

HELMUT LANG

New York / Athens / Long Island

Helmut Lang is at once one of the most tangible and enigmatic figures in fashion history, making his mark in countless ways while remaining impossible to pin down. Since leaving his eponymous fashion company in 2005, Lang has been focusing on his art. In 2009 he was invited by Dakis Joannou to curate the DesteFashionCollection, featured in this portfolio.

“True authenticity will be the most important contribution artists have to offer and it is always the best idea to be true to yourself. While artists need to be able to exist in a world of silence, chaos and change also enable them to react stronger in their work.”

— Helmut Lang



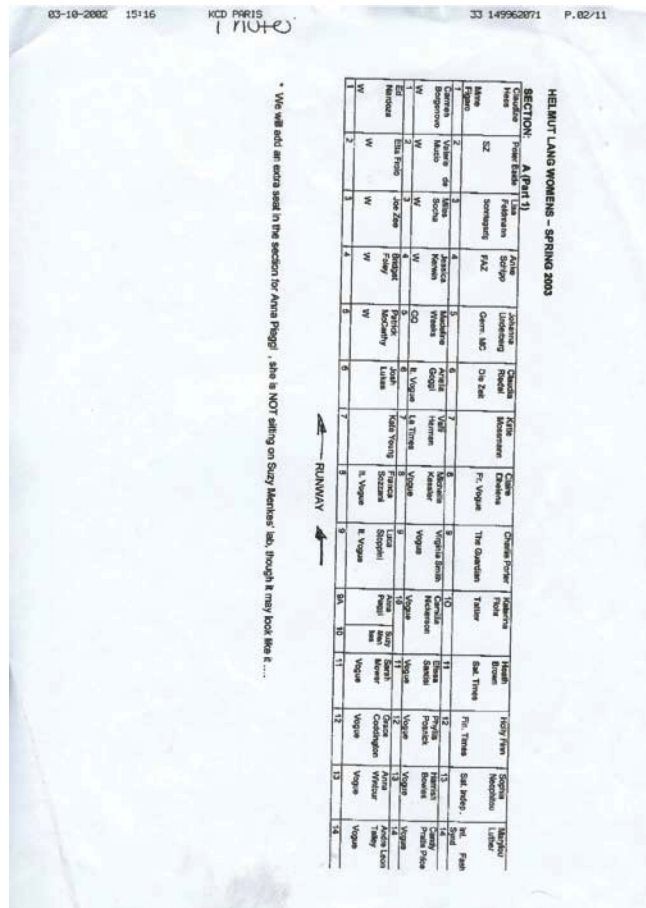
HELMUT LANG: *front row*

Having been asked by Dakis Joannou to observe a year in fashion 7/2008-7/2009 and produce a curation and an artistic commentary, I realized in the process that this was the first time I found myself in a non-contributing position to the fashion system and asked to occupy the role of observer rather than participant. Even if the front row was a virtual one, I had never been there before. After that conclusion, it became clear to me that the front row would be the subject of my commentary. As it was a new experience, I found it interesting enough. *All text by Helmut Lang*



HELMUT LANG, FRONT ROW, 2009, *Urethane resin, pigment and filler*,
79.75 x 34 x 19 inches (203 x 86 x 48 cm)

The *front row* is one of the elite *hierarchies* (hierarchy) of the *show industry*. During the presentation of designer collections it is simultaneously a place of achievement and a place of power. There is an archaic quality to it, similar to the one of an arena spectacle and the hierarchy of the pecking order. The arrangement and composition of the entire *show* in the show is an equally unambiguous and daring statement of power. The *front row* is the place of the *show* and the *show* is the place of the *front row*. It is the only moment where the entire evaluation is displayed in plain view of everyone. (...) As at the hierarchy of the *front row* itself, there is the same linear system of "more or less important" as in the back rows, but it is the *front row* where the stakes of humiliation are at their highest. The presentation of the *front row* is a performance of power, a performance of the *show* and the *show* is the performance of the *front row* and the appropriate surrounding of one's own entourage and other powerful colleagues or competitors. Paradoxically, the procedure is in its own spectacle, and it is entertaining as the unvalued performance itself. (...) In consequence, the white chair, which in essence is a simple object, is transformed into a symbol of power. (...) The *front row* is a place of power, a place of achievement, a place of glory. This position or ranking, which will change slightly every six months, consequently also becomes an arena of revenge, humiliation and glory.





SHAME BAG



BIRKIN BAG, crocodile pattern, Hermès, 201X

The year of 2009 in fashion will, in retrospect, be remembered for what happened beyond fashion and the effect it had on the flow of the expected curve ahead. In view of social and economic turmoil, the interruption of the expected became a matter of shock and survival, brought on by extraordinary financial stress both in fashion and the real world.

