

Here Lies “Helmut Lang”
(1986–2005)

In Vienna,
It's a balmy Wednesday in June.
I arrive at the museum on a Sunday afternoon, when it's free
to get in.
I've been here before, but not as A Researcher.
I walk up the stairs, through the atrium, and down into the
basement.
I hang around in The Archive –
It's low light, minimalist; all concrete, glass and metal.
It's eerie, like a fashion morgue.
Grey, numbered archival boxes are visible behind locked,
glass cabinet doors, underneath a long steel bench top.
Relics of another time.
It's open access, and there's no one around, so I spend
plenty of time looking, watching, scrutinising, recording,
photographing.
I think I feel the Gallery Assistant's eyes on me.

The next day I arrive back at the gallery and ask the woman at
the front desk to call The Curator.
Pretty soon I realise I won't be seeing or touching any of the
clothes but the conversation is great,
I record it.
I get to spend some time in The Curator's Office and we look
through some archival material, she tells me plenty more.
I feel like I've been ushered into The Inner Circle.
You have my full attention.

Months later, in Bath –
A rainy August Friday in the tourist town.
I arrive for my Study Appointment,
There are garments on racks and shoes laid out for me to see.
Handling but not touching,
I work independently, but at a self-conscious, hurried pace,
I don't want to take up too much time and I'm being watched
with one eye.
I got here at 2.15pm and I want to see it, touch it, all.
I flick through the rack gently, nervously lift pieces from
calico-lined baskets;
One by one, with cotton-gloved-hands. As I finish with each
basket, I approach The Conservator cautiously, aware that
I'm disturbing her work.
She helps me move a new basket to the study table.

Unfold, unwrap, unzip.
 Photograph the front, photograph the back.
 Note the object reference number – this is from 2003?
 Looks 90s.
 What's this, a top or a skirt?
 Fold it, wrap it back up, zip it back up.
 Put it all back just as I found it,
 or maybe even neater than how it was.
 Catch the train back home.

Digging.

Visiting the cities, the places, the institutions;
 Searching databases, websites, looking, sometimes “touching”
 Speaking with Curators, Researchers,
 People who have had contact with the man, the myth,
 the Lang.
 Swapping stories and anecdotes.
 Each interaction brings me closer to the “man”, the “brand”
 – or does it?
 Am I just adding to the fabric of the 90s minimalist fashion
 myth?
 Did Helmut Lang cut this, sew that? Did Kate Moss wear this,
 did Juergen Teller photograph that? Did Louise Bourgeois
 and Jenny Holzer look at that?
 Names, names.

Do I even care? Yeah.
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In 2011, following Helmut Lang's retirement from the fashion industry and his namesake label to pursue a career as an artist, he offered his entire archive to fashion museums and collections across the world; pieces from past collections, as well as items from the Graphic and Corporate Archive, such as look-books, floppy disks of music created for collection presentations, coat hangers, fragrance bottles, the top of a New York taxi cab, etc. Post-donation, as part of Lang's art practice, he industrially shredded the estimated 6000-7000 garments and accessories remaining in his collection, and set them into resin poles in a work titled *Make It Hard*. This came after a fire in the Helmut Lang Studio damaged and destroyed a significant

portion of pieces from the archive. Notably, the last collection Lang designed for the label was destroyed in the fire.

Fashion Museum, Bath and MAK, Vienna are two of the 18 institutions that acquired donations from Lang's archive. I recently visited both museums as part of research for my MA dissertation, in an effort to trace the now-diffused material legacy of the Helmut Lang label, from the period of 1986 to 2005 when Lang himself held the post of designer. In widely donating a significant portion of his collection and archive to institutions, and destroying the rest, Lang made a clear distinction between his Helmut Lang (1986–2005) and the label post-his retirement, following his sale of the company to the Prada Group, which Prada would later sell to Link Theory. Lang effectively freed himself from his fashion past, while ensuring a portion of it remained as a reminder of his contribution and was preserved for others to enjoy.