

# WHITE CUBE, BLACK ROOM, SWEET SCENT

**Daniel Sack**

*Süßer Duft*, conceived by Gregor Schneider, Summerhall,  
Edinburgh Fringe Festival, August 2–25, 2013.

In an antechamber before the closed doors to Gregor Schneider's 2013 installation performance *Süßer Duft* (Sweet Scent), a uniformed guard explains the situation to those queuing for the free unticketed event: "You will enter one by one. You will have five minutes. You will know you have reached the end by the lit exit sign. Take your time and open every door." Laconic reviews reveal little, suggesting only that the guarded installation is arguably the most controversial offering in the 2013 Edinburgh Fringe Festival; scant words in the festival program mention only that it deals with racism and slavery, that one must be eighteen years old to enter. When it is my turn I am let into a short white hallway with another closed double door at the other end. A passageway off to the side has been boarded up; I would need a screwdriver to pry it loose. Opening the double doors, I find myself in a nearly identical second hallway. At the other end stands another double door—distant muffled conversation tells me that the event's end lies beyond; to my left a niche offers a single door.

I step into a small white room, but it is immediately wrong. Fluorescent lights overhead burn with sulphurous constancy. Where the hallways had been the scuffed off-white of the everyday, here the walls, the ceiling, and the floor are thick with incandescent white paint that gathers in the corners into an impenetrable luminosity. It creates a haze around the edges of vision, dislocates the orthogonal axes of the room so that I seem suspended in a ragged, vibrating density. Nothing could live here. Two small square vents are the only details on the surface. Surely they account for a plastic sweetness in the air hinting at toxicity. A humming white noise cancelling all ambient difference also prevents time from passing as normal. Thinking I know the work of Schneider, an artist who mines the subconscious terrors of everyday architecture, I bask in the discomfort as long as time allows. Returning to the hallway, I linger briefly over an emergency fire alarm recessed into the wall that I had not noticed (some ironic jab at my claustrophobia?) and proceed to the

second set of doors with its indistinguishable voices beyond.

What I'd thought an exit is, in fact, a final room. It is almost pitch black, and the talking has stopped with my entrance. I am standing face to face with a naked black man. I cannot recall how I react exactly, but as my eyes adjust I see that we are not alone. There are eight or ten young men in this small dark room—all naked, all black. They do not make eye contact, but I am watched. Their attitude is one of ease: a few lean against the walls, others are seated, someone brushes past me. Clearly shaken, I pretend to play the casual observer before fumbling for the lit exit sign.

Upstairs I emerge into the café at Summerhall, tables filled with people chattering away over tea and a scone, oblivious to all that is taking place in the bowels of the building. The site of the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies in Edinburgh for nearly a century, the Summerhall complex was purchased by Robert McDowell in 2011 and converted into an art space. It has since become the most adventurous venue in the yearly festival. The former institutional frames of the medical and educational shadow the work shown, betraying a certain preoccupation with defining and disciplining the living. The small animal hospital in the courtyard is now a pub where slides of hundreds of biological specimens are inlaid in an amber-lit bar. Bones proliferate overhead, while glass cases hold beakers in a cabinet of curiosities. An adjoining dining room presents a more troubling display: artifacts from Africa on one wall, masks, effigies, and "primitive" paintings on another, oddities of American nostalgia such as

a Route 66 road sign. Elsewhere, antiquated medical theatres rise steeply over concrete pits studded with drains that once discarded the wet stuff from surgical subjects; they now host performance events. *Süßer Duff's* white walls may seem like blank canvases bracketed off in the timeless discipline of modernist painting. Yet Summerhall's architecture of analysis here plays out on the racialized bodies of human subjects, unearthing the discrimination behind the scenes of a strikingly homogenous Scotland: in 1817, at the height of the slave trade, 32% of the population owned slaves; the 2011 census states that African and Black minorities account for less than .5% of a population that is 96% white.

