

*As he consolidates his life as an ARTIST, we talk to
EMIL LANGE about why his loss is felt so HEAVILY in fashion*

LIFE IS MADE OF EVER SO MANY PARTINGS WELDED TOGETHER

*photographs by JÜRGEN TELLER
interview by JO-ANN FURNISS*





In fashion there are a few deeply influential men of mystery. Some who have learned to become such creatures and have retreated from public life after their former full embracement of it; Calvin Klein is one such person. Some who have made impenetrability and mystery their very persona and, whether accidental or not, it has become part of their marketability, like Martin Margiela. Then there is another kind who use their name but never their personal life, presenting at times an inscrutable surface but always with the person tantalisingly close beneath it. In this latter category I would say is Helmut Lang.

It is this balance that made Helmut Lang intriguing and successful as a designer. He seemed to know how to make himself and what he did into a brand while preserving the person – and that is in relation both to himself and to the people he sold to. It is why, and perhaps now more than ever, people mourn his departure from fashion and hold on tightly to his clothes. In the tenth anniversary issue of *Homme+*, five years ago, Helmut Lang was the magazine's primary focus. It was a grand summing up of the impact the designer had made, particularly in menswear. Now, after resigning from his label almost four years ago, the landscape is very different; if anything, this piece is part memorial for his loss from fashion, but on the other hand it is part celebration for his moving on.

And as for Helmut Lang the person? Being out of that world seems to suit him very well. It is 9th September 2008: we are sitting in his studio on Spring Street, New York, just across the road from where his store used to be, and I have never seen him look as well or as confident. He is 52 this year and yet could be ten years younger. He is untouched by the overinflated hubbub of New York Fashion Week, which is taking place at the time – still to the calendar he set when he decided to show earlier in that city. Now, ten years after he made the permanent move to work in New York and, as he says, 'my life developed so that every ten years I have been pushed in a different direction', he has embarked on another venture, this time in the art world.

After starting designing without any formal training in Austria in 1977, Helmut Lang first showed in Paris in 1986, with his combined presentation of both menswear and womenswear collections (something that had never occurred before) starting a year later.

He entered the Duran Duran video cliché of a high-octane world, dripping in money and bristling with shoulder pads. What he presented had absolutely nothing to do with the prevailing aesthetic, mood or even time. As Anna Wintour pronounced in 2000: 'Helmut came along and at first it was, "Wait a moment, what's this? This is not in the spirit of the mid-Eighties," which was all about opulence. But then everything crashed and fashion reflected that and Helmut was there to take advantage.' Somehow Helmut Lang had already formulated the correct conclusion to the excesses of the Eighties, right in the thick of them. He was essentially divining and designing the future.

As everything comes crashing down again I cannot help but think, has Helmut Lang once again interpreted what is to come in his art work? The 'everything must go' quality of what are in large part the chopped-up fittings from his former shop in SoHo do not just have some autobiographical import but mean something bigger. The gigantic eagles have been beheaded, the mirror ball is smashed in front of the ghostly fashion shows played on the glass of the 'Scéance de Travail' piece, originally conceived for the 'Louise Bourgeois. Jenny Holzer. Helmut Lang' show in 1998. It is almost a premonition of his own poltergeist presence in the fashion industry ten years later. For Helmut Lang's presence through his absence as a designer in this world is felt more keenly than ever. And this was what much of the talk consisted of at Kestnergesellschaft in Hanover at the exhibition's vodka-soaked opening on 29th August. But there is also something else, something menacing in the rusty industrial 'maypole' and the membranous-looking 'surrogate skins' on the wall, the weird rubber bumper reliefs and little shallow graves of coated sheepskin. When Helmut Lang first showed me this work it was pictured at night in the woods of his Long Island home and then it definitely had a kind of Blair Witch, neo-pagan feel to it, although it could also be neo-Luddite. It is almost like artefacts reconfigured from the remnants of a long-lost industrialised society. Although as he says now, laughing, 'I am not walking the dark side like you!' He continues: 'I have had so many dealings with the human form and I am getting inspiration from the human condition. I am using less high-tech materials to explore those ideas but I might use something more high-tech in the future. I thought to use such materials to explore the contemporary human condition was not too obvious, was more interesting and gave more

room for personal interpretation. I did not want it to be a closed code.'

