

# HELMUT LANG

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INTERVIEW BY NEVILLE WAKEFIELD  
SELF-PORTRAIT BY HELMUT LANG

**HELMUT LANG'S ARTISTIC EVOLUTION SINCE FASHION PROGRESSIVELY TRANSLATED ITSELF INTO NEW MEDIUMS. HIS SEAMLESS RELATIONSHIP WITH ART HAS BEEN PRESENT THROUGHOUT HIS BODY OF WORK AND CLOSE COLLABORATIONS WITH JENNY HOLZER AND LOUISE BOURGEOIS. UNCONSCIOUSLY, LANG HAS BEEN ONE OF THE STRONGEST (AND MOST SILENT) CATALYSTS PROGRESSING THE INTERACTION BETWEEN FASHION AND ART. HE IS NOW TAKING YET ANOTHER STEP FORWARD BY REARRANGING THIS EQUATION.**

Over the last two years, Lang has distanced himself from the expected and formulated a new artistic language that is about to take physical form in his first solo exhibition at the journal Gallery in Brooklyn. Renowned curator, and a

frequent contributor to the magazine, Neville Wakefield sat down with Lang in his long-time Soho studio, to talk about living and working on Long Island, the Janus Mythology, and his upcoming exhibition.



**HELMUT LANG:** ...The written word has to be treated more carefully as it has no sound. It has much more weight.

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**NEVILLE WAKEFIELD:** I thought that it would be interesting to continue the conversation where we left it the other day. In particular, what obviously interests both of us is the switching polarities of art and fashion. We talked a bit about how your involvement and collaboration with Jenny Holzer was really one of the first occasions that a designer was engaging with an artist in a clear manner [Holzer created LED installations that consisted of moving text for the Helmut Lang stores]. And how the balance of those two worlds has shifted, and how the art world has in some ways taken over the fashion world as a magnet for wealth, spectacle, and attention. So, I am curious as to whether, with Jenny, you were aware of the beginnings of this shift?

I wasn't at that point, I think. Living in Vienna for a good part of my life, I was naturally absorbed into the local artistic background and all its interesting players. Being in that environment has formulated for me a very natural relationship with art in a sense that they were all interesting people and I could talk to them more than to anyone else. Nevertheless I did start early in fashion, but that was more of an accident. I had to continue because I had already started and I wasn't clear about my other options at the time. I did start to collaborate in Vienna early on with different friends. One was Kurt Kochersheidt, a painter and sculptor who died in the early 90s. Then, when I started to go back and forth between New York and Vienna, and when the Florence Biennale came up, I asked Jenny if she would work with me because I really liked what she was doing. We worked together really well and we both generally tried to avoid what was rather common at this time: Like the designer would put a dress in and the artist would put a painting in. We knew that we had to do better and I think we solved the problem and were both happy with the outcome. It was also, at the same time, the beginning of a friendship. And for me it is always about the relationship with people and the exchange. To be friends and to work together, that to me is actually the ideal situation. Later on I also collaborated a lot with Louise [Bourgeois], which has been an unequalled experience for me. There are only good things around her and she wins always. Both of them are good friends of mine and we have contact regularly.

**I remember that, at that time, or it was a little bit before, Cindy [Sherman] had done the Comme Des Garçons shoot. But then to have Jenny do something in the store seemed really significant to me.**

We wanted to work together and when the store was designed I wanted it to be different, less like a store and not so obvious, which is a backwards concept somehow. So we turned everything around. Originally we had planned to have her piece on the outside of the store, in an old European cinema font. Not like a Times Square thing, but in a more compressed way. But the buildings are protected here in Soho and we had to put the installation inside. Louise at one point made me a present, a little house sculpture, and it took her two years to complete. And she insisted that it was displayed in the windows of the Perfumery [Helmut Lang's perfume store, which was across the street from his clothing store in NY], which was a little bit like a French competition [to Jenny Holzer's piece], but also her idea of having the piece interact with an audience for a while. But I think it was not that we were aware that this shift was coming. It was more that we knew each other; it was a way of being. Because sometimes a way of being in contact with each other and each other's work is to work together. I guess it had a bigger meaning at that time, which we were not aware of.

