





## HELMUT LANG

IN CONVERSATION WITH HANS ULRICH OBRIST

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PORTRAIT BY JUERGEN TELLER

**Helmut Lang** is one of the most enigmatic and complex figures in contemporary fashion. A master who dominated the minimal and androgynous 1990s, he was famous for the rigour and discipline of his designs. The fashion people's fashion designer, Lang no longer designs clothes – although the brand carrying his name continues – a fact much mourned by connoisseurs who talk wistfully of his fit, which remains unmatched. Here he talks to Hans Ulrich Obrist about where his new creative freedom has led him.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** I wanted to talk about the exhibition you recently opened in Hanover at the legendary Kestnergesellschaft. Obviously, it's very big. What is the show's concept and how did it come about?

**Helmut Lang:** There was not really a concept to begin with. I gave myself the working title *Alles Gleich Schwer* [roughly, "Everything has equal weight"], which I thought worked well because it is about the creative equality of work, somehow, the importance of mastering every process one is interested in, regardless of what one is attempting to achieve. I also liked the idea that on a democratic level everybody's work is equally respected. When everything about the exhibition was more or less determined, I also thought it would be a good title to give people a general thinking tool, to help them consider what kind of weight they actually want to contribute to everything that concerns them in this changing world. I think we live in tremendously changing times, and I think that one has to undertake one's own evaluation of what is important.

**HUO:** This is not your first move into exhibitions; you've worked a lot with art. It does mark a new chapter, though, because as it says in the press release, it is "a move away from the physical body's articulation through clothes" into something else, which is more installation, more art practice. How did this transition happen? Is it something you have thought about for a long time or is it something that suddenly came into the work?

**HL:** No, it was very gradual. I've always related clothes to their artistic environments. I often say that I landed in fashion by accident and that the clothes came with me. That said, I have always worked with art in much smaller ways. I think the first bigger thing I did was in 1996 with Jenny Holzer at the Florence Biennale, where I presented a scent installation.

**HUO:** I remember – that was Germano Celant's pioneering exhibition, which brought fashion designers and artists together. Can you tell me about the installation you did?

**HL:** At the time, we were not sure what it was supposed to be. We thought it was a general account of where fashion and art stood at that time. I thought that Jenny Holzer could be someone interesting to work with, and we both wanted to do it, but we also both wanted to be as smart as possible about it and not just exhibit

a dress and a piece of art. So, we worked together on a poem about the human condition, and I created a scent which represented the smell a human being leaves behind either in a room or on a piece of clothing. The smell evoked the feeling you had for this person; that was the idea at the time.

**HUO:** So this collaboration with Jenny was really your first installation?

**HL:** Yes, that was the first. Later, we worked together on a project in my stores and did other collaborations as a way to see each other and exchange thoughts. Shortly after, there was exhibition with Louise Bourgeois, Jenny Holzer and me in Kunsthalle Vienna; I think in 1998. In that exhibition I did the *Séance de Travail* piece, which is also now shown in *Alles Gleich Schwer* as a retrospective piece.

**HUO:** At that time I was editing a book of Louise Bourgeois' writings and letters, so I saw her quite a lot. At a certain moment she started telling me a lot about you, and that she had met you, so I was wondering how you became friends.

**HL:** I met Louise and there was an immediate feeling that we could talk to each other; I think we were both curious to know more about each other, and that has not changed over all these years.

**HUO:** Can you tell me more about *Séance de Travail*?

**HL:** It is a projection of a slightly manipulated compilation of fashion shows for the 1993-1999 seasons, put in a two-colour context and projected onto a big mirror. The interactions of the reflections collapse into one single plane. From the moment the viewer looks into the mirror he can see himself and becomes part of the artwork itself, but he also becomes part of the observation. When this piece was originally made in 1998, a fashion show was a rather exclusive thing, and the general public was completely excluded from it; in this piece the viewer is where all the cameras would normally be, where all of the images are being transported out. The viewer is merging with it, but is also reflected in it, and in 1998, this breaking down of exclusivity and the viewer's own reflection was interesting. We changed the colour for the Kestnergesellschaft from a very strong red to a very soft pale rose, but otherwise it's the same piece.

