

REVIEW

A grid of cages on Bondi beach puts the viewer in an uncomfortable place, writes **Sebastian Smee**

Gregor Schneider, 21 Beach Cells
Bondi beach, Sydney, until October 21.

SO I'm sitting in a cage. I'm on Bondi beach; it's a gorgeous day. A little windy, perhaps, but otherwise impeccable. To get here, I've had to walk across the sand, through another cage occupied by three young English tourists and into the first empty cell I can find.

It's lunchtime. I've come prepared. Cap, sunglasses and, in front of me, on the sand, a serving of fish and chips. As I eat, I look around. (You're thinking, this is what art critics do? I know.) My cell is like all the other cells. There are 21 of them, configured as a cube, with one open space on each side. All the walls have doors, so you can get from one cell to the next or from the outside cells to the open beach.

On this Labour Day Monday, most of them are occupied, some with families (one has even put up a beach tent), others with couples or small gaggles of teenagers.

Of the three cells that share a wall with mine, one is empty. Another has the English tourists, while in the third a topless girl lies on her belly. She's doing the crossword. On top of her lies a muscle man, twice her weight, stroking her brown shoulders. They're still lying that way when I leave.

Oh, and there's one more thing. Each cell has a beach umbrella for shade; a thin inflatable mattress for lying on; and a black plastic garbage bag for ... for what? It's filled with something and loosely tied at the top. It worries me slightly, this bag.

I prefer to look elsewhere. As I gaze around, I see what you would expect someone to see from a metal cage on Bondi beach: a lot of people lying about in various states of undress. The openness, the sensuality, the splendour, the slaying heat: it's all pretty stupendous, even if you're used to it.

But I feel I am being watched. So I get up and walk into the next cell, then the next one, further into the heart of the labyrinth. As I move from cage to cage, the perspectives change. My view of outside is broken up, fragmented. Inside, too. But, as with a kaleidoscope, the lines of vision retain a certain order, a rational if complex shape. As in a panopticon, there is no place to hide. No matter how far in you go, you remain as visible as you were on the outside.

I feel half an urge to drop bread crumbs as I go or trail a length of string behind me. But

CAPTIVE AUDIENCE



Psychology in the sand: There's no place to hide in Gregor Schneider's disconcerting installation at Bondi beach

everything is transparent in here. I can see no monsters lurking at the heart of the structure. There is only the artist, stalking the outside with his tripod and video camera.

Who is this artist? Why has he made this thing? And what am I supposed to think?

These are questions you naturally ask, if only because the first thing *21 Beach Cells* does is make you self-conscious. In this sense at least, it's a provocation.

John Kaldor, whose organisation Kaldor Art Projects commissioned the work, told me that he had worried the project would be more controversial. By day three, when I spoke to him, he said there had been little hostile reaction. Only one man who had approached him saying, "What's this?"

"It's a work of art," Kaldor had replied.

"Bullshit," said the man. "I'm an artist. This isn't art."

"Ah, well then, you'd know. My apologies."

The story was good for a laugh. But then, "What's this?" is a perfectly fair question, and the answer — "It's a work of art" — is by no means adequate, except, perhaps, as a shorthand way of saying: "Decide for yourself."

I like *21 Beach Cells*: I think it's not only provocative but subtly nerve-racking. It's very minimal and, as with all minimalist art, it calls attention to itself only to put up a poker face when we turn to look.

Thus, we are left on our own, with our own thoughts, our own physical sensations, our own perceptions and, perhaps, anxieties.

When I first heard about the work I thought it sounded pat. Take a beach — a symbol of freedom and hedonism, no less — and put a grid of cages on it. As political art, it seemed pretty obvious. Sculpture by the Sea, the other public event to put Sydney's best-loved beaches to the

service of art, sifts proposals for this kind of thing every year. The proposals all come with the same kind of rationale: woolly protest politics, strident use of symbol and rhetoric, toxic levels of earnestness. All to no avail, and guess what? No one cares. The setting defeats caring.

Gregor Schneider's *21 Beach Cells* is more taut. It is a political work, yes, but politics is at the obvious, blunt end of an experience that, given time, ends up in a place that becomes more obscure, more insinuating, less easy to talk about. The black plastic bag in each cell, tied at the top and filled with who knows what, is the perfect correlative for it.

