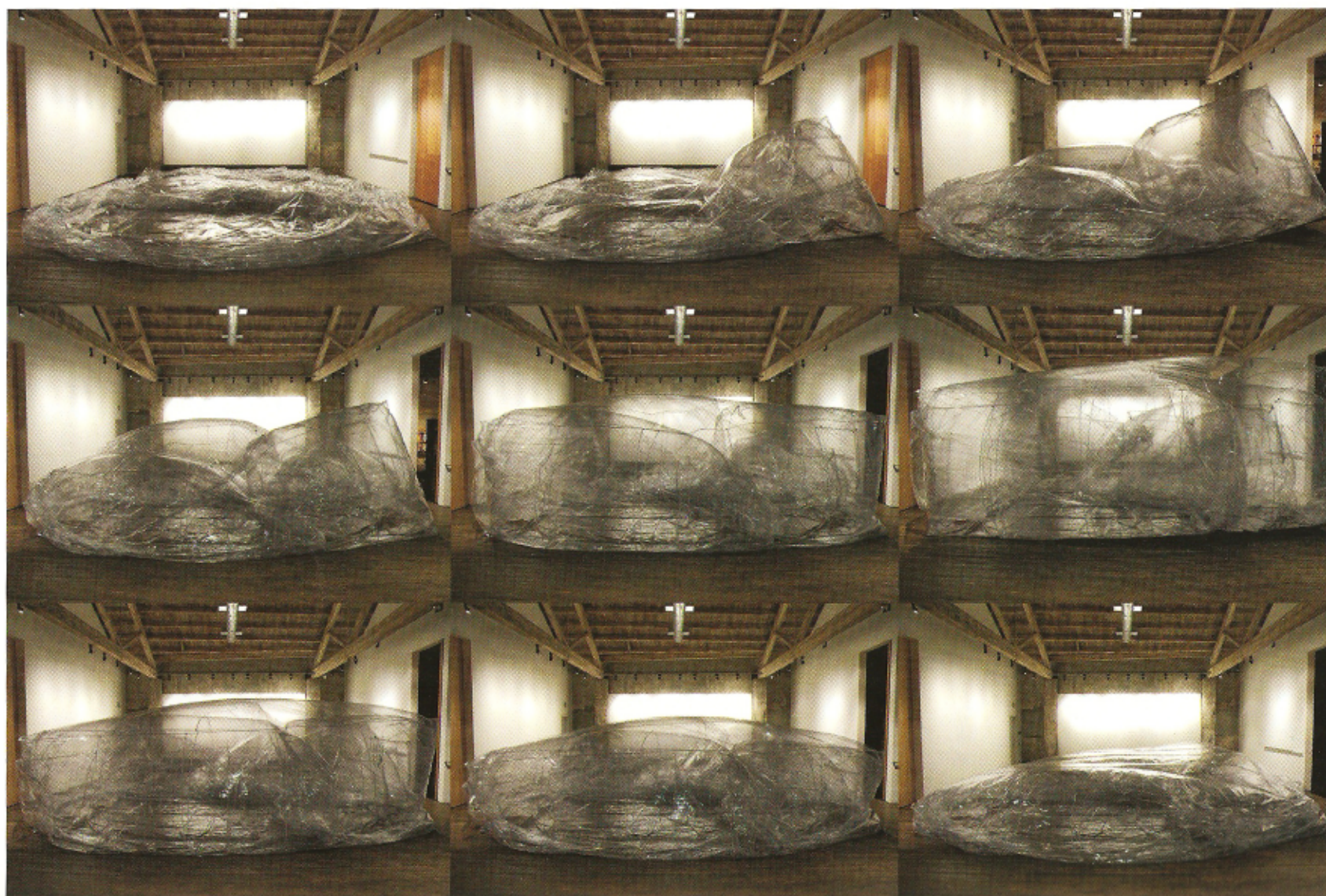


Alex Schweder

In his subtly disorienting performances and installations, this Seattle artist questions how architecture is shaped for, and by, our bodies. **By Jeff Byles**



Alex Schweder takes an occupational interest in leaks. Having worked for architects for seven years before entering the world of visual art—looking for “something a bit messier and nebulous,” he explains—Schweder found he still needed a day job following his first solo show, at Seattle’s Esther Claypool Gallery in 2001. In a serendipitous move for his artistic career, he answered an ad in a Seattle newspaper for expert witnesses to testify about building defects. He soon made himself a leak authority: a connoisseur of water’s ravages, of sagging parapets and dank masonry, and, more broadly, of the fleeting lives of structures. We inhabit buildings, he discovered, just as we do bodies—in a messy, moment-by-moment skirmish with decay.

Bodies and buildings have more in common than you might think. They breathe. They spring leaks. And they eventually fall apart. “Sooner or later,” the 37-year-old artist says, “we’re all going to rot.”

ABOVE: *A Sac of Rooms Three Times a Day*, 2007. Vinyl and fan-blown air, 11 x 21 x 28 ft. Photo: Steve Miller. All artwork images courtesy Lawrimore Project, Seattle, and McClain Gallery, Houston.

FACING PAGE, FROM TOP: Schweder with *Melting Instructions*, 2008, installed at the Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, Washington. Courtesy the artist.

Homing MacGuffin, 2008. Carpet and furniture installed in living room, 3 x 19 ½ x 23 ft.



