

THE CHALLENGE

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The two cuboid boxes that the artist constructed in 1998 were insulated with lead, fibreglass wool and sound-proofing materials. Each was just large enough for one person. Looking back, he commented: 'At the time, I imagined an exhibition where there would be two boxes in a room, you come in, there's someone sitting in one of the boxes which is screened off.' 'Air-tight?' 'Yes.' 'Then the person would die, and pretty quickly too?' 'Of course it's very theatrical. But things like that do happen in everyday life. A child falls into a deep freeze, while the woman is standing right next to it doing the washing-up.'

I

Twenty years later, Gregor Schneider comes across a photograph on the Internet of a cell-like interior. A tall, narrow window in the back wall of the room provides a more or less diffuse source of light giving the space an almost sacred air, like a chapel. There's not even a glimpse of the outside world. The furnishings are meagre: a pallet bed with orange-coloured clothing neatly folded on it and some other small utensils. The rooms looks small, clean, even clinical. For the artist there is a striking resemblance with his *Total isoliertes Gästezimmer* (1995, cat. 10, 11), first built as part of the so-called *Haus ur* (cat. 8-14)

that he has spent years constructing and reconstructing. Once again he is gripped by his longstanding, as yet unfulfilled desire to build a single, possibly rubberised, cell. A quick search of the Internet produces more photographs from the same source. Some show fat arrows, sprayed onto the cell floor. They're pointing towards Mecca. Since Gregor Schneider is in any case particularly interested at the time in the holiest site in Islam, the Caaba in Mecca, one thing leads to another. He feels compelled to explore these images in greater depth and to engage with them as an artist, which in his case means reconstructing that space.

II

Repetition has long been a characteristic feature of his art. Nothing is to be invented, nothing is to be generated that does not already exist. His art is about working away at what is already there. The replication of givens, the recurrence of the same, shifts the focus of perception. The familiar, unusually, takes centre stage, the unremarkable clamours for attention, the obscure sees the light of day. Sigmund Freud saw the neurotic compulsion to involuntary repetition a manifestation of the power of 'the repressed', since it is driven from within in the regressive hope

of recapturing lost or repressed experiences. The return of the 'real' in art – by means of the duplication of 'reality' could thus also be understood as the return of what has hitherto been repressed, as the liberation of the uncanny.

The act of duplication, as an artistic strategy, pervades Gregor Schneider's work sometimes more, sometimes less obviously. It was perhaps at its most apparent and crucial in the exhibition *Die Familie Schneider* in London in autumn 2004 (cat. 29-34). Not only did every detail match in the adjacent, lowly terraced houses in Walden Street in London's East End that the artist took over and redesigned for this project, the family members – father, mother and child – living in them and going about their daily business also appeared to be replicas of each other (they were in fact identical twins). The atmosphere that prevailed in nos. 14 and 16 Walden Street was oppressive and bleak, as though some terrible event had occurred there or was imminent. The exhibition visitor was both intruding and exposed to the situation. The feeling of not having been invited, of having entered unbidden someone else's private sphere mingled with the disquieting uncertainty as to what awaited one there. But the truly uncanny aspect of the whole situation derived from its dupli-



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cation, from the awareness that everything – the people, what they were doing, the decor, the atmosphere – was happening *again* next door, so that the duplicate scenarios connected as an endless loop of the *Here* and the *There*, of the past and the present. This powerful impression lingered on in the visitor's mind – long after the actual visit.

III

That self-same shot of the inside of a cell that Gregor Schneider came across on the Internet some months ago, spurred him on to create a new series of works that was first shown in 2006 in the Museum Dhond-Dhaenens in Deurle, Belgium (cat. 49-51), and which is now on show, in an extended version, at K21 in Düsseldorf. The photograph was shot in Camp V at Guantánamo Bay on Cuba. There are few shots of the interior of this internment centre, the most secret and least accessible of the various military prisons that the United States maintains on Cuba. According to the United States Department of Defense, Camp V is reserved for prisoners whom the authorities hope may reveal information useful to their secret services. As in other maximum security detention centres, the inmates are kept in isolation in concrete cells, where artificial lighting is left burning twenty-

