

EDUCATION NOTES
INVESTIGATING ARTWORKS IN THE GALLERY
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ART
GALLERY
NSW

40 YEARS KALDOR PUBLIC ART PROJECTS

2007 GREGOR SCHNEIDER



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PROJECT

21 beach cells

28 September – 21 October 2007
Bondi Beach, Sydney

13–20 June 2009
Accadia Beach, Herzliya, Israel

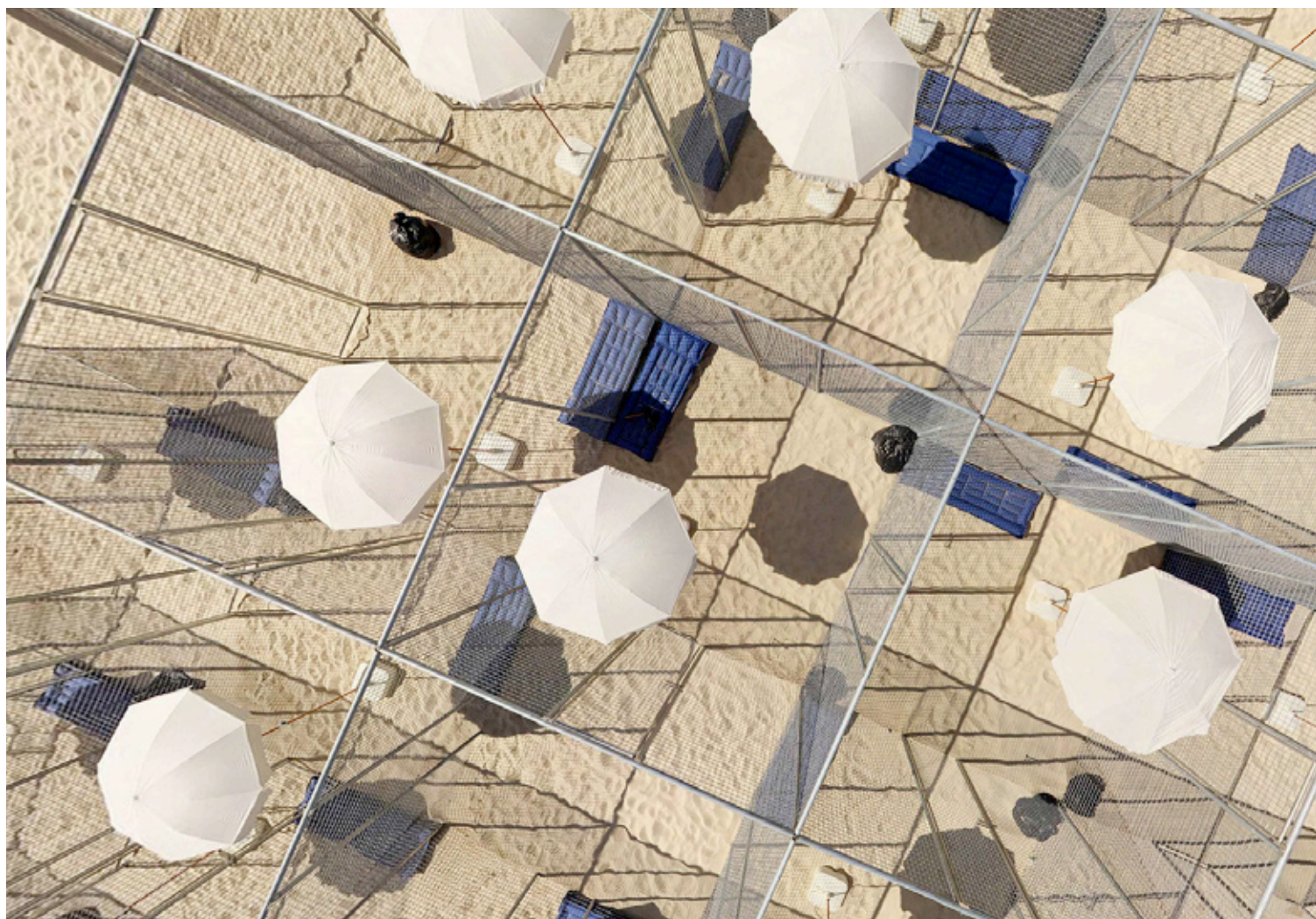
I wanted to find the point when my art was surrounding me completely but, at the same time, I could no longer recognise it ... My work is not about making you fearful. It is about helping you to reflect upon and overcome your fear.