Schneider is one of the darkest artists around. He made his name with a continually changing work called *Totes Haus u r* (Death House u r), which he began in 1985. Within his own, outwardly normal home — only metres, he subsequently discovered, from where Joseph



Shame, secrecy, violence, suppression: it's all there, waiting for us

Goebbels spent his earliest years — he conducted a series of interventions and excavations.

The work was transposed to the German Pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale, where it was awarded the Golden Lion for best work. A kind of ghost ride for adults, its repertoire of effects included cramped corridors, dead ends, obscure passageways leading up and down, clean, spartan bedrooms, hidden cupboards and scattered tableaux replete with disgusting stains, black plastic sheeting, evidence of recent occupation and various disturbing anomalies (a disco ball, a blow-up sex doll).

In this and subsequent works, Schneider has shown himself to be a master of the psychology of space. He orchestrates expectation and surprise by toying with degrees of emptiness, spaciousness, confinement and illumination as well as the uncanniness of replication.

A recent commission in London, *The Schneider Family*, involved the exact replication of two houses: you entered the first house and saw, among other ordinary but loaded details, a woman washing dishes and, upstairs, a man masturbating in the shower. In the house next door, exactly — but exactly — the same terrifying experience awaited you.

But Schneider is not just an excavator of private psychology. All of his work can be read politically, too. Shame, secrecy, violence, suppression: it's all there, waiting for us.

Shortly after visiting Bondi, I read this description of a visit to Dachau by Herbert Muschamp, the architecture critic at *The New York Times*, who died earlier this month: "The small size of the gas chamber comes as a surprise. There is nothing to see besides four walls, a floor, a ceiling and the door that leads outside. It is when you cross the threshold of that door that you grasp the reason for visiting Dachau. You walk out into daylight, but part of you does not leave. The doorway divides you. The part that is free to walk through the door feels disembodied, a weightless ghost. You feel light-headed, as though you have broken the law, as indeed you have. Your passage through that door has violated the design. The room was not meant to be exited alive."

It's terrifyingly apt, but Schneider does not make art that refers specifically to the Holocaust. One recent work, called *White Torture*, was a response to images circulating on the internet of a maximum security facility at Guantanamo Bay. The title refers to methods of torture designed to destroy a person's mind through sensory deprivation and extreme isolation without leaving any external evidence.

Meanwhile, at the 2005 Venice Biennale, Schneider tried to have a huge black cube installed in St Mark's Square. The work conjured associations with the Kaaba, the cube structure in Mecca that is the centre of the Muslim world; but also with the black square painted by Kasimir Malevich in 1915. It was approved by the biennale

authorities. But at the last minute it was cancelled and the exhibition catalogue censored.

The censorship came from Rome, Schneider says: the result of a fear that Muslims would take the work as a provocation. Another plan to build the cube, this time in Berlin, came unstuck at the last minute for similar reasons. But it was finally installed in Hamburg as part of an exhibition about the influence of Malevich.

I asked Schneider about the whole experience. Not given to explaining his work, he became instantly animated, speaking at length about the decision-making processes at the institutions involved, the different ways of reading the piece and the press reaction.

He seemed appalled by the coarseness and timidity of those who backed off the project and dismayed by the hypocrisy of the press.

He then told me that *21 Beach Cells* has the same proportions as the Kaaba in Mecca. What we are to make of this, beyond the obvious indication that Schneider is interested in purely formal concerns, I can't say. But it does seem that, alongside the dense, carefully orchestrated experiences of *Totes Haus u r* and *The Schneider Family*, or the grand provocation of a Kaaba-inspired black box in St Mark's Square, *21 Beach Cells* feels modest, like a sketch for something fuller, more developed.

Yet, despite its simplicity, it is rich in paradox. The grid of cells is a form that frames and regulates perception. On the one hand everything is transparent, leaving no place to hide. On the other, the walls of the cell continually fragment and disperse one's perceptions. Panoramic vision becomes impossible.

What is naturally isolating — a cell with four walls — Schneider has made strangely social with his network of interconnecting doors. Yet there remains a pathos about the experience of entering the cells. Comfortable as they are, you can never quite relax in them. Indeed, part of the unease of the experience comes from watching the ways in which people try to take possession of their cell, to relax, to submit, as if contracting mild cases of Stockholm syndrome.

Then there is that black garbage bag. You don't have to think about it if you don't want to. But it will stay there, in the corner, regardless. What is in it? Why is it there? What is it hiding?

