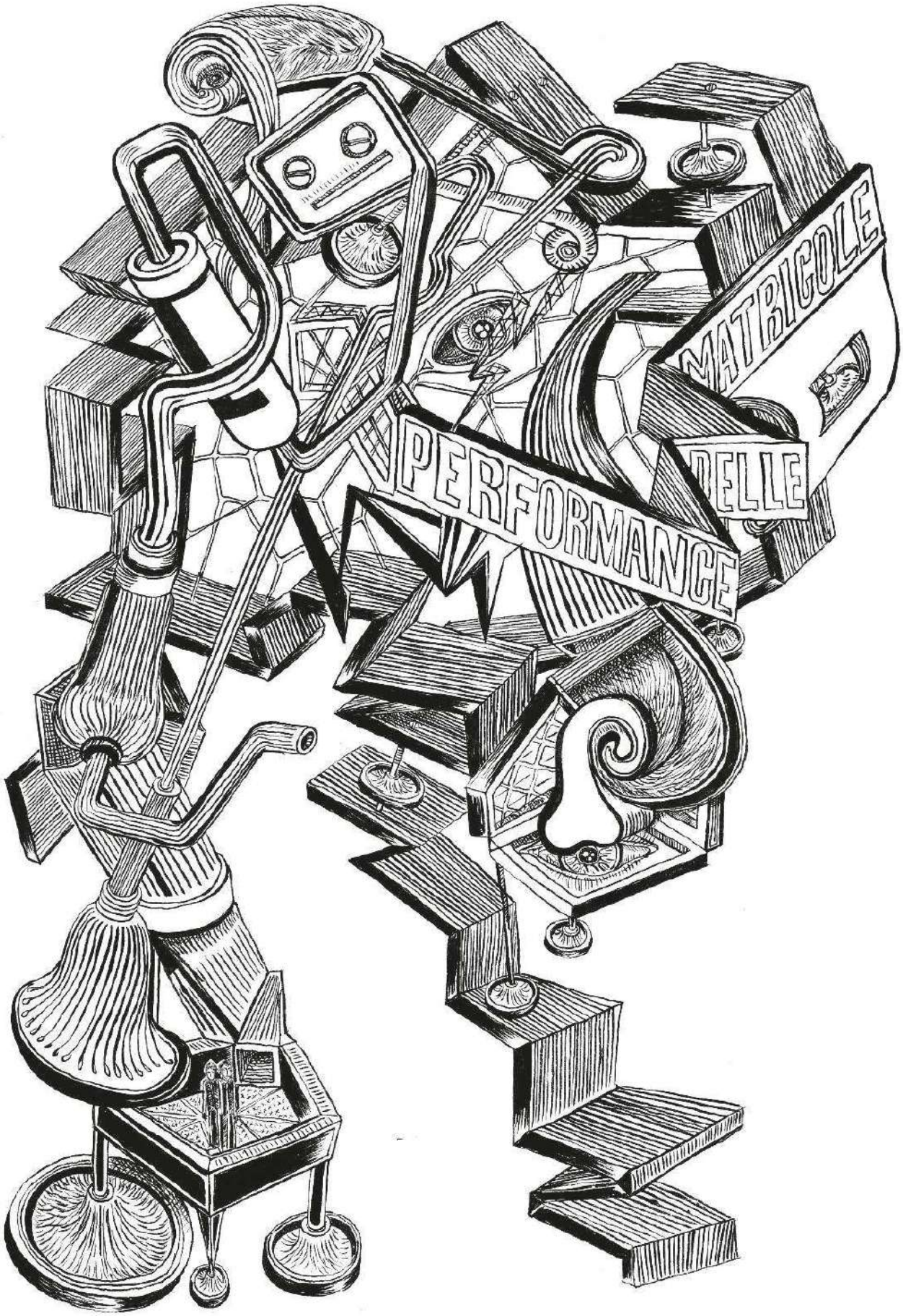
R per Raf



Harper's Bazaar online – September 2025

Exclusive interview by Harper's Bazaar Italia with Raf Simon

Interview with Raf Simons: from the debut of his independent brand to his role as co-creative director of Prada alongside Miuccia Prada, the story of his meeting with Patrizio Bertelli, the creative challenges, and his vision for the future of fashion.