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**What strikes me now is that art itself has become a luxury brand that fashion houses can attach to.**

I think it's quite active from either side. It reminds me of a beehive right now. It has all become one.

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**Yes, I had never really thought of art as a luxury good until recently. It's interesting, given the nature of what you're doing; you're reversing the flow in a sense. The demand for collaboration has always come from the fashion side. Now to have someone moving from the fashion side to the art side is particularly exciting. I guess the question is, if there is a question, did the grass at some point seem greener on the other side?**

Not at all. I think the moment when I decided to work beyond fashion, it felt more like an evolution. It is like a lot of the decisions in my life that have already been there for a while unconsciously. And then when it happens, one is not sure whether it happened because one makes it happen in some way or if it just happens because it would have happened anyway. So when I actually had the chance to make the decision of whether or not I wanted to continue [with fashion], I decided that I actually didn't want to continue because everything had become too much volume. So I had the chance again to embrace a way to work and a way to live that I originally started out with.

**So it was not because of creative constraints [that you left fashion]—I didn't think that the creative constraints were much different. You had already shifted the goalposts in the fashion world to remove those constraints, in terms of changing the timetable, changing the presentation...**

There was no plan to begin with, it was the quite opposite. I was looking for a different challenge. I thought that I would want to try to express things in different mediums. Too many things had become positively predictable, so sometimes I was bored with the flow of things. I do like stability and continuity, but if things become too predictable, in a way it becomes stupid. This was a chance for me to take some time and think about what I really wanted. And for at least one year I let go of the routine and the daily thinking and I did nothing. Living in New York where this is an uncommon condition, it feels kind of punk-like. That freedom and liberty is really priceless.

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**Yes, I think that the culture or the embrace of success has come at the expense of failure and failure is a creative engine. When things fuck up, that's when the unpredictable stuff happens.**

I guess the point is that there are reasons for all of these things. It is hardly ever possible to move forward without radical measure.

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**Was it hard doing nothing? Did you have to force yourself?**

No, I found it very liberating. I went out with the intention of taking a year off. I find that the time one spends without a particular purpose is really more like working with the idea of unlimited time and it is an unconscious working experience. I found it actually very animating in creative terms.

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**And this is when you moved to Long Island?**

I actually live in New York and Long Island, but I did start to spend more time out of the city. It has turned out to be a good idea. I began to see things differently again, unexpected things, things you normally don't have time for. It is a good procedure for me, having the possibility to go back and forth between fake isolation and an urban environment. I guess this movement is essential for me, as I always did it somehow, also back in Europe. It was nice to be removed and I thought that I would like to express things in different mediums.

**And you didn't really care what world it was in? Whether it was in a fashion or art context?**

For fashion I had decided that I didn't want to continue in a conventional form, and this decision was reassured with time. I'd rather collaborate with fashion from an artistic point of view, which in an ironic way is also somehow like it began. Otherwise I believe in a "never look back too much" state of mind and I wanted to experiment with other materials and limitations. I enjoy the possibility of not thinking too much about the physical body.

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**It's interesting that you come from the constraints of the body—the shape and silhouette you can create around the body—but at the same time the wall or larger architectural body is no less difficult or problematic.**

Once you start to think about something, it's always a blank sheet or a blank canvas or a blank anything, and the biggest challenge is to know where to start and when to stop. Once I understood that it is all the same problem it was easier. It just depends on which medium you apply it to and that of course varies greatly. [In fashion] it led to interesting structures and inventions because I wanted to break some borders, but to keep it good somehow. What is interesting to me in what I am doing now is that again it has some more unknowns.