For nearly thirty years, Gregor Schneider's installations have staged the interior worries of particular buildings. In 1985 a sixteen-year-old Schneider inherited a house in the city of Rehyd, Germany, and undertook the massive project called *Haus U R* inside its walls. While living in the anonymous house, so like its neighbors from without, he ceaselessly rebuilt its interior from within. Inside and outside collapsed into walls in front of walls, crawlspaces between floors, or windows facing windows facing windows facing walls. Schneider continues constructing his endless fever dream of a house inside a house. In 2001 he transported the entire building to the Venice Biennale as *Totes Haus U R* (Dead Haus U R), for which he won the Golden Lion award. "My working method is always one of doubling," says Schneider, "a double just in front, just underneath or just inside what already exists, or a plausible double placed at another site. So there is no invention."<sup>1</sup> He has "employed" fictional



Curator Paul Robertson and artist Gregor Schneider. Photo: Peter Dibdin. Courtesy Summerhall.

doubles to live in his house, to perform in his installations, and has even published interviews with them. His *Die Familie Schneider* (2004) peopled two identical row houses in the suburbs of London with identical twins playing out identical scenes of domestic purgatory.

*Süßer Duft*, too, is doubled over throughout. The first short hallway is answered by the second. There are two vents. And finally, most glaringly, the white room is answered by the black room; doubled not as replica, but as inversion. Here one encounters two different kinds of blinding—one seeing too much (in the white room), the other not seeing enough (the black room). Or rather perhaps one is faced with not enough to see in the empty room and then with too much to see in the full. This blinding doubles on itself in an even more significant manner: There are clearly two performances here. One situates a white, heterosexual male like myself as its ideal spectator and reproduces some very unnerving affects inherent to that position. It unveils the subconscious at work in the formalist logic of the white cube, its implied racial alignments, and the labor and presence of those excluded from its walls. The other performance, the unintentional one, is the one performed by the spectator for the crowd of men waiting in the darkened chamber, gathered together as if in some abstracted theatre. Without supposing to speak for these men, I want to acknowledge their perspective as central to the work. Holding both these performances in hand might realize the sense (or scent) passing between the binaries of black and white, seen and unseen.

Schneider had presented an earlier installation also called *Süßer Duft* in

2008 at Maison Rouge in Paris. His first work to interrogate the white cube of the gallery, visitors to this original *Süßer Duft* wandered through a series of contrasting rooms (light/dark, cold/hot, etc.) that surrounded an abstract white chamber like a hollow heart. This turn to the dynamics of the gallery belongs to the artist's more pointed engagement with the social and institutional after years exploring domestic and private architectures. "Since 2002, I have been concerning myself more and more with socially relevant topics. But now, as always, I am concerned with rooms that I cannot physically access, that are unknown to me."<sup>2</sup> (*WEISSE FOLTER* [White Torture] from 2007, for example, recreated a prison cell from Guantanamo Bay in a Dusseldorf gallery.) The "Sweet Scent" in the first version referred to the artificial smells that Schneider experimented with in the installation. Here, in the 2013 installation, the vents link the chambers in a single feedback loop; fans within funnel the air rich with sweating bodies into the seemingly pristine empty cube. Another smell filled the space—the chemical odor of the paint itself, the organic infected by the inorganic. Perhaps because the humidity in the other room kept it unfixed, it was as if the vents sought to air out a paint that would never dry. Or perhaps new coats were added every day, the white never cleaned, but covered over in an unfinished struggle to whitewash the past.

In this regard, *Süßer Duft* presses the myth of the modernist white cube to its inhospitable extremity. As artist-critic Brian O'Doherty famously wrote in 1967, "[t]he white wall's apparent neutrality is an illusion. It stands for a community with common ideas and assumptions."<sup>3</sup> It is an unmarked

community, the white upper-middle-class gallery-going public. For, just as whiteness as a racial identity relies on the abstract fiction of a universal being without qualities—against which racial difference might appear—so, too, the white wall of the gallery promises not to be seen as a textured surface so that the ‘interesting’ object might appear. Entering the modernist white cube of the gallery, the (white male) subject transubstantiates into a disembodied floating eye.

The scent in the first room should remind me that I cannot get away from my material body, but it is the second room that suddenly locates me as a white, heterosexual male. It takes a while for my eyes to adjust to the seeming darkness of the black room, a disjunction that reveals my sight to be an unreliable narrator. I am in a dimly lit room filled with people who are looking at me. It is as if I stood before a darkened auditorium: The granularity of my physical being and felt vulnerability take center stage. They will not make eye contact; there is an unbridgeable divide between us, a fourth wall. I’d thought I was the spectator, but I’m really the performer.

