

# ART & PERFORMANCE NOTES



Tim Miller in *Body Blows*.  
Photo courtesy of the artist.

## BEHIND THE SCENES

### Gregor Schneider's *Totes Haus ur*

Philip Auslander

Imagine a number of houses, each with many rooms in each house, in each room innumerable cupboards, shelves, boxes, and somewhere, in each one of them, a tiny bead. It is easy enough to find the right house, room, cupboard, and shelf. But it is more difficult to find that tiny bead that rolled out today, glittered for a moment, and then disappeared from sight.

—Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*<sup>1</sup>

In this marvelously evocative passage, the great Russian theatre theorist Constantin Stanislavski, describes the actor's quest for the right emotion memory. Squeezing through the tight spaces of Gregor Schneider's *Totes Haus ur* at the 2001 Venice Biennale, feeling trapped, rubbing up against clammy walls, chancing on other adventurers, I felt as if I were engaged in such a quest. Like the psyche imagined by Stanislavski as multiple dwellings, the *Totes Haus ur* is actually several houses. It is made from parts of the *Haus ur* (begun in 1985)—which is both Schneider's home in Rheydt, Germany, and his major piece as an artist—and is also an autonomous work. It contains multiple houses within itself that register Schneider's ongoing project of reconstructing the interior of the house; his own description of the project reads, in part: "wall in front of wall, wall in front of wall, wall behind wall, passage in room, room in room."<sup>2</sup> Unlike

the orderly psyche described by Stanislavski, in which everything is easy to find until the last crucial moment, this labyrinthine environment felt like a particularly difficult place in which to locate the elusive bead, as if it were an architectural representation of a psyche so turned in on itself that the journey into it leads to dead ends, hazards, and conundrums like windows that open only onto other windows and rooms bathed in light that appears natural but is actually artificial. Or perhaps the *Totes Haus ur* is not so much the site of a quest as the product of a restless search that involves ripping out, moving, and rebuilding walls, doors, and whole rooms in the hope of finding or creating the place into which the invaluable bead disappeared.

For Stanislavski, emotion memory has to do with discovering an analogue in one's own experience for the emotions felt by the character to be portrayed and

drawing on that memory as a means of depicting the character. The audience never knows what emotion memories the actor is employing; their presence is intuited rather than perceived directly. No matter how compelling the surface of a performance may be, Stanislavskian acting is fundamentally about what is not shown to the audience and is known only to the actor. The resonance and emotional impact of the performance derive from the externally imperceptible presence of emotion memories in the actor's mind. It is clear that Schneider, too, is concerned largely with creating work whose expressiveness and impact derive from that which is present but not directly perceivable:

A whole world opens up with all sorts of things that are not recognizable but which are there and which influence the way we feel, think, and act, how we live our daily lives. . . . Cladding in various materials can alter the effect of a room without you quite being able to say why. Even the smallest protuberances and indentations on the finished surface of a wall can arouse a response in the visitor. And when that happens, the effect is registered separately from the cause.<sup>3</sup>

As with emotion memory, an affective state is induced in the spectator, but the means by which it was created remain hidden behind the scenes—in the walls and under the floors.

Schneider's *Totes Haus* *ur*, which can be described as sculpture, installation, even architecture, is also theatrical. Schneider conflates two modern theatrical func-

tions by creating an environment that is both scenographic and performative, both a space for performance and an actor in its own right. Those who have visited Schneider at his home in Rheydt, from which the *Totes Haus* derives, have discussed the laconic performance he gives when he leads guided tours through it.<sup>4</sup> The experience of clawing one's own way through the house in Venice is so immediate and immersive that it isn't voyeuristic, even though we've penetrated Schneider's home and, perhaps, his psyche (Udo Kittelmann calls it the house Schneider built "for his soul"<sup>5</sup>). Voyeurism requires distance and detachment, neither of which is possible here. This space encourages its audience to surrender its purely spectatorial position and become performers as well.

Parts of the house also perform: the rooms with artificial lighting and breezes simulated by ventilators "act" by pretending to be something they are not. Other parts perform choreographically: the coffee room that rotates very slowly or the room whose ceiling rises and falls very slightly are examples. But the movements of which they are capable are not ends in themselves—they serve the same purposes as the materials in which the rooms are clad and the things hidden behind walls (whether other walls, photographs, dolls, etc.). The house as a whole is an actor; like emotion memories, all of these elements lie at the edge of or beyond the spectators' perception yet influence the spectators' affective experience of the space.

