



Mecca-Inspired Black Cube Finally Gets a Square Deal in Hamburg

Review by Catherine Hickley



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March 23 (Bloomberg) -- Gregor Schneider's "Cube Hamburg, 2007," inspired by the Kaaba shrine in Mecca, now dominates a space next to Hamburg's **Kunsthalle**. It is big, black and velvety and a monument to victory over bureaucratic paranoia.

Before Hamburg agreed to build the work, both Venice and Berlin rejected it, citing political concerns and fears it could offend Muslims. Schneider was triumphant at a press conference yesterday, before today's opening of the exhibition "Black Square: Hommage a Malevich," which includes his sculpture.

"The cube has been built," the 37-year-old artist said. "Until now, the cube stood for fear and ignorance."

He's right. The decisions in Berlin and Venice smacked of a knee-jerk, terrified reaction. Muslim leaders in Hamburg, which has a large Turkish population and about 40 mosques, said they aren't offended by the cube in the least.

The controversy recalls Deutsche Oper's sudden decision last year to cancel performances of Mozart's opera "Idomeneo" in Berlin because an audience member feared it may anger Muslims. The opera house's response came before any Muslims were given the chance to say whether they were offended. German politicians voiced outrage at the self-censorship and the production was reinstated.

Yet, where **Hans Neuenfels's** "Idomeneo" showed a beheaded Muhammad (along with Jesus, Buddha and Poseidon), Schneider's work takes no such liberties -- he says it is not even a representation of the Kaaba, just a reference to it.

What's more, if Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof museum and the Venice authorities had done more research, they would have noticed that images of the Kaaba are not sacrilegious and that many Muslims have pictures or reproductions of it in their homes.

Space Obsessed

The idea for the sculpture even originated with a Muslim friend of Schneider, who sensed that the Kaaba would fascinate the artist -- Schneider is obsessed with space and constantly reinvents the rooms of his home in Rheydt.

Measuring 13 x 13 x 14 meters (43 x 43 x 46 feet), the cube is made of scaffolding covered with a stretched black cloth. It has a narrow white hem around the base. On a blustery Hamburg day, the wind causes little ripples to run across the surface, adding to the mystique. It is easy to imagine an undefined energy within the cube causing the effect. The sculpture is imposing and impenetrable, guarding its secrets.

It also fits perfectly into this clever exhibition, which takes as its starting point Kazimir Malevich's "Black Square" (1915), a negation of art and society. The void it represents is also a tabula rasa -- a place to start creating again.

Squared Circles

Variations on the black square recur throughout the show -- along with red squares, white cubes and even the occasional circle, looking almost decadent in this austere, angled environment. So diverse are the materials, textures and contexts, that the squares don't get boring.

There are Sol LeWitt's white cube structures, implausibly balanced heavy metal cubes by **Richard Serra**, fields of nails by Guenther Uecker, **Yves Klein's** blue "Monochrome" and **Jean Tinguely's** "Meta-Malevich" reliefs. There are geometrical, architectural and decorative squares. There are squares to puzzle you, to make you laugh, to make you think, or all at once.

The square I found most fascinating was Japanese artist Noriyuki Haraguchi's "Matter and Mind," a tub filled with oil that takes up a whole room in the Kunsthalle.

It's the darkest abyss imaginable, capable of swallowing whole anything that fell into it and coating it in a thick blackness. At the same time it gleams with light. The mirror-like surface reflects the whole room, spectators included. It exudes danger and calm.

The exhibition, which runs through June 10, has remarks (unfortunately only in German) by the artists printed on the walls that do a good job of explaining context, the relation to Malevich and some of the rather abstract ideas involved.

Schneider's work, on the museum's doorstep, is a great advertisement for the show. And a message to Berlin and Venice: Who are the squares now?

(**Catherine Hickley** writes for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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