# Medium and Membrane

*JÖRG HEISER*

Although we are in a museum, the atmosphere evoked by the damask pattern (a powerful red on silver that completely covers the walls, floor, ceiling, and columns) is more reminiscent of the movies. And very different movies, in fact: the hotel in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980): sound-muffling carpets lining long corridors, wallpaper from long-defunct eras, blood cascading in slow motion. But it could equally be the setting for a silly scene from *The Avengers*, where a bad-guy in a Baroque wig and Zorro mask crosses fencing foils with Emma Peel to a soundtrack of rippling *cembalo arpeggios*. This contrast between dumbstruck horror and grotesque humor is reflected in the scenery's individual props: two large pictures facing each other on opposite walls. One is a collage-like composition with Hieronymus Bosch scenes on what appear to be shards of red and blue porcelain, together with white patches (reminiscent of places where wallpaper has been torn off), both scattered over a green-and-black plaid picnic blanket (that also serves as background). The other is an empty echo of this picture with roughly the same monumental dimensions and, at the same time, a monochromatic silver reprise of the red damask pattern filling the room.

Four elements, then, were used by Rudolf Stingel at the MMK Museum of Modern Art, Frankfurt, in 2004: Celotex panels of foil-faced yellow polyurethane (precisely the kind used for insulation in house-building); the damask pattern that is printed on them; an actual Sigmar Polke painting titled ROTER FISCH (Red Fish, 1992);[1)] and Stingel's canvas of the same dimensions, also printed with a damask pattern. As if they'd been arranged in a test set-up, these four elements not only bring to life the zones of convergence between the genres of architecture, painting, and sculpture; they also cause the icy heights of formal-aesthetic abstraction to confront, head-on, the sultry lowlands of real-world social concretion from which they seem to have just elegantly escaped. The arrangement itself contains the trigger for its own demystification, the wallpaper pattern is a signal that lures the audience towards (and beyond) the line that separates care from destruction (a single thin, vulnerable layer of aluminum facilitates this). The crossing of this line—a kind of chain-reaction on the part of the audience—is the work's fifth and perhaps decisive element.

In Stingel's work, there are two points of departure—formal aesthetic abstraction, on the one hand (in the reduced formal idiom), and on the other, real-world social concretion (the levels of meaning and modes of usage laid down in each specific realization)—that he places in our hands like the two lit ends of a single candle. In the middle, our fingers will get burned, but before this happens, we will pretend, a while longer, to be looking at two separate phenomena: formal abstraction (the wordless triumph of modernism), and social concretion (the battle cry of modernism's critics). Although this criticism is itself part of modernism, and formal abstraction can, in turn, be read as a criticism of concretion, let us, nonetheless, carry on pretending that they are separate phenomena.

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*RUDOLF STINGEL, Installation view / Ausstellungsansicht, Venice Biennale, 2003. (PHOTO: PAULA COOPER GALLERY, NEW YORK)*

*RUDOLF STINGEL, installation view / Ausstellungsansicht, Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf, 2003.*
*(PHOTO: PAULA COOPER GALLERY, NEW YORK)*

Looking back at Stingel's work from the last two decades, one of the first things to catch the eye is a marked tension between an extremely economical, almost vanishing use of materials and signs of classical artistic skill, in keeping with the minimalist tradition (without plinths, frames, gestural treatment, collage, bricolage, etc.), and a use of large-scale spaces, rising to the level of the architectural. Instead of operating with the positive physical presence of large, object-like, closed volumes, his use of space mostly functions via the negative physical and indicative marking, or reordering, of visible spatial boundaries (walls, floors, passages). We are thus dealing with the "skin" of the space—a boundary that is defined both by the geometrically describable structure of the space, and by light and color.