It certainly gives a different idea as to what he has been up to in the shed on his Long Island retreat these past few years. Admittedly I am quite fascinated by the idea of a wild reclusiveness, but that's my fevered imaginings rather than facts attached to Helmut Lang (I had actually seen and spoken to him on a number of occasions for a start and he did not have wild hair and extra-long fingernails either, but humour me here). At first there seemed to be a slightly OCD 'Howard Hughesian' documentation of his past emerging. At one point I was sent a document that contained scans of thousands of personal thank you notes to Helmut over the years, all neatly catalogued. Then Bruce Weber's pictures emerged of Helmut in the setting of his own pastoral idyll hugging chickens and geese. Almost Marie Antoinette as a make-believe shepherdess on her toy farm retreat, although I am sure, played for laughs (he is far from stern and humourless). And now? He is certainly sick of the 'House and Gardens' Marie Antoinette schtick, there is something very determined in his demeanour; he's far more Theodore Kaczynski, The Unabomber, and the Hanover show with its wide media coverage could be the manifesto. He was even pictured on the front of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* alongside Barack Obama – and with equal weight – on the day his show opened. And yet he did not attend his own opening. 'I always hated that part of doing the fashion shows, the aftermath when I would see everybody,' he explains. 'So I am really reluctant to do it now.' As that famous recluse Thomas Pynchon has said: 'My belief is that "recluse" is a codeword generated by journalists... meaning "doesn't like to talk to reporters".' Or as Helmut himself explains his thinking over these last few years: 'I wanted time for myself to work on my new pieces. I did not want the pressure of a deadline from the public. I did get the impression from people that I was genuinely missed; it did not feel right to say absolutely nothing, so I would do a small thing here or there. But in the end I knew I had to put myself first to be able to do the work that reflected what I wanted. And not fulfil the need to tell everyone exactly what I was doing and exactly where I stood with everything at certain points throughout that time.' Now, however, Lang is doing a tremendous amount of interviews – perhaps more than at any time during his past career as a designer – around the final unveiling of his latest art work. There

is a definite method to this contradictory madness; free of the hamster-wheel mechanism of fashion designing, it is one of his being in complete control and doing exactly what he wants to do when he wants to do it.

As his long-time friend and documenting photographer, Juergen Teller, says, 'This is an evolutionary process for Helmut and it will open him up to do other things. He will become more and more free - he already has his next moves planned, I am sure.' Having met by chance in 1991 'in a public toilet in Vienna where he fell in love with me!' laughs Teller, the photographer and designer started their working collaboration in earnest in 1993 with Teller's first backstage photographs. 'Hardly anybody did backstage photography at the time and yet it was all there for me with Helmut, all of these fantastic models and clothes,' he explains. 'There was also an immediate bond between us because we literally spoke the same language - there were not so many German-speaking people in fashion then. It almost felt inevitable that I continue to do these pictures. Instead of "doing a fashion story", it felt the most pure and intelligent way of looking, to document. I have an incredible respect for Helmut; he seemed the most modern designer there was. As a friend I know how happy he is now. Going back and editing those pictures, many of which have never been seen before, seeing just how timeless what he did was, part of me wishes he had still continued as a designer. And that is apart from my personal response of I'd have something to wear!'

Looking at those pictures now, they really seem as if they could have been taken yesterday. The clothing has none of the odd glitches of detail that scream its age and it is more and more evident that there is a void still to be filled after the disappearance of Lang's style of modern classicism. When asked about this the former designer, who is never nostalgic about anything, answers simply, 'I think time is really determining that weight basically. It's something you set out for, to be a contributing important voice, but you can't determine it - only time will determine it.'