What advice would you give for interviewing Miuccia Prada?
I don't know, I'd have to think about it. She's an unpredictable person, even in the way she responds. In general, I always find it interesting to ask questions that push people out of their comfort zone rather than reassuring ones—like "how do you work together?" It's not that we don't find those interesting, but somehow we expect them.
Actually, we do very few interviews, and never separately like what's happening now.

When in your career did you first cross paths with the Prada brand and the family?
When I founded my brand in 1995. At the time, Prada was one of the labels I considered truly contemporary—alongside some Belgian designers, of course, and Helmut Lang and Jil Sander. I paused my brand in 2001 and taught in Vienna until 2006. At one point, Patrizio Bertelli called me. The first meeting was with him; Miuccia only briefly popped in. They had acquired Jil Sander and offered me the role of creative director. The idea thrilled me.

Did Miuccia Prada personally know your design style, or had she only seen your creations in stores?
I don't know. Jil Sander at the time was a very serious, Teutonic, minimalist brand. I was kind of the opposite: Belgian, avant-garde, gothic, punk, dark, romantic. I was struck by the fact that they believed in me. But soon after, they had to sell both Jil Sander and Helmut Lang. Those were tough times—even for my brand and for independents. At first, we were looked at very favorably. There was a new generation of designers besides me, like Mario Sorbo and Ilario Mori. Back then, the industry was organized differently—multi-brand distributors still had a lot of power. Sometimes they'd pick brands like Helmut Lang because they looked great in the window, even if they didn't sell much.

When Prada bought Lang and Jil Sander, things got even more complicated for independents, because distributors started buying more from them. But then, around 2006–2007, the market structure began to shift, and distributors lost influence. Meanwhile, my relationship with Prada continued, even though they had sold those acquisitions. I remember meeting them at a Miu Miu show in Tokyo. Bertelli called me again after my time at Dior and after I left Calvin Klein. He wrote me a very simple letter: "Would you like to come to Milan? We'd love to talk about the future."

And so, that meeting happened.

A long afternoon of conversations and ideas. It was clear that Miuccia had no intention of stepping away anytime soon, and I wasn't interested in working alone either. So the idea of working together as co-creative directors emerged. At that point, of course, Miuccia became an integral part of the conversation. It felt fantastic. Suddenly, the deal was done. A completely different situation from Jil Sander—this was about being co-creative director. The relationship we had built up to that point had brought us closer.

Is the Prada Group different from the others you've worked with?

Very much so. I'd say it's truly atypical. Nothing here is structured in a conventional way. Even after five years, there are still things that surprise me—but they work perfectly. First of all, it's a group where the founders are still present. But even the relationships with key stakeholders—CEO Andrea Guerra, Lorenzo Bertelli, marketing, the head of finance—while close, don't develop like they do elsewhere. Rarely have we all been in the same room together. It's a very particular recipe, a very different organization from American corporations, which I don't really like. I feel more aligned with the European and Asian way of doing business.

When I arrived in New York, at first I thought a dream had come true—but soon came the cold shower. On the surface, I found great politeness and friendliness, but behind the scenes, things were very different. Here, everything is very direct. Discussions are explicit. You always know where you stand. It's impossible to get stabbed in the back.

Why did you decide to close your brand in 2022?

I prefer the word "pause," for now. First of all, for personal reasons. Managing two brands was always very hectic. You'd leave one thing and jump into the other, but you'd still be thinking about both. With my brand, I had a small, trusted team. Together with CEO Bianca Quets Luzi, we thought about it for a while. We had some shows planned, including one in London, which we had to cancel and reschedule—like everyone—due to Queen Elizabeth's death. I thought: "Let's do it in a club, no seating, whoever comes is welcome. Let's open the doors to schools and see what happens." And that's what we did. It was perfect. That's when I realized it was time to stop.

