

DANCE OF DEATH

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Sarcophagus of Emperor Karl VI,
Imperial Crypt, Vienna

It would be a misunderstanding to interpret Helmut Lang's "Pillars", "Spikes", and "Planes" as abstractions. On the contrary, this group of works, which has taken shape in his studio over recent years, is about a process of reduction, condensation, and concentration of concrete corporeal values. For is there anything more inescapable and concrete than death?

Owing particularly to their ragged, torn or fragmentary appearance, Lang's objects stand for structures of organic material, rotted organisms, and bodies laid open down to their bones, and are visualizations of an apocalyptic process that eludes abstract language. They perhaps even convey the dark aura of the cult of the dead that, turned into gilded stone, is represented by the plague columns erected on the main squares of some Central European towns. In their magnificent but ambivalent this-worldly sensuality, they are memorials to the horrific epidemics of the 17th century—stone monuments to mental repression. One of the most splendid of these idols commemorates, with a histrionic gesture, the 12,000 lives taken, by the lowest estimate, within a period of a few months in the last big plague epidemic to strike the city of Vienna in 1679. An inscription on the column built some twenty years later in praise of the Curia and the Habsburg system of rule is a testament not only to the all-too-ready ostrichism of the population, but rather to the manipulative sophistication of the secular and ecclesiastical aristocracy. It suggests that by the highest goodness of the Holy Trinity, the death of the plague was warded off.

"To you, most holy and indivisible Trinity: I, Leopold, your humble servant, thank you, as much as I am able, for warding off, by your highest goodness, the fateful plague epidemic from this city and the country of Austria in the year 1679: and as a permanent sign of due gratitude, I most humbly dedicate to you this monument."¹

Today we know that the plague was able to spread as it did because the powers that be were less concerned with improving the realities of their subjects' lives and hygienic conditions in cities, and instead more acutely focused on the display of imperial power, doing so also through means of art.

As much as Helmut Lang's individual objects can also stand as sculptures in their own right, his presentation at Sammlung Friedrichshof has placed them in a spatial setting in the sense of Friedrich (aka Frederick John) Kiesler's "Raumbühne" [Space Stage]. Indeed, the idea is that entering both the spaces at Friedrichshof and Stadtraum is like stepping onto a large stage while becoming aware of one's own spatial dimensions in relation to the sculptures—frozen, as it were, in a dance of death by the realization of one's horror of mortality. For "the movement in space, around the work of art, and the integration of art into living environments were central to Kiesler's ideas."²

What matters is that the artist has defined the space as a stage, its backdrop formed by the devastated surfaces of wall panels ("Planes"). Hung as a series, they form a monochrome mural. Referring to this setting, Lang talks about accretion, a process of accumulation of matter, thus pointing to the post-apocalyptic dimension of his work.



Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini, Rome

For him, this is not only about the depiction of destruction, but also about a process emerging in the wake of demolition where matter, life, and meaning newly reconstitute themselves. On this stage, the grotesque, white conglomerations of the pillars materials and the spikes reminiscent of fragmented bodies are now placed as idols into an arrangement filled with tension.

The darker second act of the drama is staged at the Sammlung Friedrichshof Stadtraum in Vienna, this time exclusively comprising black objects and wall panels as well as the projection of a white patch of light. In a suggestively slow, bottom-to-top movement, it covers itself in black, then starting anew in an endless loop. Are we looking here at a metaphor of passing away or into the eternal darkness of death?

Of course, if we picture these sculptural works reminiscent of the plague columns in public urban spaces in Vienna, the city where Helmut Lang grew up and began his development as an influential international artist, we can see the stage area hinted at in the exhibitions and its possible interpretations begin to expand in a fascinating manner. Against this backdrop, the two exhibitions appear as lab experiments—it seems as if Lang had had the public spaces and the air of death surrounding this Catholic aesthetic so dominant in Vienna at the back of his mind all along. In the context of a city whose atmosphere can still be counted among the centers of Baroque-era thought, which hinges on the synthesis of the arts and all-encompassing ideas, his objects mutate into materialized theses on destruction and turmoil. They link up with a modernist strain of thinking, in which the ornament was justly branded as the symbol of a standstill of evolutionary cultural development. In what is likely the most explicit statement on the matter, trailblazing Vienna architect Adolf Loos stated that the "evolution of culture is identical to removing the ornament from the object of use."³

With his architecture, Loos had undoubtedly turned against the aesthetic propaganda machine of the Habsburg philosophy in the tradition of the Baroque period, which is alive and well to this day, and the anti-Enlightenment alliance of church and ruling dynasty. By designing an office building devoid of any ornamentation directly facing the Hofburg palace, the center of imperial power, he set off one of the greatest scandals of modernism.

That is why his dictum sparked a process that has not only shaped 20th-century Austrian art in its ever-ongoing struggle against an overwhelming illusion of a hidebound Baroque, not to say Byzantine, self-deceiving thinking. Incidentally, this hermetic aesthetic also dominated Italy's former city-states.⁴ Like a wide range of 20th-century Austrian artists, from Loos, Gerstl, and Kiesler to Muehl and West, Lang confronts this with a brute gesture against ornamentation, against the emphasis on surfaces through stucco, and against other elements of the homogenous demonstration of power of the lifeless and formal.

His sculptures and wall panels stand for a battle of materials in which the familiar, manipulative, and comforting is destroyed and newly reassembled for the purposes of reevaluation.

This is where Lang's art coincides with the thrust of *Vienna Actionism* which, beginning in the 1960s, reacted with unparalleled radicalism to an event in Austrian history that was even more disastrous than the plague epidemics. Starting out from Vienna in 1914 and spanning the two World Wars until 1945, the collapse of the old European order and enlightened humanism unleashed a dance of death with millions of victims that was unprecedented in the history of mankind.

1 Pestsäule [Plague Column], Vienna, inscription on the north side

2 Cf. Almut Gruenewald, Friedrich Kiesler. Seine Skulpturen und sein offenes künstlerisches Konzept, doctoral thesis at the Department of Architecture at the Technical University of Munich, 2014, p. 22

3 Cf. Ulrich Conrads, Programme und Manifeste zur Architektur des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vieweg: Braunschweig/Wiesbaden 1981, pp. 15

4 It should be noted that at about the same time as Vienna Actionism, Italy's Arte Povera movement, too stood up against a similarly dominant history in a manner congenial to the Vienna artists.



Rudolf Schwarzkogler, 2. Aktion, 1965