





Helmut Lang in his studio. The artist has devoted himself to sculpture for the last ten years.

THE ARTIST

After soaring to Olympian heights in the 1990s, Helmut Lang

forsook fashion at the peak of his glory to devote himself to his passion for art.

A self-effacing move that was also a resurrection.

— Helmut Lang is a man of few words. Nor did he like to title his emblematic fashion creations of the 1990s, nor the art he has devoted himself to since the noughties. Discreet to the point of invisibility, and impervious to the siren song of the media, the Austrian artist is treading a path similar to those of his elusive former fashion peers, Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo. In 2004, while at the peak of his much-hyped celebrity, Helmut Lang took his final catwalk bow, an earth-shaking moment for the fashion faithful. There's no denying that, with his androgynous pants suits, his mineral black, his distressed paint-splashed denim, and his headstrong juxtapositions of latex, silk and plastic, the Vienna alchemist was a whizz when it came to knocking 1980s' bling off its pedestal, emerging as minimalist-in-chief.

INTERVIEW BY
Olivier Lalanne

HELMUT LANG

He then withdrew to his oceanside Long Island headquarters to write a new chapter in his book of life. Enamoured of fine art for as long as he can remember, a shrewd collector, and creative collaborator to Jenny Holzer and Louise Bourgeois, Lang is creating an abstract oeuvre where matter pulsates, its thunderous texture erupting with inspiration. From repurposed found objects to sculptures mimicking organic forms, indefinite edges, moving surfaces, and substances heaving with a tarry lava, the artist's unlikely creations expand into and beyond their space, mysterious entities flushed with glowering undertones. A small Rothko hangs in Lang's bedroom, not far from the bed that partakes of his dreams. What's special about the monochrome canvas is that it is an emphatic brown, worlds apart from the bright colours generally favoured by the demigod of abstraction. The masterpiece is not where it is by chance: like Rothko, the coloured texture of Lang's work is divorced from the object, the sole object of the viewer's gaze. Already exhibited in Vienna, Dublin, New York and elsewhere, Lang's work is the fruit of visionary experimentation, slow-burn processes, and relentless trial and error: the embodiment of his mantra that "Life is a succession of changes". Interview by e-mail.

VOGUE HOMMES Do you remember exactly under what circumstances you decided to give up fashion and concentrate on art?

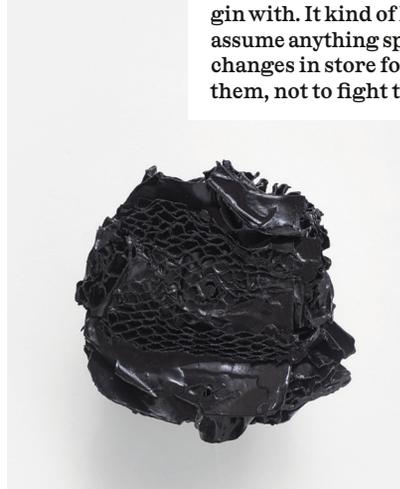
HELMUT LANG There was no particular moment or circumstance that I can remember. The art world has always been a linear presence throughout my life, and I've always felt comfortable in it and part of it. I collaborated frequently with artists who became friends, and I wanted to be more involved with art, but I knew I had to let my current professional life go to be able to do so. After that it was not a question of if, but when — and the when came in late 2004, early 2005.

VH What was your state of mind at the time?

HL I was sane, unafraid and ready for whatever might come my way. I was ready to face and challenge the possible consequences.

VH Did you know from the beginning that fashion would be only one chapter in your life and that you would devote yourself to something else later on?

