



Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons, Prada HQ, Milan

Miuccia & Raf: The Arena Homme+ Interview by Susie Lau

It was hard not to see the significance of speaking to Miuccia Prada, literally a day after Vladimir Putin ordered his 'special military operation' in Eastern Ukraine, thus beginning an unlawful and inhumane invasion of a sovereign nation that as this piece goes to print, remains nervously and bitterly unresolved... The most awful of times...

I was supposed to be gliding down the Carsten Höller metal slide that begins in her office and leads out into the courtyard of Prada's Milan Via Bergamo headquarters with my hands up in the air like I just don't care. Because there Mrs – 'call me Miuccia' – Prada was. IN THE FLESH. IN REALITY. Not a pixelated square in sight. Now no irritating Zoom lag. And, to make things truly more special, by her side Mr – 'call me whatever you like, but be honest' Simons.

Perhaps an overshare, but in my mind I was going to give both legends high fives (do these two do high fives?) on their most comprehensive womenswear collection yet, entitled An Ideology of Prada, which followed and ran in tandem to the men's show, Body of Work. Two ambitious Prada expressions, presented in the space of two months, that aimed to reflect a period very much in flux and marked by confusion. Of substance. Powerful. I feel the Weight...

On this day, just as shrapnel, fire and death was, no doubt, marking parts of Ukraine, I chose to focus more on power of a different form. Soft Power. A term that, yes, is political and is often welded as a malleable propaganda tool by those with hid-

den or not so hidden agendas; (I've always loved the delicious oxymoronic juxtaposition of these two words.) It's non-coercive. Something that ideally should have more weight and heft in the world than the spectre of the now much-touted nuclear button. Soft Power's currency is culture and here I was face-to-face – hurrah! – with two Masters of the form. And so on a day when I had been fire-fighting my social media DM inbox, deluged with cries of 'What are you doing at a fashion show?' whilst preparing to interview the most deliciously intriguing and wonderfully unprecedented creative duos at one of the most influential brands of our time... Well, all I could think was: 'Prada is Soft Power,' underlined and capitalised in my notepad.

On this day, after an excellent Prada womenswear show, where Depeche Mode's trademark noir accompanied the to-and-fro unapologetic-archaeological dig of Prada's own archives, some camera-friendly NEW FRILLS/THRILLS and, crucially, the weighted hand of reassurance (four reassuring hands! And yes, a bulbous sleeved coat dangling with bugle beading can feel essential and necessary even now...) On this day in such strange times. On this day in February 2022...

If we're going to be seeing fashion then let it be authored with real care and authority. That's why there's the well-established tradition of Prada showing in its Fondazione space, an institution that has now instigated many a credible monographic exhibition, studies and creative research projects, but is also comfortable hosting a vibey

dinner or rooftop cocktail party. That AMO-conceived hexagonal tunnel, with the feeling of a kitschy Tron set, can be overanalysed, as we the spectators watch the show from our olive velvet-clad cinema seating...

The overriding thought inevitably, if my social media feed is to be trusted, is that fashion should be immediately denigrated to a pointless, tone-deaf activity. But bravely and in measured tone, Giorgio Armani had already pronounced that those wishing to halt all fashion shows now were, in his view, Completely Wrong. The world needs Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons creating as much as ever; perhaps even more so?

I don't need to list here all the reasons why Prada matters. It's already all been said, repeated and re-repeated. (Often misinterpreted too.) War changes none of that, just gives it a different hue via an awful backdrop... The power of the sheer volume and breadth of work stems far and wide because the collective influence of the body of work is literally everywhere (certainly in Putin's Russia)... It has changed the needle, shifted the dial, and rewritten many of the scripts.

I shouldn't rant further. But I feel both emboldened by Miuccia and Raf and protective of them and their ambition.

So here we were, beginning our conversation by justifying What We Do for about 45 minutes. One of the greatest talents in the entire history of fashion, Miuccia Prada, being unapologetic and direct, calling fashion irrelevant in one con-

text but also defending it like any other necessary profession. And her co-conspirator Raf alongside her, probing at the matter with greater sensitivity, doubting even the relevance of what they were doing the day before when they were standing backstage at their show.

Yes, there was something somewhat farcical about the three of us pontificating about why fashion matters, why our job even exists. I should have just shouted aloud, every five or ten minutes: THIS IS PRADA! OF COURSE IT BLOODY MATTERS! IT TRANSFORMS MY EXISTENCE!

Instead I started going into polemic podium mode. I never do this normally. I blame the glasses of Prosecco that popped up round about the time the sun started setting. I started banging on about Prada's raison d'être. That if it didn't exist, I didn't think there would be much purpose to what I do. No hyperbole. No exaggeration. It is what it is. To which, Miuccia laughed it off with 'Brava.' And Raf happily concurred...

(Mrs Prada did admit she was a bit fatigued but Simons was in very good spirits, ready to bolster his collaborator. Lovely to witness. They've been in the thick of it. But this fight is far from over!)

Susie Lau Congratulations on the wonderful show yesterday. It's been a long, long month for both of you. Is there any concept of time at the moment for any of you?

Miuccia Prada I feel no sense of time, no.

Raf Simons I think this period is where we come together.

MP Somehow we work in a way that isn't stressful, we try not to work too late or have to do weekends or long nights.

SL I'm guessing the two recent shows, did also blend quite seamlessly for you, from the menswear into the womenswear... Is that true?

RS It was intended... Well, partially and partially not.

