

From The Times

October 6, 2004

The family haunt

Our correspondent is spooked by an eerie home conversion

Gabriel Coxhead

DIE FAMILIE SCHNEIDER

Whitechapel, EC1

"I NEVER was afraid of rooms. There's no reason to be," says Gregor Schneider. But reason doesn't come into it, as anyone who's ever experienced being creeped out by an empty room knows.

Schneider is talking about his *Dead House ur*, on which he has been working since 1985. In that year, as a teenager, he began transforming the interior of a house, left to him by his family, in the small town of Rheydt in southern Germany.

Working, initially at least, below the art-world's radar, Schneider created a series of "false" rooms within the original rooms of the building. The original rooms were replicated in stark, cheerless detail — white walls, radiators, maybe a table and chairs. Windows, though illuminated, looked only on to other walls — all the lighting was artificial. The new rooms were smaller, more menacing. The whole house was directed in upon itself — a kind of morbid regression.

Sometimes, the only way to enter a room was to walk through a cupboard or crawl under a sink. One room actually rotated imperceptibly. "Even if you enter and leave by the same door," Schneider explains, "you end up in a different place. And if you open the wrong door at the wrong time, then you fall into the space between."

Still later he began cutting out whole sections and reconstructing them elsewhere. *Cellar* — shown at the Royal Academy's *Apocalypse* exhibition in 2000 — was, literally, his cellar. So low that viewers had to stoop painfully to enter, it evoked ideas of danger and hiding, of imprisonment or abuse. In 2001 he won the grand prize at the Venice Biennale for a reconstruction of virtually the entire house.

Schneider's most recent installations, though, have departed from the *Dead House ur* template. Maybe he felt constrained by the critical tendency to read that piece as autobiographical. Certainly Schneider himself is often portrayed romantically as a kind of depressive hermit figure, cocooned within his crazy labyrinth. But Schneider intends his rooms to "change the way people think and feel".

His current work, *Die Familie Schneider*, lets the viewer explore, alone, two adjacent houses in Whitechapel, East London. It's a chilling, even frightening, experience.

Again rooms within rooms have been built. The upstairs bedroom, for instance, is windowless, even though from outside windows can be clearly seen. The room is oppressive. The suggestion is of something unpleasantly lascivious or seedy — fake-fur bedspreads and mirrored wardrobe doors. Slumped unobtrusively in the corner is a figure — a young boy or girl. A thin, black plastic bag covers the head and torso. You can just make out an eerily staring face. Apart from breathing, there's no movement.

There are other inhabitants too — younger children, perhaps. The room at the very top of the house is locked and blocked with child-safety bars. And in the basement, behind a cheap, broken bookshelf, a hidden passageway leads to the cold bowels of the house — a cramped, brick cellar and another locked door. The sound of a child crying can be heard.

Upstairs in the bathroom, hunched in the tub, a man masturbates noisily. There's no idea of voyeurism, though. The viewer is a participant in this performance of twisted domesticity. When the door to the kitchen is opened, a woman half-turns her head, acknowledging that she's being watched, before going back to doing the dishes. Her compliance before the viewer's gaze courts a ghastly familiarity.

The house next door is a precise replica. Everything is exactly the same as in the first house — the layout of the rooms, their decor, even the stains on the wallpaper. The inhabitants, too, are exact doubles, doing exactly the same things.

Schneider has hired identical twins — that's the rational explanation. But the jarring sense of disorientation, but also of exact orientation, is not experienced rationally. The house seems malevolent and inescapable — hungry

to claim another inhabitant.

As always with Schneider's work, it's the empty corridors and rooms that are the most sinister. Two brightly-lit boxrooms — one in each house — are almost completely bare. On the floor a small stack of cakes has been neatly arranged — an offering to some uncanny force. The threat is that something different will suddenly happen, that some lurking horror will be revealed.

To book a visit call 07981 578754/5

Contact our [advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times. [Globrix Property Search](#) - find property for sale and rent in the UK. Visit our classified services and find [jobs](#), used [cars](#), [property](#) or [holidays](#). Use our [dating](#) service, read our [births](#), [marriages](#) and [deaths announcements](#), or place your [advertisement](#).

Copyright 2008 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.