Gregor Schneider in Rachel Campbell-Johnston, 'Gregor Schneider, the inner space man', *Times*, 27 January 2009, p 13

GREGOR SCHNEIDER

Detail of **21 beach cells** 2007 on Sydney's Bondi Beach. Transparent from the outside, once inside the cells functioned as a maze

Photo: Peter Murphy



2007 GREGOR SCHNEIDER

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 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.

Sebastian Smees, 'Captive audience', *Weekend Australian*, 20–21 October 2007, p 18

INTRODUCTION

An artist of unusual talents, with a hypersensitivity to spaces of all kinds – especially the inner spaces of consciousness – Gregor Schneider's work has been disturbing people since his *Totes Haus Ur* (Dead house ur) of 1985. One does not look at his work or view it; Schneider's installations have to be experienced, and for that reason they modify our sensibility ineradicably, for we cannot step outside that experience. Accordingly we become participants, rather than spectators. Schneider's Kaldor project in Australia in 2007 was brewed from an uncanny understanding of what enclosed spaces do to the subjected – like the inmates of Guantánamo Bay's Camp X-Ray – and he communicates this uneasy knowledge not as an idea, or even the emotional equivalent of thought, but as immediately as the clammy odour of fear.

ARTIST

Gregor Schneider

born 1969 in Rheydt, Germany
lives and works in Rheydt

As a teen, Gregor Schneider worked as a coffin bearer, and he often speaks of the big taboo around death and dying. (Recently he became embroiled in controversy after saying he wanted to create a space in a museum in which people could die.) At 16 his own father died and Schneider started on his long-term transformation of his former family home, turning it into a claustrophobic labyrinth of dark corridors, musty crawl spaces and dead ends known as *Totes Haus Ur* (Dead house ur) 1985–2007. In 1996, he began transporting parts of the house for exhibition around the world, including at the German pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2001, for which he won the Golden Lion. His subsequent architectural modifications of space have gained him plaudits from the art world, notwithstanding comparisons with the likes of Fred West, Josef Fritzl and Marc Dutroux.

Have you ever been back to a childhood home that you lived in, with the intensity of a child, and then come back years later as an adult? If you have, you know how it plays subtle havoc with both mind and body. Are we seeing it? Imagining it? Remembering it as it really was or from the last time we remembered it? What happens with one's sense of scale? Schneider evokes those profound bodily and psychological reactions to architectural space and domestic environments; and especially to those unnerving elements that seem to escape the conscious mind. He takes as his theme this cold dread of what might be behind a creaky closed door or at the top of a dark staircase.

Trained as a painter, Schneider's first exhibition in 1985 also showed a fascination with inner spaces: rooms you cannot enter, places that cannot communicate with the outside world. Visitors to his 2004 work, *Die Familie Schneider*, went alone into first one house and then next door to a second, on an ordinary London residential street. Not only were the two houses identical but, uncannily, they seemed to be peopled with the same man and woman going through the same motions, and in a corner of the bedroom, the same small figure, almost covered by a plastic garbage bag.

In 2005, he proposed *Cube Venice*, a 15-metre-square tower of scaffolding, shrouded in black fabric, to be placed in the Piazza San Marco opposite the Catholic cathedral. It was designed in tribute to the Ka'aba in Mecca – the Islamic sacred site forbidden to non-worshippers. However, Venice city authorities, supported by Italy's Ministry of Culture, refused to grant the necessary permissions.