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**Do you feel that what you are doing now is liberating you from the body?**

Maybe it was just time to leave that dimension behind for now. I'm not someone who hangs on completely, and I really wanted to translate my abilities into different consistencies and different volumes. I can always revisit the classical body at a later time.

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**Do you get bored easily?**

No, not really. I never analyze things to the end either. I prefer an intuitive flow. But sometimes I get bored by predictability. I do really enjoy that a lot of things are more unknown to me with a different perspective, which is good because knowing too much can hinder you.

**The horizons are open.**

Yes, in a good way. I could have done the expected to the end of my life, but it seemed not intriguing enough. And people could not understand why I wouldn't immediately announce any future plans, so I would just say that I'm doing nothing for now.

**Yes, doing nothing in America, in the culture of success...**

Well, I have been successful already, so that was not the pressing issue and it was not about doing nothing. I was just really taking my own time for progressing things, because I did not want to be invaded from the outside by any perception or expectation and engagements before it was time to interact. It was really about gaining time for the better of it all, and I did not want to make any premature statements.

**Do you think that the gap between the idea and its execution in fashion is pretty straightforward, that there is a more linear route between the originating concept and the result?**

I think maybe it is more organized in fashion somehow. It must follow certain procedures and there's a certain logical flow of things to it. I want to believe that art even in the wider sense at least has the option to be more immediate.

**Fashion also seems more narcissistic in its inspiration, in that it looks onto itself. That said, you see a lot of artists going to art fairs. I've got nothing against promoting, but there is a certain type of art being made for art fairs.**

I try not to think about it. I know it's happening. But one has a choice whether or not to be a part of that. It depends on how one functions best I guess.

**In any medium you can choose to be confined.**

Yes, but where there's confinement there's also independence. I know I'm good on my own time so I just try the best I can.

**When we last spoke you talked a little bit about the elements that come from your store—the mirrored ball and the eagle—and that they've made their way out of storage and now they may be making their way back in some form.**

I never used to keep things, except for personal notes and objects. I'm using a few of them in The Selective Memory Series and The Long Island Diaries, which are projects I've been working on. Anyway, I decided to use elements that I've kept and I want to involve them in my artistic procedures because they're still part of my identity. Even the lighthearted ones. And it seems quite organic to me, if eventually they transform themselves into something else, because it's not about waking up and doing something completely different. And it's also part of my own ongoing procedure to progress into another dimension. Once you start to work with something, you realize whether it does or does not make sense, because in your mind more things are possible. And this concept makes the most sense to me at the moment.

**So how does the mirrored ball appear in your work?**

The ball has been sitting in Long Island since early summer, and I'm progressing on it every week. The idea relates to the Janus mythology, looking back and moving forward. It's also about transitions and new beginnings, representing time as one half respects the past and the other one looks into the future.

**You also think about the reflections running into interference in the space.**

Yes, and the other thing is the old back and forward which, except for sex, is not the usual anymore. With the establishment of the new connected world, it's never just two things. It's so many things. One is voyeuristic by nature and so is the other one. The mirrored ball is a good object to work with because it has all these different reflections and at the same time it absorbs everything that is surrounding it. That angle of it was inspiring.

**You were implying earlier that you're computer illiterate and that you don't have an interest in the mechanics of that process. I was interested in your relationship with abstract systems like the Internet, when you're not involved in the mechanics or know how to use a computer but are still able to change the whole world through the Internet, which in a way is what you did in terms of how your marketing and presenting the label online changed everything. [A week before his fall-winter 1998 show, Lang decided to cancel his runway presentation and exhibit pictures of his clothes online instead. Fashion editors were given CD-ROMs].**

I'm not so computer illiterate. Actually I liked to keep it abstract early on because I didn't want to get too mechanically involved with it, and rather understand the bigger picture at the time and what it would change. Because clearly it was going to and I felt I needed that distance to begin to understand where time was heading, which new society was beginning to form. It felt like a new structure was emerging, changing how we function together, starting with pretty good intentions. But in no time at all it exploded in all directions, and no one could actually control it anymore on so many levels.

