Heterotopia: within the works of Gregor Schneider

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ISOLIERRAUM / BLEIRAUM (2000)
room within a room, wooden construction,
of lead, 1 layer of rock wool, plaster boards
ceiling, 1 door, 1 lamp, det

The six principles of heterotopia

The concept of heterotopias was proposed by French philosopher Michel Foucault in a radio report for France Culture in 1966, leading to his essay "Of Other Spaces" (1986).

In *Of Other Spaces,* Foucault presents the idea of the heterotopia as a space which exists within reality; however, it is separate from the routine of the everyday. These spaces have their own sets of rules and serve an individual role within society.
Foucault defines the concept of heterotopia by six key principles.

- Universal: All cultures birth heterotopias, as heterotopias stem from the society itself.
- Evolving: Heterotopias change based on societal change, such as new norms.
- Juxtaposing: Heterotopias juxtapose multiple spaces by combining elements which would not typically meet.
- Temporal/time: Heterotopias change with time, the accumulation of time, and the creation of shared time within a space.
- Restricted: Heterotopias are a closed system where entry must be permitted through means such as ritual, rules, or invitation etc.
- Functional: A heterotopia must have a practical function that binds it to the society in which it operates.
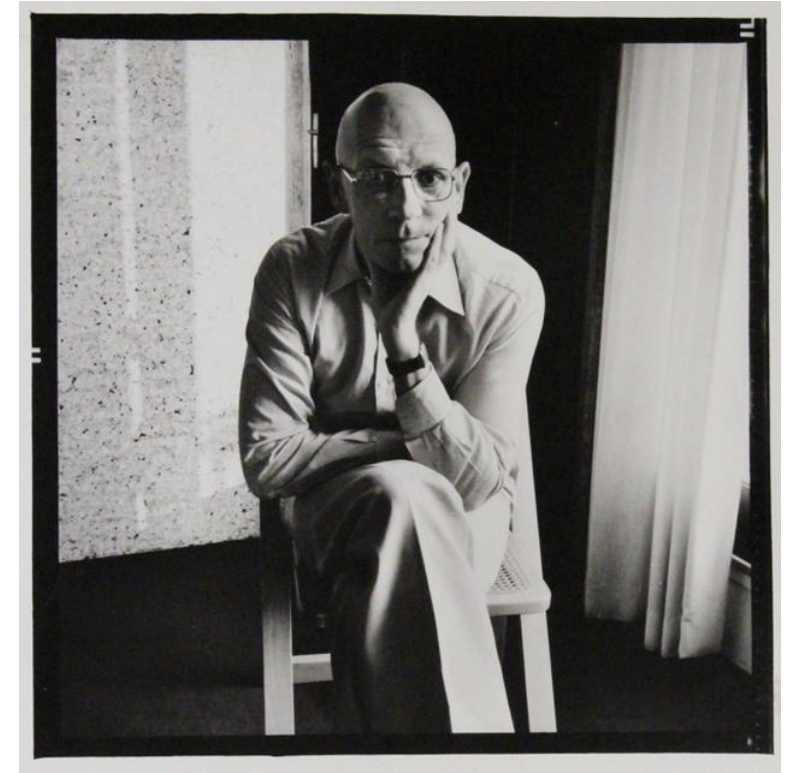
Gregor Schneider

Gregor Schneider is a German conceptual and installation artist who experiments with the manipulation of architectural spaces. Schneider's work aims to dismantle the cultural norms of art spaces, linking both art and viewer and challenging the traditional concept of the studio, described as working in the "post-studio era" (Esner, 2013). His work is often deeply unsettling and is renowned for its morbid themes, with uncanny imagery present throughout.

Schneider's works are characterised by his unique method of practice, in which he dismantles and rebuilds rooms within domestic spaces. These rooms are subject to constant change, with some spaces becoming entirely inaccessible at times. Within these rooms, particularly the kitchen areas, the windows and natural light sources are entirely curated by Schneider using artificial lighting behind nonfunctional windows . This is seen in Schneider's ongoing project *Haus u r.*

Gregor Schneider,Suppe Auslöffeln, 2014

Haus u r / Totes Haus u r (1985-present)

Beginning in 1985, *Haus u r* is Schneider's longest ongoing project. The house used as the framework for this project is Schneider's childhood home. The rooms within the house are adorned with treasures from his childhood, combined with items salvaged from the demolished mining village of Erkelenz.

