that is nullified through its very implementation. The apparatus of the multiplied cubicle has proven to be useful for a number of additional works, for instance the *Beach Cells*, made from fencing material and each furnished with a sun umbrella. These cells that claim equal usefulness for the contradictory purposes of enjoying the beach and being locked up in a prison – a commentary also on the 'white cube' and the condition of art –, were presented in 2007 at Bondi Beach, Australia, and in 2009 in Herzliya, Israel. Another work, *WEISSE FOLTER* [White Torture], incorporates the format of the cubicle as a reproduction of Guantanamo prison cells installed in 2007 at K21 in Düsseldorf. Included among these works is *Black Cube*, which was initially planned for St. Mark's Square in Venice and finally built in 2007 between the Galerie der Moderne and the Kunsthalle in Hamburg in the context of the exhibition *Das schwarze Quadrat. Hommage an Malewitsch* [The Black Square. Homage to Malevich].

Schneider was finally denied permission to build the *Black Cube* at the Venice square as initially agreed for fear of protests by the Islamic community, for its clear reference to the Kaaba in Mecca. It seems quite likely that Schneider was initially

attracted to replicating the holy building precisely because it cannot be approached by non-believers and because it is impossible to obtain precise information about the details of its construction. The Kaaba is withdrawn from access in a way similar to the house at Unterheydener Strasse in Rheydt whose architecture was duplicated in the production of *Haus u r*. The black stone may also have reminded Schneider of his own stones, which are completely imbued with colour.

When the struggle began over permission to install the *Black Cube*, Schneider started to explain that it was designed to support the understanding between different religious communities. I would like to argue that the works mentioned here lend themselves to the experience of a contextual meaning. They assume a symbolic quality while, in stark contrast, works informed by duplication in the same place levigate meaning as between two millstones. Among the works privileging experience I would also count the 2008 exhibition in Paris, *Süßer Duft* [Sweet Odour] (Maison Rouge), that presented a sequence of rooms each with different characteristics in terms of light/colour, temperature, and odour.

Interestingly the recent work, *Marienstraße* (2010), does not belong to that category of pieces, even though structurally it has to be compared to the installation of *Haus u r* in the Biennale pavilion.

Marienstraße relies on a procedure of displacing a readybuilt entity and placing it within an exhibition facility, the Leopold-Hösch-Museum in Düren, Germany, a town a few kilometres west of Cologne, not far from the artist's place of birth and current residence, Rheydt. With *Marienstraße* Schneider in a sense returns to the beginnings of his building activity, for instance the *Unknown Work in the Disappearing Village of Garzweiler* (1990-1991). At the beginning of the 1990s he frequently visited the depopulated villages in his area that were to be deleted from the map to make way for brown coal strip mining. He made works in the deserted houses, retrieved materials that he used to build *Haus u r*, and noted the way

in which things that were still there indicated a life that didn't exist anymore: "You are walking through the landscape when you suddenly get the feeling that there could have been a house there, because there is still a pavement there or because there are different odd trees that you wouldn't normally find there."⁴ Twenty years later Schneider installed a stretch of a street from a disappearing village including a street lamp in the museum. The experience value of that work was fairly minimal. Important, however, was the recognition of the withdrawal of that which mattered, the reality that was missing not only in the museum but anywhere – with *Marienstraße* Schneider not only returned from his experiential, contextually meaningful works to the places of the beginning of his building practice but also to the initial *Haus u r* where the original structures had irretrievably disappeared under the layers of their reproduction. As Schneider's body of work has been considerably broadened and expanded since the Venice show in 1990 (and, indeed, prior to that), there is no question of it being a one-liner. And indeed the artist has opened it up to refer to issues of contemporary politics. The core of his practice, however, continues as it has since he started to build *Haus u r*: a realization that liquidates itself, stagnation implemented through accelerated production.

If then there is the question of an oeuvre, this oeuvre can only be considered a non-oeuvre in the sense that it is built through repeated and continuous self-annihilation, denouncing the constitution of a creator characterized by self-awareness, and identity-building experience – notwithstanding the non-oeuvre occasionally being disguised as a contribution to the cultural fabric.

1. Gregor Schneider and Ulrich Loock, *...I never throw anything away, I just go on...*, in *Gregor Schneider*, exhibition catalogue, Städtisches Museum et al., Mönchengladbach 1997, p. 24.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
3. Cf. Gregor Schneider and Hannelore Reuen, *He is Never Going to Get Out*, in *Gregor Schneider*, Edizioni Charta, Milano 2003.
4. Gregor Schneider and Ulrich Loock, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

1/8 Gregor Schneider, *Haus u r*, Rheydt 1985-2007 Courtesy: the artist © Gregor Schneider / VG Bild-Kunst Bonn

2/8 Gregor Schneider, *VERSCHWUNDENES DORF, Unbekannte Arbeit im verschwundenen Dorf Garzweiler* (Construction of an unknown work in the disappearing village of Garzweiler), Otzenrath, 1990-1991 Courtesy: the artist © Gregor Schneider / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

3/8 Gregor Schneider, *u r 44, HANNELORE REUEN ALTE HAUSSCHLAMPE* Life action, rebuilt 2003, 742 x 567 x 350 cm room within a room, construction made of blockboard on a wooden construction, one door, light-bands, parquet floor, white walls and ceiling, one figure / life action, Galeria Foksal, Warszawa, Poland 06.03.2000 – 08.03.2000 Courtesy: the artist © Gregor Schneider / VG Bild-Kunst Bonn

4-5/7 Gregor Schneider, *Die Familie Schneider*, Walden Street No. 16, London, 2004 Courtesy: the artist © Gregor Schneider / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

6/8 Gregor Schneider, *Marienstraße*, Düren 2008, wooden construction, foam boards and sand with concrete, stones, metal, colors, street lamp, gully and drain, 1005 x 407 cm, Peill Prize, Leopold-Hoesch-Museum, Düren, Germany 27.06.2010 – 15.08.2010 Courtesy: the artist © Gregor Schneider / VG Bild-Kunst Bonn

7/8 Gregor Schneider, *Cube Hamburg*, 2007, mixed media, 14 x 14 x 14 m, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany 23.03.2007 – 10.06.2007 Courtesy: the artist © Gregor Schneider / VG Bild-Kunst Bonn

8/8 Gregor Schneider, *19-20:30 UHR 31.05.2007*, Magazin der Staatsoper Berlin, Berlin 31.05.2007 Courtesy: the artist Photo: Nicolas Kantor © Gregor Schneider / Nicolas Kantor / VG Bild-Kunst Bonn



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