four hours a day. Oversized fans create so much noise that it is impossible for the inmates to talk to each other. Inmates have reported that they are confined to their cells all day every day and are allowed out for exercise not more than once a week or even as little as once every two weeks. Often they are only let out of their cells at night so that they don't see any daylight for months on end. The international human rights organisation Amnesty International regards the confinement of all the detainees at Guantánamo Bay as 'illegal and inhuman' and has denounced the conditions they are held under as 'cruel' and 'degrading'. A variety of sources has reported on the torture and maltreatment of detainees at Camp V, including, most recently, accounts of the torture of Mohamed C., a Chadian citizen who was taken captive at the age of 15 and handed over to the United States authorities. According to a number of reports he was hung up by the wrists for up to eight hours, prevented from sleeping, beaten, exposed to extreme cold and heat, and detained in solitary confinement for extended periods of time. Murat Kurnaz, a Turkish national living in Bremen, who was recently released, was held at Guantánamo Bay for over four years, even when it had long been shown that there was no foundation

to the accusations levelled against him. His descriptions of solitary confinement, torture, humiliation and terror were published not long ago in the German newspapers. In early January 2007 there were reports on the FBI website by its own operatives of aggressive maltreatment and the particularly tough interrogation methods used by members of other US agencies and their subcontracted employees at Guantánamo Bay. But there is no end in sight, and only recently a new wing costing tens of millions of dollars was constructed where – according to the United States Department of Defense, inmates who refused to obey the ground rules are subjected to even harsher conditions.

IV

The inmates, who are held indefinitely without charge and without due legal process, some for years now, are also called *ghost detainees* – nameless, faceless beings. For the first time, in response to immense pressure from international human rights organisations, the authorities have published a list of the names of the over 400 inmates at Guantánamo Bay. To this day, however, the detainees have neither the legal status of prisoners of war under the terms of the Geneva Convention, nor do they come under the jurisdiction of

39 *Cube Berlin*, 2006 (nicht realisiert / not realised)
 40, 41 *Cube Cadiz*, 2006
 42 *Cube Hamburg*, 2007



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the United States since they are not being held on American soil. They are in a vacuum, a no-man's land, confined at someone else's whim, beyond the reach of the law. The French philosopher Michel Foucault, who – in his analyses of political power – has examined in detail its spatial manifestations and territorial impact, has also focussed on the notion of a 'heteropia' that has come to the fore in recent years. By heterotopia, we mean a realised utopia, that's to say, an en- or exclave where a society in- or excludes its own other. In his genealogy of Foucault's analyses of topological in- and exclusions, Giorgio Agamben has identified the spatial structure that typically characterises the 20th century as 'inclusive exclusion'. In his book, with the telling title *State of Exception*, Agamben describes – with direct reference to Guantánamo Bay – the fact that within the national boundaries of certain states, camps or zones are being created where normal jurisdiction does not apply, with the result that those held there have no recourse to protection from any legal system.

V

Gregor Schneider has implanted a sequence of long corridors and cramped cells into K21. These have been conceived especially for this exhibition, as evocative

of intensive care wards as they are of solitary confinement cells; they can be read as a refuge or a prison, as places associated with the most devoted of care or with social and sensory deprivation. Different rooms variously call to mind prison cells, interrogation rooms, holding bays or areas for supervised exercise. Although, as we know, these spaces are based on the real thing, known to us through various media reports, the rooms created by Gregor Schneider resist clear classification or identification. For these are prototypes, standardised structures that, paradoxically, appear both familiar and alien, real and unreal. The spatial situation created here need not necessarily be equated with a particular location somewhere in the world: abstract and rigorous, it seems to have a wider relevance and, clearly not a phenomenon from some distant age, it looks disquietingly contemporary and of our own time.

Any hint of narrative or anecdote has been avoided, nor are the rooms furnished in even the most Spartan manner. By the same token, there are no traces whatsoever of use or of wear and tear. The surfaces and textures are smooth and new, clean, almost antiseptic. In contrast to the artist's earlier work, where human life has left its mark, as in *Haus u r* that is like a honey-

comb of stored time and where different layers record individual generations, the absence of any sign of human life – in the sense of the visual effect of the passage of time – is an entirely new departure in Schneider's art. It seems that nothing is stored in these rooms, which do no more than reflect. Nothing can penetrate and remain within these interiors, for it instantly bounces back off the clinical, reflective surface in a process that negates time and scuppers any attempt at orientation.