The large canvas Stingel produced for his show in Frankfurt is infected by the surrounding damask décor, the price paid for doing away with the frame. The damask pattern becomes a fulcrum that twists, rather than simply negating, the high-modernist hierarchy of wall and frameless picture. Can the picture be considered a wall-design accessory or, conversely, has it conquered the wall? Are we in a home





or a public space? The title of Stingel's exhibition, "Home Depot" (2004), emphasizes this conflict: this American retail chain satisfies every desire of the home-improvement enthusiast; in the form of huge warehouses, it is an archive of every conceivable home design. And Polke's substitution of a canvas with an ordinary blanket encourages a similar confusion between the spheres of domestic and public presentation. Stingel himself proposes this genealogy by including the Polke picture, twisting his play on hierarchies even further. Is Polke's picture not turned into a prop within a staged scenario? And conversely, because it appears isolated and repeated *ad infinitum* on a silver background, is the value of the damask pattern not enhanced, as is the cow in Warhol's 1965 wallpaper? However, unlike the cow motif, the damask pattern remains perfectly at home in the realm of interior decoration. After all, the oldest surviving example of European wallpaper (dating from 1509) is printed with a damask pattern. Thus what we are dealing with is not an aesthetic, tautological sleight-of-hand, but a coded form, based on the conditions of social status: Where do recognition, authority, and aura come from? Who decides what is served up to whom, and in what form? All these questions directly concern the relationship between artist and audience, and are encoded not out of secretiveness, but to prevent that relationship from being eclipsed by the hierarchical relationship of teacher and pupil.

There are no explanatory notices in sight, no members of staff encouraging the viewer to leave traces in Stingel's space. But from the moment one sets foot on the Celotex boards, one is involved in the work, as the boards are so sensitive (not designed as a floor covering) that, in this case, "viewing" can clearly be equated with "using" and even "being worn out." One leaves traces involuntarily—from there, it is only a small step to the deliberate act.

It's as if Stingel has created a wormhole in the time-space continuum between the hallowed halls of the museum and the waiting room at a down-at-the-heels suburban railway station where generations of bored commuters and schoolchildren have immortalized themselves with scratched messages: names of bands (the teen goth-metal act, System of a Down), matchstick men, so-and-so "was here," maybe a declaration of love, obscenities perhaps, or a fit of creativity—a quickly executed portrait, a thoughtful poem. It is an anarcho-democratic, self-regulating semiotic order where the unconscious and the conscious, the crazy and the rational, relate to each other. Stingel imports this sign-language of toilets, underpasses, and bus-stops into the museum, not by quoting and portraying it, but by turning the very act of so-called vandalism into a constitutive element of his art in the museum.

Suddenly the path from formal-aesthetic abstraction to real-world social concretion is very short. But it is not illustrative and instrumental (like the model of interactivity commonly encountered in media art: the visitor as a laboratory mouse), but interpretative and structural (suggesting independent decisions on usage and interpretation). "Minimalist sculptures were never really primary structures," Felix Gonzalez-Torres once said, "but structures that were embedded in a multitude of meanings. For me, they were a coffee table, a laundry bag, a laundry basket, etc. So if each of these objects is nothing but a mass, then it would be like saying that aesthetics has nothing to do with politics."[2] Gonzalez-Torres reads classical minimal art against its own explicit rhetoric. The artistic consequence he draws from this matches that of Stingel's in two ways. Firstly, if art is "embedded in a multitude of meanings," it must also be linked with a multitude of possible ways for the viewer to use the work. And secondly, the object character must be precarious, associated with the periphery, the trace, or the "skin," taken to the verge of dissolution—dissolved in the space, or in usage.