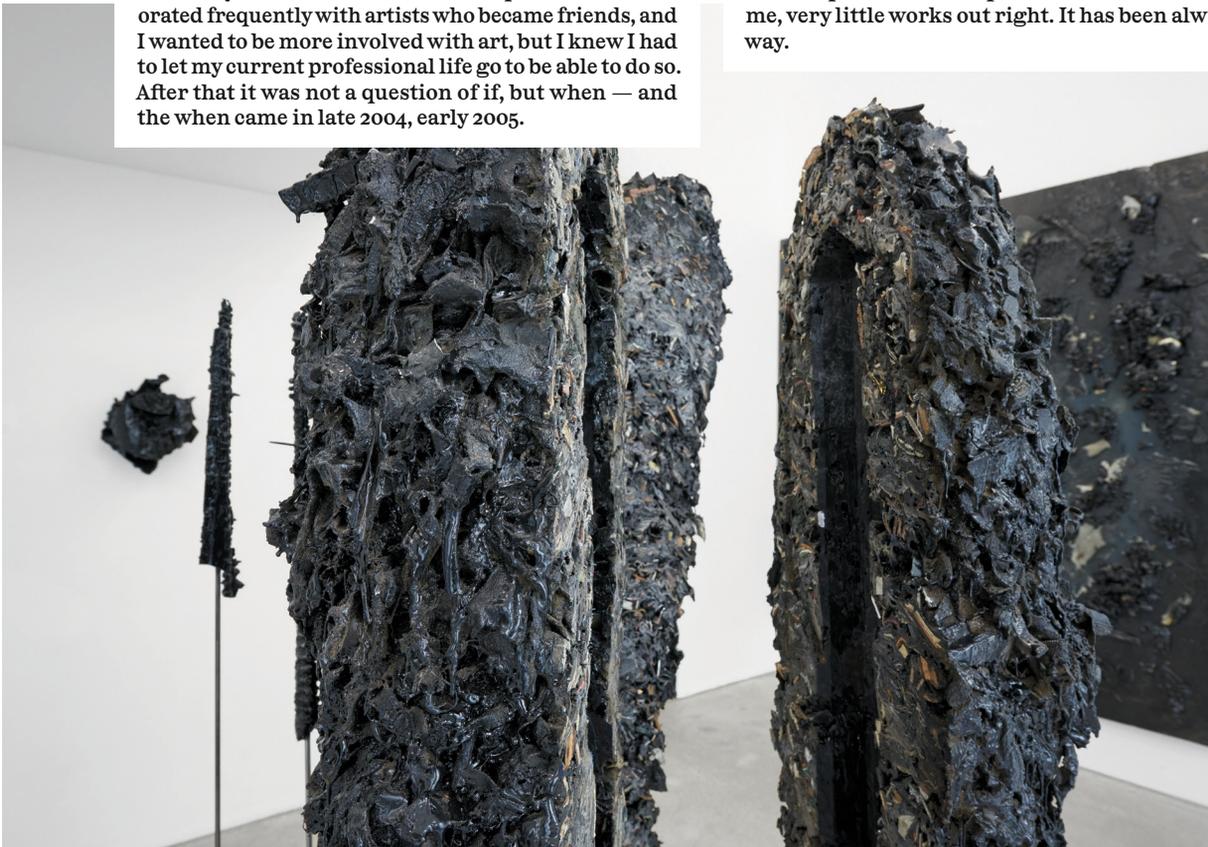
HL I didn't know that I'd end up in fashion, to begin with. It kind of happened to me and I never tried to assume anything specific for the future. Life always had changes in store for me and I have learned to embrace them, not to fight them, but give it my best.



Some of Helmut Lang's works, shown at an exhibition in Vienna.

VH Does art generate less pressure than fashion?

HL It generates a different kind of pressure. Without the occasional pressure, which I often put on myself, and the pressures or expectations that others put on me, very little works out right. It has been always that way.



VH You were considered — and still are — to be a successful, if not, iconic designer. What would it mean to you to be a successful artist?

HL It would mean I do something right — and I'm rather well on my way there. However, success is relative at best, as there are so many layers between artistic success and commercial success. I've never been interested in instant gratification or calculated outcome. I'm concerned about substance and being able to express what I feel, not what is expected of me. I never wanted to be an employee of mass taste. This has always served me well.

VH What inspires you today in your work? Is it the material you work on, or are there other influences?

HL It is the material as a starting point and where it leads me to, and then everything I'm able and courageous enough to contribute from within. I often use everyday materials that aren't necessarily precious in the classical sense, to start with, as they feel more modern to me and are also more willing to absorb what I have in mind.

VH Does the world, its social, cultural and economic vibrations have an impact on you and your work?

HL I'm always interested in the human condition, and we live right now in very trying times. Known circumstances are being brought into question, and it seems a lot of constants that we took for granted are moving closer and closer to the edge at increased speed. But my work is not a direct response to breaking news, but the impact on it is on a broader scale of emotions. The human condition is part of it.

VH Art is much more of a solitary activity than fashion. How do you feel about the solitude?

