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M A S S A P P R O V A L**

**SOPHIE VON OLFERS  
IN CONVERSATION WITH**

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Sophie von Olfers: Helmut, I think we should do this backwards, starting from when you decided to make sculpture quite recently until the early years of designing and making clothes. Was there a specific moment, a date, an occasion that made you sell your label and start making art? Is fashion a field that makes people want to “walk away” eventually? It seems to happen less in the art world, as far as I know.

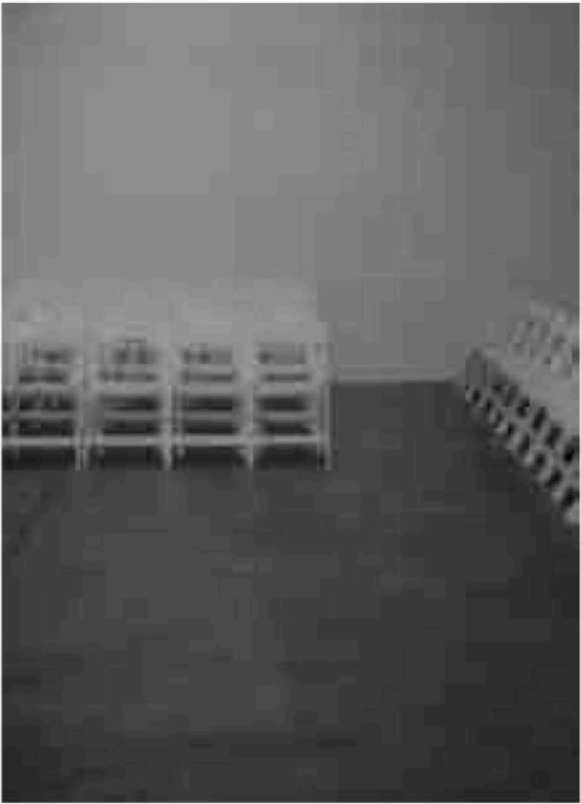
Helmut Lang: It was more of a premonition of a changing world. My instinct was to contribute on a different level and within a different set of circumstances. Fashion is extremely complex in its requirements and if these requirements change substantially, one possibility is to be brave enough to question the expected and reevaluate personal needs. I don’t think many people walk away from fashion – it is very addictive.

But don’t you think people are very careful about adopting definite positions for themselves? At least, this was my impression during the preparations for this project – a lot of people have stopped associating themselves with fashion, perhaps thinking there is something “more serious” in art practice, for instance.

Positions are important, so people should be mindful if they care about their work. Anyone who has to express their own needs and refuses to submit to expectations or compromise will search for conditions which make it possible to stay authentic. Many people work across different categories to express themselves and do not want to be trapped within a single discipline. It is really a question of creative freedom and evolution.

I absolutely agree that working across different disciplines is a way for many cultural producers to avoid categorisation. But it does seem easier in theory than in practice. There are not many people who successfully hover between different fields. Was there perhaps a time when this was easier? I’m obviously thinking specifically of the time in the early ‘90s when collaborations and cross-disciplinary practice came along with more lightness and authenticity.

I always think the past is never easier than the present – the present is always the opportunity. Although I would say that we did not really over-think things to the same extent as people might do today. It was less calculated, always striving for authenticity. If the idea seemed good and new and either functioned as an extension or com-



All images in this interview:  
Helmut Lang, Dia Center for the Arts Annex, New York, spring/summer 2001  
Photography Helmut Lang 2000, courtesy hl-art

plemented the work – one just went for it, and did so with an experimental approach. We were not concerned with mass approval. Rather, the work was conceived with a “love it or hate it” approach. Personally, I think this is the only way to find newness. If it appears more complicated today, this may be because of aspects having to do with corporate interests, work for hire, and the striving for immediate fame and fortune being more important than the actual work and respect. Having said that, I do not want to generalise nor criticise. Corporate money can also enable great moments. The current landscape of conditions is very different but I do not think that will silence any genuine artistic voice. It is a question of choice not to be overly concerned with the audience or the outcome. I do think that there are enough who hover successfully between different fields, progressing their work instead of relying on the familiar. In your question, you imply a kind of categorisation to begin with, when often it is simply a variation of a voice.

