

HELMUT LANG  
and FOREST MINIMALISM

**PROFILE**

by Charlie Robin Jones

Every second we exist on this earth clothed, we are wearing out our garments. Every step stresses the fibres in our socks, our trousers, our shirts; wool jumpers that snag and rip and have to be repatched with yet more fabric. There have been many moves in recent months to curb fashion's colossal environmental footprint via reweaving and reselling. Gucci's reselling platform; Farfetch's second-hand bag program; Vestiaire; Grailed; Depop; eBay. Of course, this is great and applaudable. But there's an ontological-level horror that remains. One of the passages that I often think about is the section in Elvia Wilk's book *Oval* in which the protagonist lives in an ultra-eco housing complex: "She couldn't keep track of everything she used; trying to do so had led to an ontological breakdown on the microlevel of her daily life. Were eyelashes and skin cells on par with hair ties and coffee cups? Were paper coffee cups on par with a mug that had to be rewashed using graywater from the house, which cost energy to pump?"

The reason it resonates is that, given enough thought, every single action we take involves some degree of ecologically detrimental excess. We pass through life consuming, eating, using up, and discarding. At what point do we stop calling this process wasting, and start calling it existing? Helmut Lang's work is, in microcosm, one solution to this conundrum. Consciousness, subtraction. In Wilk's wonderful book (spoiler alert), she escapes the complex, returning to its deserted shell after the collapse of the city around it. Dwelling in this space, surrounded by the encroaching vegetation, she becomes one with the forest, fermenting, living in nature, independent from human laws. Days blur. Freedom, fecundity, nothingness.

When I pitched this article, I wanted to write about Helmut Lang as a designer and artist of ecosystems. There are many who make clothes or art about nature or with it, those who work with microbial fabrics or zero waste. But I wanted to think about how a person could be seen to think and behave sustainably — how an artistic practice could be intellectually sustainable in and of itself. Lang fit the bill: his work as a fashion designer spilled into famous collaborations. It fed on and was fed by the practices of Jenny Holzer, Juergen Teller, Louise Bourgeois, more obviously, but also the work of the architects of the spaces, the soundtrack composers, street-cast models, perfumers, technologists. His biography is traditionally thought of as breaking in 2005, when he abruptly sold his shares, donated what remained of his archive, and ceased to manufacture clothes, concentrating on his own practice as an artist. His work after has been called a *phantomschmerz*, the pain of a missing limb, so great is his influence and so absent is his work. However, thinking of his work as that of an ecosystem, there's nothing quite so generative as to absent yourself. You allow conversation by keeping quiet. Trees fall and become more trees. His work as an artist continues this story, dealing with, to my mind, the stories of materiality, industry, and nature: beech trees, burnt wood, birds.

Then the editor of *Flash Art*, Eleonora Milani, brought up the subject of his first show. In 1986, Helmut Lang presented his first Paris collection at the Centre Pompidou, during an exhibition dedicated to the art of modernist Vienna. "L'Apocalypse Joyeuse" was an auspicious occasion: a triumph of soft power, taking place under the direct patronage of President Mitterand of France and his Austrian counterpart, Rudolf Kirschläger. This was a blockbuster show before blockbuster shows. The exhibition catalogue runs to eight hundred pages. Klimt, Schiele, and Gerstl were there, of course; and so were Wagner's buildings, Schoenberg's paintings, even Wittgenstein's house. *La Vienna de Freud and Fugue de la mort*.

This was an incredible start for a fashion designer whose work would come to define so much of fashion from the 1990s on — a designer who, more than any other that springs to mind, came to embody not only a few set pieces

or even an era, but an entire attitude, a format of feeling, that seemed to click into the moment in which it was built. But it's this beginning that I keep thinking about, his legacy and his relationship to his countryfolk. It's almost cheesy, thinking of an Austrian designer and the *Wiener Moderne*: like relating a British artist to Virginia Woolf or the Swinging Sixties. And Lang, unlike, say, Galliano, never pinned his influences to his chest or obviously flagged his forebears. But here is this fact, almost irresistible: that this exhibition was the context in which his clothes were first shown in Paris. Klimt, Schiele, Gerstl; Wagner's buildings, Schoenberg's paintings, Wittgenstein's house; Helmut Lang.