MP I usually always work like a flow. Everything that we do comes naturally also. It helps to have one strong concept for the season because we don't show the men's and women's together so they are separate, yet it is one concept.

SL I wondered, though, has that conversation of the 'blur' ever come up? Because with this season in particular you could see the two merging together and you could readily imagine the 'women's' pieces on men and the 'men's' on women. I think closing the show with Hunter [Schafer] yesterday brought up this whole other dimension to the conversation around gendered clothing.

RS It's not so much in our conversation but I think it's just a natural thing in fashion now anyway. It's more an idea of reality and we both are used to working with a narrative, and we both have worked in the past where one collection to the next would be a very different thing. But that doesn't seem right for us right now... And with the state of the world, with Covid and now this war literally starting on the day of our show... I should say, we were

anxious and uncomfortable about this war coming.

SL Is it difficult to envisage an exciting fashion show in this climate?

RS In the end fashion is unnecessary and we do feel we have to temper that, but also we want to tell the reality to it that fashion is not connected to people's life at this moment in time. It's very complicated actually. I think because of Covid and then at 'the end of Covid' people want to party again and then there is this kind of boiling situation in terms of being in a war again... So, yes, it's all got very complicated.

MP [To Raf] I agree totally with what you're saying.

RS We were really shocked. When we were standing backstage, for me and I think for Miuccia as well, it was the most extreme kind of emotional feeling I've ever had in the context of doing a fashion show. I normally wake up and read an article from *The New York Times*. And on the day we were texting about it, and when you're backstage and there are a lot of girls standing in front of you... I usually find it quite stressful before the show.

SL But this time it was a kind of disconnected, out-of-body experience?

RS Yeah, out-of-body but at the same time I felt really calm about the show, like why would I over-worry about this fashion show?

MP With everything happening around us, the show was not relevant, basically.

SL You mean the show was now like this microcosm and the war unfolding in front of our eyes is so much bigger.

MP In times like that when things are so very tough, how can we think about clothes?

RS I think sometimes we are so much in our own world that you have feelings that connect so much to your own situation, and that was kind of what happened to me yesterday. I had this feeling like 'Why do I even worry about fashion shows or problems with the clothes?' Suddenly it all felt irrelevant. We had two girls in the show from Ukraine, and one of them is a girl that I had for a few days with me in Antwerp for a video I made, and yesterday she just tells me, 'Yeah, my mum and dad just stepped into the bomb shelter.' I was spaced out for a moment. Today I checked again with Ashley [Prada's casting director] because the girl can't even go back. She's 18 or 19 and can't go back home.

SL There's your worry about this show, right there!

MP It's why I personally don't like to get political in fashion because these awful dramatic events, they're so much more serious than what you are doing.

SL It's beyond us, isn't it?

MP Fashion is beyond us for the moment, to be honest. When we have a problem, whether it's about sickness or death I am personally not one to say like it's 1929, 'Okay, the world is collapsing so we must have fun.' I am not like that.

RS The other day we talked about why we do shows and I think the message for the wom-

en's show was very much about the strength of women and the intelligence of women. In the men's show we were talking about work, and the actors represent reality. But then we were thinking about this women's show, that the models are also kind of performers. They are very talented women, each time manifesting what the brand wants to manifest.

SL I totally relate to that message of intelligence and strength... It is important in my life always. I was thinking all of yesterday, because I was tracking social media and looking at the reactions to the fashion content and there was a lot of comments going, 'How can you, on a day like this, be posting this? How can you be talking about fashion?' And I thought when I came to this interview, well if we are to have a purpose, if THIS is our purpose, and if fashion is to do anything in the wider scheme of things then why not make it as high as Prada does? Prada being a platform for culture and for doing fashion in the best way you can.

MP I don't want to use a fashion brand as a platform for politics. It's something I really struggle with because it is not believable and this war is actually very complicated. When you make things for rich people, and we are rich fashion designers, how can you begin to talk about poverty? You can indirectly, for example, before we've tried to have a discussion around this with my work with the Fondazione - not that fashion is not appropriate but, really how can you talk about people dying, about hunger and homelessness, through clothes for rich people?

SL The clothes are not just for the rich. There's an aspirational ambition and message that is important. But I think that's what I meant, can we be comfortable anymore with fashion existing as it does?

MP I was never comfortable. The only thing that makes me more comfortable is when I can spend my money to do something clever. When it's connected to the Fondazione, everything linked to education. I have to pretend sometimes, but I'm never comfortable. Let's say I like my job, I like doing it. I am comfortable with a nice coat existing in the world. And in that way, I am comfortable with what I'm doing. Fashion is my instrument as Fondazione Prada is, through both I can express my ideas.

RS I have become more comfortable with it but I cannot say that I am comfortable all the way. And I share probably the same thinking as Miuccia.

SL We all have to pretend, of course. We all have unease, no?

RS In the year 2000 I stopped my own brand for that reason. I was like - what am I doing? This is back in the day, but even then I had unease, Susie. I was thinking - I could maybe go somewhere else and do something totally different, not so much political, but do something more humanitarian. And I stopped the brand effectively because I started to feel great unease...

SL How was that resolved?

