



Anthony Vaccarello Reveals Collaboration with Helmut Lang

In an exclusive interview with Tim Blanks, Saint Laurent Creative Director Anthony Vaccarello reveals the thinking behind his new collaboration with elusive former fashion designer Helmut Lang and his vision for a post-pandemic fashion industry.

LONDON, United Kingdom — It was a grey, slightly depressing day in Paris, but that didn't bother [Anthony Vaccarello](#). "I like it," said [Saint Laurent's](#) Belgian creative director. "I've become a classic Parisian." But enough about the weather. We've convened on Skype to talk about the collaboration with Helmut Lang that Vaccarello launches on Wednesday at Saint Laurent's flagship in the former Colette space on Rue St. Honoré, after which the show will travel to the Rive Droite store in Los Angeles.

Pluck one name from a hat full of designers that anyone with an interest in fashion would most like to hear from and Lang would surely be top of the list. "I've been fascinated by Helmut for years," agreed Vaccarello. "For my generation, he is the ultimate designer of the '90s. I consider him at the same level as someone like Coco [Chanel](#) for the way he brought realness into fashion, something that everyone is still copying. Helmut was the first to stand up against artificial promotional messages, his vision and art direction brought everyone back to the real and meaningful essence of fashion."

Since his retirement show in 2005, Lang has been an inscrutable Garbo-esque shadow in fashion. "I'm always attracted to those mysterious impossible guys," Vaccarello said, laughing. "I like things that are not easy to do, when they take time. You need to seduce, to go there." So, two years ago, he made the pilgrimage to Lang's rustic pile on Long Island, by the ocean, where, as a side line to his art practice, Helmut famously breeds heritage fowl. "All these black chickens," Vaccarello marvels. "Everything black. It was a dream."

His original idea was a collaboration with Lang on a denim collection. “I associate him with denim, with workwear pieces of clothing,” said Vaccarello. “I didn’t think about that amazing couture he did.” But Lang wasn’t interested in doing clothes. He was way past that time in his life. So, the conversation quickly shifted to doing something in which he *was* interested: making art.



Helmut Lang x Anthony Vaccarello for Saint Laurent Rive Droite | Source: Courtesy

The collaboration appealed to Lang for a couple of reasons. “I always had the utmost respect for the work of Yves, and Anthony has created an unparalleled vision for YSL, furthering the house’s legacy in a truly contemporary way,” Lang said via e-mail. But, more significantly, “Anthony was the first person in fashion to engage in a collaboration focusing on my artwork. As I collaborated with artists in different ways throughout my time in fashion, it was intriguing to be in the reversed position.” Art and fashion may be bedfellows now but remember that it was Lang’s collaborations with Louise Bourgeois and Jenny Holzer that pioneered the hook-up.

The official title for the collaboration is “Helmut Lang x Anthony Vaccarello for Saint Laurent Rive Droite.” The essence of the resulting artwork is the same iconoclastic alchemy that Lang applied to his own archive, reducing it to shreds, moulding it into primal totem pole shapes. “When I work on collections, some pieces unfortunately don’t fit in,”

Vaccarello explained. “There are some defects or they’re not well-done so we take them aside. I gave Helmut these leftovers, accessories too, going back to the first season.” Lang shredded them, mixed them with a pigmented resin and sculpted similar totem forms using aluminium moulds. Look closely and you might see the embedded glimmer of a YSL brooch or earring or chain.

Propped against a gallery wall, the sculptures are stark, scorched, as inscrutable as their creator. “I like those primal hard shapes,” said Vaccarello, “especially associated with Saint Laurent which is so about elegance and so *raffiné*. I like the idea of rude, hard and brutal.” I wondered how much this same attitude had coloured his approach to his own designs for Saint Laurent. “I like the tension,” he answered. “I’m not interested in softness. I like beauty, but when it’s disturbing, not easy. Like when Charlotte Gainsbourg says she is not attracted to film for *divertissement*. It’s always the case you have to find something harder in yourself.”