In 2007, motivated by photographs of Guantánamo Bay's Camp V, Schneider made *Weisse Folter* (White torture). Visitors walked through soundproofed interrogation-rooms and cell-like spaces into existing museum architecture. With interlocking doors and strip lighting, it conjured a place that aimed, as the catalogue phrased it, 'to destroy a person's psyche without leaving any demonstrable traces'. It is this work which is most closely aligned with Schneider's Kaldor project the same year, in which he created *21 beach cells* on Sydney's Bondi Beach.

PROJECT

In the teeth of the aggressive reassertion of cultural nationalisms, where boundaries may be physical, like mountain ranges or seas, or artificial, like lines in the sand, as real as ghetto walls or razor-wire, or as imaginary as paranoia, artists since 9/11 have made artworks poised between the scars of violence and dreams of hope.

With an eye on the political atmosphere in Australia at the time – refugees detained in foreign transit stations, and race riots erupting on the beaches of Cronulla – Gregor Schneider transformed Sydney's pleasure-loving Bondi Beach from 28 September to 21 October 2007 into a kind of 'zone', with a giant cage. Titled *21 beach cells*, each 4 x 4 metre cell contained an air mattress, beach umbrella and a disconcerting, black plastic garbage bag (a recurring totem in Schneider's work). Echoing Guantánamo Bay's Camp X-Ray, the visitor venturing 'inside' was caught between security and surveillance, privacy and exposure, inside and outside. Suddenly Australia didn't seem quite the egalitarian place, eroding those old certainties in the permanent join between a particular culture and a stable terrain.

In June 2009, in collaboration with Herzliya Museum in Tel Aviv, the work was recreated on local Accadia Beach in Israel with the support of the Kaldor projects.

WORLD EVENTS: 2007

- _ Labor leader Kevin Rudd becomes Australian Prime Minister
- _ Apple launches the iPhone
- _ 'Residents' of Second Life now more than 6 million
- _ Business and government in Estonia nearly shut down by a 'botnet' attack
- _ First Earth Hour as Sydneysiders turn off their lights as part of an energy-efficiency campaign
- _ Sydney covered in smoke after bushfires in the Blue Mountains, west of the city
- _ *A cavalier (self portrait)* by Frans van Mieris I stolen from the Art Gallery of NSW
- _ **15th Kaldor project:** Urs Fischer creates his Cockatoo Island installation on the site of an old convict prison on an island in Sydney Harbour
- _ **16th Kaldor project:** Gregor Schneider creates 21 beach cells on Sydney's iconic Bondi Beach, which in 2009, is recreated on Accadia Beach in Herzliya, Israel

THEME

Installation art

There is a psychological, even moral, quality to inhabited space that philosopher Gaston Bachelard detailed so eloquently in his book, *The poetics of space*. The space we inhabit is never geometric, but oneiric (related to dreams). Space, he wrote, is compressed time. Think of the daydream-soaked house of childhood; the heady intellectual space of the attic; or the basement into whose subconscious levels we descend with a metaphorical candle, even in the age of electricity. They each conjure a super-sensory, even sub-sensory, dimension: centres of boredom or reverie or silent beholding.

In 1976, Brian O'Doherty wrote three articles in the journal *Artforum* that later became the book *Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space*. O'Doherty was looking at the modern gallery and what a very controlled context it is. Its whiteness bleaches out the past, giving the artwork a sense of being out of time, beyond time. This kind of eternity of display became so overbearing, we now tend to see the space first. According to O'Doherty, the modern museum space derives its sepulchral force from painted caves, Egyptian tomb chambers and medieval churches. The secular modern gallery has lost some power, but it still has a sanctity that mixes the formality of the courtroom and the mystique of the experimental lab.

Decades earlier, in the 1920s and '30s, Russian constructivist Vladimir Tatlin had broken away from the ideal sculptural space on the pedestal, as traditionally offered by a gallery. Working from his sailor's knowledge of physical things, he set up his sculptural works, like his 1917 *Corner relief*, made from vernacular materials, in the angles between the walls themselves. This shift to the use of real materials in real space – interior

corridors, ceilings, walls or floors, or even outdoor sites – announced the emergence of installation art.

