

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

HELMUT LANG



As told to Allese Thompson
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Helmut Lang's stealth apparel upended fashion, violating basic principles of design and reshaping the silhouette of the 1990s and early 2000s. In 2005, Lang retired from fashion entirely, retreating to his property on Long Island where for the past decade he has created artwork that have been shown in exhibitions worldwide. Here, Lang talks about his New York solo debut at Sperone Westwater, which is on view through February 21, 2015.

I NEVER WANTED TO BE A DESIGNER. I wanted to be an artist but happened to land in fashion. Most of my friends in Vienna, where I spent the majority of my twenties, from the mid-1970s to mid-'80s, were artists—Martin Kippenberger, Kurt Kocherscheidt—and I watched their practices develop; I observed how they approached and built things. Fashion is a different medium, but I don't think artists think *that* differently—before, it was about building around the body. Now, it's more about building the body.

When I began Helmut Lang, I wanted to add a new dimension to the field, to create a different kind of practice—something, I learned, you can't actually do with clothes. My work was a reaction to the opulence of the time, and it was part of what in hindsight became an essentialist antimovement. A designer is ultimately confined by the body because an item of clothing has to function, it has to move, and it has to do something physical for a person. I was working around bodies, and now I'm actually creating bodies in alternate physical forms with my new work, so it's a completely different set of circumstances.

The largest series of works exhibited at Sperone Westwater are made of shredded fragments from my former archive. In 2010, as a result of a fire in my former studio, we ended up shredding thousands of pieces and used the raw material as a source for the pillar-like sculptures. This series consists of two hundred unique columns, each measuring between ten and twelve feet high and approximately four inches in diameter. What makes these works so interesting for me is that I still see things and consider aspects I hadn't before, scars and memories from a former purpose. When all this—what was an archive of thirty years—gets shifted into a different environment, into a different context, it takes on a different kind of life. I am not sure how the pieces take shape; I am very much driven by instinct and the works make sense to me only at the end, and it seems then that I knew all along where I was going. I guess it's some kind of amnesia, forgetting how complicated and difficult the process can be. It takes me a long time to transform an idea into reality.

I don't have classical training, so I am less concerned with traditional prescriptions or notions of medium. What I am interested in are "replacement forms" that break conventional frames. This can also be seen in my cardboard wall reliefs, where I also repurpose manufactured supplies. Regardless of their original usage, these works become charged with emotions and the dynamics change.

During my career as a designer, I collaborated with artists I met through projects and exhibitions, most notably with Jenny Holzer and Louise Bourgeois on a joint exhibition at the Kunsthalle Wien. We became very close friends. Louise once told me, "Materials are just materials; they're here to serve you." That quote continues to resonate with me

After I left my company in 2005, I planned to take six months off to clear my head completely, as I wanted to change my way of thinking. This ended up being nearly a year, because it takes much longer than one imagines to reprogram—to try to return to a state of innocence, to erase any ingrained approach or methodology. After the first year, I started to make art in my studio and have devoted myself to my artistic practice for the past ten years. There is no reason to be blocked by material.

All images courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York