You do not have to have grown up in post-war Germany to see these as profoundly political questions. Indeed, part of Schneider's sly genius has been to make us reflect on the political realities — detention centres, race riots, pervasive suspicion — that are concealed by Australia's image of itself as hedonistic, compassionate, beach-loving, democratic.

But Schneider has a talent for making us see political issues in psychological terms. And that is always going to be more compelling than any amount of shouting from the rooftops.



21 Beach Cells

This installation challenged sentimentality about Australian beach culture and asked questions about voyeurism and exclusivity.

by Laura Harding

project

21 Beach Cells

by Gregor Schneider

Bondi Beach

28 September – 21 October 2007

Kaldor Art Project in conjunction with

Waverly Council. Supported by the

Goethe-Institut Australien

www.kaldorartprojects.org.au

this spread and following page

Bondi's beach and surf culture encapsulated.

Photographer: Gregor Schneider



Australians pride themselves on not taking things too seriously, but have always taken their established cultural mythology very seriously indeed. Chief among the sacrosanct elements of the national psyche is Australia's emblematic public space – the beach. Collectively espoused as a golden realm of egalitarianism, tolerance, and vitality, it is widely believed to reflect an equally vigorous and virtuous national character. Whenever contemporary events force us to question the naive affection with which we tend our cultural symbols, we hastily repolish the tarnished icons and place them back into the cultural vault. Despite the fact that our beaches are increasingly girt by exclusivity and affluence and despite the highly emotive fallout of the Cronulla race riots, the beach's role as the symbol of an open, optimistic, and tolerant national character remains unshakable.

Kaldor Art Projects' most recent public art project is a Gregor Schneider installation titled *21 Beach Cells*, which occupies the hallowed sands of Bondi. The work is a

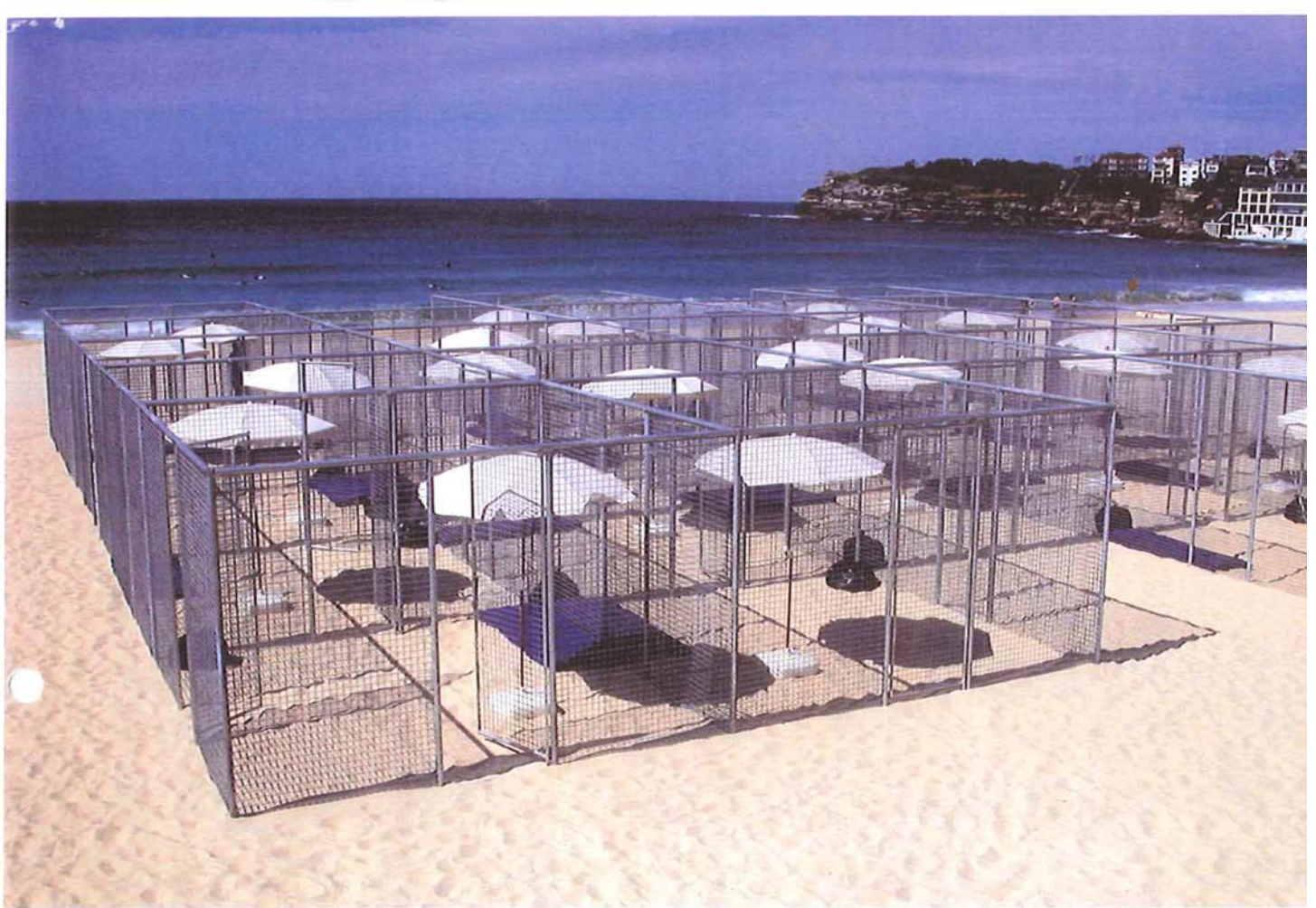
provocative and direct piece of political commentary and it is sobering that it is an international artist who has managed so decisively to cut through the cloying sentimentality surrounding Australian beach culture.

