

Art is About Journeys That Take Place Only in the Mind.

HELMUT LANG In Conversation With Neville Wakefield.

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Neville Wakefield: What was the first significant work of art you encountered, and how did it affect you? **△ Helmut Lang:** It was a small work by Victor Brauner that I saw in Paris. In retrospect it was not his best, but at the time I was quite attached to it – I bought it. It was significant *for me*, but it was not a significant work of art. **△ NW:** Was there an identifiable art scene in Vienna at that time? **△ HL:** There was Arnulf Rainer, Herman Nitch, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Günther Brus, and others who were driving Viennese actionism forward on the potential of utter darkness. On the other hand, you had Franz West, Valie Export, Kurt Kocherscheidt, Walter Pichler, Maria Lassnig, Gironcoli, Franz Ringel – and later, Erwin Wurm. Most of them had a complicated relationship with each other, and one had to pick one or two artists – that was your family – which meant no access to the others. That local competition was one of the reasons why so many did not made it internationally back then; though Franz West broke the mold, and later more of them got recognized internationally. There was also a period were Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen lived in Vienna, and they clearly shook up everything – they disturbed the art scene with pleasure, and with a *joie de vivre* quite unlike any other. Also, Josef Beuys was around... **△ NW:** A lot of these artists had a very visceral relationship with the body. It was a site of contestation. When you started working in fashion, did you think of the body as a battleground; something caught between the dual needs of protection and display? **△ HL:** I never thought of the body as battleground, but I was thinking of display, improvement and protection, and exactly in that order. **△ NW:** While those pieces clearly referenced the idea of skin, the multiple layers also suggested to me the idea of dressings, in the sense of dressing a wound rather than dressing a person. You mentioned that Beuys was in and out of Vienna while you were there. Did any of his ideas about healing and the transfiguration of material find their way into your work? **△ HL:** I would think so. What one is now is just the sum of the life lived prior: I believe that [of myself], so the same must be true for my work. If you remember, the first artwork I did for my 2008 show at Kestnergesellschaft was called ‘surrogate skin’, which is somehow telling... **△** I actually never met Beuys personally, though the Director of the Academy of Fine Arts where I taught for three years or so (so did Franz West at the time, I think) was a very good friend of his, or so I was told. But now, as you are mentioning it: there is certainly an element of dressing, in terms of layering, in my work. It’s a cover up for a good reason, I would say. The practice of transfiguration and transformation is something I was born with. I did that already as a child – my family thought I was slightly awkward, but I could not be anything other than myself already, back then. **△ NW:** To what extent did the fact that you were alienated from the traditional structures of growing up – of paternal support and encouragement – affect your approach to work and materials? I’m thinking particularly of the idea of ‘fitting in’,

whether that might in the mold of fashion, or of art. **HL:** In short, it made me try harder to achieve something in life and to be a decent person. I think the idea of fitting in lasted only for a short moment. I realised in my early 20s that I don't have a family to rely on, and that I would be on my own. So the idea of 'fitting in' via my work and practice in the conventional sense was never an issue. This is part of my strength: an interest in working at the intersection of boundaries, and in being unafraid of breaking the mold, regardless of the consequences. **NW:** It's extremely hard to be a successful iconoclast, and yet that's what you achieved during your time in fashion, before eventually turning that same impulse – when you shredded your entire archive – in on your own achievement. Did you see that gesture as the natural conclusion of that impulse, or was it a way of clearing the way for a different type of aesthetic consideration? **HL:** I considered it, firstly, as raw material, and was intrigued by the idea that when its transformation was complete, it would be a very personal work of art (and subsequently, a very different kind of consideration). It is also 30 years of work that's contained in resin and pigment, so not unlike the idea of history being trapped in amber. **NW:** The other side of that history is that it seems that both the idea and the actuality of raw material have a draw for you, still – there's an undeniable materiality to the works that you've created since. How do you arrive at those choices? **HL:** I do everything in the studio by hand – nothing, for now, is produced in an industrial