Of course, who is seeing whom is more complicated than that. For another viewer who did not identify as a white, heterosexual male, both chambers would exert a very different kind of suffocating pressure. And my exposure is answered by a more troubling literal exposure: the men in the room are all naked, displayed to my sight even if that sight is momentarily crippled. However diverse their backgrounds, or the coloration of their skin tone, they are, by virtue of their presence in this

room, collectively put in the box identified as “black.” I encounter them not as individuals, then, but as a “group of black men.” However inadvertently, I perform the part of the “white man” exaggeratedly, reproducing the response that George Yancy has described as an everyday experience for black men and women: “It is within such quotidian social spaces that *my Black body* has been confiscated. . . . I feel that in their eyes I am this amorphous, black seething mass, a token of danger, a threat, a criminal, a burden, a rapacious animal, incapable of delayed gratification.”<sup>4</sup> The situation prevents me from engaging with these men as anything apart from such a mass—it makes me perform a xenophobia that feels alien to me. Yet, just as Schneider’s work with domesticity unearths subconscious terrors in every family’s life, my response proves that it is something I am capable of performing.

I approach some of the performers one evening after the performance. The only black men in the venue’s crowded beer garden, they are immediately recognizable, and joke with me about the fact. In intermittent conversations in the following week I learn that almost all are students at the University of Edinburgh, undergraduates and graduates studying accounting and engineering; some are musicians, but none are actors or visual artists. Many are recent immigrants from Africa or Haiti, though a few lived in London for a long while before heading farther north to Scotland. They knew each other from playing football (soccer) together on the weekends, but this casual connection shifted dramatically over the course of the installation. Their initial discomfort at being naked

in front of one another and visitors had dissipated and they developed a bond with each other that could only be called profound: after each day's performance they would spend the rest of the evening together out on the town. My final conversation with them is a week before the installation's end and several of them already dread the approaching conclusion of this exceptional moment. Part of this revolves around the fact that, as first-generation immigrants, they are not in a position to freely pursue the artistic work that some had left behind when moving to the UK. Beholden to expectations both self and societally imposed, they must seek out more economically viable careers. But the larger sense of camaraderie derived from what they were collectively witnessing.

If my experience of the event lasted a scant five minutes, for those performers inside the black room, *Süßer Duft* lasted a month and featured an endless stream of anonymous, primarily white, actors. The performers would spend the hours in the performance discussing the nature of the work, their own experiences of racism in Scotland and the UK. At times these conversations would become heated as they debated the situation, and scenes that had played out before them, but they would resolve as a community. They described the young white man who opened the door and let out a shriek of terror, the elderly white woman who spontaneously announced a sincere and tearful apology for the history of slavery, the round of applause they gave her. When I returned to see the piece again—now knowing some of the performers by name as Rama, James, Innocent, Nene, and Stephen—there I was doing my awkward little dance

about the room trying not to be seen and feeling even more the uninvited guest. They seemed to be saying, "Please leave so that we may continue our discussion."

On one hand, this black *cube* was an abstract space of enslavement, and Schneider had intentionally played the part of a removed god or slave master, confining the performers in a constrictive space as objects to be seen (or, as described above, not seen). From this perspective, they appeared as supplements for the experience of this white spectator's self-reflection on the unacknowledged labor that made possible both the institution of the art gallery and the Scottish economy. From another perspective the second chamber was no abstract cube, but had become a *room for living otherwise*, where the men decided how to act. If Schneider was playing god, he was an absent or dead god; he did not return after dividing light from dark. Where the timelessness of the white cube threatened to vaporize anybody that lingered too long ("five minutes and your time is up"), the black room held a felt duration of changing attitudes and responses, a space of community formation where discussions of great personal and political weight were held in private. Here, the white spectator was exposed as an isolated object before the gaze of a community that set out to analyze and interpret his or her appearance. The position that these men so often occupied outside the black room, objectified as a distinct minority in an overwhelmingly white Scotland, was here reversed. They were now the unseen and unmarked majority, looking back at the unintended performances of the traditionally unmarked bodies in the city beyond.

## NOTES

1. Gregor Schneider and Gilda Williams, "Doubling: Gregor Schneider," *Art Monthly*, no. 340, October 2010, 1.

2. *Ibid.*, 4.

3. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 79–80.

4. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: the Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 2.

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