

RH Thomas Bernhard and Josef Fritzl have each made a deep impression on me. One with endurance, intelligence and humor. The other with abject depravity and a total absence of humanity. Both with a darkness that seems without measure. Their efforts are in no way related except perhaps their shared national identity. Is being Austrian something more than a simple cultural context? Can you talk about this?

HL I never thought that there is more to it, but then I never felt typically Austrian. Coming from a cross-cultural Eastern European family, I did learn early on that simplicity does hardly exist in Austria, generally or in a cultural context. It's often complicated and sometimes enjoyable because of that. If you want to romanticize you could assume complexity, but that applies not often. In Austria there is a preoccupation with mortality, a lustful relationship with tension or curbed desire. Freud has much explored but there is more. Personally I believe that outstanding efforts for the best or the worst are made by individuals due to their personal circumstances and the ability to deal with them regardless of nationality. It is perhaps not without irony that the Pope (forgot which one) declared Austria 'the island of the blessed' while many artists think it is hell on earth and a haven for ignorance and the bourgeois.

RH But is there something particular about the darkness? Maybe this is a touristic view of Austria? I'm thinking of the relationship to the Holocaust and their history generally. Just off the top of my head I can think of Michael Haneke, early Fritz Lang, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Arnulf Rainer, Hermann Nitsch, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Gunter Brus, etc. Such a strong affinity for self-defacement... butchery... abjection... hopelessness? Much of this material seems to hang irretrievably in darkness.

HL The touristic view of Austria is rather the one of the Austrian Empire before WWI and on the surface that is not wrong. Around 1900, everything came together at the right moment and the fin de siècle Vienna turned into a creative laboratory for new concepts and ideas in art and design, architecture, literature, theater, music, philosophy, science and medicine, including the birthplace of psychoanalysis. Nowadays, Vienna is regarded as a birthplace of concepts for the modern world—think of Klimt, Kokoschka, Kubin, Schiele, Loos, Wagner, Neutra, Berg, Strauss, Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Wittgenstein, Adler, Freud, Semmelweis, Handke, Bachmann, Musil, Rilke, Zinnemann, Wilder, to name a few....

The 1930s brought an exodus of the Austrian intellectuals and the nation has never really recovered from this loss except for the achievement of some individuals. Has there always been a counter reaction to that sugarcoated image or the repression or Austria's ability to declare itself a victim and not a collaborator? Absolutely. The Viennese secession was founded to counter the expectations of academic art of the Habsburgs. Viennese Actionism was an attempt to develop 'action art' as counter-reaction to not be confined within conventional ideas of painting, theater and sculpture. It was also a rebellion against the cultural freeze that had gripped the spirit of postwar Austria and it could not have occurred anywhere but in the extremely conservative atmosphere of 1960s Vienna, a city the cold war had pushed to the margins of Europe. Viennese Actionism drove on the potential of utter darkness but was not able to shatter the image of backwardness, of amiable provinciality that stuck to Austrian art from the era between the wars. Franz West started his art as reaction to the Viennese Actionism and its peer pressure, and his work is the clearest embodiment of how the individualism of the isolated artist would become the dominant motif for a new generation with different circumstances to react to. So too did Valie Export, Elfriede Jelinek, Zumthor and later Erwin Wurm, Kruder & Dorfmeister, Ulrich Seidl, and others.

RH When I look at your recent work, I see that objecthood and material play prominent roles. Your fashion work, especially your handling of women's fashion, was also extremely object and material conscious. For example, tears were incorporated as part of the designs and your women's footwear was so clearly sculptural. I see shared tendencies in the palette and formal concerns. Do you start with the material and develop the form? Or do you have an instinct for a

form and find the right material? Can you talk about some of these connections with your earlier work?

HL Materials have always played a prominent role and are often a starting point. The reversal of logic and appearance, experimenting with surface and the assemblage of materials. My past has trained me to realize when an object is strong enough to fight me back and then I will leave it alone. I have to walk away or I will destroy or mutilate it. The strongest link would be myself and the way I often start to work with generous possibilities, only to later eliminate and distill what's important for me and where it leads. Otherwise it is now about building 'a body,' whereas before with fashion I was building around a body.

For the new sculptures I have used found objects as I wanted elements with a certain history, elements with irreplaceable presence and with scars and memories from a former purpose. I am not sure when the form comes in. I am very much driven by instinct and it makes sense to me only at the end, when it seems then that I knew all along where I was going. I guess it's some kind of amnesia to forget how complicated it can be to find the right form. It takes me a long time to transform an idea into reality. It's a difficult process.

RH What is your interest in context (specifically architectural) and placement beyond the object itself?

HL The object and its integrity are the most important. The context and placement can be vital if one has to respond to a certain environment, or if the space around the object becomes part of it (like with Maurizio Cattelan's 'The Pope'). On the other hand I am also willing to let a space violate the sculptures and so escape the trap of beautifying the object. I want to think that a sculpture will eventually be placed in different contexts and will respond for the better or worse each time. Also, one cannot always choose where it will end up and I don't want to be consumed by that fact. There is something interesting about not always being in control beyond the creation of the object.

RH In some of the recent sculptures I see a connection to Louise Bourgeois' work—especially from the early period. I know you are a big fan of hers as well. Can you talk about this connection?

