

Rooms with very weird views

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Gregor Schneider has done strange things to his family home in Germany. Now he has a project opening in London. It's bound to be odd; so is his interview with Daisy Garnett

The 35-year-old German artist Gregor Schneider is in London because he is working on a project - something big and perhaps of note - somewhere in the East End. Schneider is best known for his work, *Dead House*, the 20-year, still continuing transformation, room by room, of the house he grew up in on Unterheydener Strasse in Rheydt, Germany.



Rooms within rooms: detail from Schneider's work at the 2001 Venice Biennale

Simply put, that is what Schneider does: he doesn't work in paint or bronze or video or, apparently, ideas. Instead he builds rooms: rooms within rooms. One, for example, has a ceiling that rises and falls 5cm unnoticeably slowly; another rotates gently on its axis; a third is sound-proofed and insulated with lead.

In 2001 he dismantled and reconstructed the house piece by piece and installed it inside the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, a painstaking project for which he won the Golden Lion for Sculpture. I don't know if that is what he's doing here in London though, because he wouldn't tell me.

I thought I was going to interview Schneider when I met him at the offices of Artangel, the organisation responsible for inviting him to London and putting the project, *Die Familie Schneider*, together. What I was granted instead was an audience with the artist. It was sort of an absurd time, our hour together; both frustrating and somehow fabulous, though I fear Schneider was only frustrated.

"My work became more and more expressive, until I realised that it was not possible to make anything any more intense"

He tried to answer some of my endlessly interrupting questions and politely deflected others, but all the time he seemed pained - visibly so - by my persistence in asking things. Couldn't I just watch the slide-show he had prepared for me? Couldn't I be content with the information he volunteered?

Why did I need to know why he sat hunched inside a black bin-bag for seven hours in a room he installed in an art gallery in Bremerhaven? Wasn't it enough to know that he did it and to move on to the next slide? Only now what was wrong with the slide projector, sticking as it did? And a mobile phone (his, presumably) kept ringing and ringing. Was nothing content to keep quiet and

behave?

The blond, boyish Schneider appeared calm and composed when I met him in the blacked-out Artangel office. When I left, however, he seemed a little disappointed, perhaps somewhat flustered and confused by our exchange. Still, no more than I did.

But this I know: Gregor Schneider, the son of a manufacturer - his father owned a lead factory in Rheydt, next to which the family lived - began making art when he was 12 years old. His first works, he told me, were pencil drawings of naked women (which is what he calls them, rather than nudes, though they are adolescent-thoughtful rather than adolescent-lustful).

But, I say, many 12-year-old boys draw naked women, when he shows me the very first slide. How did you know that with yours you were making art?



Urban detritus: Schneider's rooms often have sinister undercurrents

"I had my first exhibition in 1985," Schneider replies, his English not fluent, but careful and precise, "in a building that used to be a bank."

Where? I ask. In your home town?

"Yes," he says, rather wearily. "In Rheydt: my boring nightmare city. Where I'm still living."

He pauses, but only for half a breath, before clicking the next slide into view and the next - a photograph of himself covered in a thick batterish mixture of flour and water; then a close-up of him screaming.

"My work became more and more expressive," he says, "until I realised that it was not possible to make anything any more intense."

He begins to show me another slide, a photograph of a figure swinging between trees. I interrupt. I ask him what he wanted to express with all his intensity.

Certainly the flour-and-water piece (he also covered himself, naked, in household paint - an act of expression it took his entire family a day of scrubbing to remove) is an obsessive thing to do. But how did he know to channel all this obsessiveness so seriously into art at such a young age when his background and surroundings were the stuff of lead?

Schneider sighs a little when I keep asking him things. Still, he is nothing if not polite. Before our meeting, I had watched a documentary about his work and was perturbed to watch him refusing to answer questions at all. The interviewer would ask him something arty but innocuous along the lines of:

"You have rebuilt this room. Why? What is valuable about it for you to reproduce it so?" And Schneider would simply stare, intensely, into his eyes for a very long time in response.

Oh God, I thought, I'm meeting the David Blaine of the art world. But, in fact, Schneider didn't do anything funny when I met him. He tried to answer my questions, it's just that's he's not very good at talking about his work, and I wasn't very good at simply looking at it.

"I didn't know I was an artist," he tells me, for example, about his early, teenage work. "It just started with someone telling me that I had a talent. I was happy I was a painter."

About intensity and not being able to go beyond a certain point, so having to find a new medium (rooms) in which to express himself, he says: "It's like a sound. You can make it louder and louder and louder but you can only go so loud. After that you have to go quiet."

So far, so good, sort of. But that is as clear as he gets. When he starts to show me slides of the rooms he has built inside Dead House ur things become more confused.

How did he know to build rooms in the first place? After the screams, he replied, he constructed white boxes just big enough for a human to crouch inside (though he himself never did), because he wanted to explore how a sound-proofed box filled with indiscernible human life would affect the viewer.

But still, rooms?

"Each room has its own history," Schneider tells me, which of course makes sense. Is he then trying to examine that history, or the imprint histories leave on physical places?

"I accept the room which was there," he says. "I don't think anymore about the room left behind."

He shows me more slides and gives me more explanations, but like the labyrinth he has built inside what was once a straightforward bourgeois house in small-town Germany, (Schneider rented the house after his father retired and the family moved into the suburbs) everything gets more and more confusing the deeper we get.

"The rooms are like an onion, not a labyrinth," he tells me firmly. "You can look through a room, inside a room, behind a room," he continues. "You can live in some of the rooms without ever going

outside, and the guest room I built is soundproofed and insulated with two sheets of glass wall."

Why? I ask.

"I tried to find out what kind of effect such material would have on a room."

What was the effect? I ask. Schneider looks at me sadly. A long silence follows. Did the room feel threatening or frightening? I hazard.

"It is difficult for me to speak about expressions and emotions that aren't mine," he says at last. But what about yours? I ask. "I am not afraid of rooms," he replies firmly.

Some of Schneider's rooms are frightening, though. There is what appears to be a dead body in the corner of one (it is, says Schneider, an installation by a female artist called Hannelore Reuen, whom he used to refer to as a collaborator but who is in fact an alter ego).

Another, in the basement, is called The Brothel; then there was Rubbish Bag In Wank Corner (1999), the room he showed in Bremerhaven. Most sinisterly there is a room which, once the handle-less door shuts, is really just a black hole from which, without outside help, you can never leave. And Schneider does have fears about the house, even if he can't talk about them in relation to specific rooms. No, instead, his fear is more general.

"My personal problem is that I have to be doing something all the time," he says, as if he is giving me the key to his psyche.

I try and argue that surely there are easier ways to keep busy.

"I like things which are done," he says by way of response. "I think they have a higher quality than things that someone has just thought about. They are concrete. They are made."

He pauses, then says rather heavily something he has obviously said many times before.

"I don't believe in ideas." He pauses again and then becomes more sympathetic. "I hope one day I don't have to build any more rooms," he says, shaking his head.

The random mobile phone is ringing loudly by this point, and the slide projector has jammed again. Everything seems absurd. He almost laughs. After all, the reason we are talking is because he is building something.

Is it a room? I ask.

"It's huge," he says. "And it's very difficult to install."

Is that all you can tell me? I ask.

"I can tell you that it's top secret," he says, and, with that, perfectly on cue, as if in a play, someone from Artangel comes into the room, switches on the light, and swiftly ushers me outside.

- Die Familie Schneider takes up residence in London's East End from Oct 2. Booking starts tomorrow; phone 07981 578754/578755.<?xm-replace_text {li}?>

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