Notes on Gregor Schneider’s Totes Räume at West Den Haag, 2021

Perhaps due to the fetishization of hierarchic power reactions that finds its corollary in competitive bourgeois consumerist acquisition and in identity politics, it is, in many circles, controversial to assert that art and architecture necessarily are mutually exclusive categories. Clearly, architecture aspires to many of the aesthetic attributes we conventionally ascribed to art, such as beauty, proportionality, composition, color composition, even expressiveness. But from da Vinci’s *Paragone* of the late fifteenth century, at least implicitly, the Western Tradition presupposes that a work of art is fully constituted to the degree that it is determined by the artist. From this criterion, da Vinci, concluded that painting inherently was superior to sculpture because, when it came to sculpture, the artist could not determine the point of view of the receiver, the illumination--sculpture had to respect certain conditions imposed by gravity and engineering norms, or it would risk to fall over, etc.[[1]](#footnote-2) Artists such as Gregor Schneider, who would venture to use built structures as an artistic medium[[2]](#footnote-3), risk to transgress this traditional aesthetic criterion even more than those architects who, perhaps nonsensically, would have their works aspire to artistic status. Most obviously, architects’ designs are constricted by a catalogue of requirements that might, at first seem self-evident: entrances and passageways must conform to the dimensions of the average human form, there must be adequate spaces for windows, HVAC ducts, fire exits, insulation, and electrical infrastructure. Buildings must, in addition, conform to a catalogue of legal requirements for fire safety, occupancy limits, insurance requirements, wind resistance, waterproofing, maintenance facilitation, emergency lighting, and even sanitation and plumbing standards, along with the spaces these demand, which, often, remain invisible to those who enter the finished structures. In a sense, none of these may be determined by the artist or designer because, in large measure , they not only take precedence over aesthetic choice, but because they pertain to legal requirements., they are not strictly a matter of choice at all, and even subtle alterations of them do not necessarily change the receivers’ perception of the space. For an artist such as Schneider, who would work with an existing built structure as an *étant donné* as was the case not only with his paradigmatic (for his oeuvre) *Haus UR*, but also most certainly for *Totes Räume*, which is the object of this writing, the only adequate way to transcend all these architectural and legal “givens.” is by conceptual , means. By such means alone, the artist can transcend the fact of “what already is there,” and invest the work with artist-determined criteria that not only are sufficient to render the structure a fully constituted work of art, but also, I would argue, to make a masterpiece. Here it is useful to recall one fact that ought to be self-evident for any receiver who enters an existing built structure that the artist “ adapts” as an artistic medium: Therein, the most immediate aesthetic tension derives from the fact that by such a strategy, at the outset, there no longer is any effective distinction between the work of art and the exhibition space. Ever since 1974 when the Minimalist artist, Brian O’Doherty wrote a treatise to inform us that the so-called White cube exhibition space is a fictitious self-referential space invented in order properly to house and exhibit self-referential art works[[3]](#footnote-4), the distinction between art work and exhibition space, despite the theoretical corollary his text underscores, was both real and even necessary Not so in Haus UR or Totes Räume!, wherein the synthesis of art work and exhibition space allow us to perceive the tensions between them. Here it is my intention to argue that this tension most pertinently derives from an artist -imposed rupture in the reception, one that derives from a distinction in Husserl’s phenomenology: the distinction between noetic and noematic perceptions of a phenomenon. Consistent with his outlook and personality, Totes Räume as a title, at the outset, allows Schneider to evoke a humorous irony because, conventionally, dead spaces in a building refer to design faults such as those that can occur should the architect specifies a juncture between two walls in which the angle between the walls is so narrow that there is insufficient space to have a corner that might accommodate an object. So the totality of the area of the built structure might occupy the same number of square meters as one in which walls set at right angles to each other might yield a spacious and accessible corner suitable for a table or pedestal with a heroic bust of a head of state, and yet the economy of the distribution of space is frustrated by the narrow “dead space” that frustrates this sort of functionality, and denies human access.