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When Lang made “fabric confetti” of the 8,000 or so pieces that remained in his archive after a 2010 fire, his acolytes clenched at the sacrilege. The gesture seemed wilful to people contemplating closets filled with Helmut pieces worn to barest thread. (I felt their pain, because I was one of them.) But Vaccarello got it. “I understand what Helmut did, because for me clothes should not be *sacré*. It’s only cotton, silk, gauze... I like that idea of finishing a period like he did and destroying everything. I really respect someone who isn’t stuck in something he did amazingly. It’s better to stop at the right time than doing something less good or too repetitive.” Again, I wondered whether there was a similar impulse in Vaccarello’s own consignment of his past at Saint Laurent to Lang’s shredder. “I wish to be more like him, but maybe later,” he replied. “I like to say goodbye to something and to look to the next step. That’s why when people ask me if I would like to go back to my own brand after Saint Laurent or whatever, I say no, I would never do that, when it’s over, it’s over. I’d like to do something else, pictures or film.”

Vaccarello claimed he has no attachment to material things. “I *am* a nostalgic guy, but more in an emotional way. It’s the Belgian in me. I’m more attached to a feeling, an emotion I had in the past. I am very lucky I was surrounded by love in my childhood. I don’t care about material things.” His attachment to the peak moments of past emotions manifests itself in the way he feels about music — Depeche Mode or David Bowie rather than some radiant newbie — and maybe even fashion itself. “Because there was a certain freedom in creativity, or maybe everything was new and exciting in the ’90s. I have the feeling now everything is a bit more flat and commercial. Maybe it’s because I’m not young anymore. I’m missing that ’90s feeling that made me want to do fashion now: Helmut, Versace...”



Helmut Lang x Anthony Vaccarello for Saint Laurent Rive Droite | Source: Courtesy

the past. I take what I think is still very cool and relevant without doing a copy of him, I’m not interested in being Saint Laurent. I have a lot of respect for him because he was a genius but I want to be me working for Yves Saint Laurent, inspired without being literal.”

It’s a curious twist that Vaccarello finds himself now in a similarly totemic position to those designers then. “One of the few essential voices in fashion today,” Lang calls him. I would imagine it must be sometimes frustrating that the design language he has evolved at Saint Laurent has been continually co-opted by legacy. Not at all, Vaccarello insisted. “In the end people who are still thinking about Saint Laurent are people who are past 50. The young ones aren’t thinking about Yves Saint Laurent. What I like about doing my job here is being inspired by Saint Laurent without feeling the pressure of the legacy, that is more important for people over 50. I really wanted to take it in a very light and easy way, more like the way he inspired fashion in general without being stuck in

But after his latex-sheathed Autumn/Winter spectacular in February, just days before lockdown, Vaccarello claimed a direct kinship with Yves. “I think being anti-bourgeois is something we had in common,” he said, “playing with those codes, wear the jacket or the *lavallière* in latex to bring a woman out of her comfort zone.” I thought the presentation was a powerful expression of fashion at its fetishistic best. At the same time, it looked like a deliberate provocation of all those critics who blanch at what they see as Vaccarello’s wanton sexualization of women. It’s a challenge he’s used to. “When I do these clothes, I never think about sexualisation because, for me, a woman should be able to wear a latex dress without evoking sex in the mind of the men who look at her. Sexualisation is something that is through the eyes of men. We are still stuck in the idea that a girl who dresses sexy is a girl who sends a message she’s looking for sex. We need to change that.”

Oh, me of no faith, I feel that would only change when men cease to exist. But Vaccarello does seem attuned to a particular female sensibility. Professionally and personally, he is surrounded by women, though he acknowledges that he never really knows what they’re thinking. And then he sees the delight of the models at his fittings and he senses he’s on to something.



Maybe he's just misunderstood. He accepts that, too. "Not all the time, but it's always the same. But I don't care. I like being misunderstood. Also, all the designers who came after Yves Saint Laurent were misunderstood in a way, so coming here, I knew that I would be too. I know it's part of the game and I like that."

His predecessors at Saint Laurent were an extraordinary, diverse bunch of characters. After Yves came [Alber Elbaz](#), [Tom Ford](#), [Stefano Pilati](#) and [Hedi Slimane](#). "Of course, we're not of the same generation, they're way older than me," said Vaccarello, "but I grew up watching them when I was a student and, for me, they were part of fashion history. I feel very proud because I think they all brought something very interesting for the house, they all built the legacy of the house for me, I consider them as important as Yves. I'm not stuck in the past. For me, Saint Laurent is all the designers who have worked for the brand."



