

Wallpaper*

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**PHILIPPE
STARCK**
+ KARL LAGERFELD





STARCK VISION

Over the past four decades Philippe Starck has literally done it all in product and interior design. And done it on a wider, larger, broader and more talked-about scale. But design is not what Starck wants to talk about in his prime piece of Wallpaper* real estate. He has a new passion and purpose. 'It is my mission to make intelligence sexy,' he insists.

Approaching scientists, physicists, cosmologists, the sort of men whose lives are spent in search of extra-terrestrial life forms, and the odd artist and activist rock star, Starck has asked us all to think about time, space, matter and the never-ending quest for the meaning of life. Where are we going? And are we going to like it when we get there?

Photography by Sofia Sanchez & Mauro Mongiello Interviews by Jonathan Wingfield

'I have both the fortune and misfortune of being one of those idiots

who is often given a platform, and it makes me uneasy. I feel like an impostor, because whenever I talk I have this strong conviction that it should be someone else doing the talking. Why do people hang on the words of a man who has made a few nice restaurants and a good toothbrush? OK, they're pretty well-designed, but they are not in the least bit essential to our everyday life, our survival, our progress. It's out of guilt that I try to design these things as well as possible, with the utmost honesty, rigour, vision and creativity. But ultimately, a toothbrush is just a toothbrush.

Being an impostor has fuelled the content of the following pages. I feel perpetually uneasy that we live in a society that gives a platform to people who have nothing to say – and a lot of it. Worse still, this same society offers no platform to the people who have something worth saying. You cannot build a civilisation by giving a platform to idiots and silencing intelligent people.

Our society is based on progress, on intelligence. Indeed, our society is based on the progress of intelligence, so what is the benefit of a system such as the one we have today?

I feel privileged to have been given this platform, but I'm passing it on to some others who deserve to be heard. These people are principally scientists. For me, scientists have absolute grace: the grace to work in non-political, non-religious, non-ideological fields, in ethereal abstractions, in equations of intelligence, and in places mainly governed by poetry. In my mind, there is no science without poetic intuition. From now on, my aim is to offset society's vice and to give a platform to these people.

The bizarre worlds of marketing and the media will probably tell you that nobody is interested, that scientists are boring and that nobody wants to listen to them. This simply shows their ignorance and lack of education. Because if you have ever had the chance to talk >>

'I feel like an impostor. Why do people hang on the words of a man who has made a few nice restaurants and a good toothbrush?'

with a leading scientist, even if you do not really understand what they are saying, you get swept away with euphoria, with enthusiasm, with optimism; quite simply, you get taken to extraordinary places. And when you realise that those places are all about us, about our origins, about what life should be today, about what we will become in the future, about our great hopes, our great desires, our great visions, our great duties, then it becomes even more fascinating. Because nothing is more fascinating than talking about ourselves.

These scientists talk about life from the highest point of view, so it just stands to reason that the media's absolute priority should be to make them heard, and to make people realise that intelligence is fun, that intelligence is fascinating, that intelligence is sexy. People should understand that a scholar, even if he's old and wrinkly and looks nothing like a hot television presenter, is actually much sexier than any hot television presenter because he possesses inner fire, beauty, honour and the natural elegance of always being elsewhere. To prove that this isn't just a PR exercise for science, I've also chosen to give that same platform to two individuals – an artist and a musician – who, in my opinion, explore territories just as poetic as science. Gérard Garouste is a wonderful painter, who, like all great artists, uses his medium as a pretext to talk about the great elements of life. As for Peter Gabriel, I believe he is on the same level and has the same qualities as the greatest scientists. I have seen his actions for 30 years now, and he has always been a great precursor, a great opener of doors, a great opener of minds and a great unifier through music and intelligence.