Schneider's installation comprises a grid of 4 metre x 4 metre cellular spaces fashioned from galvanized steel pipe sections and fencing mesh. Each cell contains three innocuous elements – an inflatable mattress, a white canvas beach umbrella, and a black garbage bag. The cells are linked by doors, thin and mean in proportion, some of which are randomly wired shut to prevent access. This induces an unnerving sense of apprehension as one attempts to move through the dazzling moiré of gridded steel.

The transparency of the structure is disconcerting. The only comfort in a contained, cellular space is a sense of refuge – but here there is no protective solidity to back up against or any means to secure personal privacy. All actions are subject to

scrutiny and surveillance. Consequently, it is fascinating to watch the ways that voluntary detainees occupy the work. Many pull their mattress to an adjacent wall and strike up a conversation through the mesh or gather in doorways to share rations of packed lunches and water bottles. Others are in contact with the "outside world" or fellow inmates via mobile telephones. Intermittently, an inflated beach ball is launched into the air in defiance of the sense of containment. After a short period of observation it becomes evident that activity in the cells has a studied air – stifled by self-consciousness and an awareness of complicity in public spectacle.

This is curious for many reasons. Voyeurism and spectacle are celebrated elements of the quintessential beach experience and rarely modify behaviour to this extent. Conceptually, isolation and separation emerge as important psychological components of the beach cells. There is a comforting invisibility that envelopes beach-goers when part of the public throng melting in the rippling heat haze – but not when isolated, separated, and offered



for independent scrutiny in the cells. This is an interesting counterpoint to currently fashionable readings of contemporary culture as having no need or interest in the concept of privacy. We are repeatedly told that distinctions between public and private are passé and that our sophisticated and fluid cultural culture has no need of limits. How little it takes to expose the emperor's new clothes – a few minutes in a steel cage is a powerful reminder that privacy is a deeply human need and the gradation of public to private realms, as practised and refined over many centuries, an essential human concern.

The installation's steel mesh draws parallels with the five-kilometre-long APEC security cordon, or "rabble-proof fence," that isolated a large part of Sydney's CBD in August. Incursions into the public realm by government for exclusionary purposes are becoming increasingly common, yet use of public spaces for provocative or even slightly inconvenient public art projects is strictly controlled and generally discouraged. Public

art is paid generous lip service in Australian cities but artists are rarely given the opportunity to do more than provide decorous adornment to public space. Consequently, public discussion and argument about art and culture are hopelessly limited and invariably devolve into questionable interpretations of aesthetics and "appropriateness." The fact that Schneider's beach cells have been allowed to occupy rather than ornament a revered public space for a month is to be celebrated.

The Australian poet Robert Gray once wrote, "You have shown me the palace of your ideals. Now show me the dungeons." This is Schneider's interest and it should also be ours. Public art has the capacity to challenge easily held notions. Such investigations deserve to be in the public realm and thrust into the public eye. They offer an infinitely more interesting source of introspection than our lazy acceptance of the anachronistic fantasy of the Australian beach myth. ■



this page
The usual beach activities
continue within the grid of cells.
Photographer: Adam Free