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# HELMUT LANG

## CAPSULE COLLECTION 2009

*Text by Helmut Lang, originally published in Helmut Lang/DESTE, 2010*

Having been asked by Dakis Joannou to observe a year in fashion from July 2008 to July 2009 and produce a curation and an artistic commentary, I realized in the process that this was the first time that I had found myself in a non-contributing position to the fashion system, 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.

### SHAMEBAG

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 in both 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 any more. 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

Hermès, being the oldest luxury leather goods house, has always stood for impeccable quality and craftsmanship for all their products. They embody 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, their philosophy and manifesto 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 in handling the difficulties of a challenging year for all luxury brands, as clients turned to Hermès for reassurance and quality that they can rely on.

## AZZEDINE ALAÏA

Azzedine 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. Elitist as it may be, it ironically turned out to be also the right formula in a fashion world in crisis. One of his designs, beautiful without being spectacular, became extremely famous and 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 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 of personal style that went against the absolute authority of the luxury fashion industry and luxury fashion magazines.

## MAISON MARTIN MARGIELA

This jacket, produced for spring/summer 2009, is a plaster cast of the first jacket Martin Margiela ever produced from spring/summer 1989. The inclusion of this piece, which is also representative of his iconic usage of white textured surfaces, highlights his undeniable relevance and enormous influence in fashion. It represents for me also 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 illustrates 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 to stay interesting and maintain proper appreciation for creative ideas in defense of fashion derivatives.

## LOUISE BOURGEOIS' VINTAGE DRESS

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 Anti-Christ 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 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.

## COMME DES GARÇONS

What is the future of black? This was the philosophical question that Rei Kawakubo might have pursued in her spring/summer 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 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 geodesic 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 for her undisturbed creative genius, which is perhaps once again unwillingly helping an industry that must reinvent itself.

## ABOUT HELMUT LANG

Helmut Lang (b. 1956, Vienna, Austria) was immersed at a young age in the Viennese art world and intended to become an artist, but accidentally ended up in fashion. Over the following three decades, he gained international acclaim as a leader and innovator in the field. Since his retirement from fashion in 2005, Lang has devoted over a decade to his artistic practice, with several exhibitions in Europe and the US, including his first institutional solo exhibition at kestnergesellschaft, Hanover in 2008. In 2014, Lang joined Sperone Westwater Gallery in New York, which presented his inaugural show in January 2015. Helmut Lang lives and works between Long Island and New York City.