Significantly, all those forerunners hated each other, which would suggest a toxic legacy. It's testament to Vaccarello's supreme equanimity that he seems to simply rise above this. "That was because they were the same generation, they felt in competition. For me, it's different, I see them with a younger vision, I see them with respect. 'You did your time and you did it great, but I don't feel in competition with you.'" In fact, he feels no competition with anyone. "And I'm not being pretentious. Even when I did my brand, I thought we all should be able to work without being in competition. The system places us one against the other but there should be a place for everyone."

Fashion as a gladiatorial exercise — one rises, another falls — feels old in the light of 2020's horrors. Vaccarello is scarcely alone in believing that the pandemic has accelerated necessary change. But he has his own take. "We should listen to a new generation and embrace what they have to say, but I think that fashion needs to stay fashion. We're all able to use our voice to speak out and to make things better, but it's not an everyday thing. For me, fashion needs to be fresh and light. Of course, it has to reflect the time we're living in, a time when something's changing, but I think we should not lose sight that we are only doing clothes. We are not saving lives. Sometimes, there are heavy moments in the day and we just need to calm down and do our job properly."

That said, the need for a new context has thrown a harsh spotlight on the huge fashion brands, at the

same time as it elevates independent designers, who are, after all, the unsung spine of the fashion industry. It struck me that Vaccarello is an odd paradox: an independent splinter inside a massive corporate trunk (last year, Kering-owned Saint Laurent generated over €2 billion in revenue).

"I really feel I'm independent here," he agreed. "I talk about freedom, though in the end it's not about freedom because I'm working for François-Henri Pinault [Chairman and Chief Executive of Kering]. It is more about trust and respect. I can really act at Saint Laurent like I'm working for myself because they trust me and I feel lucky that I'm in charge of everything here. I feel very privileged because I know that in any other house it may not be like that."

One measure of Vaccarello's reach was that, in the first ghastly flush of the pandemic, he chose to remove Saint Laurent from the Paris fashion calendar. "My first feeling was about being human and not being a tyrant and telling my team we need to do a collection in two months. For me, it was not human to say, 'We've been stuck, now go to work, we need to sell clothes.' Especially when we need six months to think, to do tests, to keep or throw away. So, for me it was logical to postpone everything. That was my first idea. And then honestly, I didn't know what I'm going to do. We didn't know when the virus would stop and I thought it was very strange to act like nothing had happened. 'Oh, people died, let's do a show in September.' I would feel so strange, so *à côté de la plaque*, outside reality. And I don't want people thinking fashion is something stupid and commercial, I want to do it with meaning."

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Vaccarello still doesn't know what he's going to do for his women's collection. "I read a lot of editorial saying, 'I'm sick of going to ten shows a day,'" he mused. "Well, don't do it. A lot of designers don't need to do a show. I try to give an emotion to a show. For me, it is like a stage, having an experience somewhere. I always want to do something that's like an experience with an artist, something like that. A *passerelle*, girls just walking in and out, is so old, so useless. Let's do something else." Helmut Lang was the past master of defying expectations with where, when and how he showed his collections. Did Vaccarello raise the issue with him? "No, but he was the first one to congratulate me when I decided to be outside the calendar, which was not bad."

The times are such that I find my own innate inclination towards pessimism continually validated. Which means I'm always questioning other people's dispositions. Vaccarello's pause was long and meaningful before he responded. "Optimist," he said hesitantly. "I can be a pessimist, like everyone, but I try to be an optimist. I wake up in the morning and I think, 'A new day is coming' and then I think, 'Oh shit, maybe it's not today.' But I believe we should all be optimistic and try to see a future. Otherwise, it would be so depressing and we should stop everything right now."

Though he grew up in Belgium, his mother and father are Sicilian, which sounds like a recipe for an unusually vivid nature-versus-nurture tussle. "An extreme duality," he acknowledged. "The Sicilian is about sensuality, the idea of something sunny, bright, strong. My mother and my grandmother were strong women with a lot of personality. But the Belgian side is the most important, because it's where I was born and raised. In that culture, it's about deconstructing, reconstructing."

I'll leave you to mull over that mix, with a little help from Vaccarello himself. "Thank God I'm not too much of either, too much or too minimal. It could be so vulgar or so boring."