- RS: A few people around me said, 'But you have to switch on your mind Raf, because there are many people that see what you do as something inspiring and beautiful. You're doing something interesting in this world. You're creating something of beauty and beauty has something very important and positive. People need this.'
- SL: That's exactly my conviction re Prada in 2022. That it also encourages cultural innovation... It helps join up the dots, it encourages The New.
- RS: The world is not a beautiful place sometimes. Maybe I am more at ease with this because I still think we are doing something very positive, especially if you stop and think about all of the negative things that are happening in this world. Prada is not for everybody for sure. But with the way fashion has evolved, because fashion became a very popular thing with this very enhanced public persona, in that sense, I think Prada means something for quite a lot of people now. I actively try to be more at ease with my job. In moments like right now, I am thinking about this a lot actually. Honestly, I did feel really confused yesterday.
- SL: It has been a very discombobulating period for the last two years and now there is another layer of confusion and dread.
- MP: Yes, but at the same time you get up each day and try to do your job well. And, for me, it is a job of just as much use as if you were a lawyer or accountant... Or a politician for that matter. It's all the same in important respects. The job exists also in many moments of peace, in many moments of prosperity. It's not that we are always in that moment, we live in a privileged part of the world – yes, we are super privileged – and in that sense, I do enjoy my job most of the time...
- SL: But?
- MP: But I always have in my mind this other aspect, which I've always had.
- SL: So is it about checking our privilege?
- MP: I am proud of my job and I think it is a good thing to do. Whatever job you do, you have to do it well and be happy about it. I think it makes sense because this is our work, and it can bring pleasure and happiness, it can express the moment. It is an instrument for people to express themselves. But in the end, fashion is irrelevant when a friend is dying.
- RS: I'm thinking about what you just said about people going online right now... The people who are saying how can you even do a fashion show when the world is at war... Imagine another scenario, we stop all fashion. Does that make the world better?
- MP: It doesn't.
- SL: And eliminating a whole ecosystem, many jobs, many people's livelihoods. Beyond the pleasure and happiness that Miuccia talks about, all of our jobs are real tangible things.
- RS: It's not just the clothes. It's the jobs you create. It's the community and the opportunities. It's so many different things.
- MP: It's not as though we stop building homes, we stop building buildings, we stop building furniture, we stop building cars, we stop building everything. Compared to the war everything is stupid, not only fashion. I don't think that fashion is more stupid than furniture or cars.
- RS: But still, it's not a thing that directly helps in the context of, for example, this situation now evolving in Ukraine....
- MP: Culture can stop war. Culture helps us to understand things, and to be better informed. Actually, one of the only things I really believe is that the more people study and learn the more they will understand the world and therefore the world can be better.
- SL: It's important to restate that, perhaps especially now.
- MP: Fashion is everywhere... Film is an important form of art.
- SL: I know you said you didn't want Prada to be a political platform, but it is a platform for that elevated culture you're talking about. That kind of excellence. The values in fashion that you want to promote...
- MP: I like to create an environment for these values but not directly. I wouldn't put these kinds of statements in my show...
- SL: Why? Is it too literal?
- MP: It's too literal and too easy. I use the platform in a more subtle way. Like when we do Prada Mode events... Even the way we do clothes is respectful and introspective. For me this was a very serious show we just put on.
- RS: You have been around for a long time, Miuccia, much longer than me, so you are also aware of the importance of what that means for the people who are interested in that art, that culture. It's something very rare – you're very rare! What that means to an audience, there is this importance that you cannot really deny.
- MP: Yes. But it's like when you buy a beautiful painting, or a beautiful chair. Clothes are a reflection of your own culture. So I disagree that when there is war fashion should stop, because then at this point everything should stop.
- SL: I know Mr Armani voiced a similar conviction before his show... Now, going back to the Prada show itself, I'm interested that you were doing almost an archaeological dig of Prada and really digging deep as well... I know you have mined your own archives before, Miuccia, but you're coming into it as this partner archaeologist, Raf...
- RS: Partly, yes.
- MP: I think that part of the work we are doing now is actually a learning process to work together. So we started with the theoretical, up until now we are working with a different aspect of taking consideration of the history of the view. Maybe next season you will see it from a different point of view. We have adjusted working together more and more and so we look at it all from a different aspect.
- RS: There is a clarity now also. It's not a moment for exuberance. It's not only not welcomed, or maybe it could be welcomed, but I think that maybe in this moment it's not very understood and for the right reasons I think... It doesn't really fit in with what we are experiencing in the world right now, and not only because of Covid and the war.
- MP: I agree...
- RS: In my opinion I have a feeling that the audience in general – and this audience is a huge audience compared to what it used to be – it's staying more on the surface of things. And this is interesting. We need to engage with the fact that much of our audience is not going very deep in terms of their investigation into what fashion is.
- SL: But does that then mean that you just want what you do to be taken at a very surface level?
- RS: No, it doesn't. But we are aware that we can only exist with an audience. That's something that I've always thought about. It makes no sense – and I know Miuccia thinks this, that I can say it for her – it makes no sense at all to do things if there is no audience for it. You do it for people, you want them to connect, otherwise why do it? Otherwise I might as well just do it in my home, in my back garden for nobody.
- SL: You're talking about something that's overly heavy with concept?
- RS: Not only with concept...
- MP: I would use the word 'useful!' Whatever you do, it has to make sense to somebody.
- RS: Yes, you want to be useful. You do need to have a reality to it... Let's be honest, I think we both have a history of doing extreme clothes. That's in both Miuccia and my nature, let's say...
- MP: More you than me!
- SL: You have had some quite extreme moments, Miuccia!
- MP: I always pretend to do something useful but actually maybe what I consider useful, is in fact eccentric.
- RS: It's not that we don't desire to push things to be even more extreme, but it just feels wrong now. We don't even feel, ourselves, comfortable with the idea of that. That's something we've talked a lot about actually.
- SL: But maybe our idea of what is extreme or even conceptual has also shifted over the years. What was crazy 15 years ago, isn't now. It's very hard to shock people now.
- MP: For me, shock is classic. Shocking is a beautiful white shirt.