In 1994, Gonzalez-Torres and Stingel realized a joint project at the Neue Galerie am Johanneum in Graz which sums up this approach in a variety of ways. They limited themselves to one part of Palais Herberstein, the sumptuously stuccoed Rococo home of the Neue Galerie. On each side of their joint intervention, Gonzalez-Torres' 2 PERLENVORHÄNGE (Two Bead Curtains, 1994) marked a border by cleanly sealing off the area beyond, from floor to ceiling and from wall to wall. Crossing this border, one felt that beyond was more than just a different room. This sensation of a change of atmo-

sphere was achieved by two simple, effective means: lighting and floor covering. All the windows in the enclosed area were blacked out, with only the light from the grand chandeliers entering the mirrored hall from outside, like a child's darkened bedroom with the door left ajar to let in a modicum of comforting light. As a result, one walked from the light into the dark and back again into the light. This journey was made even more dramatic by Stingel's SPANNTEPPICH (CAPRI), SCHWARZ (Wall-to-Wall Carpeting, Capri, Black, 1994), which covered the entire surface (some 2500 square feet) between the two curtains. It absorbed not only light but also the sound of footsteps.

Gonzalez-Torres and Stingel address the delimitation and separation of a real dream space—the feudalistic dream of power and glory that represents itself in the mirrors and plasterwork—thereby plunging it into the realm of the truly unreal. Walking through the beaded curtain means stepping not only into a room that has been sectioned off but into a different level of consciousness, a different world—like following Lewis Carroll's Alice through the looking glass.

The described otherworldliness of the Graz installation—which is what actually creates the tension—stands in stark contrast to the social connotations attached to the only two materials used: industrial carpet and industrial beads. On one hand, they have the controlled glamour of the well-heeled circles at the center of power, and on the other hand, bead curtains, with their iridescent, glittering glamour, signify the extravagance of camp and the bohemian subcultures of boudoirs and nightclubs with their many contradictions. Also, if one does not identify the carpet as an artistic intervention, it might appear highly inappropriate amongst all the venerable splendor—one might think that an administrative official with no taste had ordered the cheap industrial carpeting to be laid in the palace as a way of cutting costs, as a way of avoiding the massive expense of restoring and maintaining the parquet floor. The only clue that misguided penny-pinching is not at play here is the fact that the carpet is laid in flush with the beaded curtains, so that in the two rooms beyond, the parquet floor is visible. But the association with petit-bourgeois floor coverings remains. Worldliness and otherworldliness, conventionality and transgression, are marked by the border between the two floors.

Although Stingel leaves the narrative description of social reality to his audience, he executes his works with the knowledge of this reality. And then, as if wishing to state it explicitly, once and for all, he has cast a Socialist red Shiva out of polyurethane (UNTITLED, 1994). The choice of material and its artificial color recall the souvenirs of tourism, but in each of his six hands, the Indian deity holds the tools of the Stingel school of radically democratized painting: broad paintbrush, scissors, electrical paint mixer, wallpapering brush, tube of paint, and airbrush. These are precisely the utensils Stingel named in his *Instructions* (1989), which he lists in six languages, like the instructions for an international do-it-yourself kit. The artist gives a diagrammatic lesson in "how to paint": mix up some red oil paint and apply it thickly to the canvas; cut out some gauze with the scissors and lay the pieces over the paint; push the pieces in with the wallpapering brush; use the airbrush to apply silver paint; remove the gauze; and, presto, one finished Stingel. The artist gives away the secret of how to produce painterly magic and, in so doing, debunks it as the do-it-yourself territory of painting and wallpapering. Demystification also informs Stingel's profane treatment of Shiva as a rubber god, an object any Californian surfboard and custom car spray-painter would surely love to display in front of his garage.

In classical minimalism, the surface—the skin of the objects—is expected to function discreetly as an opaque denial of the idea of skin, as a "perfect finish," as the silent boundary of the volume. The industrially crafted surface was a polemic against the pathos of the claim that traces on the surface of canvases and sculptures eloquently and vividly testify to the creative gesture. In Stingel's work, the surface as a skin is neither an opaque denial nor a trace of the creative. Let us take two examples to describe the range of this neither-nor. At one end of the spectrum stands the untitled series from 2000 and 2001 of large-format, pink wall panels made of polystyrene, embellished only with an industrial logo printed in





*RUDOLF STINGEL, APERTO 93, installation view / Ausstellungsansicht, Venice Biennale, 1993.*
*(PHOTO: PAULA COOPER GALLERY, NEW YORK)*

