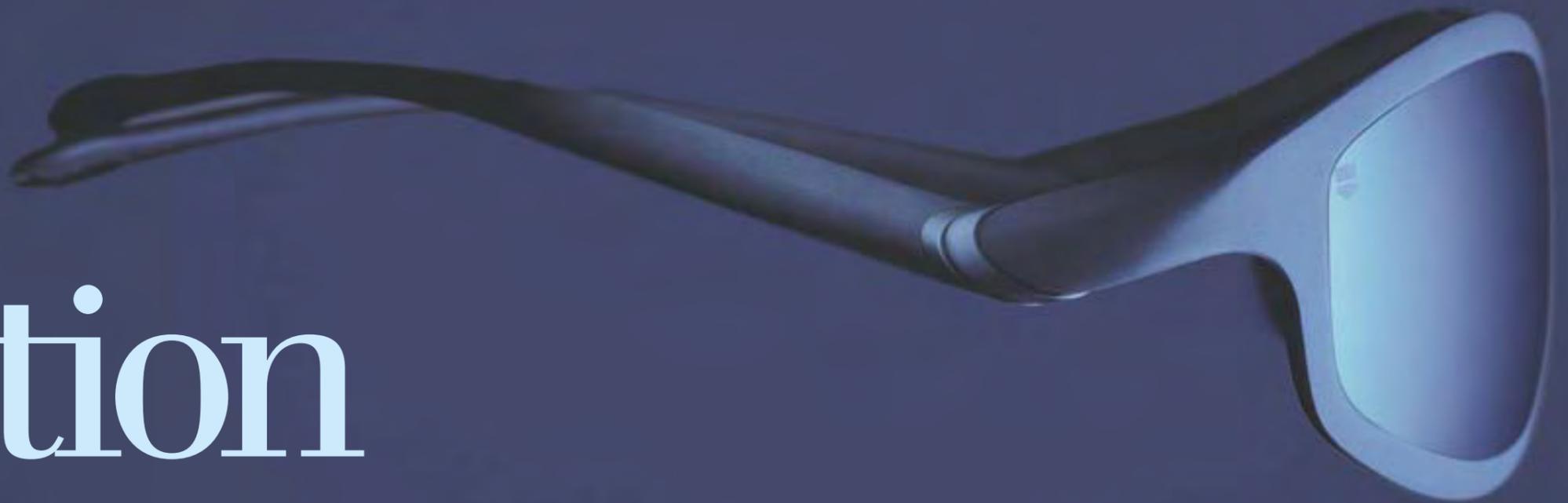


Fresh Direction



QP talks exclusively to TAG Heuer's design guru, Ross Lovegrove

Bill Prince



Since joining in 1996, Ross Lovegrove has guided TAG Heuer's cool, contemporary style towards an 'aesthetic consistency' now intrinsic to the brand. Projects such as the Monaco 69 and Sport Vision sunglasses have set TAG aside from the anodyne sports sector of old. *QP* visited Lovegrove's Notting Hill design agency to investigate how.

