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karin sander

projects



The Museum of Modern Art
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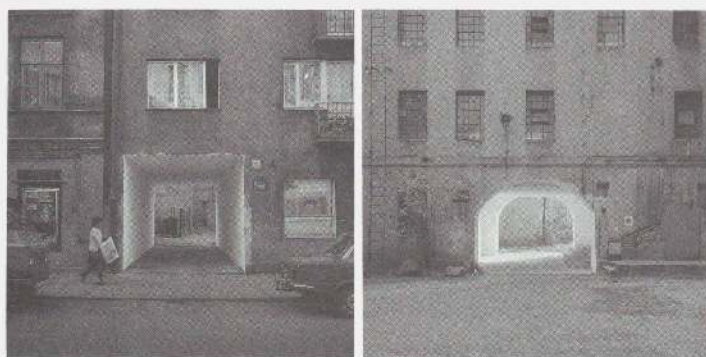
A "reflection," Webster tells us, is the partial or complete return of a wave motion (as of light or sound) from a surface encountered into the medium originally traversed, in a manner that is usually diffuse or irregular. It can also be something produced by reflecting, an image given back by a reflecting surface, a reflected counterpart. Conversely, to move from the realm of the visual to that of the conceptual, a reflection can be a thought, idea, or opinion formed as a result of meditation on some subject matter, often with a view to understanding or accepting it or seeing it in its right relations. For this Projects exhibition, the artist Karin Sander proposes that prosaic materials such as indoor/outdoor carpeting and white wall paint can be seen as cause for reflection in both senses of the word. They are made to reflect their surroundings both literally and figuratively, offering us not only something to look at but something to think about.

Born in Bensberg, West Germany, in 1957, Sander creates art that is marked by a carefully calibrated sense of the absurd. Her use of materials can be compared to the humorous use of words set into sentences or situations in such a way as to suggest different meanings: matte wall paint can, through polishing, become a reflective pictorial surface; carpet is laid with an eye to its sculptural, space-related, and space-determining potential. When we call something absurd, we mean that it does not accord with accepted ideas. Yet what is accepted and what is not depends on who we are and the context. Sander's work is far from absurd in the sense of lacking reason or common sense. Rather, it arises from a heightened awareness of both the congruous and the incongruous, and of the potential for new meanings which lies somewhere between the two.

Sander begins her projects with a meticulous consideration of circumstance: the question of where a work will go invariably precedes the decision of what form it will take. In other words, the surroundings of Sander's work function as its primary subject matter, and her "imagery" and materials derive significance from the physical and conceptual properties of place.

In 1990, for example, Sander was invited to create a project within the city of Łódź, Poland, as part of the exhibition "Construction in Process." There, Sander chose to renovate two neglected passageways in different parts of the city. Her methods and means were determined by what was already there: cracked concrete roadways and dirty white walls. By repaving the passageways with fresh concrete and painting their walls a radiant white, Sander presented the citizens of Łódź with an image of renewal at a moment of political and social transition, while simultaneously underscoring the passageways' autonomous, geometric, and light-filled forms.

Similarly, despite the difference in circumstances, Sander constructed a large canvas room within a room at the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, in Mönchengladbach, Germany. The choice of canvas was suggested by the thin white fabric which covered the walls of the gallery. By constructing — in this case sewing — a room from fabric, Sander figuratively moved what had been a background element to the fore. Rigid gallery walls were recast as flexible and soft; their traditional function as support for artworks subverted. In each instance, Sander's aim was "to move from a very open situation to one that is very defined, to emphasize something which affects and determines the whole space." Consequently, her work has a formal flexibility which allows it to



White Passageways. Łódź, Poland, 1990. Plaster, white paint, concrete. Photos: Karin Sander, Martin Lauffer

define and redefine itself in response to what she perceives as the "givens" of a particular situation.

The interpretation of givens is, certainly, a subjective matter but Sander takes her cues from art of the mid- to late-1980s, defining particularities of place in terms of both "hard" (existing architecture, for example) and "soft" (temporal, historical, psychological, cultural, social) parameters, the latter including her potential audience and its role. Unlike much art of the 1980s, however, Sander's work does not explicitly engage in a critique of the commodification of objects. Moreover, while it frequently elucidates and engages the institutional frame — in this case that of The Museum of Modern Art — she acknowledges rather than contests aspects of the Museum's complex role, and works to expand our conception of a context for art within the Museum, rather than without. Her art is one of minimal disruption; it interrupts instead of overrules, intrudes but does not overwhelm, changes the balance and upsets our expectations, yet in an underwhelmingly unobtrusive way.