**HUO:** In Vienna in 1998, the installations you were developing were a parallel activity – almost a parallel reality – to your work in fashion. It seems that something has changed, and that ideas of art and installations have gained a much bigger place in your work. It is now exactly 10 years since the show in Vienna and your new solo show somehow marks an arrival in the world of exhibitions. Do you feel like you have left the world of fashion completely or is it still a parallel reality?

**HL:** I have outgrown the world of fashion as I know it; I would not



take it up in the same form. Art has always been a thread grounding my life and I decided at one point to pick it up and to act seriously on it. For a short time I thought it was possible to do both fashion and art seriously, but if you want to do it really well you have to dedicate yourself to one medium, and then eventually you can cross over, once in a while, in a collaborative effort. I just had to make a decision – and I chose art.

**HUO:** Did something change with this installation in Hanover from your previous installations?

**HL:** After I decided to concentrate on my artwork, it took me nearly three years to find my life there, to formulate and experiment, and give it all the time it needed. I felt the need to present something that I would feel very confident about.

**HUO:** It would be great for the readers to hear about the new pieces and the chronology, how it happened from one piece to the next and how it was triggered. What was the working process?

**HL:** I can tell you a little bit about the rooms. The first room, where the *Séance de Travail* piece is, there's also a piece I showed at the end of 2007 at the Journal Gallery in New York. They asked me at the same time as the Kestnergesellschaft, and I thought it would be a good idea to do one small thing before the big show here. I used a found object, a huge mirror ball, as raw material, and I treated it with different media. The idea behind it was about the Janus mythology, the idea that we live in a world with the internet where we are all connected, and where we are all observing and watching, and in return are being observed and watched. I thought that this multi-mirrored object would be a good metaphor for that kind of communication. In the next room are some pieces I have

been working on over the past two and a half years, called *Surrogate Skins*, and which I would call "flat works". They are made up of many layers and each layer is differently treated, presenting a different prospect, or has different content on it. They start to have their own life as you make them, and they accumulate in such a way that you could actually stop at any point. The last layer, which goes on top of it, is the skin layer, which makes all the other layers invisible. I wanted to achieve a piece that was not within the classical framework of a painting, a sculpture or an installation. It's interesting to me to actually find new forms or new media to express what I would like to express.

**HUO:** What is the process when you work on an installation as complicated as this one? Do you make drawings beforehand? Is the practice of drawing important?

**HL:** No, not really. I don't think drawing was even important for me in fashion.

**HUO:** So you didn't make drawings of your collections, either?

**HL:** Only at the very beginning of my career. I start my art with some materials and a lot of ideas, and I explore them both equally and try to find the right balance between the content and form. There is not a determined idea at the beginning of the work; there is just an idea of material and texture and eventual outcome.

**HUO:** Let's move on in our tour through the exhibition. What's next?

**HL:** In the same room as the *Surrogate Skins* are things made out of vintage oak beams filled with a layer of sheepskin; you could call them "plant beds". I like the idea that these "beds" collapse into the same idea, in that they have both life and death at their core

