



THE ONLY REALLY INTERESTING IDEAS ARE THOSE WHICH ARE UNFASHIONABLE

Helmut Lang redefined the modern face of fashion before taking on a new challenge, now he is an art star and this is his turn to shine

TEXT CHARLIE PORTER
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HELMUT LANG WANTS TO CHANGE EVERYTHING. IT IS MID-JUNE, AND HE IS A MONTH AWAY FROM THE DEADLINE FOR HIS FIRST MAJOR ART SHOW, WHICH WILL OPEN IN HANOVER LATE IN AUGUST. SINCE HE QUIT FASHION IN 2005 AND SET UP HL-ART, HE HAS BEEN WORKING SOLELY AS AN ARTIST. IT IS THREE YEARS SINCE HIS FIRST FULLY PUBLIC OUTING, YET THE WORK IS STILL NOT SETTLED. CHANGES NEED TO BE MADE, SO CHANGES WILL HAPPEN.

"It's normal, that's how I work, I guess," he says. "I do something that is interesting to pursue and when I'm nearly there I feel it's not strong enough. Then I just start all over again. I find there is one second of panic when you realise it has to be done, but also it's reassuring because it means it's possibly on the right track." We are sat in his office in SoHo, New York, the same space that used to serve as his design studio. The floor below us houses his archive of clothes, but here on the white lightbox-like work benches sits a scaled version of the museum, miniatures of Lang's larger installations already in place – a large mirror piece in one room, a maypole sculpture in another. Lang has been working on his art throughout his career in fashion, but never had the time to commit to it properly. "I did it always, and in the last years I wanted to do it more, but it was just impossible to do," he says. "To be one of the ten or twelve important designers out there, that's a full-blown job. You can't really do serious stuff on the side. So one has to make a choice." That use of the word 'serious' – is one more important than the other? "It's different," he says. "In terms of the approach I take in doing either, I take both equally serious, and give my full attention. I always felt that whatever I did I had to do it as long as possible until it feels right to me and I have exhausted all possibilities at that point for a piece to be strong enough and stand on its on. I have always functioned that way, leaving outcome and implications unprecedented."

Only one of the pieces in the exhibition was made during his fashion career – a large mirror installation which he made for a joint exhibition with Jenny Holzer and Louise Bourgeois in 1998. The rest has been made since Lang left his label, a period he describes as "gaining time" to quieten the public noise that followed his exit. "When I left fashion, everybody was just asking what was I going to do now, would I do it again, blah blah," he says. "You can only say so often, 'I'm not doing much'. I just wanted time to do things quietly and not in the public eye." This remove also allowed Lang to reconvene his own thoughts. "You need a break for yourself to think differently," he says. "I spent most of the time on Long Island and worked there because you're out of that immediate urban centre. It allowed me to not be in my usual surroundings which also makes me think and do things differently."

For some of this time, Lang was literally doing nothing. "It was nice to take a short break to begin with," he says. "It was necessary to get out of the usual system to not think in the same routine. You get used to a certain kind of procedure so I just needed to reset myself, then I just wanted to continue with

my artwork. I started already but quietly without being immediately exposed. I think you need time to prepare. So I took it slow and developed it. I just needed to experiment and not think that I only have three months to work on that." No more four times-yearly catwalk requirements for women's and menswear combined, Lang was now free. In this period he worked on two art projects, *The Long Island Diaries* and *The Selective Memories Series*. Then, last year, he had three offers that kick-started him into more public action. First, he collaborated with New York art magazine *the journal*. Then came the chance to show the same work in their gallery in Brooklyn. The same day, the invite arrived to show at the *kestnergesellschaft* in Hanover. "I thought I should probably just start showing now. I could take another year, or I could just start. Sometimes a deadline is OK, I hate to admit."

Crucially, Lang is not engaging in art as a retreat, but as a new form of communication. He has no problems with making his art public. "If I'm doing something, I think it's good if the work gets some dialogue with the audience," he says. "Somehow I think the feedback is good. It pushes your work further, it needs that communication. Otherwise you just do it for yourself, forever, which doesn't make sense. I think you do it for yourself until you're done with it and then you want it to leave."