Haus u r contains many rooms which are entirely inaccessible, with the walls of new rooms constructed in front of pre-existing doorways.

After the passing of Schneider's father in 1998, *Haus u r* underwent significant changes. Schneider had previously avoided creating explicit links between the house and his own life. However, *Haus u r* later evolved into a symbol of mourning, decay, and the passage of time. Schneider began experimenting with the idea of decay, incorporating materials such as rotting wood and aged wallpaper into the rooms. Many rooms featured objects associated with death and absence, with some spaces taking on a clinical, almost mortuary-like appearance. This is evident in the repeated imagery of the empty bed, notably in what was once Schneider's father's bedroom.

The passing and accumulation of time

In *Of Other Spaces* (1986), Foucault discusses cemeteries and how their role within society changed due to social evolution, reflecting a desire to distance death from everyday life. Schneider's *Haus u r* challenges this shift by becoming a heterotopia that redefines the role of the family home to be and place of mourning and reflection. *Haus u r* embodies Foucault's notion of the cemetery as part of the "other city" in which "each family possesses its dark resting place," making death an individual and isolated experience.

Within *Haus u r*, Foucault's fourth principle of heterotopia is relevant, as Schneider has accumulated many objects from different times, many of which belonged to his own family. I particularly appreciated the imagery presented in the 2004 documentary, *Art Safari*, where Schneider showed a photograph of his mother resting on a fireplace. Schneider then reached behind a fabricated wall to reveal a second, much older and weathered photograph of the previous generation of his family from within a crawlspace.

"The cemeteries then came to constitute, no longer the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but the other city, where each family possesses its dark resting place." Foucault (1986)

Well, at least this used to be a photo of an older generation.

"And now there are photographs which represent each generation. For example, this is a photo of my mother... and behind there must be an older photo." Schneider, Art Safari (2004)

WUNDERKAMMER *(Chamber of Wonder)*, 1982
Haus u r, room within a room, concrete, plaster, blocks, wood, 1 window, 1 lamp, carpet
and ceiling in brown, walls in white, immured 1989, detached with painting and
sculptures

Die Familie Schneider (2004)

Die Familie Schneider was an installation in which Schneider worked within two identical terraced houses on Walden Street in London. Within these homes, Schneider constructed rooms which were mirrors of one and other. This rendered the houses physically indistinguishable, down to the smallest of imperfections, such as paint chips or scuffs.

Die Familie Schneider was open for viewing by appointment only. Visitors were permitted to visit in pairs but were separated upon entrance, with one individual within each house. Prior to this, the viewers retrieved keys from a separate location on the street.

Schneider hired three pairs of twins to act the roles of mother in the kitchen, father in the bathroom, and child in the bedroom, with one twin in each house. The actors took on a robotic and unresponsive presence, continuing with their corresponding tasks as though the viewers were never present.

DIE FAMILIE SCHNEIDER, Walden Street No. 16 and No. 14, London, Great Britain 28.09.2004 - 23.12.2004

"...the only difference between numbers 16 and 14 is that in 16, there is a cellar door, behind which a bed has been supporting someone or something, while in 14, the door is locked. There, just the sound of a baby crying. This haunted house [is] ... a domesticated version of absolute terror to be experienced in the comfort of the home: the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence. Its play was one of doubling, where the other is experienced as a replica of the self" Kartsaki (2016)

DIE FAMILIE SCHNEIDER, Walden Street No. 16,
London, Great Britain 28.09.2004 - 23.12.2004

DIE FAMILIE SCHNEIDER, Walden Street No. 14,
London, Great Britain 28.09.2004 - 23.12.2004

Die Familie Schneider, TEEROOM, 2004

Die Familie Schneider, TEEROOM, 2004

Die Familie Schneider, BATHROOM, 2004

Die Familie Schneider, BATHROOM, 2004

Die Familie Schneider, SLEEPINGROOM, 2004

Die Familie Schneider, SLEEPINGROOM, 2004

The mirror

Die Familie Schneider, along with other examples of Schneider's work, functions as a metaphorical mirror. Foucault (1986) describes the mirror as a heterotopic "placeless place," existing in the liminal space between the real and the unreal: "In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface."