When I brought up the words 'real men,' which I had noted in the AW/22 'Body of Work' menswear collection's press release, that's when the conversation began to heat up. Mrs Prada was adamant that they would never use those two words, loaded with machismo and gender politics pitfalls.

When I picked up on this phrase initially, my reading of it was that Prada tongue was firmly in cheek. That the Man in question, the actors that populated the show, spanned the gamut from Lynchian protagonist Kyle MacLachlan to young actor Asa Butterfield and his Sex Education-derived awkwardness, means that 'Real' is very much

open to interpretation.

And on this day where men are once again, regrettably being asked to 'step up, man up,' be conscripted and say teary farewells to families, here we were debating about this imaginary notion of 'real men' when for the most part, they may not define themselves as such. As evidenced by their menswear show back in January, the whole point that Raf and Mrs P seem to be asserting is that what is overtly masculine actually hides a wealth of doubt.

What's underneath those enlarged shoulders of sculpted leather? What does it say when a blue-collar boilersuit is rendered in powder pink? And when these workwear derived silhouettes oscillate between the bodies of Jeff Goldblum and Thomas Brodie-Sangster – youth and experience jostling with one another – there's something of an arch interpretation (and provocation) to the expression 'manning up.' Here were 'real men' of cinematic imaginings wearing clothes that are real in the sense that they are true.

SL The word 'real' is problematic. What's 'real' for one person isn't 'real' for other people... And in that men's show press release, the term 'real man' really struck me. Because it's a very loaded term. Who's a real man?

RS It probably was a bit of a mistake for us to put that expression in it because as you say it can be read in many different ways.

MP Listen, it's impossible we used that expression, because we're in a moment where strict definitions can't be applied especially in gender.

RS In reality we mean men making themselves real.

MP Yes, we meant people in real life. How they express themselves in real life. Real necessity of people living in reality.

RS We don't touch on that classical judgement in terms of lots of people in the real world being seen as a real man. We don't say it in that sense.

SL Within the Prada universe I thought you guys were almost taking the piss out of the notion of 'the real man.' He doesn't exist, of course.

MP Every human being is a different person, no matter the presentation, sexuality, the way you're behaving, the way you're feeling. So for me that is so completely clear.

SL Thoughts on men – rappers and footballers – wearing looks off the women's runways? Just a temporary trend?

RS I don't think that at all. It's not a trend, it's all an evolution. I mean this conversation is about Prada, but I have to go here to referencing my brand, which technically for 25 years has been mostly men's clothes. Now we have almost as many women following us. It seems to me like it's almost the other way around. I wasn't offering women's clothes so I couldn't at that point speak about men buying women's clothes, which is very much the case these days in fashion. It's all an evolution and I think it's a fantastic, exciting evolution.

MP But you're working at a point where you never push that, and me neither.

SL It's a reflection of what is happening and how people, if you're non-binary and born biologically a man for example, you don't feel like going into the men's department of a store and being restricted by that.

MP Does Prada in the catwalk show, push the boundaries on that? No. I push the boundaries on freedom, I understand that probably the pressure to accelerate makes changes happen. Earlier I wanted to do something that was more sensitive, open possibilities, trying to make men less 'Alpha male.' But I never wanted to dress them like women just to say, 'I'm very avant garde' and ticking a box.

RS It's not only about the gender, but also about tradition and the way of traditional thinking in that context. In my brand, it was almost a natural evolution that when you started in men's there was actually not so much difference between the clothes. Because they have always been kind of both genders anyway, and it has not so much to do with the idea of a man or woman but more the idea of authenticity or a form of thinking in terms of a fashion proposal, because it's not that the world is full of men and women that are so free and open-minded in the context of what we are speaking. I wish.

SL We all wish! Well, sadly, not all...

RS Every strong designer has a particular point of view on clothes, and therefore on people and it almost seems these days, and I find it very forced and very wrong in most cases, that people just feel the need to do collections and shows that you need to kind of pinpoint all the particulars of anything, being politically correct. But it's a very fragile thing to talk about, I think.

SL It becomes political and very heated very quickly – and deliberately!

MP Also we could come across as very superficial. And I don't believe we are.

RS I do think that you have a history with the brand showing different body types and ages of women, Miuccia.

MP My first show!

RS And later. And many, many, many years later.

SL The Lara Stone collection!

RS Lara Stone, and so many, many more. You know the Prada brand had originally a lot of interest in introducing new women. And they come in sometimes at a very young age because they're new in the business. But then people are only picking up on these women, sometimes 10 - 15 years later.

SL I think everyone in our industry is struggling with the word reality. What is 'real?' Real is a very loaded term and, for people in the fashion industry, real currently means 'Okay we've got to have a Black girl, we've got to have a Chinese'... it's a sort of return to a United Colours of Benetton type of casting. Honestly, it can feel like box-ticking. I've written about feeling like I've only been invited to events because of my ethnicity... My confusion...