Reflecting society—which is what fashion can do very quickly when it is at its best—was overrun by the obvious series of events. In turn, the consumer and the luxury industry had to come up with a band-aid while figuring out how to pursue consumption and survive as a consumer or as a brand. To talk boastfully and show off what one can afford is a healthy part of a booming economy, but within weeks of the financial collapse, no one really wanted to flash expensive things in other people's faces. There is a certain sensitivity in response to a recession. Under these circumstances, the fashion year of 2009 invented the unmarked shopping bag. It is a first in terms of customers asking for a plain white paper bag in place of the prominent, iconic, and branded shopping bags, which in consequence illustrates a reversal of the idea of a status symbol. Some of the clients just had recessionary guilt as they could still afford shopping, while their friends or family members were not in the position to do so anymore. And for the regular high-end luxury clients—particularly the ones who might have taken an active part in the collapse of the economy—there might have been a French Fear Syndrome that the guillotine would make a comeback.

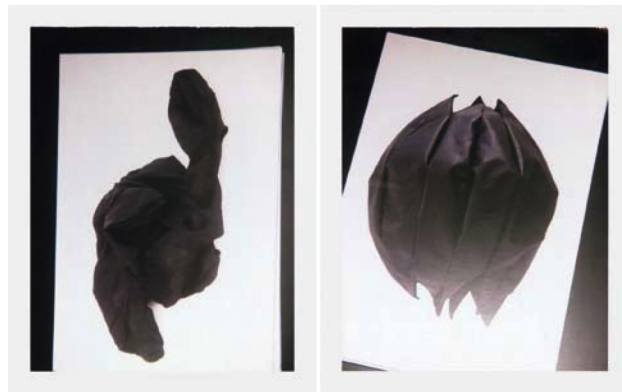
Hermès, being the oldest luxury leather goods house, has always stood for impeccable quality and craftsmanship for all of its products. It embodies the idea of solid and iconic investment pieces that will be carried over many years and become even more valuable with time. The Birkin bag is one of these icons. Also, the brand's philosophy and manifests of repairing and reusing products plays with the idea of individuality and sustainability, going back to an aristocratic approach of valuing tradition. This approach has put Hermès in one of the best positions for handling the difficulties of a challenging year for all luxury brands, as clients turned to reassurance and quality they can rely on.



BELT, patent leather, Azzedine Alaïa, 20VII
CAST, plaster/cotton lining, Martin Margiela, S/S 20IX

Left: Azzedine Alaïa is one of the true independent créateurs who has managed to withstand editorial pressures and sustain his own unique business model and position in the fashion universe throughout the years, supported by a loyal crowd of fashion insiders and fashion journalists. Elixir as it may be, it also ironically turned out to be the right formula in a fashion world in crisis. One of his designs, beautiful without being spectacular, became extremely famous and also broadened Alaïa's name immensely: a black belt, worn by First Lady Michelle Obama on several occasions. Her influence on fashion and popular American style is unprecedented. Her versatile and eclectic choice of designer fashion and high street pieces, has created a new style and physical language for first ladies as a true reflection of our times, portraying how the modern woman in general is applying fashion in a contemporary way. Her choice of embracing both American and international designers alike, as well as rather unknown or progressive designers, became an exercise in personal style that went against the absolute authority of the luxury fashion industry and luxury fashion magazines.

Right: This jacket, produced for S/S 2009, is a plaster cast of the first jacket Martin Margiela ever produced from S/S 1989. The inclusion of this piece, which is also representative of his iconic use of white textured surfaces, highlights his undeniable relevance and enormous influence on fashion. It also represents, for me, a paradox reflecting a system that suddenly went into unexpected shock without the ability to move. Whatever the original intention behind the piece was, it shows Martin Margiela as the visionary man he has always been. His body of work has been so much more than fashion or clothing. I also see the white surface of plaster as a chance for a new beginning, which a stagnant industry will need in order to stay interesting and maintain proper appreciation for creative ideas in defense of fashion derivatives.



DRESS, silk, Louise Bourgeois, 19XX
TOP, Comme des Garçons, S/S 20IX

Left: I chose this simple but feminine black silk dress from Louise Bourgeois, which she kept with all her other clothes and items to be reused at a later point with the purpose of turning them into something else. This philosophy, which is generally the Antichrist of fashion, has become the survivor-chic formula in the first recession period of 2008-2009. As the realities of the current economic climate developed, the idea of keeping clothes for a longer period of time and turning to vintage garments became a significant trend. That shift was made much easier for the fashion crowd as it also embraces the idea of environmental and ecological consciousness and sustainable consumption, allowing people to enhance personal style with a positive approach. This dress used to be part of Louise Bourgeois' personal wardrobe.

Right: What is the future of black? This was the philosophical question that Rei Kawakubo might have pursued in her S/S 2009 collection, which was conceived and presented before the economic downfall. As one of the last independent créateurs, she is intuitive as always, fearlessly experimental, and of such an original mind. She has had widespread influence over generations of designers. As exclusive and particular as the Comme des Garçons client is, her ideas reach far down the fashion pyramid in endless watered-down versions. As a symbol for this year, I chose this gynecoid top, as it seems to predict that the world is losing its bottom and its top. This was probably not her intention, but looking back I found it quite visionary. In a sense, this choice is also made to highlight my respect for her entire body of work, but in particular for her undisturbed creative genius, which is perhaps once again unwillingly helping out an industry that has to reinvent itself.