Like the notorious "Blob" of B-horror movie fame, Sander's AstroTurf floorpiece spreads out over the Museum's floor, spilling down the steps into the Sculpture Garden. Yet where the Blob, in ever-expanding fashion, consumed anything unfortunate enough to lie in its way, the outer contours of Sander's sculpture are definitively circumscribed. Her work accommodates, rather than devours, the preexisting architectural and sculptural elements that fall within its bounds. Despite its grand scale (it measures almost eighty feet in length and fifty in width) and synthetic green color, this is a piece of carpet cut to fit all dimensions. Instead of an independent, detachable, autonomous object which displaces and takes up space, Sander's sculpture clings to the surface (just as her *Wallpieces*, on view in the Projects gallery and elsewhere in the Museum, are embedded in the surfaces of walls) and is inseparable from the space in which it is displayed. It is not transportable, not repeatable, not for sale, and not permanent; it cannot exist anywhere else but here and only for a specified length of time (the duration of this exhibition).

As suggested above, Sander's decision to use indoor/outdoor carpet was made after rather than before the fact, the fact being the architectural circumstances. Having been invited to explore the Museum's public spaces with her springtime Projects exhibition in mind, Sander chose to employ AstroTurf because of its physical, conceptual, and metaphoric capacity to speak to and isolate what Sander views as one of the Museum's defining spaces: the Garden Hall and Sculpture Garden, which first confronts most visitors to the Museum.

Like the Projects gallery itself, which to a lesser degree also functions as a point of passage isolated between the Garden Hall and cafeteria, Sander's carpet sculpture pinpoints — with the decisiveness of an

"X" which marks the spot — one of the Museum's most highly trafficked areas. It is also, as she says, the place where the Museum "presents" itself, where visitors must decide whether to ride the escalators to the galleries or to head for the cafeteria, to take in the current temporary exhibition or, in good weather, to linger in the Sculpture Garden. The carpet thus places the Museum itself — its architecture, art, audience, and spaces — on display. The blatantly artificial character of this material as well as its indoor/outdoor qualities extend the dialogue between culture and nature initiated in Philip Johnson's design of the Sculpture Garden, blurring the boundaries between the natural and the artificial, between sculpture and not-sculpture, and between inside and out. Its reflection in the glass wall which divides it confounds our perceptions further: what appears to be outside from one vantage, appears from another to be in, and vice versa.

Flowing between the Sculpture Garden and the Garden Hall, Sander's AstroTurf sculpture is a work which can be two places at once. Its vivid green surface suggests a continuous visual field, providing a perceptual connection between "in here" and "out there." At the same time, its artificial color contrasts with the natural greens of the trees and other plants in the Garden, emphasizing the fact that all of the latter are confined within the Garden's rectilinear boundaries and therefore, in a certain sense, not "natural" at all. Sander's sculpture, however, unlike the Garden's greenery, breaks the rectangular rule: it masks the grid of the Museum's marble floor, and introduces two sweeping curves into spaces largely defined by rigid verticals and horizontals.

By "collaging" synthetic and uniformly green carpeting over the subdued, variegated, gray tones of the marble floor, Sander stresses the difference between the two and at the same time humorously comments on the vast distance traveled since the days when marble reigned as sculptors' *sine qua non*. AstroTurf, most commonly associated with putting greens, sports arenas, backyard patios (or more recently, pre-Presidential pickup trucks), supplants marble, a material traditionally linked to images of monumentality, civic grandeur, and luxury.

The use of materials which seem perversely antithetical to fine art is, assuredly, one of the oldest tricks in the book of twentieth-century aesthetics and even Sander's particular choice of AstroTurf as a sculptural medium is not unprecedented (Vito Acconci, for instance, used it to cover his outdoor sculpture, *Face of the Earth*, in 1984). Yet Sander forces her "turf" to work on several levels, setting it up against not only the marble floor, but against the tradition of sculpture defined as an object in the world which displaces and occupies space (the one indisputable feature, for instance, which links all the various sculptural idioms displayed in the Sculpture Garden). Instead, Sander presents us with sculpture which is, in essence, defined by its support. By insinuating itself into the Sculpture Garden, Sander's work charts the distance traveled from the heroic, isolated individualism of Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (1897–98), set high on a pedestal, looking out rather than down, to the less commanding level of Picasso's *She-Goat* (1950), comprised from a diverse variety of objects and materials, and down still further to Sander's AstroTurf sculpture, sprawled across the floor like an enormous abstract color-field painting (Ellsworth Kelly's paintings and sculptures come to mind).