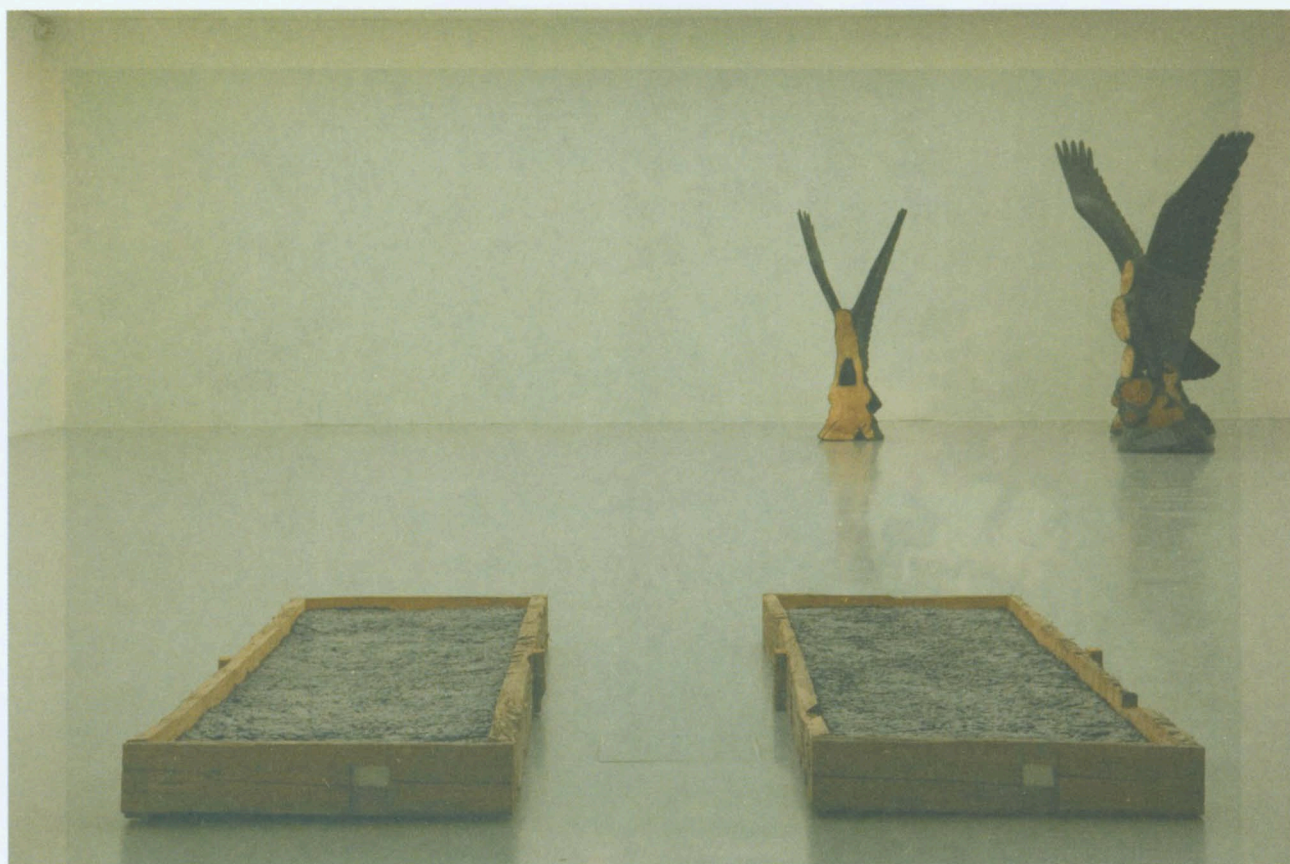




Séance de Travail 1993-1999 (1998)

two paintings: a landscape and a portrait. The last room also another one from the 'Séance de Travail' series. The last room has a gate illuminated by a bright light source.





Front: *Life Forms* (2008), back: *Three* (2008)

so they really engage with the idea of the creation of existence. Each one is like a life form in itself. I got really interested in the duality and also the sameness of the idea. In the same room there is a piece called *Three*, which is also made out of found objects used as raw material. They used to be eagles, which you probably saw in the New York store. Each of them is made out of one piece of mahogany, and what was interesting was that they have such a traditional and explosive content and are highly ornate. As a sculpture they don't have a pre-implemented purpose; they are open to other interpretations.

**HUO:** It is interesting that they appeared in the shop before the show. I lived in Paris until 2005 or 2006 and I had the feeling that your shop was always a laboratory for exploring your interest in art. You used to exhibit lots of different artists, but you also experimented yourself.