In discussing earlier work that led up to his work on the house, Schneider refers to a clay sculpture he made as a teenager: "For days on end [I] modeled this hand, my own hand, constantly moistening it



Gregor Schneider's *Totes Haus ur*. Photos: Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.



again. It was nice, constantly moistening the clay again.”<sup>6</sup> This desire never to allow the work to be finished or set, clearly evident in the endless reconstructions of the *Haus ur*, partakes of what the American performance theorist Richard Schechner calls “performance consciousness,” which he describes as “subjunctive, full of alternatives and potentiality” and associates with the process of rehearsal, when “alternatives are kept alive, the work is intentionally unsettled.”<sup>7</sup> The economy of Schneider’s work is very much that of a system of rehearsal and performance: the *Haus ur* in Rheydt is a never-ending rehearsal, where all potentialities are kept continually in play. Works that Schneider shows in other locations, such as the *Totes Haus ur*, are the performances that result from this continual process of rehearsal. (I had considered identifying the *Haus ur* as Schneider’s version of Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, the work to which all his other works refer. But Schneider’s house is actually the inverse of Duchamp’s window—whereas the *Large Glass* is the summation of Duchamp’s concerns and images to that point, *Haus ur* is generative; it throws new works off rather than gathering existing works together.) Compared to rehearsals, performances are static—Schneider calls the piece at the Biennale a “totes Haus” precisely because it is finished and, therefore, dead.

The elements of Schneider’s work that I am describing as theatrical constitute a set of strategies for representation based in an ideology of performance that paradoxically both honors and wants to reify evanescent experiences. Schneider describes early “experiments” that “involved going into a room, leaving it

again, hoping that the experience would linger there and then inviting other people into that room.”<sup>8</sup> The value of this experience is defined in terms of a simultaneous acceptance and resistance of its evanescence—like theatre, it is considered valuable both because it disappears and for the traces it leaves behind for an audience. But those traces cannot be so concrete as to constitute either a document of Schneider’s presence in the room or a new experience in itself—they are thought to be present, yet must remain implied, inchoate, imperceptible.

The *Totes Haus ur* participates in this ideology of performance in a dual way. Because Schneider is constantly working on the *Haus ur* in Rheydt and changing things around, any given configuration bears invisible traces of previous configurations, much as Schneider supposes the room to retain his presence even after he’s left. But each configuration is relatively stable at any particular moment in time, even more so when parts of the house are removed or replicated to be shown in galleries and museums. The hidden structures of the *Totes Haus ur* are there to undermine that stability by producing the same effect on the audience as the lingering traces of Schneider’s absent presence in his performative experiment. But these structures are not traces—although imperceptible, they are fully and concretely present, made of wood, stone, and plaster, run by motors. Not traces themselves, they *perform as* (and thus represent) the traces of absent events Schneider seeks to capture.

## NOTES

1. Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1936, p. 164.

2. Gregor Schneider, *Arbeiten 1985–1994*, Krefeld: Haus Lange/Haus Esters, Krefelder Kunstmuseum, 1994.

3. Gregor Schneider and Ulrich Loock, “. . . I Never Throw Anything Away, I Just Go On . . .” in *Gregor Schneider: Totes Haus ur/Dead House ur/Martwy Dom ur 1985–1997*, Frankfurt, Warsaw, Monchengladbach, Paris: No Publisher, 1998, p. 25.

4. Cf. Elizabeth Bronfen, “Chryptotopias. Secret Sites/Transmittable Traces” and Daniel

Birnbaum, “Before and After Architecture,” in *Gregor Schneider: Totes Haus ur, La Biennale di Venezia*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001.

5. Udo Kittelmann, “Haus ur, Rheydt versus Totes Haus ur, Venice,” in *Gregor Schneider: Totes Haus ur, La Biennale di Venezia*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001, p. 15.

6. Gregor Schneider and Ulrich Loock, op. cit., p. 47.

7. Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985, p. 6.

8. Gregor Schneider and Ulrich Loock, op. cit., p. 45.

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