**I'm always interested in these environments, ones that start out with intentions of control and specificity, and then become contaminated.**

It has an interesting side and a frightening side. Most of it becomes a healthy interference and progresses things.

**In terms of what you're doing with art—and this is why I brought up the Internet—you used the Internet in the past without having to become involved in the process. How involved are you in the making of hi-art.net, and does the actual fabrication of what you're doing interest you?**

I was quite involved with the Internet project, just more from a strategic and artistic point of view rather than the mechanical side. I'm naturally involved in everything that I do and fabrication is an important part of it. At the same time I'm trying to remove myself if it is in the interest of the project and give it some natural flow, allowing some room for accident.

**So, you have two shows coming up, one at the Journal Gallery and one in Hanover, Germany.**

Yes, the one at the Journal Gallery happened as an accident, and I see that as a good sign. I consider it to be a good accident. And then I have a big show next year in Hanover at the Kestner-Museum, which I am mentally preparing for and which will have enough body and will probably complete the transition and will clear things for me and I think for other people as well.

**And it is a museum show. That involves taking on the space in terms of installation...**

It is quite a big undertaking but there's no fear.

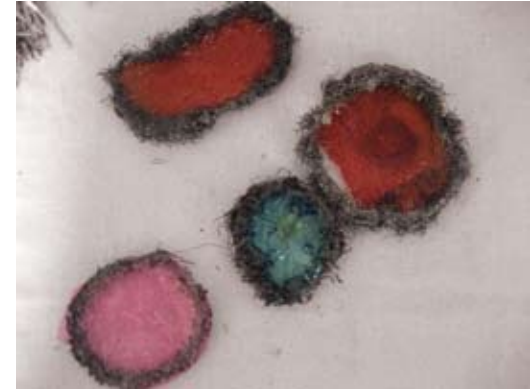
**Do you have a sense of what you are going to show?**

Yes, I do. I am starting to. There's still half a year of preparation time, so *the journal* project is first. I mean, *the journal* project started out as an editorial project that we have been supposed to do for the past three issues and we really wanted to do it too, because I think that *the journal* is a really good publication. And then the exhibition just came out of this project.

**So the exhibition at the Journal Gallery is a byproduct of what you have done here for the magazine?**

Yes but no. Originally we planned an editorial contribution. Later, when the invitation for the exhibition came in, the idea for the magazine changed and it became related to the exhibition object. The original editorial work is now different because of the exhibition. I generally fear the deadline, but I like it as well because it gives you a push in the last second, which can be really good. Sometimes that changes everything.

**NEXT EVER AFTER**



**Left:** Helmut Lang, *Study in B/W*, 2007, courtesy of hiart  
**Above:** Helmut Lang, *Study of Four Life Forms*, 2007, courtesy of hi-art





**Previous spread:** Helmut Lang, *Fuck*, 2007, courtesy of hlart  
**Left:** Helmut Lang, *Mirror Study for Next Ever After*, 2007, courtesy of hlart  
**Right:** Helmut Lang, *Reflection Study for Next Ever After*, 2007, courtesy of hlart