Installation transforms the foursquare, stable cube designed by architects into an existential or actualised space produced by a reader or viewer. It also dismantles the tidy groups of spatial experiences we associate with museums – those neat rows of eye-level art – by forcing us to enter other spaces and take in other information.

Installations vary enormously: they can be small and intimate, or massive and theatrical, while each artist's efforts in this area are as intimate and revealing as handwriting. Photography, video, painting, sculpture, all the mediums of installation, shed their autonomy; the object itself is not the work but the system of relationships. All the tangled arteries of 20th-century art seem to lead to installation.

Installation art releases ways of thinking and feeling that have previously been marginalised by the pictorial and illusionistic orders of space. It can tap into the empowering forces of indigenous cultures, or make us aware of crippling forms of absent power (like dharma), while at the same time plugging into current metaphors of techno-immersion (like ambient music or omnidirectional acoustic space, interactivity, virtual reality). Installation is art finding new ways to go on despite frightening historical discontinuities.

Examples of other influential installation artists include Joseph Beuys, Louise Bourgeois, Daniel Buren, Christian Boltanski and Giuseppe Penone. Among the Kaldor project artists, Ugo Rondinone, Gregor Schneider, Martin Boyce, Tatzu Nishi, Richard Long, Barry McGee and Miralda all fit under the umbrella of installation art.

COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection

• Rachel Whiteread (England, b1963)

Untitled (elongated plinths) 1998

plastic and urethane foam; 3 plinths: each 67.3 x 77.2 x 221 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales Foundation Purchase 1999 87.1999.a-c

Perhaps Whiteread's most talked about work was *House* 1993, a major project in London, much celebrated after it won the Turner Prize. Her earlier works were all created by casting the inside of domestic objects and spaces. *Ghost* 1988 was a negative mould of the inside of an entire room. The effect was to turn space into a solid object so that the viewer is placed outside real space in an imaginary relation to the real. Whiteread's positive casts of beds and later mortuary slabs continued the use of objects and spaces associated closely with the body but were now exact replicas rather than negatives. In *Untitled (elongated plinths)*, the plinth forms are cast in the negative from a classically moulded silhouette of a dado but it has been stretched to make a positive form the size of a bed or mortuary slab. They are exactly the

right size to be containers for the human body and could easily be read as sarcophagi. From a distance the material could be marble, reinforcing the tomblike appearance.

• **Anthony Gormley** (England, b1950)

A field for the Art Gallery of New South Wales 1989

1100 unfired clay figures; 12 x 11 m approx

Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund 1993 314.1993

Gormley's work provides important insights into some of the most compelling and radical changes that have occurred in modern sculpture and to major changes in the way we think of representation in art. He and other artists have quietly shifted the emphasis away from making images of things in the world towards generating experiences of their presence. These experiences may or may not involve images of the things themselves and may simply provide us with a trace or residue of the thing.

• **Doris Salcedo** (Colombia, b1958)

Untitled 2007

wood, concrete, metal and fabric; 189 x 233 x 82.5 cm

Purchased 2007 305.2002

Salcedo traces the distortion of reality that occurs when power and violence are used as means of social control. What comfort resides in the bed you once shared with a missing lover? What pleasure can one take in the intimate possessions of one's spouse or child when they have been dragged away with no explanation? Objects retain traces of those who have used them. It is difficult to throw away such traces of an absent loved one, and yet it is equally difficult to continue using them as though nothing had happened. In this series, wardrobes and beds are rendered monstrous by their merger. All the holes, gaps and cracks in the wood have been meticulously sealed with white cement. It is as if they have been rendered blind and mute, just like those whose silence is ensured by the threat of further violence. This careful sealing of the cracks is also read as an attempt to keep something out or in. But in this case the 'something' is elusive, like the nebulous fear of some unforeseen tragedy. Salcedo's fusion of inanimate matter and human remains provokes a sense of abomination.