Initially, the *Kestnergesellschaft* suggested that Lang show an overview of his career in fashion. "They originally asked if I wanted to do a retrospective," says Lang. "And I said I wasn't interested. I said I have new work, they said fine, and that was that." Lang says he knew the name of the show immediately. Called 'Alles Gleich Schwer', it loosely translates in English as 'Everything Has The Same Weight'. "Don't ask me why, but the title was clear to me," he says. "Alles Gleich Schwer means everything has the same importance or equal weight, and it goes for every angle of life, from social and demographic to questions of what is right or not right. I like these three words. It's good in German, but in English you have to explain it more."

What's missing from the English translation is a sense of personal reflection. In German, the words seem to hold for Lang an unspoken sense of equilibrium, for what seems right to him. With the shift away from clothing, Lang has more possibilities for exploring his thoughts. "I can use the knowledge I have of humans, but I don't have to work with the restraint of the human body, or of movement," he says. "It's basically free. There are different materials that you can work with that do different things. Some of the research for designing can be used and produced as objects. It's different and it makes it interesting at the moment. The outcome is not foreseeable, but basically it's extremely personal, which I like."

What made his exit from fashion such a shock was that his work in fashion still felt extraordinarily new, as if he'd just started out. Born in rural Austria in 1956, Lang first started making clothes in Vienna for himself, and then his friends in the local artistic community, in 1977. At that point, the international fashion shows were nascent, in no way like the industry that exists today. Ready-to-wear was a relatively new concept, usually agreed to have been invented by Yves Saint Laurent with his *Rive Gauche* line in 1966. It wasn't until Lang was thirty that he started showing at Paris fashion week in 1986, and even then he retained his home in Vienna to maintain his outsider status. His label grew in size and influence until, during the late-nineties boom in conglomerates buying up fashion and luxury labels, Prada Group bought Helmut Lang. The collections continued, expansion ensued, and then he walked away. It showed that Lang had wilful independence ingrained in him long before the preconceptions of the fashion industry.

I ask him if, by doing art, he is freed from the pressure of commerce. "I think quite frankly, fashion-wise, the most pressure was actually during the first 15 years after I started, to basically survive," he says. "That's the real pressure, and after that it all made sense, it went incredibly well."

That Lang still cares about fashion is clear. At one point, I refer to fashion as "silly". Lang doesn't even let me get to the end of my sentence. "No, it's not,"

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Helmut Lang, self portrait, 2007.

he says. "It can be, everything can be. I don't think *it's* silly. That is one cliché perception. You can't meld everything together, one shoe really doesn't fit everybody." What follows is an impassioned defence of fashion as I've ever heard. "I think it's very important, and clothes are extremely important, and the whole social communication thing is on every level important. I think it's also very complicated to do it right, to fabricate and get the proportions and everything right, and it needs tremendous knowledge. It's an incredible procedure. I think it's completely underrated if it's done really well. I wouldn't even judge this against anything else. It doesn't make one better or one worse. It's just a different thing."

The relief here is that Lang has not quit fashion because he is disillusioned with it. In fact, it's the opposite. He cares about it too much to work in ways that he does not agree with. Since he came into fashion by chance, he has always wanted to pursue art properly, it makes sense for him to flick the switch and see what comes from a different pace and a different mood. The strength and clarity of his opinion also reminds the fashion world what it has lost. "I don't think I have ever accepted to do anything else than what I felt I had to do," he says. "Very early I started to grow on my own. I was very young and basically worked for myself. I started fashion by accident and at the beginning I wasn't sure. It took me a long time to think, what am I really doing here? But somehow it worked out really well. I was always able to live and work and do what I wanted to do because I believed in it."

Does he feel freer now? "I feel as free as I always did," he says. "What I like is that I'm able to express whatever I have to express in different proportions, in a different form, in a different context which is basically not necessarily restricted to the human body. This seems new for me because the rest I can do it blind." By the rest, he means channel his ideas into clothing. "I also think it's possible to do it on a more intimate scale and I like that. It can be quite personal and I like the idea that what you do can also eventually be presented in different locations. It feels contemporary in the best sense, and that's really what I want to do right now, I guess for the rest of my life."

