

GROTESQUE BY THE FALL:
THE ART OF HELMUT LANG
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The “Grotesque” is a category defined by its slippage: named after the locus of the genre’s discovery—in the grotto-esque ruins of Emperor Titus’ public bathhouses—it is generally seen as a genre founded on gruesome hybridity—human and animal forms mingling idiosyncratically with fruit, flower, leaf and vine. The “grotto” is the subterranean space wherein all the tenets of classicism slough off and the weird and vulgar elements of the creative psyche awaken. The “Grotto-esque” is a conceptual arena for waste, opulence and perversion. The grotesque is born below the surface. From this oblique perspective, the grotesque is an aesthetics of excavation.

For his twin exhibitions at the Sammlung Friedrichshof and the Stadtraum in Vienna, the only acute dichotomy between the two shows is chromatic: at Zurndorf, the sculptures and panels carry the ash and bone whites of a charnel house; at the Stadtraum, the tones are blackened like rotten or burned animal or plant life.

Both exhibitions allude to accretion: the pale pillars refer to bat guano towers found in caves; the dark, loamy pillars to dung or compost heaps. Standing taller than the average person, they refer to the monument more than the figure.

The paragraphs of a catalogue essay often function in a similar manner: they are accretions of language rarely read and normally valuable merely as a supplemental sort of anti-image amidst full-color artwork reproductions. Catalogue essays usually justify their existence via their texture and density more than their inherent content. They tend to be inert and somewhat self-reflexive.



Auguste Rodin, Les Bourgeois de Calais, 1889

Like fossil records, each of Lang’s pillars is presented in cross-section. Embedded within is a multitude of half-digested matter, from chewed up paper to the occasional garment remnant—the crenellations of a zipper or a shock of dyed fabric. One begins to fantasize that these are the fecal stools or stomach contents of an indifferently ravenous giant.

Like *Les Bourgeois de Calais* by Rodin, Lang’s blackened figures huddle together in weary poses. Rodin’s masterpiece is a monument to self-sacrifice—instead of mimicking classical tropes of muscular heroism, the Burghers embody pain, anguish and fatalism. Completed in 1889, the monument is a harbinger for the 20th century—an historical epoch characterized by depletion, exhaustion and fatigue. A daydream of contemporary Calais—home of the infamous Calais Jungle—betrays the landscape of the Anthropocene: scorched earth and groves of manmade detritus. Lang’s teetering cairns resemble “Les Bourgeois de Calais du 21ème Siècle”.



Catacombs of Paris, France

Since the start of the new millennium, geological history has entered a new epoch: the Anthropocene, or the Earth’s sixth major extinction. I think that, epochs later, whoever is excavating this sedimentary layer will find something akin to the stuff of Lang’s art. In the niches and spandrels of the modern city, one finds the excrement of late capitalism: discarded garments and vermin entrails; plastic and aluminum packaging; paper waste and bits of molded plastic. I dream of seeing this lurid layer in the fossil record millennia from now, but can catch a glimpse of it in Helmut Lang’s art. These objects look like time capsules transmitted from a distant, wasted future.

On a visit to Paris I walked the length of the Catacombs. On the tunnel walls are countless skulls and femurs stacked in an elegant pattern. Here were the remains of six million Parisians rendered into luxurious, almost velvety walls. Around halfway through the vast ossuary, I noticed that the cave ceiling was dripping. I pressed on with a newfound desire to escape. When I finally emerged into daylight, a white mineral slurry coated the shoulders of my black tee shirt and ran down my torso in rivulets. Whether this cement-like material was some runoff from modern construction or from the limestone deposits from which the tunnels were carved—or from the soft piles of ancient bones (or a combination thereof)—had little bearing on the formation of this rich, deeply felt memory. The memory of how that bone-paste sunk into the cotton of my tee shirt has returned by way of Lang’s slouching pillars in Vienna.

Surrounding the pillars are grim wards: spikes mounted on steel dowels resemble half-digested human spinal columns—what remains of the heroic figure. Lang references a pale room of Rodin sculptures as an inspiration for *Various Conditions*. These spear-like assemblages are a dream of Rodin’s skeleton—as if the master’s manipulation of the human body in clay extended under the skin, omitting neither the bones nor the viscera.