Schweder believes buildings are fantasies about what our bodies should be. For centuries, we've built the image of an ideal human form: just think of Leonardo's classic Vitruvian Man, arms and legs outspread in harmonious proportion; or Le Corbusier's Modulor system, which molded space to mathematical ratios. But flesh rarely adds up. It's often out of plumb. It seeps and bulges with ungainly human desires. Having labored over blandly ideal domestic spaces in his architectural work, Schweder resolved to give our fantasies a liberating kink. And thus he found his métier at the intersection of performance and architecture.

Inspired by the Austrian artist Erwin Wurm, whose "one-minute sculptures" instruct viewers to pose with everyday objects—and in the process make performances with a refreshingly absurdist edge—Schweder alters space to reveal new ways of being. Call it the one-minute building. As in Wurm's instruction-based sculptures (or in Fluxus artist George Brecht's performance events, in which everyday objects were "scored" to instruct viewers), any room can be read as a series of commands: Sit here. Eat there. Why not rewrite the instructions?

That is what Schweder aimed to do in a recent installation in a New York City town house. Amid the building's renovation into upscale apartments, he was invited to create a temporary site-specific work by the HomeBase Project, an annual public art event that explores the notion of "home" in urban spaces. In a fourth-floor living room, Schweder inverted the normal course of finish work. First he installed furnishings: sofa, television, dining ensemble. Then he installed the carpet. With its furls and folds wrapping seats, muffling the TV, and sweeping over the table, the carpet's brown contours created new domestic terrain. Titled *Homing MacGuffin* (after the plot device pioneered by Hitchcock), Schweder's piece throws a sudden twist into the standard living-room narrative: How do we read the instructions of a space when they are veiled? In its beguiling humps and gnarls, the apparent logic of living is up for grabs.



Performative architecture thrives on thickening the plot. As a credo, it might take Winston Churchill's oft-quoted line about the reciprocal relationship between structures and souls: "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us." That premise was potentially explored in *Flatland* (2007), wherein Schweder and five other artists set out to live for 20 days in a two-foot-wide, four-story-high building. Presented at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens, where the artists worked and slept behind walls of transparent vinyl, the piece displayed what Schweder calls "the scrimmage of occupation," showcasing rogue acts of habitation: bodies and their unruly ways within a tightly circumscribed space.

INTRODUCING

This derangement of architectural stability animated another large-scale work, *A Sac of Rooms Three Times a Day* (2007), installed at Suyama Space in Seattle, where Schweder, who grew up in Manhattan, has been based since 2000. An inflatable house that toggles between landscape and building, the structure rises and expires throughout the day. The clear vinyl enclosure is constructed so that the rooms inside the house occupy more volume than the exterior building envelope, resulting in a writhing, weltering space. (A version of this project will be on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2009.) Like the inflatable buildings of the 1970s collective Ant Farm, whose billowing forms gaily transcended brick-and-mortar reality, Schweder's work creates a heightened sense of place. Yet his vision is decidedly more volatile than Ant Farm's sunny inflatables; it's a structure deformed by the darkness of desire.

Two years ago, as the recipient of the Rome Prize in architecture, Schweder worked with a Milan-based bioplastics manufacturer to explore the properties of biodegradable packaging peanuts, which adhere to one another when wet. In *Spit Skin* (2006), he set out to create a room-size, lick-and-stick sculpture. Using his own saliva, he joined the white peanuts together in a continuous layer coating the surfaces of his bathroom at the American Academy in Rome. Walls, floors, sink, and toilet made a pleasingly textured landscape. Yet this tableau, too, segued into an entropic performance of space. Subjected to the leaky bathroom, as well as normal bodily routines, the peanuts slowly shriveled—a splash here, a drip there—in a dance of water-activated attrition. "It became a kind of map of moisture exchange between a body and a building," Schweder says.

Tracing that map's terminal point, he recently embarked on his third residency at the plumbing giant Kohler's artist program in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, where he acknowledges, and even celebrates, our complicated, leaky lives. A urinal, too, is a set of instructions: Pee here. Given the run of Kohler's sprawling production facilities, Schweder creates pairs of custom-designed urinals—typically one male and one female—that turn the act of peeing into an aesthetic adventure. Presented deadpan in vitreous china, the pieces give the ideal body a rousingly mutant twist. Now, in his current Kohler project, Schweder is working to join male and female urinals back-to-back. In a utopian gesture that even Le Corbusier couldn't deny, the streams mingle as they go down the drain.

This coming year, Schweder will begin work on a type of performative architecture with a further conceptual turn. Working with his fellow Flatland alum Ward Shelley, he will build two rooms set on opposite ends of a fulcrum, to be inhabited for one week. When they take up residence at Lawrimore Project in Seattle next year, Shelley will live on one side, Schweder on the other, with a kitchen and bathroom in the middle. As on a teeter-totter, each artist's motions will alter the balance of the structure itself, which in turn will alter the artist: a continuous feedback loop of buildings and bodies in flux. (Happily, the two men are roughly the same weight.) Here, as in the rest of Schweder's oeuvre, self and structure intersect in the messy game of life. ♦

Alex Schweder's work will be on view at the Warehouse Gallery in Syracuse, New York, in November; at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in February 2009; and at Lawrimore Project, Seattle, in March 2009.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *Spit Skin*, 2006. Saliva and biodegradable packing peanuts; original installation 96 x 42 x 120 in.; 48 x 18 x 72 in. at present. Photo: Alex Schweder.

Bi-Bardon, 2001. Vitreous china and chrome flushometers, 34 x 32 x 14 in. Photo: Alex Schweder. Installation view of *Flatland*, 2007, at SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York. Construction materials, household appliances, and five people, 32 x 24 x 2 ft. Photo: Mark Lins.

