

VOGUE

“No Regrets.” Helmut Lang Speaks About His “Living Archive” Intervention at the MAK in Vienna and His Work in Fashion



By Laird Borrelli-Persson
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Hope can take many forms—an encouraging smile, the head of a crocus peeping through dirt to signal spring’s arrival—and appear in unexpected places, such as Mr. Helmut Lang’s art-filled Instagram feed. To see fashion images flash up in his stories was golden, like finding a long-sought-for face in a crowd.

Lang has always preferred privacy to the spotlight, so it’s ironic that since he left his label in 2005 to return to his art practice—he always meant fashion to be a temporary pursuit, he explained in a recent email exchange—his presence was everywhere present in fashion. No two designers have had more influence on the last decade of fashion than Martin Margiela and Helmut Lang, men who stayed resolutely true to themselves. At one point, a few years ago, Langisms were so copious and so blatant they were almost shocking. These homages or borrowings, which continue, extend well beyond aesthetics, and touch upon innovations the designer made in relation to casting, show format, use of technology, brand building, and advertising.

What makes Lang’s work so appealing? Some would say its modernity or industrial edge. Having selected and digitized dozens of shows as part of the *Vogue* Runway Archive Project, all of which

have their own merits, I can say that few are so purely about concept and design that they seem to escape time as Lang's. Having asked the artist to describe his work, his team directed me to these lines from the curator Olivier Saillard's text for *Louis Vuitton: Art, Fashion, and Architecture*: "It has been incorrectly said of Lang that he spearheaded the minimalist trends that defined the '90s. His work is really more about essentialism." I would argue that there is an element of wild romanticism running through it as well.

Now you can form your own opinions, guided by those of Lang himself, who has staged an intervention at the Helmut Lang Archive at the MAK in the designer's native Vienna. Lang made donations of his fashion work to many museums, but he gave to the Museum of Applied Arts more than 9,000 artifacts related to his company's brand development and identity from 1986 to 2005. There have been temporary exhibitions of this material in the room permanently dedicated to the collection; this is the first time Lang himself has been involved in interpreting them. It should be underlined that this is not an exhibition per se, but an intervention intended to break from standard museum practice to conjure a "living archive." That's achieved by presenting objects as artifacts alongside new work created for this project: collaged artworks and a special video edit using pieces in the permanent collection. "The idea of the living archive," Lang explains, "is not only about preserving the facts and data but the spirit which gave my work its gravitas."

Lang's intervention at the MAK should not be taken as a phoenix-rising-from-the-ashes scenario. Though the new work on display, a continuation of the artist's *Selective Memory Series* project (more on that below), does speak to disintegration and regeneration, Lang had already enacted that story when he made artworks out of the charred remains of his clothing archive which had





caught on fire. Fashion is a subject Lang hasn't spoken about for many years. Naturally, the art he is making has been his priority. What this new project signals is a shift in Lang's openness toward his incredible body of fashion work and his engagement with its "ongoing influence."

Here, Lang speaks to *Vogue* about how he came to this point.

You have spoken of returning to your art practice after leaving your brand. What was its first iteration?

My intention was always to become an artist. I started experimenting to find my language and became sidetracked. I had the self-inflicted idea that I could do clothes as a second day job to sustain myself until my artwork would do so. As you know, it grew into much more than I expected. Fashion was always supposed to be temporary.

What did you set out to do with fashion?

It was just one step after the other, and it just developed into the story you know quite well.

What did you want to express through clothing?

Contemporary and visionary possibilities infused with my interests in the human condition with a shot of elegance, romance, and coolness. Experiments with basics and eccentrics, shaken not stirred, and served with a dose of sexuality.

You're often categorized as fashion's great minimalist; I'm curious what role romance played in your work.

There is definitely a romantic element in my work. Romance is one of the big players in all of our emotional lives. I abstracted it as intelligently as I could to make it not appear too obvious. Romance is more important as an inner quality than one you wear on your sleeve.