HL I fell in love with Louise the moment I met her. I felt safe and challenged with her and we shared the souls of Europeans who choose New York to live and work and found our place here. What connected us probably most is the fear of abandonment, although we never spoke about it and our history is different. Also we were both concerned about much but not afraid of anything in the end. We collaborated a few times—some serious and others we invented to be able to work together as it was a way to see each other. Louise's and my work is quite different except that in the new exhibition I made a sculpture in her honor.

RH I have the sense that you were always connected to art, even when you were young. Is this true? Which art and which artists were you interested in?

HL I was not exposed to contemporary art until I lived in Vienna on my own at age 18. I started to make art then while I was also working three jobs at the same time to get myself through school. At one point I started my own fashion label and by accident that occupied me for nearly three decades before I liberated myself completely to work full time on art from 2005 on. During those years I maintained my relationship with my friends in the Viennese art world—Kurt Kocherscheidt was most important among others and Martin Kippenberger more by accident. I met Jenny Holzer and Louise in the mid 1990s in New York and began a series of collaborations with them.

Around 1986 I began to divide my time between Vienna and Paris. I was introduced to the larger French 'creatives' at the time—an interesting experience coming from nowhere. I was easy to impress at the time and I was bleeding a lot

being on the cutting edge with not much social experience, but I learned a lot as well. They taught me that not everyone can become a great artist, but a great artist can come from anywhere.

RH What is the 'nowhere' you refer to? What was your life before you went to Vienna?

HL My parents divorced when I was about a year old. I consider that to be my first displacement. I ended up the next nine years in an isolated mountain valley, where I was raised by my grandparents, who had fled there before the war. Breathtaking landscape, long winters and a heavy dose of austerity (I did not watch TV until I was ten years old). I have good memories mostly and I was very close to my grandparents, but there was also some hardship as we were the only family among farmers not born there and not accepted by them. At age ten, I was forced to live with my father and stepmother in suburban Vienna. My stepmother hated and repressed me and made life hell, and as I spoke a different dialect and had not grown up with the same circumstances as the other kids, they considered me slightly retarded and did not really accept me. I consider this my second displacement. I moved out from home at eighteen with two banana boxes—one with books, one with clothes. That's when I moved to the center of Vienna, which was as different as Manhattan was to Brooklyn at that time. That was in 1974. Another world was unfolding for me and I was hoping to be accepted for what I was and not from where I came from. So what I also meant with 'nowhere' is literally so. I had a 10-year or longer delay, which took me some time to see as an advantage after all.

RH So now you are out near the ocean on Long Island. Has living there influenced your work? Was this setting necessary to your transition from fashion to sculpture? Getting away from urban density and urgency?

HL In retrospect it might have been. My lifelong pattern of working in a most quiet setting and then presenting my work in a cultural center would suggest that is the case. I prefer working with a sense of being reclusive, nearly autistic. At the same time I need urban life to expose my work and to be with friends and communicate to balance my need for interaction. But that has become less urgent now than in the past. It's a yin-yang case, like using the right side of the brain or the left side. I used to move all my life between two places due to my circumstances. I learned that to leave everything behind and then come back enables me to see my work or my life in a different context. So I am doing still the same thing. This is how I function best.

RH Okay, if you can't go home again what is it that keeps you in New York?

HL New York feels like the home place I was looking for since I was displaced early in my life. Manhattan, which is not a mirror image of the United States and is more a mirror image of the world, is full of diversity and opportunity and gives you the freedom to self-realize, to succeed or disappear. That is a lot more than other places can offer. Paris is very French, Vienna is very Austrian, New York is the world.

RH Yes, when you're in New York you're in the world. When you're in Paris you're in Paris. What is the difference for you between designing clothes and making sculpture? Your clothes for women and men were very sexy and now your sculpture is as well. What is the relationship between sex and creativity?

HL Sculpture is creating a body, designing clothes is thinking of one and working around it. I don't know if there is a direct relationship between sex and creativity, but if you have good news please tell me. Sex for me is an extremely powerful presence like everything vital in our DNA. The quality of unfulfilled desire or the power of a lustful relationship is equally inspiring. I believe sculpture has a sexual side.

RH What contemporary writers, filmmakers, visual artists are you following?

HL Not much of anyone lately. It's a phase. It will pass.

RH Your new sculptures are essentially formal in nature. We are in a period in which Pop and Conceptual art dominate. What do you think of artists like Koons or Hirst?

HL I am not intimidated by current domination, especially if it's not mine. I think of the art world of today as getting more global than ever before in terms of participating artists and reach and players. It is what it is right now, simply said. Anyone working on slow art? I feel it is important in the current fast-moving art scene, with all its voices, to maintain the perspective of an outsider and not to become too enriched by experience or wisdom. I try to leave behind the safety of experience.

RH How much are you thinking about the audience?

HL I don't. I believe that a found audience is much better than a targeted audience. Otherwise, there is great risk that you work for the expectations of others and you become an employee. It is not part of my DNA. It's important to push and violate and animate an unexpected dialogue by not explaining to the audience what they want to know.

RH I was thinking more about whether you imagine your work in relation to your viewer—not what kind of audience, but the fact of an audience.

HL I think about how the sculpture will perform in public as a sign or information, but I cannot really make sense of it. My work is definitely intended to go public at one point. Otherwise, 'if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?' The advantage of art is that it just does what it does. By that I mean it will communicate something different to any individual audience.