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This old obsession

By Louise Roug

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As a teenager, Gregor Schneider began building: a wall in front of a wall, a room within a room, slowly reshaping the house he lived in. Over the next 18 years, he created crawl spaces and dead-ends in the small two-story building. He isolated rooms with lead, fiberglass and soundproof insulation and eventually assembled a maze that – with each new wall – closed in on him. In one room, the ceiling gradually rose and fell. Another room rotated on its own axis, imperceptibly. Visitors leaving would find the door they entered through now opened onto a gaping hole. Even the sunlight shining through the windows was an illusion.

This fall, the 34-year-old German artist brought his obsession to Los Angeles, creating “Dead House ur,” a life-size exhibition, which opened to the public last month. The house in the museum took two years of planning, two months of building and 20 tons of material. The house, on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art’s Geffen Contemporary until next fall, is one of the largest, most complex pieces of art ever to be built at the museum, comparable in size only to the Richard Serra sculpture exhibition in 1998.

Move-in Day: Schneider’s building material arrives from Germany via cargo ship the second week of August. Trucks haul the five 40-foot containers the last 22 miles from Los Angeles Harbor to the downtown museum.

With one of the metal containers backed up to the loading dock, a MOCA employee breaks the lock and swings the double doors open. Inside are wood beams, plaster, nails, bits of stairs, doors and windows. Piece by piece, the house is arriving. After two days of unpacking, the crew of 11 assembles the structural core of the house – a staircase. At the back of the museum, surrounded by rolls of fiberglass and bags of cement, the two-story structure stands like a solitary sculpture, stairs leading nowhere.

Schneider is lanky, blond and blue-eyed. Even after a day of carrying bricks and bags of concrete, he smells of washing powder, a reassuring scent of normality.

“For a year, I will have a house in Los Angeles,” he says, “unbelievable.” He breaks the word in two, with a hard emphasis on the first syllable: UN-believable. “Crazy” (as in, “This is crazy, no?”) and unbelievable are, fittingly, favorite words. Around Schneider it’s hard to know what to believe.

He grew up in Rheydt, a former mining town near Cologne where his family, for many generations, owned a lead factory. On the edge of the property stood an abandoned two-story building that once housed apartments that Schneider’s parents allowed him to use as a studio. He made amateurish videos from the reconfigured house and exhibited them in German galleries and museums. (The “ur” of the title has a double meaning: It means “origin” in German and is shorthand for its street address.)

Eventually, he moved in completely, and the house itself became his work. It became an obsession. Schneider tore out rooms for exhibitions around the world – meticulously reconstructed in galleries and museums.

“Whether this is my psychological problem or art,” he says, “it doesn’t matter.” Paul Schimmel, chief curator at

MOCA, first saw an exhibition of Schneider's work five years ago. At the time, the artist was still living in his house, inside his art.

"It is a piece that really eliminates the distinction between art and life," Schimmel says. Other museums had displayed rooms, but Schimmel wanted MOCA to be the first in North America to show Schneider's entire house. To build it, the artist brought two German assistants, and had a crew of eight technicians from MOCA.

"It's domesticity taken to a level of complexity that I don't think anyone's experienced within the museum before," Schimmel says. "It completely and utterly transports people to another place."

Before Schneider arrived with his plans and drawings, the Americans had a few misconceptions. Lead technician Barry Grady thought, for example, that the house would be installed upside down.

"That may have been a figurative term that was used, like topsy-turvy," he says. "I kept envisioning a house upside down with the furniture somehow attached to the ceiling."

Once Schneider was on-site, he explained his vision to the crew. "And then – just when you thought you had a grasp on something – he would put a twist on it," Grady says. But in stages, the crew began to get it.

"When you're in front of a painting, you still recognize it as a painting. Rooms are different," Schneider says. "You don't see a room completely. All the time, there is something behind you."

Smells of home: In the otherwise empty museum space – a former warehouse – the only sounds are the occasional echo of a drill or hammer. By September, the crew has built the skeleton of a house. Stacked upon one another, the rooms resemble gigantic wooden blocks. Now work can begin on the interior – the only part of the finished installation visitors will see.

Electricians install lights and the crew lays down carpets and hangs wallpaper. After weeks of 12-hour workdays, Schneider's eyes are bloodshot. His hair is flecked with white paint.

Large fans clear the rooms of paint fumes. Meanwhile, Schneider injects scents into the walls, mixing his secret concoctions in white buckets – a cabbage-like smell for the hallway and menacing gasoline odors for the cellar.

In some shows of his work, a live performer – the artist or one of his collaborators – poses as a corpse within a room. Schneider says he wants to incorporate real cadavers into his work. But it's hard to gauge whether he is serious or playing a part. (During an unusual day off, he surveyed the bikini-clad crowd around the Mondrian hotel swimming pool, observing afterward: "It was like they were swimming in blood.")

The house has its own characters who inhabit this alternate universe. In Rheydt, the primary tenant in Schneider's house is "Hannelore Reuen," whose name can be found by the doorbell. In the catalog that accompanies the MOCA exhibition, she is "interviewed" by Schneider.

Referring to himself in the third person, he asks her: "You are an invented character of his art, aren't you?" She doesn't seem to like him much and replies, in part, "I want as little to do with him as possible."