What role did art play in your fashion brand?

Art is naturally a passion and interest of mine, so it was just natural that it would be integrated into my work life. It became a continuous red thread throughout my work and a natural extension in the communication of it. All of the artists or estates I worked with are friends of mine, and we wanted to work together.

What separates art and fashion?

Let me quote YSL: "Fashion is not quite an art, but requires an artist in order to exist."

In what way was building a brand an artistic endeavor?

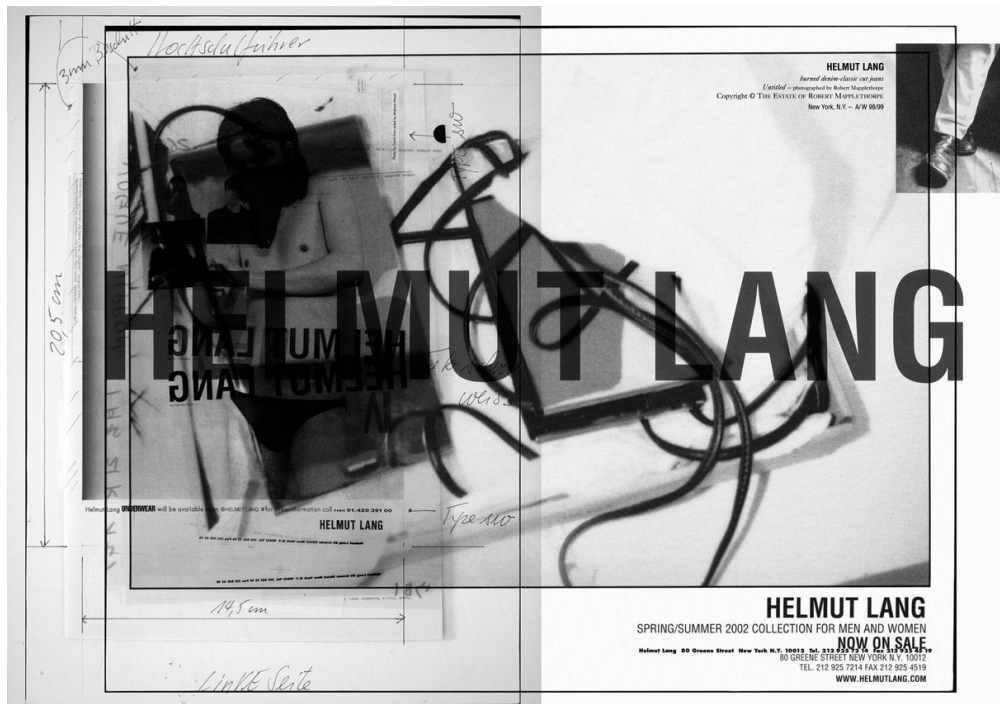
I wasn't thinking along the way of building a brand. I just tried to do good work using everything I had inside me. I guess in that regard, you can see it more as an artistic work practice.

What was your approach to this intervention?

I wanted my archive to be experienced outside of the usual and somewhat bureaucratic museum presentation and to give it a contemporary angle using the archive artifacts.

Should we read a sense of urgency into the use of the term intervention?

No. *Intervention* is a term used in the art world. It is meant to be an action that interferes with a known body of work to create a different outcome than what the viewer would expect.





You've made a video of your *Séance de Travail* shows specifically for this intervention. How did you make the selections for that?

My first video installation was for a group exhibition I did with Jenny Holzer and Louise Bourgeois at Kunsthalle Wien back in 1998. The current edit for the MAK is done in a different spirit, as a medium to support the living archive.

Why did you refer to your shows in this way, and in what ways did you break with traditional formats?