In the case of Totes Räume, the artist had no need to impose interventions in the structure in order to render the space a fiction. It’s longstanding function *a priori* made it a sort of readymade in this respect because it had been for decades the Embassy of the United States to the Netherlands. As spaces, embassies embody a tacit fiction that must be accepted as de facto reality both by the country represented and by the host country: the pretence, which has a very real legal status under international law, is that the space of the embassy literally is territory of the country it represents despite that it is self-evident that it occupies a piece of ground in the host country. This is why the violation of the integrity of an embassy space by a hostile force universally is recognized as a *casus belli* because it is tantamount to an invasion of the territory of the country it represents. Perhaps more pertinent in the case of a Schneider work is the matter of the perception such a building evokes in a receiver. One could ask even a very young child,” Where is that building located?” And perhaps even a competent pre -schooler might well respond: “In the Netherlands; in the e city of Den Haag.” As an embassy, we might reply to the child, “Yes and no.” But once decommissioned as an embassy and its territorial status, in effect, returned, this bizarre reversal becomes yet a further confirmation of the fictitious status of the legislative- bureaucratic sleight of hand, a misdirection that posits a rupture between perception and “legal reality.” Where this sort of spatial/ bureaucratic/ phenomenological tension becomes even more explicit is when we proceed to the interior and learn of the functions of some of the rooms. The precedent of Schneider’s *Haus UR* demonstrated that, unlike Asher and Matta Clark, Schneider not only subtracts volumes from existing built structures, but also adds rooms within existing rooms. This is not to say that he adds dividers dividing walls to an existing room in order to multiply a sense of discrete spaces, but that, inside an existing room, he constructs another structure from the floor up that becomes a room housed by an existing room. This strategy is that which is most disorienting to the receivers’ noetic perception of the space because such a strategy blinds us altogether to any sense of the dimensional progression of their relationship, or to the distance between the peripheral walls of the interior space and exterior space because liminal transition from one to the other has been effaced. The doubling effect of successive walled enclosures compound the sense of claustrophobic constriction while simultaneously evoking an architectural dead space between the wall of the interior constructed room, and that of the existing structure that contains it, and echoes that sense aforementioned of an embassy as a “ fictitious space that here feigns through a bureaucratic-legal act of close-up magic misdirection, to be US Territory. By calling this constructed room *Interrogation Room*, the artist thereby not only ensures access to a noematic perception of the space, but evokes a whole global archipelago of such fictitious spaces , including but not limited to Guantánamo, that were operated as “ “black sites” by the US government in order to interrogate, torture, and imprison” terrorist suspects.” The national debate that arose *vis à vis* this practice gave rise to the term *enhanced interrogation techniques* as a euphemism for torture that tacitly was acknowledged and openly debated in the legislature without public recollection that the USwas a signatoryof UNCAT, the United Nations Convention Against Torture of 1949, a product of the very postwar order the United States established by virtue of its leading role in the defeat of Fascism in Europe in the Second World War. The presence of such a room in an American embassy not only poses a violation of the Convention, but further undermines the very premises from which its claim to legitimacy derives. This condition posits yet another phenomenological disjunction consistent with Schneider’s aesthetic program: the room appears to be just one more embassy room like any other, but in fact he “ repurposes a structurally fictitious construct as a locus of war crime and atrocity for an ideological context the existing construction of the embassy predated. That it contains a mirror placed diagonally not only posits a literal dead space of the sort that resembles our aforementioned description of the angled walls, but, in anothersense, the mirror here is not merely an allusion to the act of mimesis, but also it reflexively compels us to become witnesses to our own reception of the work. In this sense, it imposes a double reception in which we perceive the work of the artist as we perceive ourselves, too, in the act of reception. This is yet another sense in which Schneider’s project is radically distinct from those of Asher and Matta Clark. And here it is most apparent how Schneider’s synthesis of art work and exhibition space posits a much more artist-determined system of reception than that which such a synthesis presupposes de facto.

In his famous account of his perception of a tree in bloom, Husserl distinguishes between noemic and noematic perceptions. We recall that a noemic perception which, for Husserl, presupposes intention by the first person subject, refers to the outward aspect of the object observed— the tree, for example, has a myriad horizontally arranged leaves which are green, and a central, vertical trunk which is brown, the noematic perception, in brief, refers to the meaning of the perceived object, which may comprise its associations and memories related to its symbolic referents, etc. This distinction leads us to consider the architecture of the former embassy designed m by Marcel Breuer (1902-1981, a Hungarian student of the Bauhaus known for his Brutalist work with exposed concrete. In its reaction against architectural “nostalgia, “Brutalist architecture typically builds narrower at the base of a structure and becomes wider, the higher the building rises, thereby generating “dead spaces” beneath the diagonal edges that run from the ground to the first-floor level. Notably with regard to our treatment of Schneider’s synthesis of art work and exhibition space, for decades, Breuer’s most famous design was an exhibition space, the Whitney Museum of American Art on Madison Ave in Manhattan (1966-2014), and since 2016 known as the Met Breuer, a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As receivers, the moment we depart from our noemic vision of a restrictive, fortified, and security-conscious Brutalist concrete building to consider its noematic associations with the hypocrisy of institutionalized rights violations endemic to the post 9/11” war on Terror, one that routinely took advantage of legally anomalous “ FICTITIOUS” SPACES in order to circumvent legal prohibitions against such acts perpetrated on US soil,the suppression of Bauhaus Modernism as “ decadent” by the National Socialist regime**,** , the postwar military hegemony of the US in Europe that endures to this day, we perceive through the prism of this “ reconfigured space” a network of conceptual tensions that do to rely too much on what is already there, “ ( the ”defect” for which Beuys , another artist native of North Rhine Westphalia, denied the status of photography as art, but which are through and through determined by Gregor Schneider and the system of reception he imposes. on this complex of spaces.

--Drew Hammond, Berlin, 2021

1. For the best annotated translation of da Vinci’s Trattato della Pittura, see Kemp, Martin, *Leonardo on Painting, New Haven: Yale university Press, 2001.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. If for no other reasons than to draw distinctions that promise to illuminate the specificity of Schneider’s interventions with built structures, it is useful to recall that he is neither the first, nor the only artist to adopt this “medium. “Both Matta Clark and Michael Asher before him also modified existing buildings, but with very different ideas, and different results. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See O’Doherty, Brian i*nside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Exhibition Space, Berkeley, CA, 1974.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)