Maybe you’re right. Perhaps I’m a product of a different time, one where categorisation often seems inescapable simply due to the institutional and commercial structures that exist, may they be non-profit or commercial. And mass approval is definitely a big thing nowadays, because we are functioning within systems of such extreme visibility. It’s a delicate thing to navigate. What does authorship mean to you? I get the impression that this, too, was much more of a loose term and critically dealt with in productive ways. Diverse constellations were formed at the time; for example, between designers and artists, photographers and stylists, or magazine editors and art directors. The abolition of hierarchies when it came to producing resulted in images, objects, and situations that portrayed a joint effort.

Authorship means to me exactly what it is supposed to mean. In fashion, photography, or art, today the constellation for collaborations is quite similar to the one in the early ‘90s. On one hand there is a team effort, but it is always very clear who has authority and authorship of the part they are contributing. This has not really changed. Everybody involved has a certain purpose and in general decent people do not hijack others’ accomplishments for their own personal agenda. If all is perfectly aligned, then everybody will put in their best effort for the best result, adding to their accomplishments and stature in their respective fields. Now and then, it is a question of hierarchy in terms of authorship and work



for hire, which is a creative and legal issue, but it is not in opposition to the ideal scenario of a joint effort.

In that case, if collaboration then and now is more or less the same: Did those joint projects in the ‘90s simply have different aesthetic outcomes? As they do communicate a totally different approach to working in comparison to what one sees in today’s media, magazines, fashion design, and public imagery in general. Most of the people I talked to about this exhibition project mentioned that the current situation is killing creative processes, individual artistic positions, small productions ... Wasn’t that one of the reasons why you stopped doing what you did and decided to do something else?

That was not the reason for me because I always had absolute creative control on every level, as I owned my company and therefore had my freedom. I also hear the entire industry complaining about the current situation, but one has to also respect the companies that are taking the risks and financing everything. Somehow, I am getting a little bit tired of everybody complaining because nobody puts a gun at your head and forces you to be a well-paid and famous fashion star. It is a situation comparable to the movie business right now. If you are in for it, you know exactly what and who you are dealing with, and as you work for hire, you have to respect somehow what you are asked to do. That comes with the territory. If you want to do something like completely realizing your own artistic vision, you have to do it in your own name, at your own risk, and at your own cost – then you can do whatever you want. The aesthetics that formed the early ‘90s were guided more by that independent spirit than they are today. I think that at that point most people were trying to have a voice first and then worried about how to make a living out of it.

I like how strongly you react to complaints. It’s true that they don’t get you anywhere. But perhaps one could say that they manifest a mood: being trapped, not finding new ways to create, being nostalgic about sub-cultures, and feeling the need for renewal. If you look at fashion design today and the imagery it is creating: do you think a cycle has come to an end? Or do you believe in things constantly continuing to change and shift?

Well, maybe that is not right, and maybe it is mainly the successful and the established who are complaining and





talking about the feeling of being nostalgic. But on the other hand they are in no way interested in escaping the trap, as they do not want to give up public exposure and the financial benefits. Anyway, the need for renewal will not come from the top, although the circumstances at the moment militate against the independent, as it seems really hard to resist money. It will ultimately divide the God – searchers from the opportunists. I prefer not going deeper into exploring whether if the fashion cycle has come to an end, for I have not been involved in it since five years ago. But generally on the brink of a new order, we will have to deal with the fact that things are constantly changing and shifting for better or worse. It is quite difficult to predict a specific curve ahead for a certain industry. I remember years ago couture was declared dead – and suddenly all this massive money came in from new markets and the entire luxury business became a dominant force. So we will see.

