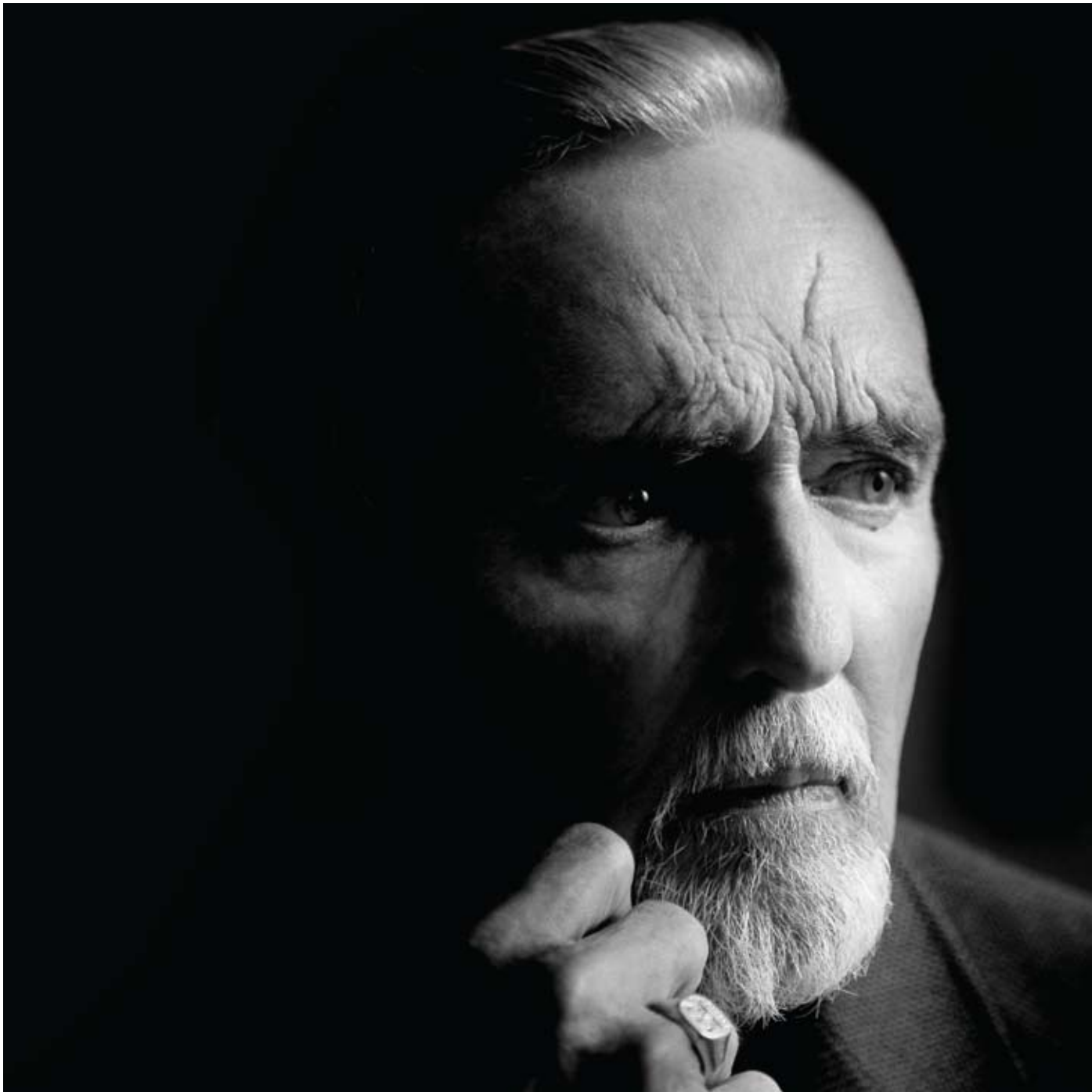


# whitewall

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*THE LUXURY ISSUE*

*PHILIPPE STARCK – PHARRELL WILLIAMS – LANCE ARMSTRONG – DENNIS HOPPER*



# PHILIPPE STARCK

BY GUILLAUME WOLF, PORTRAIT BY JEAN-BAPTISTE MONDINO

*Whitewall's Creative Minds* is a continuing conversation with visionaries in the fields of art and design that focuses on the unique drive behind today's top thinkers. *Whitewall* spoke with designer extraordinaire Philippe Starck in a roller coaster exchange — starting with his latest collaboration with Jenny Holzer, then moving to the influence of Stanley Kubrick on his work, poetic politics, subversion, Einstein's relativity, mutation, and the next revolution.



Above and following spread: Philippe Starck's Hooo!!! and Haaa!!! lamps with texts by Jenny Holzer for FLOS and Baccarat

**WHITEWALL:** Tell me about the lamps you designed in collaboration with Jenny Holzer, made by Baccarat and Flos? How did the collaboration come about?

**PHILIPPE STARCK:** It's very simple. We loved the idea with Piero Gandini of Flos to create high contrast between the magical, empirical, and archaic aspect of the crystal and high-tech electronics. It took the shape of writing. In a poetic way, you could say that it's to "give a voice to the crystal." It's also an answer to Chateaubriand's question: Inanimate objects, do you have a soul?