RS Because we need to capture a more diverse vision, because it really was a mistake many years ago. It was a mistake from everybody

in high fashion. I am always embracing this in my brand, and you know very well the casting of my brand for many years. I always have to take responsibility for how I see it as a creative suggestion to the world. But I am so fascinated the moment the show is done, what happens afterwards? I am completely fascinated if I see my clothes afterwards in a completely different context, different style, different people. I am fascinated and sometimes it inspires me more, sometimes I think, 'Oh, I didn't think about that.' So in that sense I don't think that it's only about the actual suggestion on stage. I don't think that fashion is like that anymore. Fashion has a whole new life beyond designers.

SL It has a creative life beyond the catwalk for sure.

RS One thing is the designer's presentation, but there is so much around it now and I think that fashion by definition now is not just about the catwalk. I think it used to be but not anymore.

SL Can I ask you both, with the menswear is it about envisioning the men's proposition as a prospective partner or something you're attracted to? As if you were looking for the thing that you're attracted to in an ideal sexual way.

RS No, no! Not always.

MP Actually not, when I do men, more so than if I do women's, I imagine myself as a young girl, 15 years ago. Now I'm old so I imagine myself young today. And I do the same thing, imagine myself as a man, what would I wear? So I imagine that.

SL Did you find Jeff Goldblum sexy?

RS Yes.

SL I mean, he had quite the strut!

RS To me he feels like a very young person and I like that a lot. I think that's very attractive, when someone can keep a very youthful spirit.

SL I guess that was the dichotomy as well, because in that show you had all this workwear, very solid things but then they sort of started deviating into something more extreme. I felt like it was almost contradicting what it was trying to do. It was workwear, but not as you know it.

RS Yeah, because what we very much wanted to do with that collection was to not really see those clichés in that sense. Why would we see a businessman suit which is related to work and a working man, as a higher thing than for example a workman's overall, which is as much to respect and like? Why would that not be seen as much as serious fashion in the context today? Why can that not have a presence? Why can't you have overalls seen as luxurious to an audience as a suit? Why is that? That was the question we have to ask ourselves. Why can that also not be a classic, because we're all entrenched in the codes of that world, so why can it not be a fashion thing, like a suit can be very much a fashion thing if you take it away from its traditional approach? It seems like the workwear overall always remains as the workwear overall.

MP No it can be both. In the 1980s, I myself, be-

cause I didn't like anything on the market, I only wore workwear pieces or children's pieces. Anything that wasn't something for everyone. For me a uniform of any kind, anything that was not obviously acknowledged in fashion for a long time.

SL And how is that uniform in 2022?

MP Now with sustainability everything is even more expensive because for example re-nylon costs much more than the non-sustainable version. If you want to do anything recycled or sustainable it's more expensive. Professional people making clothes, making bags and shoes – the professional skills of these people is something that really fascinates me. I love these people and I love the workers in my company. They are passionate, they stay late in the night until they have found the perfect way to do the shoulder, or to make some fabric work. So I really am fascinated and in love with people who love their own job.

RS It was something we very much wanted to show, is that we don't want to see it as a hierarchy in the sense that, 'Oh, a CEO job is much more important and powerful.' That was the main point of that show, we wanted to show all these different kinds of things that can relate to work in a sartorial way. They're all of the same importance to us.

MP We have teams in Tuscany who are just so dedicated. One of our team made me this for Christmas. So he does bags and made this for the pleasure of doing it. How can you not be in love with somebody who spends their night doing this work?

Miuccia goes over to get an intricately made wooden model of an early 19th century delivery car bearing the Prada name in a florid Art Nouveau font, from the time when Mario Prada was making leather trunks and travel accessories and selling them from the store in Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan. It's one of the few brands that doesn't rely on 'centenary' celebrations and century-spanning heritage to give it historic heft. When Miuccia was admiring this wooden miniature model, representative of another world, another time made for her by a Tuscan craftsman, it seemed like a quaint nod to the history of her family's lineage. It's intricate. It's small but that care translates to the bigger picture. From paying attention to what's small and tangible in the hands to the largeness of an all-encompassing listed company, whose profits are monitored at every turn, Miuccia has full grasp of it all.

SL So... Mrs Prada you once said that you would come into a meeting naked to me...

MP Yes!

RS Yes, she says it all the time!

MP It's so clever because everyone would shut up. The problem is you have to be clever and cultivated.

RS But going back 15 years ago, when we were on this man and woman thing, it's not so much a man and woman thing. At the end, still a very traditional way of thinking for most men in

the world, is to put on a suit and want to be dressed sophisticated. That's something I have been fascinated with for several years now. How come we don't see a CEO walking in the door of a meeting in, let's say, a green leather overall from Prada?

SL Will we ever see that day do you think? Is it the evolution of sartorial codes?

RS If I didn't believe it then I'd stop, because I do see a lot of evolution over the decades.

MP But this is a very strange moment in history, because in the past men were much more flamboyant than women.

SL Dandyism

MP Much earlier!

RS Even the Middle Ages... Usually most people that don't think further back than their own lifetime do not remember. People are not going to think a lot about the 16th century or 18th century. Me, it's something I'm very interested in.

MP Probably they think that dressing like that they are powerful. But for sure, men since then decided not to change and decided to go with the suit. The opposite of flamboyant...

RS Power dressing in itself is a very interesting thing because when you think of power dressing, it probably means wearing a suit, because they feel powerful and then you come to a board meeting where there are 23 people all in black suits or grey suits, ties, white shirts – it looks powerful, but they end up the same. Shouldn't the person with decision-making, look different?

SL That's why emperors used to dress a certain way

RS To be more unique, surely is to be more powerful.