VI

The absence of human beings means that the exhibition visitor as it were takes their place. We become part of this deserted set, finding ourselves on a stage where the action suddenly begins without anyone having decided what the play is. What role are we supposed to play? Which part have we been given? Observer, accomplice, perpetrator, victim? The surveillance cameras at the ends of the corridors purvey a sense of latent unease. We, as viewers, are also under observation. And we start to see ourselves from outside, keeping step with ourselves as it were. As soon as you close the small door in the fire door, at the start of the exhibition, you become your own guinea pig in an open-ended experiment. A long, gleamingly bright corridor stretch-



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es out before you. The floor is pale and shiny, the ceiling is sound-proofed with thick pyramid-shaped insulation panels. Heavy, brownish-red sliding doors with small viewing slots open into three small cells, side by side, with tall windows in the centre of the far wall that you can't see out of and that only allow a diffuse light to enter the space. No objects for the eye to rest on. The sliding door closes automatically, and you are alone. At the end of the corridor is a surveillance camera. And another long corridor. Sliding doors that won't open; through some you can see more small rooms. In one of the rooms there is a false ceiling made of chicken wire. It's bright. The atmosphere of the rooms become increasingly leaden, the sound-proofing materials seem to close in on one, the claustrophobic effect that ensues from the physiological impact of the changed sound pressure on the eardrum becomes ever more oppressive. One's spatial orientation becomes impaired, as does one's sense of time. The choreography of the rooms plunges the visitor further in, deeper in. Now there is only inside, like a whirlpool, sucking you in, on an on, that you can't escape from. At the heart of the vortex, the core of the rooms implanted in the museum by the artist, is a dark, fully sound-proofed room,

a 'black box'. And this black box, whose exterior gives not the slightest indication of its interior, induces in us a fear that seems somehow familiar. It is the fear not of what is happening but of what *could* happen: the fear of pushing open a door into a dark room when we neither know how big that room is nor what it is hidden within it. The sense of unease is overwhelming, even before one has crossed the threshold. Even worse, when the source of the terror is not outwith our own physical boundaries but has shifted from the ex-territorial and is now within us. For in this now immense interior there is only one inside that one is caught in and caught up in. The journey into one's inner being brings to light things that are otherwise invisible, things that lurk in the darkness – hidden, repressed, uncanny. 'The uncanny is not simply the Other, it is that which is inaccessible or has been rendered unidentifiable within oneself.' (Ulrich Looek). At its most extreme this claustrophobic, empty interior, cut off from the outside world, could be seen as a picture of our own human existence.

VII

The *camera silens* (Lat. 'silent room') is a completely dark, sound-proofed room and it is known from experimental psycholog-

ical research that it can very rapidly debilitate a person's senses, destroying the human being, body and soul. The *camera silens* has been and still is used as an instrument of torture. It is one of the methods used in 'white torture', also known as 'clean torture', since it leaves no external, give-away marks; both its use and its immediate effect are invisible.

The 'Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment' adopted by the United Nations on 10 December 1984 defines 'torture' as 'any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.' Thus the term 'torture' cannot be applied to individual acts of sadism but is, by definition, an institutionalised exertion of power. As such it is also a social phenomenon. According to the findings of the human

43 02.11.06, Köln 2006 (Einladungskarte / invitation card)

44 02.11.06, Cryo-Tank Phoenix 1, Köln 2006

45 26.11.2006, Cryo-Tank Phoenix 2, Neapel 2006



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rights organisation Amnesty International, torture is still a reality across the world in the 21st century, and they have reported cases of torture in over 130 countries in recent months. Moreover, in over 80 countries people are known to have died from the consequences of their suffering at the hands of torturers.

