

He revolutionised
fashion in the
nineties and was
**HAILED ONE OF
THE GREATEST
LIVING
DESIGN
LEGENDS.**

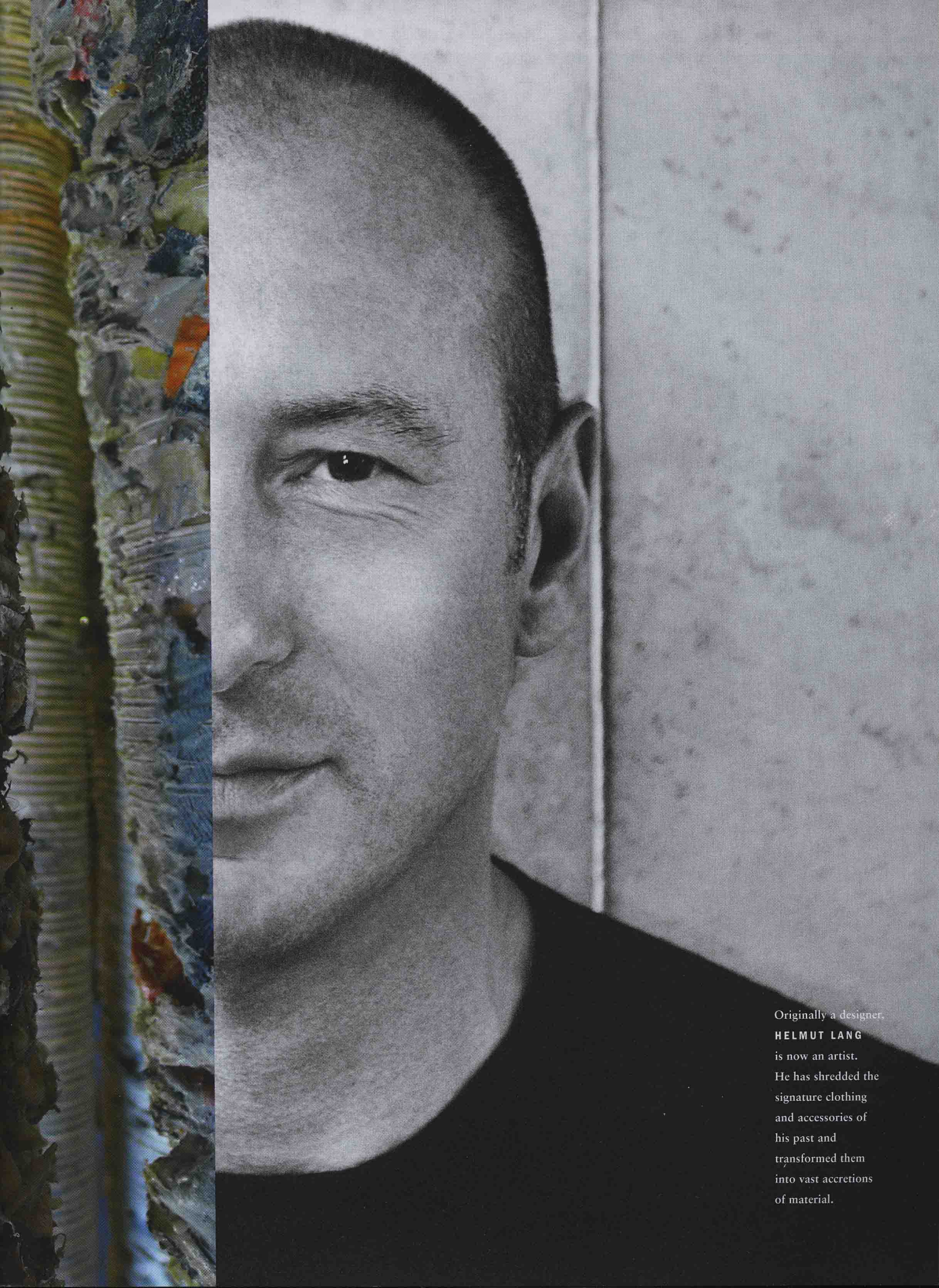
THE MAGICIAN

HELMUT LANG
**NONETHELESS
DECIDED
TO BOW OUT**
at the height
of his fame

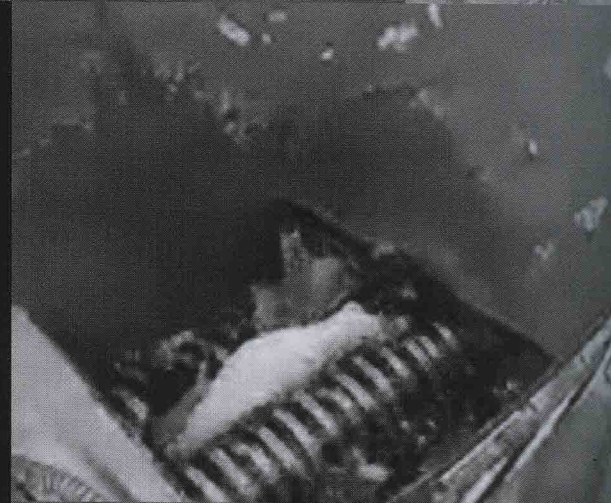
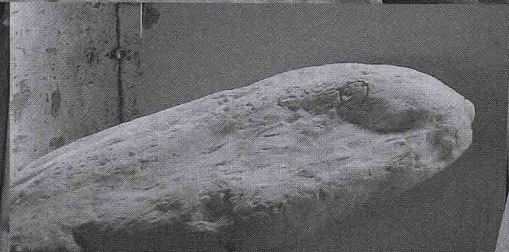
**TO START A
RADICALLY**

PORTRAIT ELFIE SEMOTAN





Originally a designer,
HELMUT LANG
is now an artist.
He has shredded the
signature clothing
and accessories of
his past and
transformed them
into vast accretions
of material.