Isn't there also the intimacy of him creating one piece of art, rather than a multiple-produced item of clothing? "I feel better if there is less volume than a lot of volume," he says, starting a thought process that unexpectedly flips into an insight as to why he quit. "It's ecologically more responsible than anything else. It's not an exact reason why I wanted to stop, but it seemed also it's an excessive volume. I'm not against the volume, but fashion involves so many things that you have less time to do what you really started out to do, which is the creative part."


What Lang means here is the dichotomy between what is seen on the catwalk, and then what is known as the selling collection, the commercial range, which makes up most of what is eventually sold in store. Alongside the cruise and resort collections which currently obsess the industry, it means the work seen on the catwalk is increasingly irrelevant. "The creative part is what I'm really interested in," he continues, "I didn't want to let that go from me and I guess that's what I've defended all my life." I say to him that, in terms of volume, those who bought his clothes are still able to wear his T-shirts, sweater, shirts, suits, and again the conversation unexpectedly changes course, even if the path is cryptic. "Yeah, sure, I wear mine," he says. "We'll see how time goes on, but it's not unusual in art and fashion and music. I just heard yesterday Naomi Campbell and Victoria Beckham are doing a project together so everything's possible really." He appears to be talking about crossovers, in working in more than one genre. My translation: watch this space. Don't ask him when, don't ask him how, don't be downhearted if it never happens again, but watch this space.

After his Campbell/Beckham revelation, he continues to discuss his drive. "I think the important part is that, in a positive sense, I've just tried to fight all my life to be able to be myself, and I will continue to do so." I say to him that it seemed towards the end of his fashion career, he was becoming even more liberated. The final collection I saw, menswear Spring/Summer 05, had the models clomp around in clogs, some patent, some extraordinarily spined like a dinosaur vertebrae. The ideas bounded forth: this was not the work of a man dejected. "No. I told you, it's one of the most difficult jobs you can do when you try to do it well," he says. "It's something I know I do really well, I could do it anytime again, it's just that it involves so many aspects to be able to sustain it all the time. It would take away from the original idea, which is to really take time to make it be exactly what you want it to be. I just want to maintain that, whatever I do."

The past few paragraphs are pretty much how the conversation flowed. After our staccato start, the talk had taken on a warm rhythm. I was aware, though, that the talk was of fashion. But then I realised that as a subject, fashion was

more natural to talk about. His art has an absolute air of mystery about it – the pieces are not there to be defined. Fashion, however, is a subject that demands conversation. "I think clothes are probably easier to talk about," he says, "because I worked in it for quite a long time, and then everybody's opinionated today. I guess one feels sillier to say 'why is it like this about art, why does it do that?' It just doesn't make the same sense."

I also realise that, aside from wanting a sense of his relationship with both art and fashion, I just wanted to find out from meeting him how he was feeling, if he was OK. "The feeling is assuring," he says. "I'm used to coming from the outside. I always work this way. It's not unfamiliar to me. And it's definitely intriguing. After working in fashion for so long of course it's intriguing." Indeed at the heart of our conversation, Lang talks about his feelings about himself and his situation. To him, this is all intuitive. "It's quite uncomplicated," he says. "I think because I'm uncomplicated with it, I think people are also uncomplicated with it." And if they aren't, that's more their perception. "That happened with the clothes," he says. "I'd do something from a completely different angle, and then it went out there, and they'd say that it came from here. The clothes might be inspired by some insect or bug, and then they'd say, 'ah, great sado-masochistic reference'. Or whatever. So what the heck. I basically know why things are happening so I'm not concerned about that at all." For Lang, this is life being lived. However much we would like to define it, he's found a way of avoiding being tied down. "I got to this point without having an exact plan," he says. "If in retrospect it all seems so clear that as if it had been planned, it never has been. It is always after when one looks back it makes complete sense."

And so he heads off on this new path, with whatever risks that might entail. "This is what I do now, and I give it exactly that weight, and then we'll see." He says. "If hopefully I get really old we can talk again, look back and see what happened." 

helmutlangstudio.com