**HL:** When I was designing the store I never liked the idea of a decorated window. I thought the entrance should be a place to give you ideas, a place to experiment.

**HUO:** Are there any more pieces in the exhibition?

**HL:** In room number three there is a massive installation, which is drawn from the maypole. I can't explain exactly why I'm so drawn to the maypole. I think it's a formal opportunity; it carries horizontal and vertical communication and I like that its symbolic aspect goes in both directions. It's the idea of connection – it evokes connections between people, or the circle of nature. Also in this room are two paintings called *Network*, which are made out of lace, and also another one from the *Surrogate Skins* series. The last room has a gate installation and some sculptures made out of recycled

or manufactured bumpers. They are about the idea of end pieces, but also pieces that have a history of impact or abuse and are also protective. For me it's also a way to find new surfaces outside of the classical frame, so to speak, a replacement form for the classical requirements of painting or sculpture or installation.

**HUO:** You've created this project in Hanover, and so many other things, but are there still unrealised projects that are too big? Are there any as yet unbuilt Helmut Lang roads?

**HL:** No, I think I am quite dedicated to art right now.

**HUO:** Have you ever thought about venturing into architecture? In fashion and artwork, have architecture and design ever been an issue?

**HL:** Surroundings are always an important issue. I never intended to be an architect but I'm very specific about my surroundings – they are quite important for one's state of mind and I'm respectful of the energy they can create. I think if you are a visual person, surroundings automatically become part of your material.

**HUO:** Now that you have left the fashion world and are so focused on art, what is your view on fashion? Do you still look at it? Fashion designers working with artists – something you pioneered early on – are now widespread; almost every brand now works with a contemporary artist. How do you see the fashion world in 2008 or have you just stopped looking at what's happening?

**HL:** I look on fashion like I look on everything else. Now I can look at fashion completely without feeling competitive, which makes it a much nicer experience. I will soon be preparing a project for the Deste Foundation in Greece, which will involve some level of





Left to right: *Tor* (2008), *Untitled* (2008), *Untitled* (2008), *Surrogate Skin #5* (2008)

curation of fashion and art work; so yes, I follow fashion as much as I follow everything else, like political, ecological and cultural issues. Of course, I have years of experience, so it just takes me a second to see what's going on.

**HUO:** I am also curious about cities. We first met in Vienna in the early 1990s. It's an unlikely base for a fashion designer or an artist, which is why exile is frequent. I am Swiss and it's the same in Switzerland; it's the small country thing that pushes artists into exile. In the 1990s you were fascinated by Paris, but now you live in New York. Can we talk a little bit about these cities: what Vienna, Paris and New York mean to you?

**HL:** Those three cities are the most important ones in my life, as they represent three different urban environments that have always been important for my work. Vienna actually has good artistic quality and, in retrospect, it was a rather good environment to start. The environment there feels very critical and also somehow local, and it sent me, as you put it, into exile. Then I chose Paris to present my work from 1986 onwards, so for a while Vienna was where I did most of my work and Paris was where I presented and discussed it.

**HUO:** Vienna has produced some amazing artists of our time, like Maria Lassnig, the Vienna Actionists and Franz West. But in its narrowness it is also slightly claustrophobic. What was it like in your childhood or adolescence?

**HL:** I think that if you are in an environment like Vienna, it will either silence you or you will somehow find yourself in a counter-movement. As you say, exile is partly a reaction, an attempt not to be overwhelmed by the local situation. It is a good ground from which to formulate your voice. I loved being there and it was only

in mid-1997 that I decided to move away from Vienna. I was always travelling, always between two places, and originally I thought I would move to Paris, where I had lived for nearly two years. But then I started to go to New York more often. Paris had become kind of convenient, because I knew everything and everybody – it had become like a bigger version of Vienna. So New York was the bigger challenge, and I took it and I have not regretted it so far. It was the right time to come to New York and get an idea of how it was then, and shortly after, the idea of money took over completely. It has been interesting to live through these times.