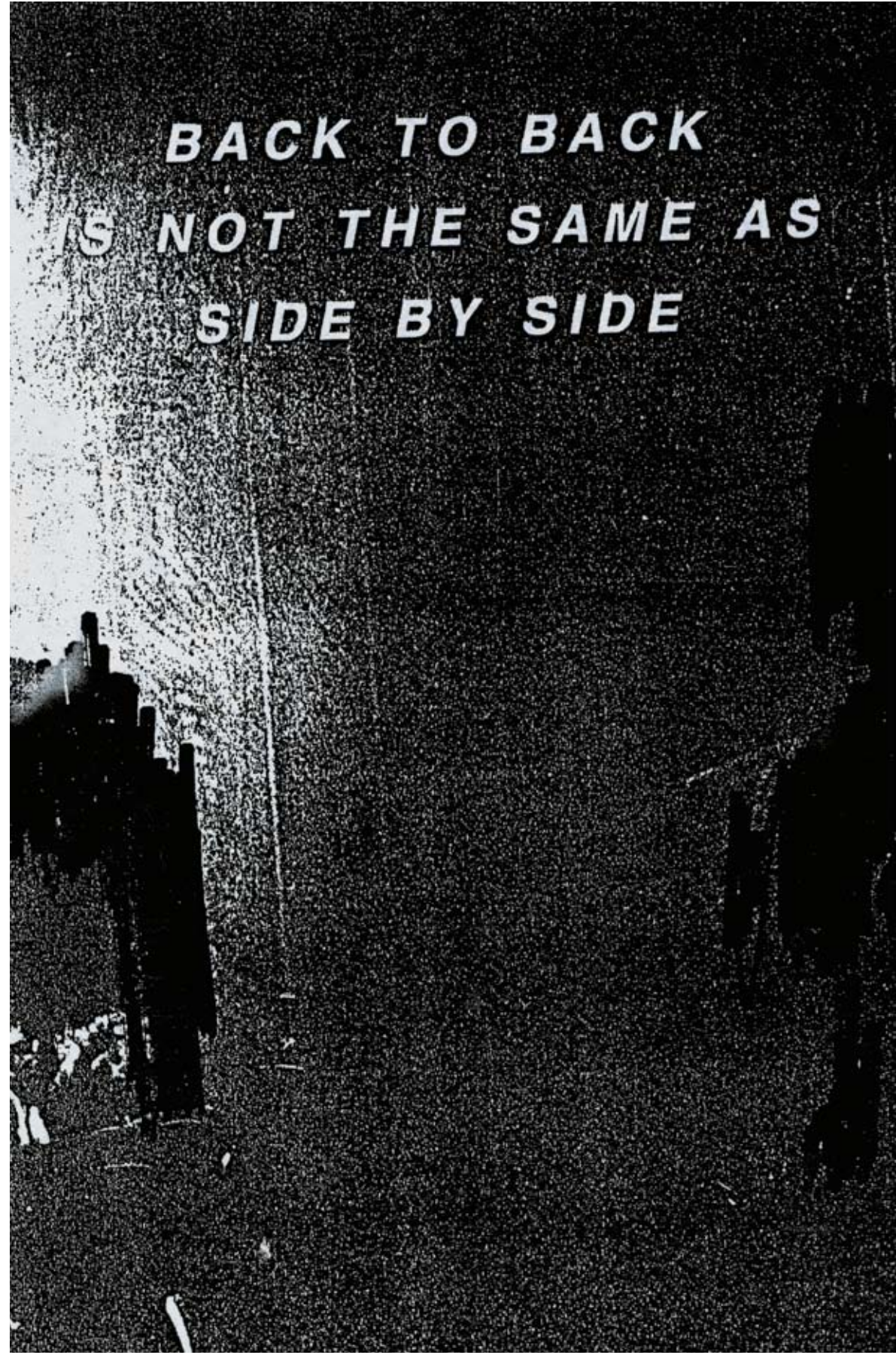


**Right:** Helmut Lang, *Kugel*, 2007, courtesy of hiart

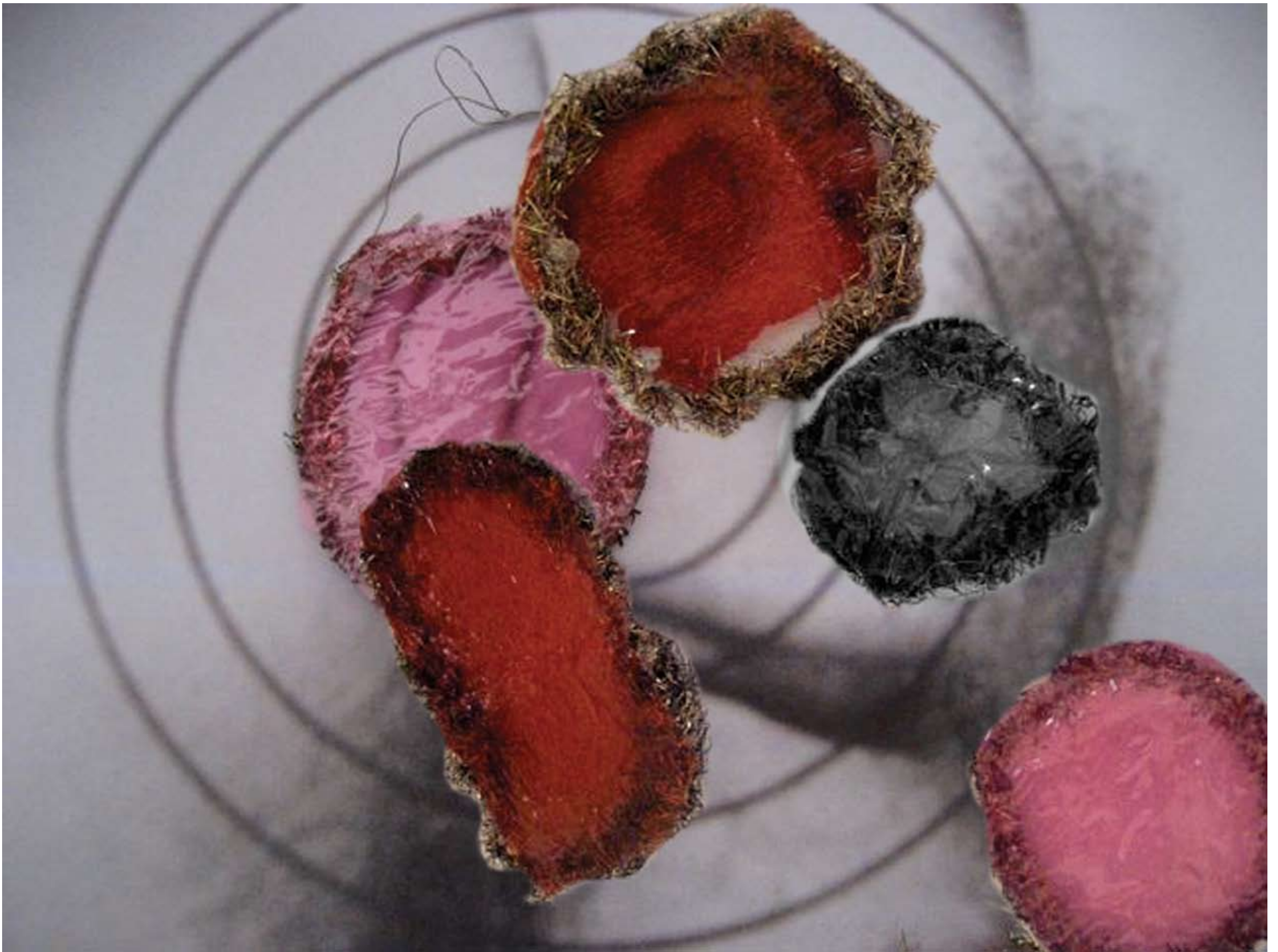




Left: Helmut Lang, *Back to Back*, 2007, courtesy of hi-art.  
Right: Helmut Lang, *Found B/W Excerpt*, 1989, courtesy of hi-art









**Previous spread:** Helmut Lang, *Five Primitive, Life Forms on B/W*, 2007, courtesy of hi-art

**Left:** Helmut Lang, *Alone*, 2007, courtesy of hi-art

**Right:** Helmut Lang, *Found Except*, 2007, courtesy of hi-art