The hardest part was managing the people I had worked with. Three of them are still with me, handling many things. It's not like everything disappeared. We have an archive the size of a football field to organize. Part of me feels it's not over yet. The brand is still mine—it bears my name. And if tomorrow I wanted to reopen it, even just for one project, I could.

Let's talk about your DNA and Prada's: music, architecture, design. The attitude toward cut, styling, and combining different elements.

In general, even when fashion is disruptive, there's a sense of fear. And fear is creativity's worst enemy. You feel less free, everyone puts up their defenses.

Will it take time for things to change?
Definitely, it's a moment of uncertainty for the industry—but it's not just that. Many big players have gone too far, as if we've passed the point of no return. The power is no longer in the hands of designers. Many brands are controlled by people who have nothing to do with the creative strength of their founders. Economic mechanisms have been put in place that worked as multipliers for years, but the result is sad for those who truly love fashion.

I believe we should find ways to protect young independent designers. Culture and business don't always go hand in hand. When I went to Dior, I did it out of curiosity and because I thought it was very avant-garde of me to lead such a brand. It felt like a challenge, something underground—and therefore unexpected. Working with the Dior team was a great pleasure. Lots of dialogue, great cohesion. But at a certain point, I felt it was time to leave.

Calvin Klein was my American dream, but it didn't work out. When I left, I thought: "I've had enough. I don't want to be a creative director anymore. I want to stay quietly in Antwerp and focus on the things that interest me." Then Bertelli came along. It was the last brand I expected to hear from—but also one of the few I could say yes to. Mainly for cultural reasons, for the mindset, for Miuccia's ability to face the world as it is, with all its changes.

I don't want to become one of those people who say, "Things were better in the past," but I have fewer responsibilities—I don't carry the weight of the company or the people—so it's easier for me. You have to be very pragmatic, and keep up with fashion.

Do you think the fashion system needs a reset, to be rebuilt on different foundations?
If someone knows how to do it, they should try. But I don't think anyone does. In the '70s, '80s, and '90s, it was much easier for independents to emerge. Every generation should hope that at some point someone steps forward and throws them into the mix.

For example, Dries Van Noten, the most commercially successful designer in Belgium, used to say: "Go check out those kids—they're good." He wasn't promoting a competitor—he was strengthening the system. The idea was: the more young people succeed, the more it's possible for me, for my environment, and for our generation to last over time. That's how you reinforce fashion. It's an attitude that may have been lost.

But I don't want to be negative. I actually believe that things can truly change. It might even turn out to be surprisingly easy.

How?
If every creative director said, "Tomorrow I quit," *boom!* The next day we'd all start over as independents. We should have saved up a little money to get started, right?

Do you think Miuccia likes risk?
I wouldn't describe her that way. She takes responsibility for what she believes in.

Is the acquisition of Versace a risk?
Anything can be a risk in a difficult market moment like this. It could also be the right move. It's a topic I'm a bit hesitant to talk about. I prefer to speak about Prada. Sometimes I'd like to try and push reality a bit. Things like: "You can't do a show without seating, making people stand." Why not? We should all dare a little more.

Let's talk about art. Both you and Miuccia are collectors and personally know artists. How does that influence your work?
It's not about acquiring works. It's about involvement. Artists are part of the air Miuccia breathes, even though she likes to keep work and relationships with them separate. For me, it's a fundamental part of daily life. I can't imagine a day without art.

In Belgium, when I was a teenager, there was this legendary curator, Jan Hoet. In the mid-1980s, he started organizing the *Chambres d'Amis* exhibition series in Ghent, where 50 European and American artists were invited to create works for 50 private homes. They even made a documentary about it. I was 15, living in a small town—no internet, one record store, TV, and not even a boutique. Those were things that deeply influenced me.