The next step was to find what message we wanted. For me, it had to be political and crafted in such a way that it became poetic. Jenny Holzer was the natural pick. Twenty years ago, I owned a black Mercedes flanked with a "Protect me for what I want" decal on each door, so I'm very used to living with her work. For Piero and me, the choice was self-evident.

**WW:** A collaboration by Starck and Holzer — is it art or design?

**PS:** None of the above. It's politics, making luxury objects that express political statements. By the way, it's luxury — not by choice — but simply because structurally, crystal is very expensive. What you see is one of the biggest pieces of crystal in the world. It's quite extraordinary. So it's not art, because I'm not an artist, and with Jenny

Holzer it becomes something else.

**WW:** Political poetry?

**PS:** Yes, a form of politics that becomes more acceptable to certain people because it is expressed with a luxury object, through an artist.

**WW:** Isn't it what you could call the subversion of subversion? Isn't it a dangerous game?

**PS:** It might be so, but it's better than doing nothing. Nobody's opening their mouth anymore, nobody says anything. We're in a society where the opposition is idle. In that context, I'm not very picky when it comes to the choice of subversion. Knowing also that I'm not in the easiest position to be subversive with furniture, you have to be either courageous or a little bit stupid. When you are a writer, a singer, or a politician, you can make a revolution with an article, a song, or a law but for me, trying to shake things up with a lamp or a toothbrush, it's not easy.

**WW:** The first time I saw the lamps, it made me think of the seminal scene of Stanley Kubrick's 2001 when the character is stuck in a strange neo-classical apartment where time and space morph and collide. Do you remember that scene?

**PS:** You are very perceptive — it's not that I simply remember that scene; it's actually the basis for all my work. For me, this scene by Stanley Kubrick has

been foundational because it contains everything I love: mystery, poetry, surrealism, the future, a vision. It encompasses all. A lot of the things I do are from this mindset, this way of thinking. I've always been very close to Kubrick's vision. How could one not be?

**WW:** It seems that your lamps could fit in that scene. They have this shifting quality — a blend of past, present, and future. Is this an approach in your work, the collapse of time and space?

**PS:** You are terrific — that's exactly it. It's present in all my creations. I only work around relativity. Why am I mixing time, cultures, or play with oversize objects? It's always to talk about Einstein's relativity, which states (and I'm oversimplifying) that nothing exists. Unfortunately, I live in that realm, and it's not fun to be stuck in there because I almost need to pinch myself to make sure I exist. I have enormous existential angst. The foundation of my life is not being sure I exist. This is probably why, if we do some psychobabble, that I work so much. It's a way to constantly remind myself that I do exist. I don't have any relationship with life. I barely have a relationship with death. I "under-feel" life. I need to remember death to know there is life. This is why I'm into astrophysics, quantum mechanics, and relativity, into the micro-macro.

**WW:** In the past you were talking about aerodynamic objects that accelerated space. Today,

*are you producing objects that distort time and space?*

**PS:** Aerodynamic objects — it was over 20 years ago. I had a “family inclination” to do it. It was a bit regressive for me, as I grew up surrounded by aerodynamics with my father building planes. It was something easy. Later, I got into quantum physics. It was more modern and closer to who I was, because it’s so poetic. Why did I accept working on Baccarat? Because reflection, diffraction, and aberration are expressions of mathematical formulas that are absolute poetry. When I can, I spend entire afternoons talking with astrophysicist Thibault Damour of the Institut des Hautes Etudes Scientifiques (IHES). I love working with him because he teaches me, and he says I have poetic visions inspired by math and science.

**WW:** *You’ve talked about getting your inspiration from the “collective memory” and “the unconscious of society.” How do you tap into it? Also, I heard you take naps to get your ideas. Is that part of your process?*

**PS:** First, I don’t really get my inspiration from collective memory; it’s simply a method I sometimes use. There are objects that come from (almost) nowhere, and there are others that directly follow collective memory in order to be better assimilated by their users. When I create something from scratch, it’s something that comes from me so the users need to accept this personal thing. But when you synthesize collective memory, they don’t need to make this effort. They don’t have a relationship with me, but a relationship with themselves. It’s a communication strategy with the other. I call it “humble friends,” “discreet friends,” or “silent friends.”

The second question is about naps. You see, I’m very anxious with consciousness because it always lies. We manipulate it or society manipulates it

*But at the same time it carries a demand as if life had given you a gift but in exchange was taking a lot.*

**PS:** That’s very true. That’s when you have luck through randomness or, as Jacques Monod would say, *le hasard et la nécessité*. Because you had a creative father, a mother who was a little bit foolish, because you suffered a lot, because you worried a lot, because you were an outcast — there are many reasons — naturally you end up creating because you’re inadequate in society, like me. I did not understand anything in school, and I rarely went. Today, everything is filtered around me. Thanks to my work, I was able to create a protective bubble with a lot of people who love me.