Atrabiliarios 1992–97

timber, gyproc, cow bladder, shoes and surgical thread

dimensions variable

Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund 1997 372.1997.a-o

• **Juan Muñoz** (Spain, b1953, d2001)

Piggy back (right) 1996

183 cm height; 62 x 56.5 cm base plate

Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund 1997 293.1997

SELECTED REFERENCES

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_ *Gregor Schneider: 19-20.30 Uhr 31.05.2007*, Walther König, Cologne 2008

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_ Julian Heynen, *Gregor Schneider: white torture*, Walther König, Cologne 2007

_ Udo Kittelmann (ed), *Gregor Schneider*, Hatje Cantz, Germany 2001

Websites

_ Gregor Schneider

www.gregorschneider.de

_ Gregor Schneider, Bondi Beach, YouTube

www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDesFkreDQk

_ Kaldor Public Art Projects

www.kaldorartprojects.org.au

_ Kaldor Public Art Projects Explorer, Art Gallery of NSW

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor_projects

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Art is often the manifestation of an artist's inner landscape – their mind's eye or feelings. What challenges do artists face who are not working from a tangible object, model or vista? List the steps Gregor Schneider might take to transfer his reality into a physical three-dimensional form and space.

Research the definitions of the words 'thought' and 'memory'. Discuss the effect of scale on the ability of Schneider's memories to come to life for the audience and stimulate their own subconscious. Do his works reveal his real-life experiences or are they intentionally exaggerated?

Build a vocabulary to describe what Schneider's works reveal about his childhood. Name structural clues in *Totes Haus Ur* (Dead house ur) that suggest these memories to the audience. Few artists have a whole house to act as a vehicle for their work. Research how other artists communicate a similar experience of childhood without modifying a three-dimensional life-size form.

Schneider's art engulfs the viewer while channelling them through his projected thoughts. Articulate the difference between positive and negative spaces as well as interior and exterior spaces, using examples from other artists such as Rachel Whiteread. How does it feel roaming around the outside of a house compared with moving within its rooms? Imagine the feelings of moving around the rooms of someone else's mind. Have you experienced claustrophobia or other psychological reactions to physical spaces? Are your memories and feelings in three-dimensional form or colour?

Compare and contrast *Totes Haus Ur* with *21 beach cells*, considering their respective fixed and temporary natures as well as the time each took to create. Analyse the significance of cages, mazes and scaffolding in Schneider's work. List other materials that hold symbolism and meaning, either through Schneider's repetitive use, or through the associations and sensory nature of the material. Investigate various philosophies that believe in interrelationships between materials and energy, such as shintoism and feng shui.

Commencing with Vladimir Tatlin, follow the history of installation art to the present. Why do some artists prefer to avoid museum spaces? In which space do you prefer to experience installation art? Do you agree with the proposition that installation is a dated art-making practice? Debate whether an iconic location such as Bondi Beach overshadows or complements an artwork's significance.

Referencing *21 beach cells*, explore why Schneider has sometimes placed the same installation in a different geographic location. Suggest what significance *21 beach cells* might have for the Australian community. Do you believe art has cultural boundaries? With reference to Schneider's other works, debate if there are boundaries – moral, ethical, religious, physical – which should not be crossed and subject matter that is out of bounds. Research some of Schneider's proposals that have been rejected. Write your own acceptance or rejection letter to the artist. If rejecting his proposal, are there certain things you would avoid saying in your letter?

Justify why Schneider invites viewers to experience situations they would usually prefer to avoid such as in *Weisse Folter* (White torture). Have you been to places, such as historic sites, that have a similar energy or atmosphere? Survey your friends to see whether some people are more sensitive and aware of their physical surroundings than others, and in what way. Explain your research findings, considering theories such as Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and existential philosophies. What literacies do viewers require to fully comprehend Schneider's work? Would you display extensive conceptual notes on Schneider's works if you were his curator?

Schneider has said he hopes his work helps us to reflect upon and overcome our worst nightmares. Consider the cathartic effect of creating something new from experiences and objects associated with negative experiences. Research artists such as Doris Salcedo who have responded to trauma through their art. Locate the work of artists using digital forms to distort or express their reality. Discuss whether you would expect Schneider to incorporate these new technologies in the future.

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Photo: Gregor Schneider

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