Breaking open the vast exhibition guide, themes surface: Sex and class. Death. Nature. Modernity. It's all there. The myth and magic of early Klimt, the way nudes turn into woods and back again. Of course, it's the Wittgenstein house that most aligns with Lang's work, or at least as it exists in the imaginary: the impossibly bare spaces, the absolute concentration on materials, the obsessive images of door handles. Somehow, in a book crammed with more than its fair share of horny painters, these are the sexiest images of all — infinitely restrained, bursting with power, an otherness to be inhabited, space that invites you while objectifying your presence. They're so hot, in the way that a Helmut Lang leather jacket is just *hot*.

*While some forms of subtraction deliver aggressive, debilitating attrition, others gradually recondition and strengthen urban relationships. Some subtraction economies are not the disposal of failure and error or the eradication of contradiction but rather deliberate tools for managing building exchanges. They do not erase information, but rather release a flood of information, association, and interplay. — Keller Easterling*

Keller Easterling, in her amazing book *Subtraction*, discusses the relationship between reduction, construction, and value. Architects destroy buildings to build new ones. New buildings themselves destroy ecosystems as they suggest new ones. Yet sometimes the relationship can be inverted. The vacant lot anticipates the garden plot. Values rise according to their proximity to open space. Nothing into something, the circle of life.

What drives destruction, for Easterling, is a differential between value and worth. A house is valuable as both a requisite of life and a financial asset, as a lived experience and its tradable worth. Yet this process can be put in reverse by positioning other ideals as values. What matters is the interplay between components in any system: a housing block, a forest. Interplay, then, demands subtraction: you have to have space to move around. Being able to make one thing work in a different way, enabling movement and flux between functions — all this needs, at some level, removal. Freedom, a patch of land, impossible to be developed, that allows for experimentation and play, nature. Thus, a new form of margin can be built — not between cost and market price, but between known and unknown.

Easterling mentions Gordon Matta-Clark in this context, who broke buildings in late '70s New York, to make the outside come alive: the removal of objects, even walls, suggests new programs. Is Gordon Matta-Clark *hot*? I say yes: veils, glimpses, through lines. Neighborhoods come alive. There is more because there was less.

It's such a tantalizing idea, and it's been rattling around my head since hearing Lucia Pietroiusti, a curator at the Serpentine Galleries, bring it into focus around wider practice. She said one afternoon that it wasn't just architects who needed to actively remove buildings. All of us engaged in creative practice and had to work out how to unmake the world around us. Like I said, it's an amazing idea, but hard to know how to apply it practically, apart from decidedly *not* starting a podcast. Perhaps Helmut, however, hit on

something. First by subtracting what he would design. And secondly, before, removing.

If we're to return to the idea of the margin, his work as a fashion designer is super interesting. Lang, for me, is a poet of this differential. His objects play with the space between their functional worth and their symbolic power: The car coat that is never just a car coat while being, yes, absolutely, such an incredibly car coat-y car coat. The pair of jeans that cling at the thigh and drop just so around the ankle, jeans that become imprinted with time and use, reacting and building around the body. Paint splatters. Bondage-strapped bomber jackets. Bulletproof vests. What's remarkable, stunning really, is that all these garments, so full of meaning and allusion, are always, absolutely the objects themselves. Any CSM grad can churn out a conceptual collection. What makes Lang the most generative living designer is that he could produce garments that exist within their own boundaries while also transcending them. A white parka that evokes the military, the landscape, and absolute clarity of thought, while also being, absolutely, a white parka.

His famous bondage collection never struck me as being just about bondage. The sense of the garments, when you feel them on you, as they hold your body, is nurturing: you feel enclosed, safe. The secret straps you in. It's S&M, sure, but it's also swaddling. You breathe into it, feeling the curve of the fabric around your wrists. And then you take off the coat, lay it down, and see that it is just a piece of fabric. You look to see what happened, where the event happened: and it is just a coat, almost indistinguishable from the million other camel overcoats out there. And then you realize: this is the margin. The gap between the garment's meaning and its physical presence is dependent on Lang's ability to work via subtraction. It's the absence that makes the interplay so complex, so generative that it feels urgent to discuss twenty-five years later. We're still working out what it means.