Since at least the 1960s, many things have come to be called "sculpture" which depart from previously defined, traditional notions. It is impossible, for instance, from our current perspective to view Sander's sculpture without thinking of Minimalist precedents, in particular Carl Andre's grid-like "plains" (large squares, begun in 1967, made up of multiple, one-foot square, metal plates) or of his statement that

the sculptural dimension of these virtually two-dimensional works consisted of the "air above them." Yet to compare Sander's work with Andre's (such as his *144 Lead Square* of 1969, on view in the Museum's galleries upstairs) is to discover as many differences as similarities.

Whereas Andre's metal plates are metaphors for industry, Sander's fake grass falls somewhere between landscape and not-landscape, between the thing itself and that which is signified. And whereas Andre presents us with what is, in effect, a closed system, Sander's work makes room not only for Rodin and Picasso but also for the steps and grates of the garden and inside, for escalators, columns, and windows as well. Its surface unity is repeatedly and intentionally violated. It is this profound sense of openness which sets Sander's work distinctly apart from Andre's. In a similar vein, while Andre intended people to walk on his floor pieces, how many of us have not hesitated before carefully stepping onto his cold metal plates? Sander avoids this problem by using a material which is far more familiar, inviting, and less intimidating, and by placing it squarely in the museum visitor's path. She presents us with a surface for activity, action, rest, and relaxation — an arena for the "sport" of museum-going in all its myriad aspects.

To Sander, the horizontal plane of the floor carries within it a potential as pedestal, an idea she has explored in other works (including a concrete floorpiece installed at the S. Bitter-Larkin Gallery in 1991). Although the carpet is manifestly beneath our feet and below our field of vision, in stepping onto it we realize immediately, if only subliminally, that we are in a different situation, raised slightly above the floor, assuming our own place in the sculptural dimension described by Andre, a space where "things" are presented, subtly transformed.

The openness to incidents of human movement, architectural structure, and functional detail evident in Sander's turf sculpture is equally evident in her polished *Wallpieces*, translated into a two-dimensional pictorial realm. As with her sculpture, Sander again takes her cues from preexisting circumstances: the location of the Projects gallery (which faces the Sculpture Garden), its white walls, and the innate capacity of white paint to reflect light. In this case, however, her process is subtractive rather than additive: rather than laying one material over another, Sander



Canvas Room. Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, 1992. Wall paint, canvas. Photo: Martin Lauffer



Floor. S. Bitter-Larkin Gallery, New York, 1991. Wood, concrete.
Photo: Martin Lauffer

burrows into the skin-thin surface of paint which covers the gallery's walls, grinding away with ever finer grades of sandpaper, eliminating all but the most microscopic traces of surface irregularities until she achieves a highly reflective sheen. Prosaic wall paint is coaxed into service as gesso, primer, and paint layer. The effect has an almost magical quality. Mysterious, evanescent images emerge as a result of mundane, repetitive gestures. Responding to the position of the viewer, they fleet across the highly polished surface of the wall and yet remain inextricably bound to it.

In German, the word "Wandstücke," meaning wallpiece, can allude to various traditional categories of painting, and indeed, the sheer whiteness of Sander's *Wallpieces* connects them to a long lineage of modernist art, from Kasimir Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918) to Robert Rauschenberg's White Paintings of 1951 (to which Sander's *Wallpieces* are most closely related), or more recently, to the work of Robert Ryman. Yet Sander's concerns lie not in transcendental geometries nor in exploring the potential of painterly surface, but rather, and in this sense similar to Rauschenberg, in creating a blank surface or screen subject to the vagaries of light and shadow. Both artists begin with white house paint (in Sander's case, gallery paint), applied with a roller. Rauschenberg, however, applied his paint to canvas, while Sander works with paint on a wall. And where Rauschenberg decided to leave the white paint surface "as is," Sander burnishes her white paint to a smooth and highly reflective sheen, creating surfaces in which we see not only shadows but clearly recognizable, albeit diffusely defined, images.