NEW LIFE. THE ULTIMATE SHOUT
OF FREEDOM, HE HAS
TRADED THE CONSTRAINTS
OF HEADING
A FASHION
EMPIRE
AND KEEPING TO
A CRUSHING
SCHEDULE FOR
THE FREE
WHEELS OF
TIME AND THE
LONELINESS
OF THE ARTIST.
WHETHER IT'S
FATE OR PURE
COINCIDENCE,
HIS WORKS ARE
INHABITED
BY THE EMBERS
OF THE PAST.

BY NEVILLE WAKEFIELD

In January of this year, Helmut Lang shredded what remained of his archive. The six thousand-odd garments, accessories and other creations that stood testimony to his much feted, groundbreaking twenty-five-year fashion career were reduced to frayed morsels. Designs once celebrated for their immaculate conception and construction were deconstructed into industrialised shards.



Inside **HELMUT
LANG'S** studio
and screenshots
from a video
made of his clothing
being destroyed.

“THE FORMS THAT LANG HAS MADE
ARE FULL OF AMBIVALENCE.
LIKE CORALS, THEY APPEAR BOTH
HARD AND FRAGILE.”

Lang, of course, is not the first to relieve himself of the burden of the past by destroying it. In many ways it has always been part of the creative birthright of artists to do as they please with the results of their endeavours – results that are often more highly valued by others than themselves. Martin Kippenberger made an artwork of paintings he destroyed and whose remains he displayed in a rubbish skip. Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty of the K Foundation burned a million pounds in cash that they received from KLF (Copyright Liberation Front) record sales, and Michael Landy made a public spectacle of systematically destroying all his worldly possessions in a storefront window on London's Oxford Street. But, for Lang, the gesture itself has less to do with erasing the past than having creative agency in an ongoing transformation.

The material out of which the new sculptures are made was, after all, never destined for immortality. The samples he fed into the industrial shredder had already been abused – first by the runway, then by press and more recently by smoke damage resulting from a studio fire. Significantly, what remained intact even as the samples had started to deteriorate was the public identification and investment in the idea of clothes and collections they had intimately known. Outcry aside, by acting upon them in this way, Lang was simply accelerating a lifecycle that was already underway. And, as with any process, the raw material that becomes a product, whether through abuse, wear and tear or simply age, is eventually returned to its original state. We learn to discard that which we have cherished as a way of creating space for the new. This, of course, is the creative potential inherent in all acts of destruction. For Lang, it transformed the product of one period of his life into the nutrient of another.

The results are a series of strangely ambiguous columns, accretions of material that appear to grow out of the ground and reach for the sky. Without clear beginning or end, they might be an indirect ode to Brancusi's own endless columns, whose repeated geometric forms were also monuments connecting the before and the after, the ground of our being with the rarefied air of what we may become. But where Brancusi's forms invoke the language of spiritual pas-

sage, Lang's appear grounded in a language of material transformation. The fragments of rubber, tulle, fabric, metal and leather that make up their substance and bleed the dyes and pigments they once carried into the surrounding material have been divested of their former sophistications. In its place is the raw energy of materialised thought, of process given form.

The forms that Lang has made are full of ambivalence. Like corals they appear both hard and fragile. They seem to be in a state of becoming, caught as it were between opposing forces of growth and decay. In places, the material appears to have a life of its own, as it appears to haemorrhage out of its containing geometry of the column and attempt to spill into the world beyond. At other times, it appears recessed and barely visible through the medium that contains it. It is the tension between containment and spill, nature and culture, order and chaos that provides presence to the work. Encountering these sculptures, one is forced to wonder at the forces that went into their creation and the creative energies that turn one thing into another.

Make it Hard, the title of Lang's recent show, suggests a sexual energy at play in the creation of this new body of work. But alongside this invokes the digestive process whereby material is ingested, absorbed, transformed and expelled. Here the past seems to have been similarly metabolised. And just as the residues of former loves, lives, careers and obsessions also become monuments to a transformed past, so this series of new sculptures may speak to the autobiographical sense in which the material of artist's lives has always been the subject of their art.

Lang's subject may simply be that of transformation. History itself is, after all, a metabolic process, one that is in a state of constant change, of being rewritten and reshaped. But if history is, as Karl Marx claimed, condemned to repeat itself first as tragedy and then as farce, then what of its objects and artefacts. Lang's new work seems to suggest that the break in this cycle can be found in the acts that turn life into art. By treating the material of the past in this way, he has created a language that is utterly assured and utterly his own. In doing so, he has staved off the ridiculous and created a space for a new sublime. —



Helmut Lang,
"MAKE IT HARD",
2011, resin,
pigments and mixed
media. Photos
of the exhibition
staged at the
Fireplace Project in
East Hampton.