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TASTEMAKER

STARCK REALITY

When is a shoe not a shoe? When it's the result of a two-year exploration of evolutionary theory... welcome to the strange new world of design-god-turned-philosopher Philippe Starck

INTERVIEW KATE MUIR PORTRAIT DAVID VINTNER

To Paris to meet Philippe Starck, the famous French philosopher. Because the creator of lemon squeezers, transparent chairs and boutique hotels has now risen to a higher plane. It is not that he thinks of himself as a design god – though that may come. It is just that he now values pure thought more than the creation of mere objects.

When Puma asked Philippe to design some trainers, it took two years and he came up with the accompanying *Starck's Theory of Evolution*, a book of the thoughts of Chairman Starck. Before I interview him, this tiny work is delivered in an enormous box to my hotel, along with a cardboard chimp mask. I read the booklet on the métro: "Like the imploding star we see in the sky whose volume decreases as gravity increases, so too the product of tomorrow, its looks and size will decrease, but its intelligence will increase." You can get away with stuff like that in France.

When I arrive at the designer's offices above a funky nightclub and warehouse in the Rue Faubourg du Temple, the 55-year-old Starck immediately puts on his black-and-white cardboard chimp mask, and lopes apelike up and down the corridor. He is making a philosophical point, which we'll discuss later. Meanwhile, behind him, serious young men and women work intently on computers, their offices separated by gauzy white curtains, surrounded by all your favourite Starcky things – the giant light shades, the Louis Ghost chairs, the sweetie-coloured plastic stools.

Starck is stark but plump in a white T-shirt, shirt and jeans. It amuses him to wear different-coloured Pumas – one orange, one lilac. They look like a cross between diving shoes and stable boots.

Aren't the rubbery Pumas a bit hot in this weather?

"Pah, not too bad," he says, shrugging.

In his office, beneath a humungous black Anglepoise lamp, Starck shows me a sketch of an ankle boot he imagined in 1996, long before Puma approached him. He refused to compromise on the shoe design, so new materials and moulds had to be made. "It took two years. How I suffered, ah!" He puts his hands together in mock prayer. "It was like banging your head against a wall."

"Philippe was so passionate, I believed in taking a gamble on him," says Antonio Bertone, Puma's director of brand management. "It was a positive relationship, with incredible attention to detail. It was a labour of love, which came close to madness."

Very close, as I discover when I ask Starck how he got the idea. He sits back in his chair and opens his arms wide. "Evolution is everything. We must first remem-

ber an old story, our story. You

see, first of all, we were bacteria..." At this point, I think my French has rusted; but no, he goes on via frogs and monkeys to our present state of being "super-monkeys". At last, the ape mask makes sense. "We then created the concept of love and God, and from this we built civilisation... By the 19th century, our tools were mechanical – lots of noise and smells of oil. It was almost obscene." He explains how we came to worship machines and technology, but that now "we must create for our own benefit, not the benefit of technology".

Thus, the perfect shoe – had you forgotten the shoe? – will not, as Starck says, "have lights and wings and turbojets and GPS systems". Instead, it will be lightweight, comfy and antibacterial, but without having to show it: "More intelligence, less styling. This is the secret of the product of tomorrow." He points across the office to a set of transparent yellow chairs floating round a boardroom table. "They shrink away; they become invisible."

Starck may own 15 houses around the world, but he has a socialist vision of "bringing good objects to the maximum number". Hence we all have his Excalibur toilet brush holder. "I work at two extremes: designing a \$9 stool or a \$2 baby bottle for Target in America, or designing a grand yacht. I steal from the rich, use their resources to develop things, and give the results to the poor."

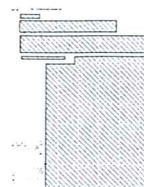
Starck says he turns down 90 per cent of commissions, and he won't do tobacco or arms. "Do us a nice casing for an Exocet, Philippe," goes down badly at Starck HQ. Alcohol is acceptable, however – he shows me the new 1664 Starck beer in bottles and glasses. I look around for other works. There's an uncomfortable-looking red chair with a large phallus coming out of the seat, and a series of stools, including one supported by a garden gnome.

"That's horrible," I say.

Starck smiles. "It's my joke – a fart at good design."

We discuss who Starck might have been in the days before mass production. A Surrealist, perhaps? "I'd have been a sort of Leonardo da Vinci," he says, modestly. "Science, maths, astrophysics – I'm fascinated by all of that." He also listens to music as he designs – he won't say which music, except that it must be "high quality". If I want to know more, I can listen to the four compilation CDs he has made for Virgin: *Conscience*, *Head*, *Heart*, and *Body*. "I must have sounds that correspond exactly to the project I'm working on."

He sketches with a fine pen on pads of untearable tracing paper – specially made, with the Starck logo. "They're not affected



by humidity, by wrinkling in planes." A consideration, when you mostly live on a private jet – "I haven't been home for a month." Home is in Holland Park in London, or Paris, or Venice, or New York with his third wife Nori. He has four children, one grown up. Doesn't the constant travelling play havoc on his family life? Starck looks puzzled by the question. "There's a nice double bed in the plane with linen sheets, and the kids can sleep in the plane. It's a family plane."

Starck's life really doesn't bear imagining. His parties are also very weird. He likes to surround himself with his "tribes" – youngish people who know what's happening on the street, or perhaps in philosophical salons. The party for the Puma shoes is very tribal – lots of orange tights and piercings – and takes place in the Palais de Tokyo, a huge art gallery open until midnight. The staff are wearing "Vive l'Evolution" T-shirts and the food is frightening: orange goo in test-tubes, strange corn and beetroot salads in shot glasses that grown men must excavate with tiny teaspoons. The drinks are jelly vodka shots in violet, lemon, orange and icky grey – to match the

Puma shoe colours. There is thrumming music, and Starck's philosophical statements are being projected on to the walls. None of them, sadly, say: "Pretentious, moi?" ■

Men's Starck for Puma shoes and boots will be available in the Conran Shop this autumn; the women's collection will be available in spring 2005