Similarly, Schneider presents a mundane, familiar setting and distorts it by removing the essence which makes it familiar. In the case of *Die Familie Schneider*, this essence is the warmth and intimacy of the family home. The absence of voice and human interaction transforms the home into something foreign and cold, leading the viewer into a state of uncertainty. While the viewer can recognise elements of themselves and their own lives within the work, they are left haunted and vulnerable by the eerie emptiness that pervades the space, disrupting the normalcy of everyday life. "From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there." Foucault (1986).

Gregor Schneider Haus u r 1985-1994

Heterotopia, on society

In my view, the concept of heterotopia is relevant to *Die Familie Schneider* as it explores the idea of heterotopia on a smaller scale. Schneider uses heterotopia as a means of critiquing the dynamics within the home, and the notion of the nuclear family. This is evident in the roles of the actors: the mother embodies the traditional role of the housewife, the father neglects his role as a husband to indulge his own perversions, and the children are portrayed as vulnerable, endangered, and sheltered.

The choice to include a baby in only one home further reinforces this critique of the nuclear family. I believe that the presence of two older children and one baby may allude to the "2.5 children" statistic commonly associated with the idealised nuclear family.

One could also argue that the work reflects broader societal changes in post-war Germany, reflecting on shattered families, deceased or otherwise absent fathers, and the psychological impact of these traumas upon children, and the stability of the family unit. These themes may have resonated with Schneider on a generational level, impacting his personal experiences, in turn, influencing his artistic practice.

Totes Haus u r, Gregor Schneider, Photographs, 2002

Materials

Schneider primarily works with found objects, and standard building materials (wood, brick etc.)

Notably, Schneider lists every aspect of the room as a material, demonstrating the sculptural and aesthetic value he bestows upon his work.

Example:

u r 37 u 24 B, FLUR

u r 37: room in room, blockboard on a wooden construction, tiled floors on a wooden construction, three doors, 1 lamp, 1 wooden wall cladding, walls and ceiling white, u 24 B: wall before wall, plaster board on a wooden construction, pale yellow, 1 door, detached.

By immersing the viewer within the work, Schneider challenges the traditional roles of how the public is permitted to interact with sculpture. In turn, redefining the rules of the conventional art space to ones that adhere to his own beliefs on the relationship between art and the passive viewer.


u r 8, TOTAL ISOLIERTER TOTER RAUM
soil, lead, glass wool, sound-absorbing material in the room, 2 wooden constructions, 1 insulated door