VIII

Torture typically takes place under cover, it flourishes in conditions of secrecy. We associate not only horror with torture, but also things hidden and deeply disturbing. The fact that it takes place in secret adds to the sense of horror. As a blatant infringement of the individual's human rights, torture is abhorred throughout the world today, but it is not out of concern that their international standing may be damaged that governments cover up or deny their involvement in torture. Torture was not even conducted in public in the Middle Ages when the Inquisition was at its height and witches were routinely persecuted, when Europe – according to some historians – was little better than a slaughter house and torture was even sanctioned by the Catholic Church (in 1252 the papal bull *Ad extirpanda* not only implicitly approved of the practice, it in fact prescribed its use). Only executions (which

could involve a person in effect being tortured to death) were conducted in public. During the period of the so-called 'disappearances' in Argentina between 1976 and 1983, the individuals concerned – abducted by the Argentinean militia – simply 'vanished' without trace, and it was impossible for their loved ones to discover their whereabouts, although everyone could guess what had happened. The willingness on the part of certain individuals to turn a blind eye only fosters a climate of secrecy that is particularly conducive to torture. Whether this 'blindness' is due to ignorance, indifference, self-protection, the psychodynamics of self-deception or a mixture of all of these is not the issue here. And any examination of the phenomenon of torture (be it analytical, scientific, personal, artistic) is made all the more difficult in that – as Leo Löwenthal wrote in his 1945 essay on German concentration camps – 'our deep reluctance to ruthlessly explore the phenomenon of terror in all its implications – in itself constitutes a subliminal symptom of terror'.

White torture is the perfect, most perfidious tool for those engaged in cover-ups and secrecy, since it leaves few external marks, if any, which in turn makes it extremely hard to prove any allegations of torture. It includes methods such as the

social and sensory deprivation that arise from solitary confinement, imprisonment in complete darkness, sleep deprivation, the withdrawal of food and drink, controlled sensory stimuli (cold/heat, constant artificial light, constant loud music). As far back as the mid-19th century Charles Dickens already identified the effects of solitary confinement and deemed its effect on the human soul to be insufferable. In the Federal Republic of Germany the concept became a topic of debate in the 1970s in connection with solitary confinement and the development of a new kind of cell, the so-called F-type cell (which, as it happens, became widespread in prisons in Turkey). When the conditions under which Ulrike Meinhof and Astrid Poll, as members of the Red Army Faction, were held – in the 'dead' or 'silent' wing of the prison in Cologne-Ossendorf – were equated with torture, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote on 8 December 1972: 'in the Middle Ages blood flowed and human beings were physically scourged in the attempt to extract a confession from an individual against their will. Nowadays we have more subtle ways of achieving the same aim. . . . No blood flows as a result of modern torture. . . . Modern torture is practiced in a clinical atmosphere, as in Cologne-Ossendorf for instance, that most



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“modern” of German prisons; extreme solitary confinement is one of the preferred methods.’ The Federal German press and media were immediately up in arms, as though the accusation of torture was itself not far short of torture. In our own time vain attempts are made to replace the (taboo) word ‘torture’ with more media-friendly terms such as ‘coercive interrogation’ – a euphemism that has been repeatedly denounced by the acting General Secretary of Amnesty International Germany, Barbara Lochbihler.

Gregor Schneider has entitled his exhibition in K21 *WEISSE FOLTER* [‘white torture’]. In view of the aforesaid iniquitous alliance of interpersonal, institutionalised violence that is perpetrated in secret and under wraps, on one hand, and, on the other hand, a combination of ignorance, indifference and self-delusion of those not directly affected, the choice of this title has to be seen as provocative.

IX

Gregor Schneider once said of himself that he came ‘from the expressive corner’. Even if his latest works might not immediately suggest this, his artistic beginnings go right back to the experiments he embarked on in puberty when he subjected his own body to unusual situations.