Who this upstairs tenant is, Schneider won't say. Does she even exist?

"I hope so," Schimmel says. Perhaps the woman is Schneider's alter ego, he suggests, like Norman Bates' mother in "Psycho."

And, like the Bates Motel, the house Schneider builds is a trap: In every room, doors shut automatically behind the visitor.

"You never know how people react in rooms. Some people will have problems getting out," Schneider says, somewhat gleefully. The "lead room" is another favorite. It is unadorned but lined inside with lead and insulation that makes it totally silent. "When you close the door, they flip out." (It's the one door in the MOCA show that doesn't completely close – in fact, it's ajar on a hinge.)

Unpacking: Schneider is rummaging through cardboard boxes a few weeks before the opening. As he lifts the lid on

one labeled "Wunderkammer" ("curiosity cabinet"), the dank smell of attic childhood memories fill the room.

He holds up a stiff, double-breasted blue wool coat, examines a battered suitcase rigged to conceal a camera, sifts through old letters, weighs in his hand several unshapely, moist paperbacks and a jar filled with pickled pears.

"Rooms inside rooms. Isolated stuff. These sculptures

Schneider on this day is hung over. Schimmel had dragged him to a barbecue the day before – a rare outing for Schneider, who mostly stayed at his Hollywood hotel, finding Los Angeles difficult to navigate.

He opens a chest stuffed with family photos in old frames. A picture of his mother, a picture of her mother. The latter didn't survive the shipment from Germany and has disintegrated into bits of paper and dust.

Somehow it fits with the house.

Before he built rooms, Schneider painted screaming faces. His first show, "Pubescent Doldrums," was at a gallery near his hometown in 1985. He was 16.

He was still fascinated with screams when he began building insulated boxes and finally an entire room. The idea, he says, was that the screams of the person who entered could not be heard from the outside. The door could not be opened from the inside, so the person would be fatally trapped. His work, he says, would not be complete until he had entered and closed the door behind him. But he never had the courage.

Working on his art and the house, Schneider almost didn't finish high school and was excused from the mandatory two years of military service in Germany on psychological grounds. Instead, he began studying at the Kunstakademie Dusseldorf and at art schools in Munster and Hamburg, completing his studies in 1992. Four years later, he reconstructed rooms from the house at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland. He showed a room at the prestigious Carnegie International in Pittsburgh in 1999 and the next year constructed a cellar at London's Royal Academy as part of the show "Apocalypse." But it was in 2001, when he won the prestigious Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale, that Schneider's house was thrust fully on the art world.

The show in Venice was the largest exhibit so far of his rooms. British art critic Adrian Searle called it a highlight of the Biennale but also said in one review, "I don't know what to think of Schneider. It could be that being an artist is his only way of socializing a terrible inner world." Ralph Rugoff, writing in the Financial Times the year before, called Schneider's work "a kind of metaphysical jigsaw puzzle

Despite this high-profile interest, Schneider says he would prefer to simply work in the original house. "Exhibition," he says, "is a form of prostitution."

But for someone supposedly disinterested in the art world, he has powerful and prominent allies. In New York, he shows with Barbara Gladstone Gallery. In London, it's Sadie Coles HQ. In Tokyo, Kiyoshi Wako sells his work – mostly photographs so far, but he is hoping to sell one room to a Japanese collector.

One room in the MOCA house belongs to art collector and TV mogul Dean Valentine, who also serves on MOCA's board. It was shipped separately after a recent exhibition in London. Known variously as "dead man," "core" or "the shower room," it features a shower curtain and a two-way mirror, where a spectator faces his reflection or peers through to a basement-like room on the other side.

Having guests: By early October, Schneider and the crew have finished. They have carved a new door into the building so that visitors enter the Dead House without going through the museum. Only five people are allowed in at one time. Before entering, each must sign a personal injury waiver.

It's a maze of connected rooms – a dank cellar, a mundane stairway, a cramped curiosity cabinet filled with dusty mementos. The overall effect is disorienting—and slightly creepy.

Will Carter, a 23-year-old USC student, visits shortly after the house opens to the public. To navigate parts that are dimly lit, he uses the glow of his cellphone. He explores the house, finding hidden spaces and trying doors.

He finds some rooms quite disconcerting, such as the cellar with a child's bicycle and a deflated sex doll. "It

reminded me of playing a video game," he says afterward. "It didn't feel like an installation in a museum. It feels like you're in a real space."

A guard at the door says some visitors had been scared and others had been unable to find their way out.

"We accept rooms like skin," Schneider says. "We don't think, 'What's outside?' We think, it has always been there."

After removing so many of the rooms from the Rheydt house for the Venice Biennale, it became impossible for him to continue living there.

In a sense, the house in Rheydt has become unhinged – its torn-out parts moving through museums and galleries around the world. But the show at the Geffen will be the last, Schneider says. He refers to exhibitions as "killing" his house – hence the "Dead" in the title.

Still, he harbors no illusion of being able to leave it behind. He is its prisoner. "I'm doing new work but I'm still in this house," he says. "I want to get out

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'Dead House ur'

Where: MOCA's Geffen Contemporary, 152 N. Central Ave., Los Angeles

When: Monday and Friday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Thursday, 11 a.m.-8 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.

Ends: Sept. 13

Price: \$5-\$8; free Thursdays

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