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ART

A Cube, Like Mecca's, Becomes a Pilgrim

By R. JAY MAGILL Jr.

HAMBURG, Germany

THE towering black cube at the center of the Great Mosque in Mecca, known as the Kaaba, now has a politically charged twin standing in front of Hamburg's premier museum. This fabric-clad cube made its way here in an odyssey that began in Venice, detoured through Berlin and overcame, en route, fears of offending Europe's Muslims.

Pitch black and 46 feet tall, "Cube Hamburg 2007," by the German artist Gregor Schneider, is the first work one sees in the current exhibition at the Hamburger Kunsthalle, a show that honors the Russian artist Kasimir Malevich. Mr. Schneider's slightly smaller Kaaba — though differing entirely in material, weight and function from the original — stands outside the museum, its imposing blackness a stark contrast to the square white building beside it.

Mr. Schneider, who represented Germany at the 2001 Venice Biennale, had been commissioned to build his cube of aluminum scaffolding draped in black muslin for the 2005 Venice Biennale. But his plan to install it in St. Mark's Square was rejected by city officials, who suggested it might offend or provoke Muslims. He was then invited to construct it at a contemporary art museum in Berlin, only to have the work there halted by a city museum official.

But now his cube — whose evocation of the Kaaba held particular resonance in Venice because of the city's historic connections to Islamic culture — has found a home here, wrapped into the exhibition, "Homage to Malevich," as a celebration of the artist's 1915 painting "Black Square."

"My first trip to Russia was in 1971, and ever since I've been enamored with Malevich, with the idea of the black square as the quintessentially radical modern form," said Hubertus Gassner, the Kunsthalle's director and curator of the show, which continues through June 10. "Cube Hamburg" is the most contemporary piece in his exhibition, which shows 45 works by Malevich (1878-1935) alongside variations of the square in paintings, drawings and architectural models by artists ranging from Lissitzky to Sigmar Polke to Donald Judd.

Mr. Schneider, 38, is well known in Germany and on the international art scene for his sinister interior installations. His "Dead House Ur" (1985-1997), a complex of 22 rooms and dead-end paths, won the Golden Lion award at the 2001 Venice Biennale. His current solo show in a Düsseldorf gallery — near his home in Rheydt — consists of isolation cells, sterile corridors and other institutional reminders of the United States Army's prison camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

It was his interest in shadowy and isolated spaces that led Mr. Schneider to begin making illustrations of the Kaaba, which translates from the Arabic simply as cube but according to Islamic tradition is the first sacred structure on earth. It is said to have been built by Adam, rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael and reconstructed numerous times since. The actual Kaaba, which stands almost 50 feet high, is the goal of the Muslim pilgrimage known as the hajj. In Islam it is not forbidden to represent the Kaaba, and illustrations of the

building and its internal structure are plentiful.

Standing outside the Hamburg Kunsthalle on a recent afternoon Mr. Schneider spoke about the problems his cube had encountered at the 2005 Biennale: “To this day I have received no official response as to why ‘Cube Venice’ was not permitted.” But he received an e-mail message from Davide Croff, the Biennale’s president, that described the rejection as “of a political nature.”

Alessandra Santerini, a spokeswoman for the Biennale, told the news agency Deutsche Welle at the time that the cube had been excluded for both aesthetic and security reasons. “It would block the view of one part of the square,” she said, adding that “it could hurt the religious emotions of the Muslim community.”

The rejection at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin’s contemporary art museum housed in a former train station, came after Mr. Schneider had been invited to construct “Cube Berlin 2006” by the museum’s director, Eugen Blume. The general director of the State Museums of Berlin, Peter-Klaus Schuster, halted the work, even though the catalog, with Mr. Blume’s essay, was already at the printer.

The debates over the cube, and its eventual construction here, have been documented by Peter Schiering, a filmmaker for the German television channel ZDF. His film, which includes the planning, public discussions and interviews with officials in Berlin, was shown on March 24, the day after “Homage to Malevich” opened. (Mr. Schneider himself, with the authors Eugene Blume and Amine Haase, documented the Venice Biennale events in an English-language book, “Cubes: Art in the Age of Global Terrorism,” published in 2006 by Charta.)

Mr. Schneider argues that the criticism of both the Venice and Berlin projects came from political officials, not from Muslims in those cities. “‘Cube Venice 2005’ was planned without cynicism and with a clear conscience,” he said. “I could have looked every Muslim openly and honestly in the eye.”

Germany is home to more than three million Muslims. Nadeem Elyas, the chairman of the country’s Central Council on Muslims, has said in public forums (and in the “Cubes” book) that he thought Mr. Schneider’s project was undertaken with “honor and dignity,” and that the decision to decline it was “not conducive to dialogue between Muslims and Christians.”

Mr. Schneider echoed this, saying, “My hope is that this reduced cube might remind us of the cultural elements that we have in common.”

Felix Kraemer is the project manager of “Cube Hamburg 2007.” “We had started to speak to leaders in the Muslim community about possible concerns — frank and sincere dialogue with the ‘potentially offended’ — when we thought it was going to be in Berlin and come here afterward,” he said. “And everybody we spoke with — normal Hamburg Muslims and religious representatives — was fully supportive and didn’t see the big deal.”

Ahmet Yazici and Ramazan Uçar of the Alliance for the Islamic Communities, at a public forum in February at the Kunsthalle, spoke of the cube’s installation here as a triumph for freedom of expression. Dyafad Mohaghighi concurred, speaking on behalf of the only ayatollah in Germany, Seyyed Abbas Ghaemmaghami, who heads the Persian-Shiite Islamic Center in Hamburg.

“Because the cube does remind Muslims of the Kaaba,” Mr. Mohaghighi said, “is even more reason for us to respect the form — as an artwork or as religious monument. We hope that the public response is a respectful one too.”

That it is Hamburg, which has large Turkish and Iranian populations, that finally welcomed Mr. Schneider’s

project seems apt. [Mohammed Khatami](#), the reformist president of Iran from 1997 to 2005, had earlier served as chairman of the Islamic Center here, during the Iranian revolution. Ayatollah Ghaemmaghami is the only German Muslim to have issued a fatwa on terrorism, in July 2005 after the London bombings. (Hamburg has also been home to less moderate Islamic men: [Mohamed Atta](#), Said Bahaji and Ramzi bin al-Shibh — the Hamburg Cell at Marienstrasse 54 — helped carry out the attacks of Sept. 11.)

“I’m not an expert in contemporary art,” said Duane C. Butcher, the United States consul general in Hamburg, “but the sincere dialogue the cube is creating between Germans and the Muslim community in Hamburg reminds us of how genuine discourse can succeed in cultural understanding.”

So perhaps the impenetrable form, with its taut black fabric absorbing the light as onlookers wander around it, can also be interpreted as an attempt at reconciliation. The flyer for the “Cube Hamburg 2007” project is a black cutout cube with flaps for assembly. In two dimensions the cube is a cross.

“Malevich himself wanted to build exactly this cube — for Lenin’s grave, actually,” said Mr. Gassner, the curator. “And without a doubt he would be thrilled to see Schneider’s box standing out there.”

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