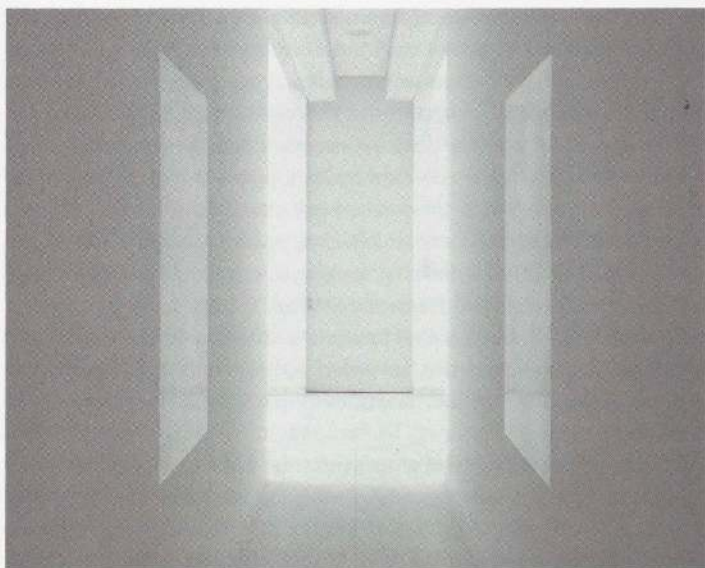
Because of their intimate alliance with architectural space and their dependence on light, perceptual phenomena, and the viewer's frame of reference for their effect, Sander's *Wallpieces* build upon, in some senses, the concerns of some California artists who emerged in the late 1960s, such as Robert Irwin. Both aim to draw attention to the visual complexity of given situations, even those of seemingly empty rooms. Yet whereas Irwin frequently employs translucent scrims to create subtly disorient-

ing, light-filled spaces which play with human eyesight's vulnerability to optical illusion, Sander's intent is less to disorient than to orient, to acquaint us with what she perceives as the defining aspects of an existing situation, through the simplest of means.

By polishing the walls of the Projects gallery, Sander seeks to "bring the outside in" and to extend what she describes as "painterly space" into the realm of three-dimensionality. Her intention is for the gallery walls to reflect not only elements internal to the gallery (floor, ceiling, lights, visitors) but also those which appear in the garden outside. The literal connection made between inside and outside by her turf sculpture is represented here in intangible, reflected form. Like the *Wallpieces* which flank a corridor in the Museum Abteiberg, these "paintings" trace an open-ended, three-dimensional space with an architectural and theatrical resonance. Similar to a Bertolt Brecht theater piece, Sander's polished *Wallpieces* insist on the incompleteness of the artwork without the active engagement of the viewer. They participate in a "situation" which, as defined by Michael Fried in his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," includes not only the work as object but the beholder as subject, a situation whose dynamic element resides in the beholder's gaze. The images which appear on Sander's walls are entirely dependent upon the viewer's position and angle of vision, and are thus subject to constant change.

All of Sander's work serves in one way or another to frame and contain, to momentarily capture and reflect light and space. If her art can be described as one of surfaces, it can equally be seen as an art of space which her surfaces define. Like much art being made today, it crosses the borders which our culture draws between aesthetic and non-aesthetic sectors, confounding and animating the constantly shifting divisions between what is within and what is without, between what is internal to and external to any given art object, social situation, or architectural space. In so doing, Sander's work both reflects what surrounds it, recasting the familiar in new and provocative relationships, and gives us something to reflect upon.

Anne Umland
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Wallpieces. Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, 1992. Polished wall paint. Photo: Martin Lauffer

biography

Born Bensberg, West Germany, 1957.

Lives and works in New York City and Stuttgart.

education

Studied at the Freie Kunstschule, Stuttgart (1979); the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Stuttgart (1981 – 87); and the Independent Study/Studio Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1989 – 90).

grants and fellowships

- 1994/95 Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart
Villa Romana, Florence
Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris
1992 Kunstfond Bonn
1989/90 DAAD Scholarship, New York

one-person exhibitions

- 1994 "Second Floor" Exhibition Space, Reykjavik, Iceland
Galería Juana Mordó, Madrid
1993 Kunstraum Neue Kunst, Hannover
1992 Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach
(catalogue essay by Hannelore Kersting)
1991 S. Bitter-Larkin Gallery, New York
1989 Galerie Ute Parduhn, Düsseldorf; Vera Engelhorn Gallery,
New York (two simultaneous exhibitions with
catalogue)
1988 Vera Engelhorn Gallery, New York (catalogue)

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Cover:

Wallpiece. Kunstmuseum Bonn, 1993. Polished wall paint. Photo: Achim Mohné

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