I, however, am not intelligent. Or rather, I cannot be classified as intelligent according to the generally accepted criteria. I have other talents that are totally respectable: an extraordinary intuition, a diagonal mental structure which allows me to work quickly and efficiently and spares me from months of research. People like me, with a diagonal mental structure, find solutions without even knowing how or why they found them. This allows me to find what I am looking for (whether it is good or bad) so quickly that I spend most of my time verifying, cleaning, and checking everything from an ethical perspective. But intelligence doesn't come into it. And being extraneous to intelligence, I'm like anyone who lacks something (blondes want to be

brunettes, brunettes want to be blondes, fat girls want to be skinny and skinny girls want to be fat): I am madly in love with intelligence and I've always gone looking for it wherever I can.

My first mission was to understand that from the first amoeba, about four billion years ago, the distinctive characteristic of our constantly mutating animal species has been to develop our intelligence. In other words, the only thing that prevented us from happily remaining an amoeba is that one day, for reasons beyond my understanding, we decided to become intelligent. I don't know when it happened, but I have the greatest fondness for that primitive species who had the intuition to say, 'Let's stop grazing like the other idiots and become intelligent.' And when the others said, 'What's intelligence?', it replied, 'I don't know, but let's give it a try.' So, from that tiny amoeba four billion years ago, we became a fish, then a frog. At this point, things changed a bit: came out of the water and brought the egg with it, creating the extraordinary concept of maternal love, which is the basis of civilisation and has created the need for intelligence. In other words, intelligence was going to be needed to protect the egg, because at one point, a mother loved her egg. This need to protect the progeny has created the will to evolve and the result is modern civilisation based on intelligence.

My work is about trying to understand the extraordinary time we are living in, which just happens to be halfway through history, as life appeared four billion years ago and will disappear from earth in four billion years' time when the sun implodes and earth explodes. It's a finite story, just like a book or a movie, but it happens to be eight billion years long. So we're currently halfway through the story: we're new improved monkeys, still animal-like but always concerned with increasing our intelligence so as to further develop civilisation. The beauty of the story is that the amoeba had no notion of what we are today and we have no notion of what we'll be in four billion years, two minutes before earth explodes. I certainly have no idea and that's what wakes me up every day. Otherwise, what would be the point?

Being given the chance to hear some great people express themselves, I wanted to seize the opportunity to ask an important question: 'What is lacking in humanity?' Today, many archaic things still exist: violence, barbarism and so on.

What is still preventing us from going forward, what is the thing preventing us from forgetting our animalistic tendency when our aim is to deny it? And on a positive note, what is lacking that would allow us to reach even higher, to be stronger, more beautiful, more poetic, more in love in order for us to become, at last, the man that those billions of beings dreamed about? What is preventing us from reaching that stage of perfect maturity, to have, as one says in business, a 'return on investments' from all our mistakes? From one day to be able to say to the next generation: 'Well kids, we have worked hard for four billion years and we still have four billion left. We have cleaned everything up; there is no more polluting industry, no more barbarism, no more false gods. We have worked so well that you can close the book before the eight billion years are up. You have four billion years to reinvent history. You have a clean slate that's full of resources. The only thing we ask is that you should have no idea of what you'll be. Invent a new scenario that will provide you with the possibility to survive; for you are the ones who will continue history and you are the ones who will know how to escape earth before it explodes.'

Let's not forget Icarus, the Montgolfier brothers, the Wright brothers, Santos Dumont, Concorde, Zeppelins, NASA. Isn't it strange that we've always wanted to fly? Why are we the only animals who want to leave our natural state? Why do fish, although sometimes they jump out a bit, generally stay in the water? Why do birds, although sometimes they dive in water, generally stay in the air? Why do dogs and cows stay on the ground? And why have we always wanted to jump in the air? It might mean that from the beginning we knew that we would have to get out of here. Do whatever you want with the future, but the clue is that we might have to leave before the house burns down.

To get to that moment we must be intelligent, all the time, even if you are stupid like me. Not everybody has to be a genius, but everybody has to participate. It's our duty. When we are born, we sign a contract with our family, our tribe, our environment. We have to honour that contract. I try to honour mine. I know I only have the small means of a designer and, as I know that my means are too small for me to become one of the great players of humanity, I've given this platform to the great players. ★

Philippe Starck