*RUDOLF STINGEL, installation view / Ausstellungsansicht, Museo d'Arte Moderne e Contemporanea, Trento, Italy, 2001.*
*(PHOTO: PAULA COOPER GALLERY, NEW YORK)*





red. Their shape remotely resembles perforated rubber mats, except that the holes are nearly fist-sized and morph from circular to increasingly elliptical as the hole passes through the picture, as if drawn out in length by an invisible force. Here, the surface—the membrane of a totally permeable relationship between wall, picture, and object—is proverbially punctured. But at the same time, it remains clearly the product of industrial processing, untouched by usage. At the other end of the spectrum is 1000 MATTONI (2000): 1000 clay bricks were laid out to dry on an open surface where mangy stray dogs ran across them several times, leaving a pattern of paw prints that were then fired into the finished bricks. The first example shows the object as a technological membrane, the second as an archaic recording medium.

In most cases, however, Stingel's works are both medium and membrane in one. They are skin. They record traces of use—of being walked on, of tearing, of flaking. As permeable membranes, they mark and "regulate" the locus of border and transition in spatio-physical terms (between wall and picture, floor and covering, painting and sculpture, architectural and institutional space), and in temporal-economical terms (between that which produces and that which consumes).

Most recently, at his 2005 exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, Stingel made this especially clear. On entering the space, one found oneself confronted with a prototypical modernist white cube. But not quite (white cubes should actually be called white-gray cubes since gallery floors are usually gray and not white). Here, on the other hand, the floor was painted an unreal, glossy white, so as to leave traces of anyone walking in off the street. In another way, too, the space created a modernist situation prototypical of a contemporary art gallery: a photorealistic black-and-white painting, the portrait of a woman, was mounted on the far wall. In order to take a closer look at the portrait, viewers had to cross the floor's white surface, from entrance to picture. The resulting traces of "use," and the knowledge that Stingel based his painting on Robert Mapplethorpe's 1984 photograph of gallerist Paula Cooper, deactivate the abstract erasure of social, structural properties in the white cube, successfully undermining the initial impression made by the impact of the white floor and black-and-white portrait. Just as the viewer's prints become visible on the floor, so does the gallerist, as a personality with a specific history in the art community. However, it is also perfectly possible that an unsuspecting visitor might enter the gallery and go away thinking that Rudolf Stingel is a photorealist painter with a penchant for rendering women in black and white. This acceptance of the possibility of being overlooked or misunderstood is the very thing that allows him to play on borders and "skins."

Which, finally, brings us back to Frankfurt: Stingel accepts viewers' oversights and misunderstandings to the point of banality, stupidity, and even vandalism. As we know from religious frenzy and celebrity worship, awe and adoration can swiftly turn into the reverse. The inclusion of the Polke picture again marks the possibility of crossing this line. What if someone were to misunderstand the possibility of using this space and to offensively "use" the picture in a hands-on way, going against its definition as a finished work of art? Or what if someone were to scratch a racist invective into Stingel's damask pattern? Actually, ideologically and politically loaded statements were completely absent. One could interpret this pessimistically and assume that a depoliticized generation is only interested in communicating declarations of love and the names of its favorite bands. Or one could posit a sense of healthy skepticism concerning the theatricality of anonymous political slogans in closed spaces. Either way, Stingel's piece does not prescribe, it inscribes. Understood as membranes and recording media, his works stand exactly at the point of convergence between formal-aesthetic abstraction and real-world social concretion.

*(Translation: Nicholas Grindell)*

1) Sigmar Polke, ROTER FISCH, on permanent loan from a private collection.
2) *Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Rudolf Stingel,* exh. cat. (Graz: Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Johanneum, 1994), p. 32.

This essay about "Home Depot" is published here for the first time. The "Home Depot" exhibition was on view at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt from February to August, 2004 as part of the Dornbracht Installation Projects®.