MP In nature males tend to be much more beautiful. But do you remember the Rossellini movie *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* about the power of dressing? He wanted to control the noble people around France and so they had to come to the court dressed up.

RS For me the powerful one is the one who is able to put himself or herself out of the traditional expectations of society and other people, and therefore I would find the most powerful one to...

SL To not conform is also a form of power...

RS For me yes.

MP For me, no. Ideas are powerful.

RS Of course, of course, but in the context of the clothes, I do think a lot of men stepping into board meetings, they wear a suit because they think they are expected to wear a suit.

The obsession with delineating the power and responsibility between Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons has been THE inevitable hot topic since the announcement of this impossible conversation between the two co-collaborators. Every collection has since been dissected to death to the point where both Miuccia and Raf are quite openly tired of the simplification of their working relationship. It seems people have literally taken it for gospel when Miuccia once said it was like working in the structure of 'Me from the waist up, him from the

waist down.'

Instead, I'm more interested in their dynamic. If their collaboration as two like-minded designers, with a mutual admiration that spans decades, is a unique one, then what ensues when they actually get down to the business of working with one another? Are they like siblings – brother and sister – which one is the elder and which one is the younger? Who's the McCartney, and who's the Lennon? Who's sensei and who's the disciple? If they argue, who backs down first? On this occasion, if you were fishing for signs of conflict, you'd be hard pressed to find any. One would often finish their sentences. The other might talk over the other in vehement agreement. And none of it felt premeditated. The dynamic might have been different at the beginning when they were working remotely and seen next to each other, floating in a digital live stream sphere. The impossible conversation has therefore become a living reality.

SL If we talk about male presence then, Mrs Prada, you obviously have two quite different male presences in your life, Mr Bertelli and now Raf. How do you deal with two very different male energies in your life working at Prada?

MP I am perfectly comfortable. I am comfortable because I have definitely no problems. Here in Prada and Fondazione Prada we are used to working with so called 'difficult people,' usually they're the ones that can make a difference.

RS I have to confirm that really loud. She's very comfortable in general.

SL I just wondered how, I guess obviously not that you need to be defined by your gender, you are your own person but to have this different energy in the creative process?

MP That is the beauty of it, nobody obliged us to do this, we decided to work together and that should create new energy. For sure the beauty of it is why we chose to enlarge possibilities to discuss, to help each other.

SL How has it changed over the last two years, like the dynamic? I'm obviously hugely fascinated with the dynamic. As everyone is.

MP It's getting deeper because when we began, there was Covid. The more we work together the more we get used to working together and I was always comfortable, but I understand the more time passes the more we can deeply discuss things.

RS I think we challenge each other further, besides other things.

SL You mean push each other? Or sort of challenge each other on certain decisions?

RS We challenge each other but also reinforce each other, for me I feel surer about something when you feel sure about it.

MP Thank you very much!

RS We are both used to, for many decades, to make our own decisions. I think it's also curiosity, interest and respect because we have always admired each other's work and I think that when you are doing it for a long time, you get into a kind of, I wouldn't say a system, but you are who you are and I'm totally fascinated