Later, I graduated in furniture design. I interned with Walter Van Beirendonck, first in Antwerp and then in Paris, where I met the avant-garde of young creatives. I wasn't designing yet—I was making furniture, accessories, masks, mirrors for him. I became passionate about fashion and got in touch with Linda Lappa, who was then head of the Fashion Department at the Antwerp Academy. Her husband produced documentaries, including art ones that interested me. Suddenly, the connection between me, Linda, and her husband became very meaningful, even though we were from different generations. In a way, they adopted me.

I said I didn't want to design furniture anymore—I wanted to go to her school. She challenged me: "Show me you can do something." She drove me crazy. I didn't know how to draw the human body—until then I had only drawn objects, cars. So I asked some kids who had graduated from tailoring school to help me. I produced about 40 pieces and went back to Linda: "Here, now let me into the school." But she refused and sent me to Milan to Daniele Ghiselli, then European distributor for Helmut Lang and other brands.

We left in an old car: me, a friend, the 40 pieces, some photos, and a video I had made with skinny, dark kids with narrow shoulders. He told me: "I don't want to see photos or videos—hang the clothes." I was terrified. A few days later, he called me back: "I sold to nine stores in Japan." "Now what do I do?" I asked. "You have to produce." I was so naïve. I didn't know how to move forward. Meanwhile, word got out, I retrieved the clothes, and got interest for an exclusive in Belgium. Linda told me: "That's why I didn't accept you into the school. It would have frustrated you. You know what you want to do—you're ready."

In some ways, it still happens like that. There are young people from Ghana, from Mexico, with the same hopes.
Yes, but now they're probably more aware. I was really naïve. I started making videos with the guys from the Antwerp scene. The first one featured tracks by Sonic Youth. Then I met the

husband of a gallery owner who worked in the textile industry. He funded me for a year. Very honest, direct, simple—everyone was genuinely interested in creating something new. There weren't even billion-dollar expectations. For four seasons, it was just presentations. I wanted to go to Paris. The runway shows came later, when we realized they were easier to organize than videos, which required pre-production. A press agent called me—I didn't even know I needed one. During the first show, someone smoking set a chair on fire. That was the world back then.

Let's go back to the creative process with Miuccia. Does the dialogue change when you're designing for men versus women?
I'd say no. Maybe I try to hold back a little more out of respect for the brand—but I don't mean that negatively.

You both go against the clichés of masculine and feminine fashion—no supermodels, no alpha males...
I don't come from a bourgeois background, whereas Miuccia does. For her, maybe it's natural to think of those references, even just to be controversial in relation to her origins. What she does is a great source of inspiration for me. The way she observes the world, how people dress, those small things that are hugely important for anyone working in fashion: the details, the colors... All of that awakened a deep sensitivity in me.

Miuccia Prada is in love with the idea of "new." What does it mean to you?
I don't think "new" for Miuccia means something never seen before. It's more about doing the right thing at the right time. It's pointless to say, "I did that eight years ago," as some people do—often out of frustration—when they see other collections. The nature of fashion is to be in the right place at the right time. Going back to what we said earlier about the general sense of fear, "new" also means daring, exploring unexpected territories.

When I started, my work was a total reaction to the establishment. Now, people design by looking at others, at the competition, at what's considered right for each market. I don't claim to have the truth, nor the certainties others seem to have, but I do think we should focus more on the audience. The audience is smart—sharper than we think—and will always be interested in fashion. You can fool them for a while, but not forever.

Belgian, with a background in industrial design, Raf Simons (57) debuted in fashion in 1995 by launching his namesake menswear brand, which he "paused" in 2022 after 27 years. Youth subcultures and their styles, music, and an architectural eye for cuts and silhouettes were the hallmarks of a brand that quickly became cult. After serving as creative director at Jil Sander (called by the Prada Group), Christian Dior, and Calvin Klein, in 2020 he became co-creative director of menswear and womenswear at Prada.