manner. I believe the rawness gives it more character, especially as I am often monochromatic in colour; so texture and surface obstruction become important. How do I arrive there? I don't know, exactly. It's instinct and time, and the moment when I think it's interesting. **NW:** How did the sheepskins make it into your studio and work? **HL:** I had them lying around, and I wanted to repurpose them: they had an interesting surface to begin with, and I was curious to see where it might lead if I start to work with them. The first ones – the beds – were made in 2008, and I used the sheepskin to simulate soil; after that, I was intrigued enough to explore it further, and over the next 6 years the planes were made. **NW:** Were you thinking at all about the attendant mythology when they first appeared in your work? **HL:** No, I did not at all. I was much too preoccupied with the

process. **HL:** I am always interested in the human condition, both individual and global. Every interest or inspiration derives from there. **NW:** Yes, but what are the manifestations that drive this interest? After all, there's a huge difference between say the individual existential crisis represented by say the work of Francis Bacon, and the consumerism-driven world view of a pop artist such as Roy Lichtenstein... **HL:** For me it's neither of those; it's more an unconscious amalgamation of all of these things. I am a rather emotional observer, and within that varied stew of interests [both individual and global], something is happening I cannot explain. But it is something that acti-



vates, on the one hand, my selective memory – and it demands a reaction from me in life and in work, both of which are naturally inseparable for me. **NW:** Is the art, then, a manifestation of this unconscious collateral, and the creative process one of mining the things that can't truly be observed or given a voice? **HL:** Yes, and I basically cannot determine how I get there. Also: [art is about] journeys that take place only in the mind, and about explorations of un-lived emotions. Or else, an imaginary idea – one which I have not lived, and therefore which remains something waiting to be explored. **NW:** Do you see everything as being in some way biographical – as reaching back into repressed memories? Or is it something simple, more like the idea expressed by Joan Didion

when she opened *The White Album* with the sentence: “we tell ourselves stories in order to live”: that art is just one of those stories? **HL:** I assume it is part biographical and part repressed memory, but it is also the perception of emotions I have been longing for, so that they become part of my work. As Louise Bourgeois said, art keeps you sane (or something like that!). What I want to say, essentially, is that emotional desire is a driving force at times. **NW:** It also seems that there's an almost ritual aspect to what you do. The way that you encounter objects seems at first very cautious, but then once they have become part of your cosmology, you return to them repeatedly – almost as if they had acquired an emotional life of their own. **HL:** That is the case – but often, I also start quite brutally, as I have nothing to lose and then the recklessness pays off. But it is true that in both approaches that I go back repeatedly 'til I find the right form and texture, and often I let it sit for quite a while until I am sure I have nothing to add or to take away; until I have the feeling that the sculpture is strong enough to fight me back, and then it's the point to stop. **NW:** It is crucial, to me, to find that moment, and it is just as important as the starting point. What happens to me in that work process, intellectually and in terms of form, is that I approach a piece with an idea which is then condensed and layered, broken up, and then collected again, and finally, suddenly taken over – it becomes an interactive struggle with the work for balance between the importance of the form and the importance of the content. **NW:** there's

an almost animistic aspect to the way you approach form. A lot of the pieces carry a latent suggestion of skins, heads, phalluses and so on. Is your practice fundamentally figurative in this way? **HL:** It is not intentionally figurative, but if the subject matter requires it I will explore it. A lot of my new work is, in fact, rather abstract. Do I want to have it a soul? It's not necessarily that direct, but I definitely try imply different layers of meaning, so the sculpture is able to communicate on different levels. I actually overwork every piece numerous times to push it further – it is that effort that leads to creating something new. **NW:** You lead an extremely private life, and I'm curious as to how you deal with what might be the conflict between interiority – perhaps embodied in this idea of the 'soul' – and the increasingly strident needs of the art world? **HL:** I decided a long time ago to live at my own speed, even if it is at the cost of possible faster progress in the [art] system – it has worked well for me, and I am willing to continue in this way as art, especially is supposed to be timeless; it is not seasonal. Leading a private, anti-Instagram life is [important to me] because I think the work should be always more important than the personal cult for the public, even if this feels sometimes like pushing a rock uphill. It is worth it. You said once that art is one of the last places in culture where you have the right to fail in a successful way. If I fail at the required speed and in meeting the art world's strident needs – that's fine with me. I actually think [this failure] will benefit me, after all.