- with somebody next to me who can shake me up, who makes me think deeper and further, who's different. I find that very fascinating. Also she says things to me which afterwards make me think again. We are both very assertive and we have very specific things in mind and to be honest, they match great, which is not what I was expecting before I started. I wanted to be prepared for it, if it was going to be difficult, but it hasn't been difficult ever.
- SL I was trying to think if there are any other design partnerships that you may be like, not model on or look to, but I was trying to think of a parallel, it was very difficult.
- MP There are none! Everybody is doing collaborations, but this is deeper, and it's the first example...
- RS It's not the same nature of others. Most people they start up together.
- SL In the art world you do have the duos. Or you are a couple, lovers...
- RS But we also made it simple for ourselves before we started, we said if there was really something that one of the two hates, we are not going to do it. There are so many other things we can do.
- MP Or he says something to me, then I take the time to think about it... Is he actually serious?
- RS It happens, and it happens regularly, and I think that it's a good thing because no matter who you are...
- MP It sounds like an idyllic relationship but it actually is...
- SL Is it like there's a big sister and little brother? I'm sorry that I want to try to lock down this dynamic. I'm a journalist, we're used to labels... is it like a disciple and their sensei...
- RS You want to label it?
- MP A title?
- SL Yeah, like a sort of dynamic. Let's say an archetypal dynamic that you can identify with... not an old married couple, surely not?
- RS NO!
- SL Okay, not a title, what's the dynamic between you two? Like the energy between two people, you know like a couple, lovers have a dynamic. Siblings have a dynamic.
- RS I think co-conspirators maybe.
- SL Partners in crime?
- MP We don't have to banalise everything. In our job we are used to working with people who we trust. Ours is a higher level of collaboration, but we are both used to working with other people so it's not that it is so strange, it isn't strange at all. Actually I am happy because I have a collaborator that is clever; I trust what he says, because he is a great designer. So it is perfect because he is the dream collaborator. Somebody who helps you. Also he pushes me further and makes me change my ideas. He makes me go outside of my own idea, which I think I often started to get bored with. So because of him I have a new energy, and exchange and I have new ideas.
- RS When you are two, I cannot say you never have to give in but sometimes you do have to give in...
- SL Compromise?
- RS I think we compromise, but I think we do that only when we also really believe that it makes sense. We have a longer conversation about it, then if I believe that there is a better reason to do it than to not do it, then we do it and we do it with conviction.
- MP People forget that when you are working, you are working on something... We are professional people, so we know what we are talking about so we say, 'Which kind of fabric do you want to work with this season?' And, 'Do you like? Which kind of shape? Which kind of volume? Which concept?' so we start working on direction. So afterwards it's not so complicated.
- RS Everything is very together, like daily together non-stop all the time. This can be written for me and I didn't tell Miuccia - there is a kind of perception of a certain part of the audience, specifically the writing audience, really thinking in clichés, even if we get great reviews, thinking like, if there was a bomber in the collection that that automatically comes from me and if there is a full skirt, that automatically comes from Miuccia. All I want to say today is that I would be really happy if it is written in this piece, that this is not how it works, it's not. It might be that Miuccia really wants a bomber that season...
- MP And very often it's the opposite of what they say...
- RS It is so the opposite! On the last collection people would be really surprised about how the dynamic worked.
- SL People just want to attribute something, like what is your role? What is your role? You're the bomber person and you're the skirt person... And it's kind of an insult to what you both do because you're not just the bomber guy and you're not just the skirt person...
- RS Not an insult, but just like it's surprising to me, it's surprising to me after the first round because then we did it on purpose, it wasn't even my thing, I wasn't coming in and saying, 'Oh let's do a hoodie with a Peter De Potter print.' Miuccia was really interested in like, 'Hey let's literally bring something from your history DNA into the collection.'
- MP Actually everything that is him, I want to do. I ask him to do it. And very often he asks to do something I used to do. So we are exchanging.
- SL It is an interesting dialogue.
- MP I don't understand why people are so fixated on which part is his and which is mine. Because we work together so at the end it is one!
- RS It all comes back to the same point, always. It's not very much different than the man in a suit. People like to make all these definitions - archetypes, stereotypes even - and it's not really bothering me, but I keep wondering, why is that? Because at the end of the day the world is clearly showing you that's evolving in a very different way, so why do you keep doing that?
- SL But fashion has always relied on very simplistic language to give it labels. I mean that is one of the problems of the industry, that's
- why it gets simplified and made to look quite stupid to most people.
- MP The simplification is a big argument that I am obsessed with - it's a big problem. I mention this in every interview.
- SL But that's why YOU have to continue, to keep things not simple.
- MP [Laughs] Brava!
- SL ...to ensure that nuance is always there. I mean that is kind of one of the *raison d'être* of Prada, is it not?
- RS For me too.
- SL If there was no nuance, I think there would be a real lack of purpose to what I do as well. Because I truly believe that if Prada didn't exist, what would the landscape look like? I think a lot of it could be pretty much eliminated. If we go back to why do we do this?
- RS I think the same and that's why I came here!
- SL And you're here to bolster, support, infiltrate - a myriad of things.
- MP I said recently, and he didn't know, but I learned to look at things through his eye because he has a very contemporary eye.
- RS Says the person that I find the most contemporary!
- MP I think that his vision is modern...
- SL You're actually going red, Raf!
- RS Yeah, it's such a compliment that it makes me emotional.
- SL Did that surprise you? The level of respect that Mrs Prada came to you with. Because you're a superfan that came here and you had admired her so long...
- RS Maybe because I knew that before, because how could I not have felt that, because they had faith in me back with Jil Sander, when I was seen by the fashion world as some sort of new wave punk men's designer from Antwerp. And they offered me Jil Sander womenswear. So at that point they saw something different from what other people saw. Not that I have a problem with how I get defined by the fashion world anyway. But this has a longer history than just two years ago when we started here.
- MP But also, we share the same stylist. And very often I would say, 'Ah I want to do this' and Olivier would look at me with this face like 'I'm sorry, Raf did it already...' It used to happen at least twice a season.
- SL So better you just collaborate together so you don't have to have any issues.
- MP And sometimes I would really envy what he did! I mean I envy but in a good way, like 'Oh my god, I would have loved doing that.'
- SL Competition is good.
- RS No other designer would say this. Miuccia is very honest. That's something that I find very admirable.
- MP I want to be intellectually honest and I like intellectually honest people.
- RS I remember after my last Calvin Klein collection, you said to me 'Those dresses, those dresses!' I mean most people didn't even like it...
- MP The veils, the patchworks... there were many things.

SL So there's this very true respect.
RS There was this natural pre-existing connection. I cannot explain it in words because the company doesn't have that kind of same systematic approach in that sense. When you're in it for as long as I've been in it, you know how all these things work. Normally, there's a beginning where you go let's talk, we're looking for a new creative director. It wasn't like that, Mr Bertelli kind of vaguely stayed in touch, always.
SL There was an ongoing conversation?
RS There were many years prior to the moment I exited Calvin Klein, when Mr Bertelli asked me to come to Milan. It wasn't even me becoming creative director, it was just like, 'Let's talk again.' And out of that we had this conversation that got to a point of doing it this way. And I think that's very interesting because it's very atypical, you might think it's typical but it's not typical, ever.
SL Unprecedented.

We're coming towards the end and outside it has gone completely dark. And the two 'co-conspirators' speak freely about being judged on terms that are often not fair or just. We come to my favourite thing to ask designers about, which is what they consider to be their personal parameters of success. Naively, I often think if everyone adjusted their ideas of what success is – one that doesn't just need to be an upward straight graph line of growth – then it would solve a lot of problems that are considered the ills of the industry. When young designers try to run before they can walk. When investors call for 'More output!' When brands are floatable on a stock exchange. Mrs Prada is skeptical about being consistently judged by her company's profit margins. Raf talks candidly (some parts were distinctly off-record) about the cut-throat brutality of the hire-and-fire mentality today. Together their collective raised eyebrows at the industry around them, again puts them on a united front against the tidal expectation of growth and monetary success. In Miuccia's words, she wants to 'win in her own way.' Don't we all?