There's a look, a suit, thirty deep into perhaps my favorite of his shows, fall 1998, the "smell of concrete and hi-fi show." On its face, it's a three-button, single-breasted gray suit. It's cut slightly close around the chest, loose on the legs and arms, and styled with an open-necked light yellow shirt, but otherwise it's a perfectly normal suit. Yet something sticks in the mind. And then, you look closer and its *perfect* normality comes into view. This, you realize, is the platonic ideal of a suit, a garment that has signaled civilization, corporate capitalism, and masculine discipline for most of the last two centuries. It's an item of clothing that has dominated the world, at the head of empire, of corporate labor, of tradition's dead hand. It's here, right at the end of its relevance as a uniform. Many of Lang's contemporaries and fellow travelers, from Rei Kawakubo to Martin Margiela, have confronted the suit with various levels of abstraction and fracturing. Yet it's this absolute hewing to the item, subtracted of any signs — even signs of design — that allows it to take its archetypal form. This is, wonderfully, a suit about suits and all they signify. Its *utility* is abstracted, not its form. As a baggy gray suit, it's almost boring and, unbelievably, unspeakably *hot*.

An alternative view: Anna Chave wrote a landmark essay in 1990, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," describing the work of the 1960s minimalists. This is not power in a hot way. This was power in the sense of corporate power, of the multinationals, of the military-industrial complex going into overdrive in Vietnam at the time Carl Andre and Robert Morris and Richard Serra were imposing such *volumes* onto the gallery — volumes that necessitated the reinforcement of floors, lest the sheer materiality of the statements collapse the building. This is, for Chave, and, kind of, mostly for me too, minimalism as domination, without a safe word. This is *not hot*. Consider Flavin's *Diagonal* (1963), a phallus reduced to its barest essentials: an angle. The value is in the force, not the restraint: the yell, not the slide. Nothing is alluded to, so nothing, really, is subtracted. A fear of frivolity, fragile.

Wittgenstein the interior designer, Helmut Lang when he

made fashion: frivolous but essential. They might be making work that shares an aesthetic with minimalism, but they are, for me, people who worked by subtraction down to absolutes — compressors, not minimalists. Compressed to the point of their field even: no one *needs* a set of slate squares, but we all do need walls, and trousers do come in handy. If the '60s minimalists, in Chave's telling at least, worked from nothing outward, Lang instead worked the opposite way, taking a mass of ideas and identities, and shaving until all that is left is the object itself.

It resonates, for me, with the art of Aria Dean. One of the most interesting writers of the last decade, her practice as an artist is an astonishing combination of so many different modes of production — from installation to theater to sculpture to engravings. Her works offer a kind of fruity formalism, a kind of dissident stripped-ness, where the most stunning ideas about modernity and power are rendered into ultra-pure forms. I wrote the word “bare” instead of “pure” originally, only to replace it a second later. She deals in, it seems to me, the ideal of a thing: a cage, a column, a cartoon: the ultimate object, but seen through the layers of reproduction.

In 2017 she made an incredible sculpture called *untitled (footnote to war of position)* — a twig of cotton, coated in black polyurethane, as if tarred. Everything that tar means, everything that cotton means, compressed into a scar on a gallery floor. She recently proposed a monument to Swedish slavery — seven-meter-tall blocks of iron. Everything that iron is — vital cargo for the early modern Swedish state, slave chains, material paid in tribute to the Nazi empire — is rendered here, in a monolith. The proportions could make a classic minimalist proud, but there's something more interesting here, as with Lang, than pure presence, or simple simplicity. Rather, IMO, this is work so pregnant with meaning, so full of stories to tell, that it demands absolute distillation — brevity be the soul of wit, and all that.

The work reminds me of Helmut Lang because of the compression of complex ideas into total typologies: a proposed monument to slavery as a block of metal, pressing the narratives of iron, from trade to chains, into a seven-meter-tall monolith, for example. One review of a show at Greene Naftali in New York mentions that a viewer wouldn't understand the conceptual weight of the forms without an attached text, which seems to me to miss the point. Notably, Aria Dean's interests as a writer are around the circulation of images today — the ways that ideas become objects that turn into systems: memes, songs, texts. Notably, Helmut Lang's innovations were not merely on the level of technical fabrication. They marshaled the aura of their objects via a supreme understanding of the technologies of image transference: Holzer's “I breathe your breath / I smell you on my skin”; shows on CD-ROM; ads on New York taxis; Juergen Teller shooting backstage (the construction of the show is the show!). All these go beyond mere advertisements; they are interventions in the economy of images. The form is never just the form; the unmediated experience is implausible. Both Dean and Lang understand this, and they articulate it within an ecosystem-level conception of their work.