**HUO:** Going back to Vienna, it has produced amazing avant-gardes: firstly, in the early 20th century with Klimt and Schiele and the whole Secession, with architecture throughout the 20th century, and again after the Second World War. For a small country there has been an astonishing sequence of avant-garde movements – have any of these been heroes or influences for you?

**HL:** Not so much. You have to remember that Austria used to be a huge empire, in a lot of ways like the US: New York has its own spin and similarly, Vienna became a melting pot for different nations and ideas. I think that all of these movements were created because of that, and it has continued for a long time even though the empire has disappeared. Growing up, I was not that interested in what have become the traditional artistic revolutions in Vienna; I was much more interested in contemporary art, but I think you can't escape traditions in any case. It just becomes part of you, I guess, part of your basic education and things you see. I had a good relationship with Elfie Semotan, the photographer, and her husband.

**HUO:** Elfie later became Martin Kippenburger's wife?





**HL:** Yes, but her first husband was Kurt Kocherscheidt, and I used to spend a lot of time with them. The time I spent with Elfie and Kurt, particularly in his studio seeing how he was fighting to start his work, actually made me understand how I worked in fashion. I didn't work with the typical inspirations of a fashion designer, and that always made me wonder if I was doing the right thing, but seeing Kurt work gave me an understanding of many things. There was also a common understanding between us, so we didn't have to discuss things to the end, which I found reassuring.

**HUO:** It's interesting that you refer to Kocherscheidt because he is a wonderful painter who is often forgotten. I am always interested in pioneers. We need to protest against forgetting! There is so much amnesia in the world, so I am very, very happy that you mentioned him. Are there any similar pioneers in fashion who have inspired you or did all of your inspiration come out of art? Did you have any kind of fashion heroes?

**HL:** No, not really. I usually just find an object or something like that. I collect garbage sometimes, rather than valuable things, because I am interested in the form. I had no formal training in fashion, so I basically learned as I was going along. I wasn't that familiar with the history of fashion either, which was an advantage because it made my ideas of how to use fabrics or how to use shapes and forms very uncomplicated. So I didn't really have a hero back then.

**HUO:** You say you sometimes collect things with very little value. Do you consider yourself to be a collector? Do you have any kind of collection or archive?

**HL:** I only have art pieces that I have been given by friends, so I am not a typical art collector. I more collect objects, garbage, things