At some point you realize that the only choice you have is to create, and you enter into the Faustian myth to save your own skin. You sell your soul to the Devil to live, you sell your life to creation. You suddenly get stuck into a system where you don’t live your life but instead are permanently out of sync with time — five minutes, five hours, five years, fifty years, five hundred years, five billion years to always know what’s going to happen in advance, to predict and structure this future, to show new paths or denounce the ones that seem unjust. It is a monastic life.

This is what I live with my wife. We’re extraordinarily lonely because we are either in a plane (where we’re alone), in hotel rooms (where we’re alone), and we leave all this to stay in houses in the middle of nowhere (where we’re alone). But this solitude helps protect the “print head.” The subconscious works alone. It is a bit guided and structured in order to produce more than just nebulous ideas, but then you have to be in the proper state when the subconscious delivers its finished products. You have to be “ready to print.” This is why I live mostly in my bed, anxious, biting my nails, in a semi-open state of anxiousness and melancholy in the middle of nowhere. When I feel a “delivery” is coming, I always have a little table

problems we have on earth come from our refusal to accept our mutation, and we’re walking backward so we constantly fall on our butts. We should embrace the beauty of this state of being. It’s our intrinsic value.

We’re the only known species who was able to take charge of the quality and speed of our mutation. Every day we should have conversations to learn how to do it. What are the next steps, what are the next challenges, how do we move to bionism? I only live in that realm, it’s the only thing that interests me: tracking mutation signs, classifying and indexing them. You know how in movies they put smoke to reveal the invisible man or use ultraviolet rays to detect phantoms? That’s what I do all day. I say, “Look at these clues! Wake up!” because if we miss the boat, there will be terrible consequences. The big thread of evolution is linear but it works with micro-jumps. Unfortunately, every micro-jump we create out of laziness and not intelligence calls for a revolution. A revolution is only amusing for morons. It’s always extremely costly in blood, tears, and energy.

**WW:** *There will be a revolution not in the traditional political sense but a revolution through people accelerating toward the next mutation. They are everywhere, young people we know nothing about doing things differently. You might feel alone at this point but there are people standing behind. What’s funny is that it’s a silent movement, a different paradigm.*

**PS:** You give me shivers! That gives me immense pleasure — not for me because I’m old — but if only there was a little bit of self-awareness so we could become a little more intelligent and remember where we came from and where we’re going, people would be so much happier. If we could move toward a civilized civilization, this would be amazing. You just shed some light on something, though we don’t see the thread. We don’t see any more differences

## **“ALL THE PROBLEMS WE HAVE ON EARTH COME FROM OUR REFUSAL TO ACCEPT OUR MUTATION... WE SHOULD EMBRACE THE BEAUTY OF THIS STATE OF BEING. IT’S OUR INTRINSIC VALUE”**

by absorbing everything. I’m very cautious with this — that’s why I prefer working with the subconscious: the untold, the slips of the tongue, the accumulation of little invisible signs. They all provide a more solid foundation. In order to work with the subconscious, you need first to use rigorously the conscious state and later from a “half-open” state (between awake and asleep), you can start using and structuring your subconscious.

I’m not an intelligent person, but I have an extraordinary intuition that allows me to place myself in the world differently and to do things differently. In the classic orthogonal way of thinking, I’m completely lost. I cannot even read an operating manual. But in the diagonal way of thinking, I’m faster than everyone else. Generally, when I ask a question, the solution appears completed, in one block. Unlike people who will do a thorough analysis and do a linear map of their thinking. In a sense, I’m a “beast of subconscious,” even if I pay dearly for it.

**WW:** *This super-intuition you’re describing gives you a great advantage over your contemporaries.*

by my bed that I use to draw with great precision all the elements. At this point I don’t have to think, I just execute.

When I’m done “printing,” I look if it’s worth something and, if so, I send it to Thierry Gauguin, who has been chief of design with us for 20 years. I would not be anything without him because he is really intelligent. We’ll talk about it and he’ll make sure the project is going to exist. I don’t have any relation with reality but I have real visions. I understand the big tides of ideas.

**WW:** *You have talked a lot about the mutant, the idea of mutation . . .*

**PS:** We all are mutants, from the amoeba, the fish, the frog, the monkey, the super-monkey, to what we will become in four billion years, right before the sun explodes. We all are the products of a long mutation. That’s evident. For example, the two of us talking, in just three minutes we already have changed. I’m the one who says, “Let’s accept being mutants, let’s enjoy being mutants, let’s consciously manage our mutation instead of doing the opposite.” All the

between the left and the right. Democracy is collapsing, it’s imploding from within, science is starting to lie. Things are getting darker, strangely enough.

**WW:** *But they will lighten up and I would like to leave you with this idea: I think we are heading toward a creative revolution. So far, creativity has been the privilege of an elite group of professionals, but it’s going to explode to touch everyone. There are signs everywhere, but it’s a silent movement. It doesn’t mean everybody will become a rock star or anything like that but it’s a totally different way to use creativity, integrated in the day to day.*

**PS:** I would love that God exists so he could listen to you! [Laughs]

**WW:** *Well, I just finished talking with the God of Design — that’s a start! [Laughs]*