These included getting into a tub filled with paint, and only being able to remove the coat of dried paint with the help of his family who had to spend hours scrubbing him clean. On another occasion he devoted days to making a model of his own hand, constantly moistening the plaster; he buried himself in a hole he had dug himself (cat. 1); he jumped from tree to tree making swimming movements, imagining each tree was a world and that there was water between these worlds (cat. 2). There is a certain amount of photographic evidence of some of these performance-like, sometimes life-threatening experiments. The impulse to expose himself to marginal situations had nothing to do with a desire to produce art – the question as to whether this was art didn’t even cross his mind – but he was driven by a need to find the most powerful means of expression and the intensest mode of living. For him the most potent expression was in the human scream – both of pain and of liberation. Early drawings by Schneider depict humans with wide-open mouths (cat. 3). It seemed to him that a scream might remain in a room after one had left it. He tried to work away from pictures, sculptures, artistic space, and instead sought out places where particular events had taken place. He wanted to discover whether anything of

that event still lingered on in the place. He immediately found the place in the woods where he had heard an art student had been murdered. And then it was as though everything became its own opposite: the scream was followed by silence. Now Schneider started to construct sound-proof boxes and imagined a person sitting in the box, screaming, and no-one could hear his cries. His hope was that ‘life would be the difference between a full and an empty box’. This was followed by a whole number of works such as *Total isolierter, toter Raum, Giesenkirchen* (1989-91, cat. 5-7), *Completely Insulated Hanging House, Rheydt* (1991), and the *Total isoliertes Gästezimmer* (1995) mentioned earlier, in which the artist engaged with the physical and mental effects of isolation, exclusion and detachment from the world. Even today he is not really in a position to assess the effect on himself of his work on *Haus u r*, which goes back many, many years, and where he subjected himself to a particular form of isolation: ‘Whether I am insulating myself from the world, or whether it’s a breakthrough – I don’t really know.’ Schneider’s art is not about producing evidence, but about exploring situations. He himself has identified the motivation for his own work as his fascination for dealing with ‘the unknown’: ‘And the more I deal



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with it, the more unknown it becomes. That's the challenge for me, to keep running on the spot.' The unknown is *terra incognita*, the concealed, the subterranean, the uncanny, the forbidden, places hidden from sight and to which there is no access. It can be the unfathomable private sphere of one's own home (*Haus u r*) or someone else's home (*Die Familie Schneider*, London 2004), it can be a religious or sacred site – impenetrable and mysterious (Caaba, *Cube Venice*, 2005, cat. 37, 38), a child-prostitution zone near the station in a major European city (Steindamm Hamburg, *Gregor Schneider. Hannelore Reuen*, 2003, cat. 35), or the off-limits territory of a maximum security detention centre (Camp V, Guantánamo Bay, *WEISSE FOLTER*, 2007). The artistic strategy of duplicating things that already exist has nothing to do with a preference for realism in art, for it is specifically not about what is visible and obvious, but about what is latently present. The fact is that 'latent' implies hidden, but not so thoroughly that the phenomenon in question does not make its presence felt: it may be invisible, intangible and impossible to identify, but it is palpable. Feelings and an awareness beyond the reach of conscious sensory perception are at the heart of Schneider's artistic work. You could even say that his works

undermine customary modes of perception, for they resist any conscious processes and, paradoxically – for they do operate within the realms of the visual arts – they deny the primacy of visual reception. There are many different ways of experiencing the world around us; first and foremost there are our sensory organs – eyes, nose, ears, tongue, skin, but we also have physiological, electromagnetic, chemical and other receptors that register qualities not accessible to our other senses. Did you know, for instance, that the concentration of air ions in a space can affect your mood? That the intensity and duration of our exposure to artificial light can crucially influence our hormones? And then there is the question as to whether there is a special human capacity to see things that are in fact invisible. Can the scream emitted by a person in a sound-proofed box be heard by another person? Can a scream, left behind in a room, manifest itself in the materials within that room in such a way that it can be physically or mentally apparent to someone entering the room at a later date? Can a place be imbued with the events that occurred there? And how is it that, after death, a person can unleash an intensity of experiences and emotions in the psyche of the bereaved that bears no comparison to their impact as a corporeal, living human being?