After couture was – at least for some time – declared dead, when fashion, photography, and publishing were out to de-

mocratise the field, when you introduced the white cube and abolished the catwalk, when Martin Margiela hijacked other designer's shows and Rei Kawakubo published *Six* as an integral part of her practice and of the Comme des Garçons label ... What was the general atmosphere 20 years ago?

I am kind of the least suitable person to remember what happened in a certain period of time. Anyway, I do have some flashbacks. Paris was really the only dominant force in fashion. It was about Montana, Mugler, Gaultier, and all the other big fashion designers from the '80s with dramatic shows featuring Pat Cleveland, Jerry Hall, and Alison, etc., who were probably part of the first kind of supermodel gang. Yves Saint Laurent was ruling ... Within all this, Comme des Garçons and other Japanese designers appeared on the Parisian landscape with a very different mood, as did Margiela and myself. I guess it started as a kind of silent counter-movement somewhere in the mid-'80s, provided a different vision not only in terms of clothes but overall, and helped create the modern silhouette of the '90s and of the years till today, without taking away any of the other possibilities of fashion, well, maybe the total look. Most of all, I remember that everything that happened did so because it was the personal vision of the new guard – and that also relates to all new media images or visuals or happenings.

So the idea of the individual "genius" couturier was definitely left behind in this counter-movement. In my view, this had a lot to do with a shift in how people understood style, the body, and their surroundings. It was more about integrating given situations – be they personal, social or political – rather than prescribing codes. If one sees your ad campaigns of the early '90s or some of the documentary backstage images by Juergen Teller from your shows today, it seems very clear that your work was about creating cross-references between fashion and "all the other things out there". Do you agree?

The counter-movement was not organised as a group, it just resulted in one. Every single "créateur", as designers like myself were referred to at that time, worked independently on their own vision within their own corporate culture and rules. In a way, they did so not unlike all the important voices before. The '90s began at the very beginning of the decade and, in contrary to other decades, were formulated early on. I remember that Juergen

simply asked if he could photograph backstage and I said yes. He did his pictures and I took care of backstage. Later on, we used his photographs either for an advertisement or for editorials, but it wasn't initially planned that way. I think what was new and important about all this was the original intent, that we did not produce a special shoot for these purposes, but rather used existing photographs. It was also less expensive and turned out to be a rather new idea. I did this also with Polaroid images shot in-house and later on by using archive photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. The idea was to address with all the visuals everything that could not be expressed with the clothes or the runway, and I always felt that it needed at least this other dimension, or maybe more.

Definitions are always tricky – there have been so many attempts to classify fashion and culture of this time in general: Grunge, Heroin Chic, Radical Fashion, Street Style, Generation X, real, authentic, pure, and so on ... None of them really describes the broad spectrum of practices. You have a very pragmatic way of describing what your interests and motivations were and how one had to find ways to produce with little means and yet find opportunities to move beyond the limits of one's field. This is certainly true for many designers, photographers, and artists even today, and yet the early '90s were such an influential time for an entire generation. Do you think this is overrated? Are we mythologising an "era"? Are we simply nostalgic for sub-cultures and undergrounds?