RS After Calvin when I returned to Antwerp, weirdly, I think I'd mentioned it to someone, that the only brand I could potentially have any interest in is Prada in the future. But I'd never really thought about it in that way. It was more this question of which brand would have the content, the intelligence, the approach and the culture that I think would be the only one, I would want to relate to in this fashion world because it is a monster...

MP Who's a monster?

SL The fashion world.

MP [Laughs].

RS I think it's a monster now...

SL Is Prada itself, do you think of it as a bit of a beast as well because it is a big entity and it's bigger than you, Miuccia. Does that ever overwhelm either of you or the process?

MP It worries me because there's a lot of jobs at stake. I always say, today we have to work three times more, or ten times more because

the quantity of the things you have to do. I am, by definition, interested in the changes and realities of the fashion world, because it is connected to reality and the more it gets difficult to understand the more I am challenged.

RS I think the big change is that now you could be a good designer today and not get anywhere, because there are so many other aspects that came in that take a lot of importance because of how it has evolved. And there is another thing which is a big problem for me – you could be a shitty designer right now and it works really well.

SL Yes, it's not meritocracy.

RS It just depends how you define, and that's why I like to work with Miuccia – how do you define what works and what doesn't work? I know how I decided it to be for me and my Antwerp brand, that's why it's a small table with a small team. With Prada it can't be like that because it's already this huge thing, you have to take into account, but at the end of the day when it's about clothes I can tell you, she takes an enormous risk with what she does, challenging the scale of it. It's not that you don't know what to do to just make the business grow more, you still like to grow, you still like to question, you still like to challenge.

MP In theory, I would like to win my own way.

SL Yeah, to have growth your way.

MP To win my own way, it's nearly impossible. The challenge for Prada is to keep growing but retaining some intelligence and something meaningful, it's a very continuous effort, just trying to be out there in a clever way and keep going.

SL Let's say how fashion operates today, is that growth supposed to be relentless, you want more so you've made one billion, then you want ten billion, then you want twenty billion. It keeps going and going and going...

RS But there's something else, looking at it the way you pose the question – you pose the question 'limitless' – it's a different thing. I mean we all know it's an economical law to grow, whether you grow a little bit or a lot, but is it limitless?

SL Can you just keep on growing and growing and growing?

RS You see it everywhere. Theoretically you can grow and grow and keep growing, but it depends on what you're willing to give in or what you're willing to do.

SL But what about your personal parameters of success?

MP To be honest I'm not interested in success at all, I'm interested in doing my job well. Success doesn't mean anything to me. Thank god I am successful (!), but honestly, I am interested in being good at what I do and in my life, so in that sense I want to be successful because I want to be good at my job. I want to succeed at my job.

SL Well, you have!

RS You're only as good as the moment itself, and then it has to be better afterwards. It's a drive. I'm very much like if I don't have everything perfect then I could not continue, I would

have to stop. So I'm also a little bit, even if I can be annoyed or upset from it, a bit in need of reaction and resistance and it's not that I find it easy, I don't take it easily, but I know it's an important thing.

SL Does that define your notion of success, what other people say?

RS Clients who buy the collection and then say something about it. I have to think about it, and I have to do better. I have to go again.

SL It drives you? It stimulates you.

RS Oh yeah, I also very often think it makes sense.

RS You know, they make gods out of designers and then afterwards they have to find a way to push them down again. You see everybody going through it.

SL It's called 'tall poppy syndrome' where if you grow too tall then people are going to pull you down again...

MP The thing that shocks me the most in present time, is how everyone is obsessed only with money. Never before! It's how much you sell and at what price, not if you're good or not...

SL Yeah, it's the thing I'm not very good at analysing. I mean, that's why things like NFTs are really confusing to me because it's this arbitrary value that's put on this weird thing that's not tangible, but it's got this strange high value attached to it.

MP You are interested?

SL I'm sceptic slash curious...

MP Me too, I'm sceptic slash curious!

SL I want to understand it, but I do think it is speculative.

MP Six months, or one year, we've been reading about NFTs. I want to understand, because people are so interested in that and it's happening everywhere, that there must be something there. My latest thought is that people want to also live in a fantasy land. Maybe they're frustrated with reality and they want to pretend there is another life. But it is also a complex conversation.

SL Because reality is so appalling?

MP For that, or it's just another possibility. It's a game.

RS It's another kind of reality.

And as we edged onto the topic of the metaverse (that's for another time, another conversation,) Miuccia had to take a phone call but she still gets the last word. Mrs Prada's got a football match to go to... A.C. Milan, duh. She seems surprised I'm just a fair-weather football fan [Arsenal].

Raf, meanwhile, is off to Paris. Fashion month carried on amidst rising tensions. In that moment though, the weekend was upon us. Friday. We weren't to know how it would escalate and how millions would begin to be displaced, as though history was faithfully repeating itself. No slide action on this day, but at least we did get to the bubbly. Because when those signature glasses of Prosecco are served in a Prada context, that means another collection is aced, done and dusted. Onto the next one. And then the next after that, we hope... But, let us remember, this body of work is never finished.