Another point of interest: Time. In an interview with *Frieze*, Dean recalled the artist and musician Mayo Thompson telling her that “sculpture is simply about time [...] insofar as space itself is also time-bound.” It's a recurring interest for Lang, too. Jeans, these icons of work wear, became a focus of Lang's work — both as one of his most popular items and, in the form of “painter jeans,” an icon in their own right, prized for their shifting, fraying forms that break around you, molding onto your frame. Lang recently said, in an interview about the launch of an exhibition curated with Anthony Vaccarello for Saint Laurent's LA space (Vaccarello, who recently collaborated with Doug Aitken on a vast mirrored hall for the recent Saint Laurent show, has been praised many times by Helmut.) For the show, he used old clothes as the basis for new, totemic sculptures cast in stark,

sensuous black: a folding with time. As an artist, he returns again and again to ideas of transformation, of combustion, of time's inexorable ability to induce alteration. In 2008 he constructed out of mahogany a series of huge winged creatures in flight, their heads severed clean off. Tarré on the outside, our place in time is plotted in rings of wood grain. The history of sculpture is the history of endurance, as this powerful pun on winged victory reminds us. One of my favorite of his works is *Tor* (2008), an installation suggesting a door, or the gate of the title: in bare materials, so simple as to be invisible. In 2019, he exhibited a series of sculptures made out of the remains of his archive. Destroyed in a fire, he used the ashes and frayed remnants as material for slender columns, rods extending to the ceiling. Out of the trauma of the burning, a forest emerges. Lang displayed sixty-three of these, one for each year he had been alive at that point, lined up like a grove of beech trees.

Each of these works references time directly, of course. But also they intersect with deep time, mythic time, pulling toward a pre-modern, even pre-Christian mode of thinking. Each mirrors a deep archetype. Gates, eagles, trees, fire: these are powerful metaphors, ways of dealing with our presence on this earth and our passing from it. In his penultimate show, fall 2004/5, Lang referenced Hungarian folklore, fur, horsehair — like any good Wiener Moderne, he knows that modernity is not a destination but a thin skin, lying over something seething, ancient.

In Ingeborg Harms's essay on Lang in *032c*, a great deal is made of his idyllic early years growing up in the Austrian countryside with his grandparents and his miserable teenage years in the capital: the jump between ancient peasant life and that of the absurdly urbane. It's this gap, that between the sublime and the intellectual, of the raging soul and the brilliant mind, the coffee-shop and courtly manners and the teeming mob, that makes so much of the art of L'Apocalypse so irresistible, as irresistible as this narrative itself, which Lang's life itself tells us about. Everywhere in Lang's work, we see such deep ideas and references to the world just gone. That it is stitched into such starkly modern, almost literally seamless clothing is not an accident or an irony but a deeply intelligent conception of his temporal place in the ecosystem of twentieth- and twenty-first-century image culture. The weight of history and his forebears are contained within his work because of, not despite the lack of outward signifiers. Compressing these into such singular items was in keeping with a centuries-old tradition of creative work, not a disruption to it. His unequalled impact on the shape of twenty-first-century fashion stems not just from his polite refusal to engage with it, though that is important. More: it is that he saw, with dazzling clarity, that a brand could act as a conduit for the communication of complex ideas, *and* a belief in collective and collaborative working practices.

A lot has already been written about how the Alps built Lang's early aesthetics — most directly the simple functionality of farmers' tools and peasant clothing. More poetically, there is a certain zen mindset that mountains mandate. But there's more to this formative time, still. Surrounded by woods and beasts in his childhood, his work and life since have been characterised by a deep sense of the ecosystem in which they exist. I believe he took this early sensitivity, one foot in the roiling times of Vienna in the time before and after punk, and another in the foothills of the Alps, and fused it to create a deeply generative, deeply wise sensitivity to his place and possibility within his wider habitat. For new growth, mighty trees must fall, and regrow, and fall. We make our work, as simply and well as we can, collaborating where possible. What did the forest teach Helmut? Material is ideas and ideas material, and bodies all, and each of us are just nutrients for the next generation. And what can he teach us?

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Helmut Lang, excerpt from  
the *Selective Memory*  
*Series*, 2021. Special project  
conceived by Helmut Lang  
for *Flash Art's* "Profile."  
Courtesy of the artist.