X
 'Latent' implies either a threat or a promise. In Gregor Schneider's work the latent presence is always threatening and uncanny, in the Freudian sense. The uncanny provides stimuli that liberate things repressed deep within the individual and allow the subconscious to come to the surface. Vague notions, suppositions and suggestions set in motion a process of subconscious comprehension and activate a familiar raft of emotions that induces an underlying feeling that we are all at home with. But since the uncanny is precisely the familiar 'that should remain hidden, but has come to the surface' (Sigmund Freud), it is not unusual for viewers to regard Schneider's art as an unwelcome challenge. Some people simply dismiss it – in order not to have to deal with it – as the neurotic outpourings of an obsessive charlatan; others become aggressive. This was evident at an exhibition in Krefeld where the figure of Hannelore Reuen (Schneider's female alter ego, cat. 36), lying on the floor, was repeatedly kicked in the ribs by participants in a group tour although (or because) it was by no means clear whether the figure was a doll or a real person (Hannelore Reuen was alive). The strength of Schneider's art is partly the fact that in the best case scenario it hits a nerve,



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confronting us with (precisely) the things we wanted to have nothing do to with, although – as though magically drawn to them – we also cannot ignore them: our anxieties and phobias, our loneliness, our longing for and fear of death, our dread of pain and our desire to hurt others. At the same time, the sheer intensity of Schneider's art derives in part from the fact that it rubs us up the wrong way. Literally. We, as corporeal beings, are caught up in his art, for there is only an inside; we cannot view it externally, from afar. In an age where the image is all and place is virtual, Schneider re-examines the question of space and challenges us to engage with it physically. Globalised, virtual knowledge, images (of Guantánamo, for instance) kept at bay by the news and information media crystallise into a performative and situative event, a (corporeal) exhibition experience. What was distant becomes unbearably close; the unfamiliar becomes the familiar. A highly unsettling change of perspective. The point of no return. Until, in the end, we are spat out again, half-way up the building, somewhere by the Kaiserteich, nowhere near the entrance to the museum.

XI

The social scientist and literary historian Jan Philipp Reemtsma, who has engaged

in detailed research into torture as a means of subjugation and has written informally on the subject, has described it as 'the greatest terror that human beings can inflict on other human beings. Torture is the greatest possible individuation of the human being; it reduces everything outside that human to the administration of pain.' This in turn begs the sceptical question – which is also not unjustified with reference to Gregor Schneider's exhibition *WEISSE FOLTER* – as to what extent it is legitimate or meaningful to address the question of torture in an aesthetic arena. Does it not seem somehow inappropriate to encounter 'the greatest terror' in the halls of 'beautiful illusion'? Can art be more, perhaps achieve more than merely inducing a shudder of delight? There can't be any simple answer to this, above all not one along the lines of the fact that art can make people into better, nobler beings, or that, fortified by our encounter with art, we can more resolutely face life's trials and temptations. In Greek philosophy the *aisthêtes* denotes a person who feels or perceives. Sigmund Freud tapped into this double meaning of 'aesthetics' – as both an emotional response and sensory perception – when he did not restrict its application to the realms of beauty but specifically also related it to the 'quality of feeling'. But why

should the feelings that arise from art be any different to those we experience in life and, hence, to what extent can art teach us something about the quality of certain feelings? – At one remove from everyday life, art provides a secure, formal framework for decisive experiences and heightened intensity. In the context of art we feel free and safe, and – confident that no serious injury will befall us – we can yield up to emotions that we might not indulge in so readily in real life. In addition to this, art is a realm that we already associate with intense sensations. Or you could put it another way, namely that art dramatises and creates images. It dramatises issues in the sense that crucial questions take centre stage, or are 'staged'. And in so doing art shifts towards theatre, to performative events; a shift that does not affect all art but that is entirely relevant in the case of Gregor Schneider's exhibition *WEISSE FOLTER*. Thus art becomes an intense experience, contained and articulated within a special, formal framework – a necessary detour, a seeming distraction from real life, that in fact brings us back to life by inducing us to expose ourselves more fully and intensely and with fewer defences to life in all its many facets.

49, 50, 51 4538 KM, MDD Museum Dhont-Dhaenens, Deurle 2006
52, 53 Foto aus dem Internet / image from the internet,
Camp V, Guantánamo Bay, Kuba



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*'So you feel that one would somehow
sense that there was someone in it?'*
*'That is what I hoped, and thinking about
something can of course make you
believe it.'*

The statements in this text by Gregor Schneider are taken from a conversation with Ulrich Looock, that was first published in the catalogue *Gregor Schneider*, published to accompany the exhibition in the Kunsthalle Bern in 1996.

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