On the walls of each of the show’s chambers is a lineup of panels, each its own scene of some variety of ferocious undoing of the flesh. These panels carry the hybridity of the grotesque seen throughout the practice—at once ornate friezes, the fourteen panels divided between the shows could just as likely be preserved sections of studio workspace. As relationships develop between the objects, the hierarchical boundaries between painting and sculpture begin to dissolve—or slough off and decay, only to be preserved as friezes.

In 1980, the post-punk band “The Fall” released *Grotesque: After the Gramme*. Lang’s recent shows inspired me to revisit this album in depth. *Grotesque* is ostensibly the typical post-punk British album: sharp, dissonant and repetitive instrumentation—almost monochrome in its uniformity. Mark E. Smith’s vocals have the snotty monotony that typifies most of the punk music of the era. I only fully understood what exactly was “grotesque” about *Grotesque* when I paid closer attention to the lyrics: just beneath the stylish surface of “The Fall’s” sound, Smith’s lyrics allude to a florid, fragmented fever dream. In *The N.W.R.A.*, Smith paints one of these vivid pictures:

“But out the window burned the roads
There were men with bees on sticks
The fall had made them sick
A man with butterflies on his face
His brother threw acid in his face
His tattoos were screwed
The streets of Soho did reverberate”



The grotesque of Lang’s artwork functions similarly: the gluts of material come from a dizzying variety of sources and contain a wealth of color, texture and implicit narrative. I’ve always viewed his tactic of coating his sculptures in enamel paint as similar to Mark E. Smith plunging his lewd picaresque verse into a sea of antiseptic instrumentation.

„Joy Division” can be seen as the inventors of depression in rock music. Forebears in rock music always referenced an object-cause for their melancholia—bereavement, infidelity, loneliness. Ian Curtis’ music lacks such a referent for its blackness, wherein the void seems to be his only muse. A feedback loop ensues, much like the symptoms of depression: black begets black. From *Day of the Lords* (1979):

“These are your friends from childhood,
through youth,
Who goaded you on, demanded more proof,
Withdrawal pain is hard, it can do you
right in,
So distorted and thin, distorted and
thin.
Where will it end? Where will it end?
Where will it end? Where will it end?”



The Fall performing at The Ranch,
Manchester, 1977

Following double page: Something to Think About, 2011, Video (b/w, no sound, running time: 55 seconds)

This dream of World War I trench warfare by a 22 year old Briton—a soldier withdrawing from morphine; watching old friends wither and die—speaks to the aesthetics of Lang’s art. A successful contemporary artwork is marked by a certain inexhaustibility of content, wherein the object has been reduced so completely that there is nothing left to exhaust. Viewed from an oblique perspective wherein the stuff of Lang’s artwork appears pulverized, charred, and compacted, one could argue that the artist’s entire practice—characterized by a certain grotesque “hybridity”, falling into no exact category—is defined by a very literal inexhaustibility. An inexhaustible object—like depression—invites a circular interpretation; every logical pathway returns to the place from whence it came. Where will it end?

One could argue that “The Fall” were performing the collapse of history with their music. The lyrical content has a fecal quality—morsels of modern life share space with fever dreams of a darker age. Lang’s sculptures seem similarly digested: the gluts of material speak to an utter collapse of an historical or personal record. It is only when we study these ruins carefully that we understand the sheer diversity of their contents. As with the grotesque, where humans, animals and plants are broken down to form an interlocking design system, so does Lang’s sculpture, wherein the universe of consumable matter dissolves into a kind of all-purpose cultural composite.

This grotesque collapse of history, wherein all matter is pulverized and leveled, is nowhere more evident than in journalistic photography of modern battlefields. Along with the advent of modern industry came the modern battlefield, which, since the Battle of Verdun in 1916, has resembled a thick carpet of metal shrapnel, destroyed wildlife and shredded fatigues, skulls and bone fragments. Gone is the classic image of the well-proportioned heroic warrior. In his place is the leveled figure. Lang’s art is a gathering of leveled figures.

Rodin Museum, Meudon, France