Schneiders work and the six principles of heterotopia

- Universal: Schneider often uses the family home, or other familiar settings as a basis for the heterotopia
- Evolving: The heterotopic spaces Schneider creates evolve and change over time.
- Juxtaposing: The objects found within Schneiders work, along with aspects such as inaccessible rooms directly juxtapose the environment in which it is made to mirror.
- Temporal/time: Schneiders work often combines objects from different times and homes in a singular space. The spaces do not retain the same structure forever.
- Restricted: Access must be permitted to view Schneiders work, making it inaccessible without reason.
- Functional: The spaces have strict rules which differ from that of the space being imitated.
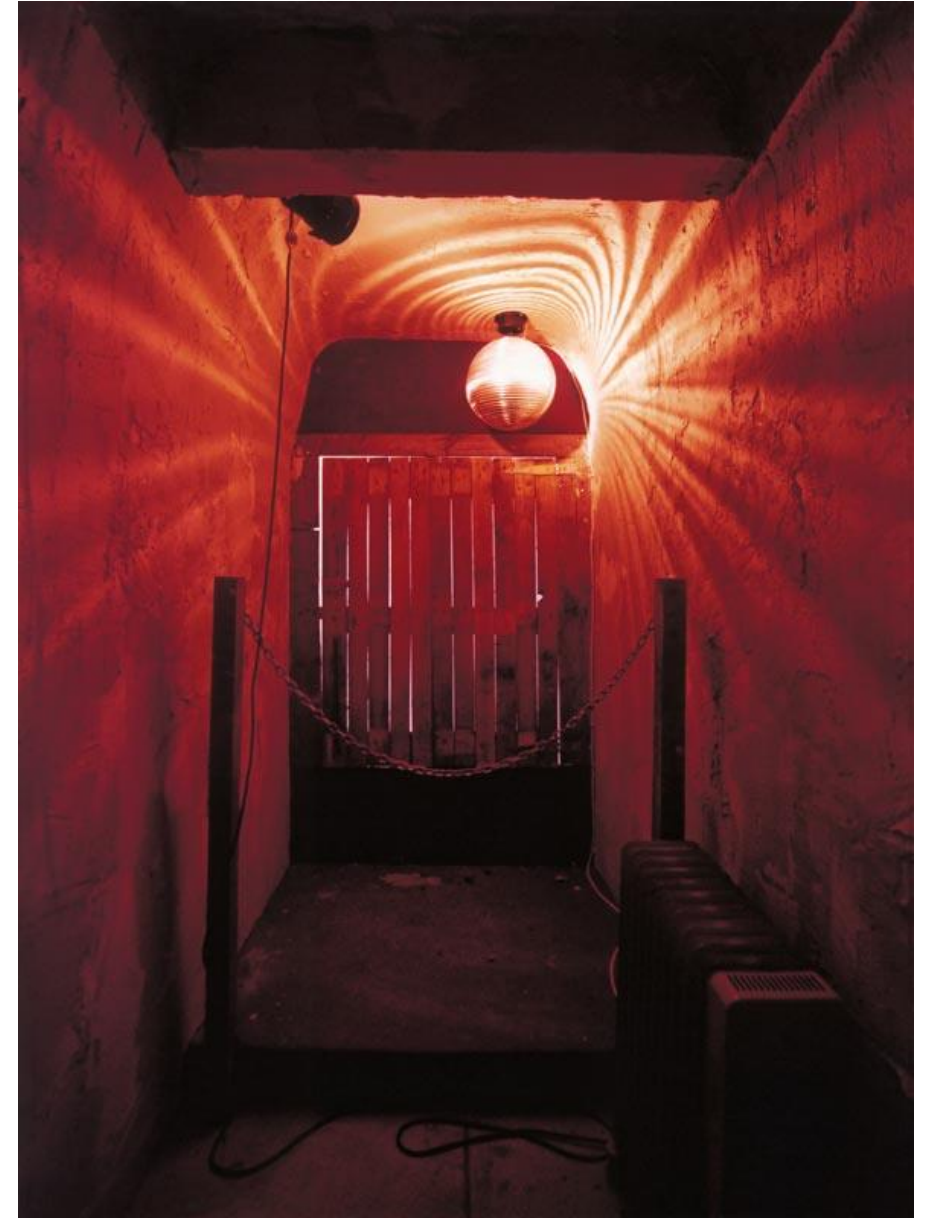
u r 18, PUFF (AUS BERLIN), (1996)
room within a room, plaster- and chipboards on a wooden construction, plastering, 3 doors, 4 lamps, 1 mirror ball, wooden floor, red carpet, white plastered walls and ceiling, detached

Conclusion

To conclude, I think the work of Gregor Schneider embodies Foucault's concept of heterotopia in many aspects. The installation of the work, the choice of materials, the juxtaposition of mundane and alarming imagery, and the manipulation of space within space are all used to redefine ordinary living spaces. By creating environments that both mirror and subvert feelings of familiarity, Schneider reflects the mirrored nature of heterotopias. By acting as both a reflection and a distortion, Schneider's work challenges ideals of societal norms- such as the traditional nuclear family, and passive viewership within the art world. Foucault stated that societies use cemeteries to separate themselves from death – Schneider reverses this and brings mourning and contemplation into the family home. This assumption of the role of cemetery within his work creates an ever-present pervading image of heterotopia.

u r 14, DAS LETZTE LOCH
room within a room, breeze blocks and plaster blocks, concrete floor with a puddle, cement plastering, 1 door, 1 lamp, grey walls, ceiling and floor

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Documentary featuring an interview with Gregor Schneider. Includes a tour Haus u r, and other works. Image used on slide 5.

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Side by side comparative video of number 14 and 16 Walden Street for *Die Famile Schneider*