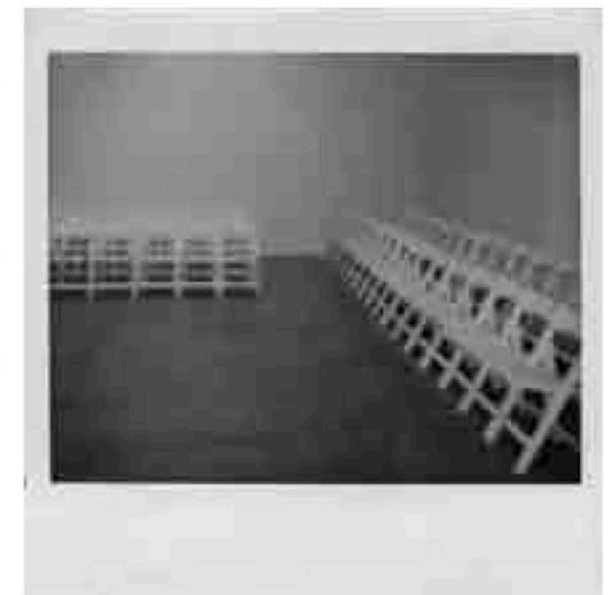
I agree that the early '90s were extremely good in formulating newness with very strong images, movements, or sounds, and I am not sure why this was so obvious – it could be that the '80s were very rich and somehow vanilla and it needed a radical response to progress. I certainly was always armed with my own vision and prompted by the desire to find true form for whatever I was working on. Somehow, there was also a reasonable volume to most, which contributed to clarity. Then, in the mid '90s the digital and technological revolution silently began and after a few years it had led to a vast expansion and globalisation, to a broader access to creativity or profanity – which eclipsed the importance of clarity. The result is a visual chaos where one does not really know what is what and where more also means less clarity – if that makes any sense.

How did you approach the "public"? You were obviously interested in this construct, considering your radical ads and campaigns, and the shows you did, which confronted the audience with a completely new understanding of representing fashion. Did your definition of "public" change at all during the development of your practice?

I don't think so. Compromising creativity never has pushed anything forward – only independent work and independent minds have done so. It is a contradiction to merge creativity and compromise if you want to maintain your authenticity – the "public" is the response to one's work.

But in art practice or exhibition making, for instance, one often responds to the notion of a public. It's interesting that you say the public is the response to one's work. Do you mean the work only happens once there is a public?

Well, I have two takes on that – if one is done with whatever one does and hands it over to the public, it starts a dialogue with that audience and will get a life on its own as everybody will interpret it with what they are able to. You cannot really control that anymore. It very often is an important dialogue, but on the other hand I also think that if it has substance or is intriguing in any way, it will indirectly find its audience. For me, a found audience is better than a targeted one.





There's no doubt about that! What did the shows mean to you back in the '90s? Did you see them as performances in their own right? Were they channelling your work in a different medium?

I called the presentations "séances de travail" instead of fashion shows, as I really wanted to stress another reality on the runway and also allow myself to sometimes transfer an element from one show to the next, leading to something new in a more elaborate manner. The séance de travail concept made sense to me, as it was set up for the press, buyers, and other attendees. I introduced it by eliminating the elevated runway, promoting all age groups of models, supermodels, and friends, sending them on a ground-levelled runway that, rather than being centre stage, had a square-shaped path with two extensions and different exits. This allowed a fast and interactive flow similar to a public space, where some models rotated one time and others walked the circuit two or three times. It was always at random and a decision I took the second I sent them out. I consider these sessions as performances because I did not only want to convey modern clothes, but also a feeling and mood of a moment in time, which, in combination with men, women, speed, and the unpredicted synergy, created a different dimension for most spectators. I consider this approach a counter-movement to posing, and the press in a way defined the events at Rue des Communes as cult-like events (for lack of a better word).

I think this is a great point to conclude our conversation. You just mentioned public space, performance, unpredicted interaction, moods and moments in time ... To me, these terms represent the significance of a relatively recent part of fashion history and the new work ethos that emerged. I think it is important to look back, especially because fash-



ion rather neurotically only ever looks forward. You are looking back at an incredible history of your own work as well as on the history of a cultural movement and a generational shift. And although there are other people who contributed to this, you seem to be one of the few designers willing to do this. Is this because people don't take the time or because they don't dare to look back?

Ha, ha ... I am actually the one who does not like to look back at all and famous for it – but as I committed myself to do it for you, I did. Another reason may be that working in art now allows me an uncompetitive view on fashion and its surroundings.