HL On one hand, I enjoy the solitude and, on the other, I absolutely hate it. I especially have trouble with it at night. I'm trying to find a better balance.

Helmut Lang shredded his archives, clothing and accessories, for them to be reborn in the form of huge concretions of materials.



VH Can you describe your studio or the place you work in?

HL A bit too dark, but I can't change that for the time being. Otherwise, it's messy but somehow together. It has a few half-finished sculptures in it that I'm working on at the moment for upcoming exhibitions, a selection of power tools, and endless cans of glue, resin, fillers and enamel sprays. It isn't the image of the classical or romanticised artist's studio. The space is adaptable to pursue different kinds of disciplines.



VH How would you define your art?

HL I would rather not. I find it increasingly difficult to explain the procedure or outcome, as my work has become even more intuitive and unconscious. And I don't want to define it, as I work at the intersection of many disciplines, and definition is the enemy of possibilities. I prefer for the audience to define it in every way that an audience can.

VH What does the concept of beauty mean specifically in art? And from a general point of view?

HL I'm not interested in the concept of beauty in art, it seems to be a requirement of the past. In general, the idea of beauty is very personal and completely relative. What is appealing to one is not attractive to the other. Personally I find the concept of superficial or predictable beauty rather uninteresting. I fall for everything else more easily. If it's a person, they ideally hold a combination of both interesting appearance and inner beauty.

VH What guides you first: your emotions or your brain?

HL They go together, but it isn't clear to me how that really works. I just know that the emotions are strong and go everywhere, but I assume the brain manipulates them in all different directions.

VH What does the concept of "self-presence" inspire in you?

HL I'm aware of it.

“I've never been an employee of mass taste or sought instant gratification.”

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VH Are you influenced by other people's opinions or are you strong enough to trust yourself?

HL I'm eager to listen and I value other people's honest opinions. It's very helpful for my own assessment. But for the final cut, I definitely trust myself solely, as I'm alone responsible for my decisions going forward. It's a vital part of being true to myself and bearing all the consequences.



VH What is your definition of balance?

HL Balance is something you achieve at times, but it isn't a constant. I think life is about balancing the everyday, one thing at a time. If you have it all the time, you wouldn't appreciate it, I guess. And being always balanced might be boring after a while.

VH Do you meditate or practise yoga? What's your most efficient method for feeling at peace?

HL I don't practise either in the traditional sense. It isn't clear to me whether I can achieve inner peace, except for a short time. I'm trying to make these short periods last longer. But I've learned that a certain inner conflict is necessary to be creative. One needs both — it's a curse and a blessing.

VH What's the most important thing life has taught you?

HL I'm still finding out and learning — but being true to oneself (I don't think I ever had a chance to be anything else for better or for worse), and being the best person you can be at any time is on the list so far. And that most behavioural patterns from childhood still pop up when you thought you'd mastered them, they will probably continue to do so, and that I'm a hopeless romantic, after all.

VH What's your aim in life?

HL My aim is to have an authentic life, whatever that involves.

VH Which artist or leader's career do you admire most?

HL I couldn't say, because you don't really know if that life is a projection or a portrait put carefully together, as no-one will know the truth, sometimes not even the subject. I've seen many people being not what I thought they were, and I don't mean that as judgemental. It is often our projection on them, which is misleading. "Never meet your idol" makes perfect sense to me.

VH Can you just tell me what you miss most about fashion?

HL What I miss are the people I loved being with, and seeing them at least twice or four times a year in Paris, when everyone was together. When you change disciplines, you naturally lose contact over time. But I believe that it can be taken up again at any point, if it was real and genuine.

VH How do you see yourself in ten years' time?

HL I have no idea. I can be visionary, but not when it comes to myself.



Helmut Lang's studio (right). "It's messy, but somehow together", says the artist.

VH Even though you've left fashion, do you still follow it. Do you keep an eye on the runway shows, magazines? If you do, are there any young designers you find interesting?

HL At the moment I do the absolute minimum in following fashion. I kind of have an idea of what is going on in the business on the surface, mostly through the information that is online. But I also keep an eye on the street, which is an automatic reflex, and am aware of the celebrity culture, which has become a major influence for the young generation. I consider, of course, the interest in expressing oneself, which fashion is, to be part of the human condition and that's how I follow it now. VOGUE HOMMES