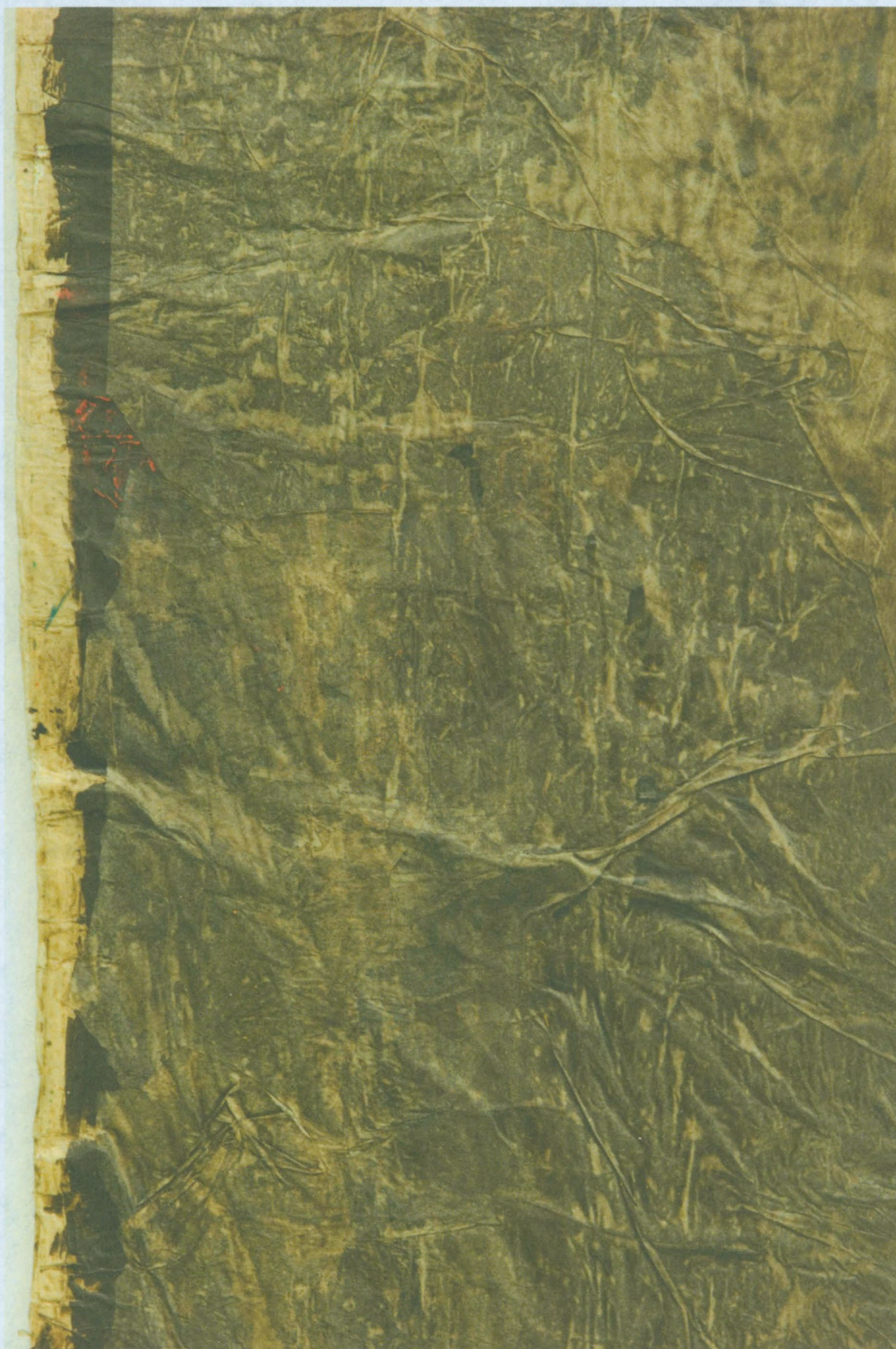
that have no financial value attached to them but that animate me or make me think. In my work, I sometimes use something I have had for 10 or 15 years, so I am inspired by something after a long time. My collecting is definitely more for inspiration.

**HUO:** I often read interviews from your fashion years, and it seems like the fashion world was trying to pin you down as either a minimalist or a futurist, but you always managed to escape those "-ist" definitions. Over the last 10 or 20 years, at least since the 1990s, the art world has gone beyond these "isms", but in fashion there still seems to be an obsession with backing someone into a corner. I thought that might be one reason why the art world suits you more than the fashion world.

**HL:** I always thought that it was just wrong that creative work had to be labelled for easy understanding. I think minimalism as an idea is only interesting if it is the logical consequence of opulence, a reaction against it: you don't just set out to be minimalist; it's a distillation of an opulent procedure. I was never interested in being labelled with a certain perception and then actually having to oblige and fulfil it. I am interested in being as open as possible, but I think you should also try to convey your real intention. For authentic reasons I was never interested in being labelled, as it limits one's own and others' abilities to see or feel. I also find it outdated. We are on the brink of a new chaos and we have to let go of all perceptions and rules.

*Alles Gleich Schwer* is at the Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover, until November 2 and at [www.absolut.com/helmutlang](http://www.absolut.com/helmutlang) until December 31.





*Surrogate Skin #2 (2008)*