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Yablonsky, Linda: ART; The Carpet That Ate Grand Central

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WHEN most people want to leave a building, they look for a door. Not Rudolf Stingel. For a year he came and went from home by climbing through a second-story window. Anyone could use a door, he reasoned. True, he was 16 at the time, and the window was low. But now, at 48, with a stubbly salt-and-pepper beard and wavy brown hair that has begun to thin, Mr. Stingel can still call up that youthful strain of subversion.

Anyone else coming across a floral carpet, for example, would probably just see something to walk on. Mr. Stingel, who recently described himself as "caught between the rational and the poetic," sees a landscape painting. Starting this week, when his first work of public art in New York has its debut at Grand Central Terminal, 120,000 commuters a day will be able to view the world as he does, as an anonymous artwork masquerading as an everyday object that is transformed every time people walk on it.

Titled "Plan B" and installed for the month of July within the soaring Beaux-Arts marble climes of Vanderbilt Hall, the work consists of a 27,000-square-foot stretch of carpet covering the entire floor of the hall and woven with a pattern of bright blue roses on an even brighter pink ground. You could call it the carpet that ate Manhattan without exaggerating much.

Another part of "Plan B" is in Minneapolis, at the Walker Art Center, where Mr. Stingel rolled out a duplicate piece, which he calls a painting, on June 11. That version, which totals a mere 7,500 square feet, covers the lobby floor and extends onto an outdoor plaza, where it gobbles up the ground around a garden and a bicycle stand, stopping only when it reaches the street.

"It gives the place the kind of sinister familiarity you see in a Kubrick movie like 'The Shining,' " said Richard Flood, the Walker's chief curator. "It could have come from the Overlook Hotel."

In fact, Mr. Stingel's design came from Durkan Patterned Carpet, a company that serves large hotels and casinos. After some experimentation, he altered the color scheme of pattern No. D-1063 to suit his more psychedelic taste.

"The 'Plan B' color is definitely off," he said. "It's almost obscene, it's so far

off. And there's so much of it." Recalling his window-climbing phase, he added, "I always had a problem with boundaries."

Clearly part of the allure of Mr. Stingel's art is its biting humor, its challenge to ideas that have acquired outsized stature in our culture. Yet he insists: "My carpets are paintings. Not carpets."

Mr. Stingel considers himself primarily a painter. Indeed, he is currently preparing a group of new canvases for a September exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, a London gallery. If they have the look of gold damask wallpaper, it is because "artists have always been accused of being decorators, so I just went to the extreme and painted the wallpaper," he said. "Now it's pure decoration." Then, again, he added, "I always had a problem with paintings."

Such problems have had their rewards for Mr. Stingel, who dates their onset to his upbringing in Merano, Italy, a Tyrolean town steeped in what he terms "German Romanticism and angst." He knew nothing of contemporary art, he said, until he left high school for Vienna, making his way as a traditional portrait painter and doing well enough to win a commission from the Italian ambassador to Austria. There he came across a museum show of American photo realists and quickly traded his Renaissance-era technique for this new approach to painting. That took him to Milan, in 1980, when he decided he was more Neo-Expressionist than realist and began piling thick layers of paint on canvas to produce what he dismisses today as "mud."

By 1987, when he reached New York (following a girlfriend), he was still seeking a painting style that would satisfy the social-revolutionary philosophy he adopted in his formative years, when Minimalism was hitting its peak. "I wanted to be against a certain way of thinking about art," he said, "to question its ability to inspire awe."

HE came up with a method that called for painting a large canvas a single color and laying a piece of wedding-veil tulle over it, then spraying the whole with silver paint. Removing the tulle left lyrical, and painterly, creases on a luminous field of color. The silver, as Andy Warhol had earlier discovered, added a touch of glamour. "Silver makes everything look contemporary," Mr. Stingel said. "If you paint something silver, it looks, I don't know, from today."

After being asked, time and again, what his work was about, he revealed his technique, which he still employs, in "Instructions," an illustrated, step-by-step guide that he printed in six languages. In theory, Mr. Stingel believed, anyone following his "recipe" could make one of his paintings. Since then, he has embraced all sorts of nontraditional strategies and materials. "What was the cheapest thing I could use and still make it beautiful?" he asked. "Or take out of context and make amazing?" The answer came with his first solo show in New York, in 1991, when he carpeted an entire SoHo gallery in fluorescent orange deep-pile and left the walls completely bare.

"It was the most extreme show of that year, for sure," he said. "It was liberating, and not just for me. It was a monochrome that was uncontrollable, monolithic. How big can a painting be? That big!"

When Mr. Stingel's carpet pieces are underfoot, they typically remind viewers of Carl Andre's copper-tile grids of the 1970's, sculptures that lay flat on the floor, where visitors were welcome to walk on them. At the 1993 Venice Biennale, Mr. Stingel's plush orange carpet, now more than 20 feet long, was glued to the wall, where it appeared as a mock-heroic Color Field painting of the sort identified with Mark Rothko. For his 2001 retrospective at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto, Italy, Mr. Stingel covered a wall with a large swath of chocolate-brown carpeting from a corporate cafeteria, its furniture marks and drink spills intact.

"This had all the intellectual qualities that I ask from a painting," he said of the piece. "It's aggressive, it's against the system, it's against the usual way of doing a painting. Once in a while, it's good to freshen up the air with these kind of things." Those things also include making paintings out of pastel Styrofoam and casting sculptures of Buddha, with several arms bearing tools of the artist's trade, in primary-colored rubber.

Mr. Stingel obviously enjoys courting audience participation. A mirrored room he made out of silver insulation panels for his 2001 retrospective barely survived the exhibition. At the opening, a spectator added a few marks of his own to those made by accident during installation. Another artist would treat such a move as vandalism. "I thought it made the work better," he said, and because he did not object, others followed suit, turning his art into Abstract Expressionist rubbish.

By the time of the 2003 Venice Biennale, where he reconstructed the silver room, spectators were primed for chaos. "It was incredible," Mr. Stingel said. "What people did was attach things. It looked like a shrine, thousands of objects and photographs, underwear, all kinds of things. It was full. Full."

"Plan B" got its start five years ago, when it was called "Plan A," which Mr. Stingel envisioned as a two-story Victorian house painted black inside and out, with black carpeting, located somewhere outside of the city. He proposed the idea to Yvonne Force-Villareal, president of the Art Production Fund, a nonprofit organization that helps artists realize seemingly impossible projects.

After a fruitless search for a site, in and out of New York, Mr. Stingel came up with "Plan B." "We needed a huge public area to carpet," Ms. Force-Villareal recalled. After considering several settings, she and her business partner, Doreen Remen, came up with Grand Central, with the help of two other arts organizations, Creative Time and Arts for Transit. A group of private and corporate donors helped underwrite the \$200,000 cost. Mr. Stingel also made a separate edition of 10-by-12-foot sections of the carpet, adding a silver border. They have been selling to private collectors for \$10,000 each.

What will the public make of "Plan B"? Mr. Stingel hopes it will change the way people see the hall's architecture. Mr. Flood compares its potential effect to lines from T. S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding":

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

Still, Mr. Stingel isn't sure what will happen. "Things become very scary when you take them out of context and change the scale," he said. "But isn't that what art is about? Dislocation?"

Rudolf Stingel, 'Plan B'

Vanderbilt Hall in Grand Central Terminal, through July.