In fact the designer is supremely philosophical about the past and always has been. It is testament to his own strength of character and his constant ability to do what he thinks is right. And it is this that is informing his present work. 'I think naturally life and time is like a constant evolution so there's no way you can just

hold a moment or a day because it just moves on after that. Life is inevitably connected with death and it's a cycle in itself. I think that every cultural or social evolution is something that is basically a given circumstance and I think that you cannot oppose it. You can question it, of course, and I think that that's what one should do, and just find your own way... The only way to move things forward, to move oneself forward, is to do whatever comes to you. I think the other idea that things don't change at all also means that there would be no new opportunities or ideas and the whole concept of life would not work. Because you always look for something, or hope for something, you lock into something. If you cannot hold the good side of it you cannot hold the bad side of it either.'

In many ways it seems that Lang learned this approach to life from his upbringing, which appears to have made him incredibly strong-willed and never shackled to the past. When I first met and interviewed the designer in New York in July 2001, he had talked something of this then. The artist Louise Bourgeois, a close friend of Helmut Lang's and sometime collaborator, had said of him that he liked New York because he is 'a runaway'. When asked about this he replied: 'We've never discussed it so I don't know exactly what she means. But like a lot of people who come to New York, I am running away from a place I did not want to be, so in that sense yes. But you know, I think it is a really good thing to do. There are a lot of people in Austria who have decided to stay there and fight and they are unhappy all their lives. I think that was a solution which I couldn't consider. I think that the good thing about Vienna is that you encounter everything emotional, and weird, and mean. Basically, if you survive that training, you can go anywhere. It's not a problem, it has its good side, I don't want to trash it, it just doesn't have enough good sides for me.'

Helmut Lang was born in Austria in 1956, a year after the Allies left the country. His parents divorced when he was less than a year old and he was sent to live with his maternal grandparents in Ramsau am Dachstein, a small village in the Austrian Alps. Some years later his mother died and his father remarried. This resulted in the young Helmut, then ten years old, leaving the mountain retreat and going to live with his father and new stepmother in Vienna. Then began a period which he has described as 'the unhappiest in my life'. From ten to 18, Lang was forced to wear the suits

(and even hats) of his stepmother's father, a Viennese businessman. He would have to wear them to school and around the house. When Helmut Lang turned 18 he left home and never spoke to either of his parents again.

This remarkable, almost Dickensian upbringing has stood Lang in good stead. As he says, 'There are actually not many things that you cannot get something good out of later.' And his formal aesthetic in fashion was certainly shaped from this time. His time as a one-man Gilbert and George, or as he puts it, 'I felt like Edward Scissorhands,' set him apart and seemed to make him absolutely understand his own identity and what he truly wanted to do. 'It is the sum of your experiences that gives you the widest range of possibilities,' he explains. 'You can look at things from a variety of angles and use your own judgement especially if you go through changing times as we are now. That is the run of things. If you really have your own identity you will keep on doing what you think is really right for you and you will also understand the next step you want to take. It will all fall in the correct context. You can only influence what you really want to do, not the time that you are doing it. The time to judge you will come later.'

At a time when we are moving from an imaginary recession to a real one, from imagined hard times to real ones, it is always useful to listen to a brilliant individual thinker like Helmut Lang - a man who has had and used his fair share of them after all - and to take inspiration from what he says and does. 'I think times which are not so favourable, normally times that are difficult, create opportunities. If you're not too afraid of the change then I think it actually inspires you to just pursue certain things. I think it's also sometimes, maybe, when everything is too easily available, it is more difficult to formulate your own voice. Everything becomes very easy-going and you know there is nearly too much of everything. I think a certain restrictive environment of possibilities often produces very very great ideas.'

So what great ideas are you going to do next?

'I am going to do exactly what I want to do next!'

Alles Gleich Schwer will be on view at the Kastnergesellschaft, Hanover until 2nd November 2008. Absolut.com/helmutlang will be on view until 31st December 2008