I saw my work as a continuous story to be told. The standard fashion show format couldn't communicate what I wanted to express. I found that *séance de travail*, which means "work session," was much more relevant and contemporary. At that time the main audience was professional fashion journalists and editors for whom the collections were the basis for their work for the next six months. I also eliminated the classical elevated runway and had the models walk in a specific pattern and speed, which would resemble a real-life walking pace. Casting-wise, I always felt that the modern concept is to present women and men together, models and superstars, with non-model friends of all different ages and backgrounds, something which is very present in fashion today.

What does movement give to fashion?

Movement brings fashion to life, although it is really the person wearing the clothes who completes the picture. This is why I find most fashion exhibitions rather stiff and lifeless—with a few exceptions: the exquisite exhibitions by Andrew Bolton at the Met, for example, or those by Olivier Saillard, who is an absolute artist in achieving a magic dynamic in his presentations.

The press release states that in your current art practice, you are “no longer limited by the restrictions of the human body.” Did they feel like restrictions then?

It is not a restriction in a negative sense—it is being aware of what the subject matter is. I was always making sure that my clothes were actually made for the human body and not the runway. I wanted them to fit perfectly, be executed perfectly, be of long-lasting quality, and be cut in a way that would enhance the human body while at the same time make a strong statement about the wearer’s personality.

In addition to the film, you’ve created new works for the intervention, building on your *Selective Memory Series* project. Can you give us some background on it?

The *Selective Memory Series* project, which, in essence, is my own living archive, was created after I left fashion. It first encompassed digital records of all the notes and interactions from my time in fashion. The first installment was published as a supplement to *Purple Magazine* in 2005. The project has manifested itself in various forms thereafter, and it is ongoing. Further installments are planned. The *Selective Memory Series* project show at the MAK is an adaptation of the project as it pertains to the archive.

These are new works, correct? Are they made using overlapping transparencies? Are the originals preserved?

Yes. They are over-layered transparency sheets from former advertising layouts. They are by default multilayered and create through a layered procedure a different meaning, message, and creative output. The originals are preserved in the MAK archive.





How do they relate to your current practice?

I will take them a step further, rework them in a more abstract direction, and try to find the right artistic form for them.

This intervention is said to “evoke memories without hierarchy.” What does that mean?

I like to think that everyone should be perceived equally, as should be all work, all things, and memories—big or small.

How do archives relate to the concept of nostalgia (which I feel has enveloped fashion in a fog)?

When I am talking about a living archive, I am trying to establish it so that it is not an affair of yesterday, but a current, functioning, and exciting affair.

Can you build on the concept of a living archive, please? This seems such a fascinating concept in relation to your current practice, which was built, in a way, on the ashes of a past archive.

The idea of the living archive is partly to save the soul surrounding my work, so it will not be lost in a traditional archive system. On the other hand, it is meant to be used for the purpose of inspiration and to be studied across fashion, graphic design, architecture, and basically every aspect complementing the clothes. Again, it is not about only preserving the facts and data, but the spirit which gave my work its gravitas. The concept of a living archive also allows for the infusion of experiences and observations from other people—be that academic, journalistic, or otherwise—from 2005 to the present day, and ongoing, about the body of work’s ongoing influence.

Are you aware of the many, many homages paid to your work? As I've said before, you seem to have moved on, but fashion won't quit you. What do you think of it all?

My accomplishments have been very rewarding, not to a small part by always maintaining an authentic voice, which has proven to stand the test of time and define a new code for the 21st century.

How do you think fashion has changed?

It feels different, for better or worse. But I think it would be interesting to regain some soul, intimacy, personal context, and authenticity.

Having gone back through this material, what are you most proud of? Do you have any regrets?

No regrets. Also, no favorites. All experiences being equal parts.

What emotions did your intervention evoke?

It made me finally ready to embrace the idea to work on a few books and other materials encompassing my body of work in fashion.

Helmut Lang Archive at the MAK: *An Intervention by Helmut Lang* is on view through July 12, 2020.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

All images courtesy of the artist