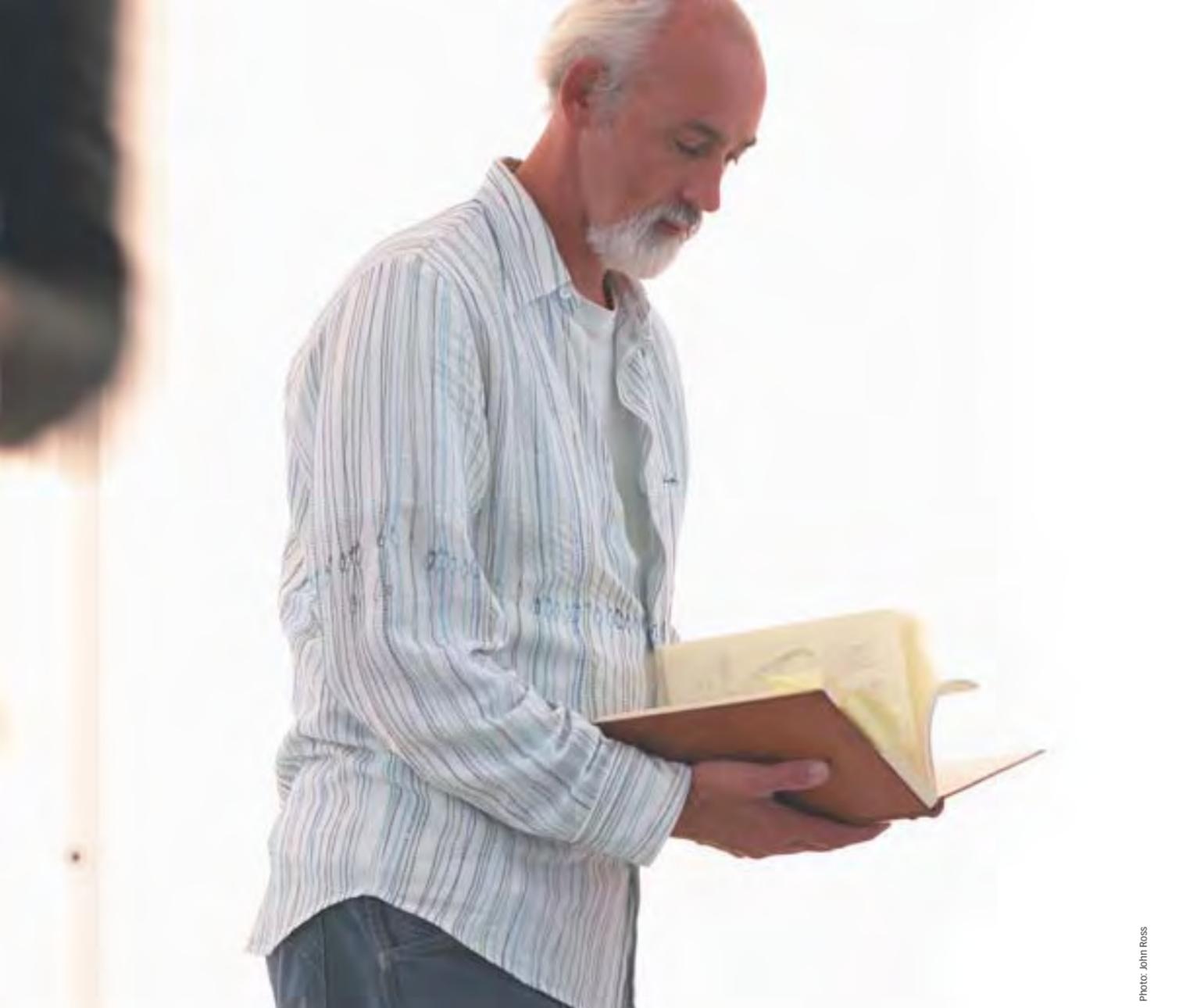


Photo: John Ross

Ross Lovegrove in contemplative mode, amidst the cool surroundings of his studio.

He looks like a young Gandalf and boasts the build and moves of a matinee idol (ask anyone who saw him in action on the dancefloors at Basel last year). More importantly, he talks with that alluring mixture of certainty and wonder, together with an irritation at accepted norms and blinkered thinking, which most of us begrudgingly discard at the first hint of a pay packet.

At the helm

Forty six-year-old Welsh-born designer Ross Lovegrove is the man charged with helping TAG Heuer to imagine its own future. Or, as he puts it: "When people come to me they come for future thinking, innovation and the amalgamation of worlds; more of a strategic position. That's what

I'm good at and why I'm employed by TAG Heuer. Rather than being a pen, a service that's pushed around, I can help them understand their classic stuff, which I bring up to date and ensure is absolutely exploited to the full for the brand. But I'm at my best when I'm pioneering where the brand can go."

Universally fêted for his designs which use high-tech composites and polymers in chic and subtle forms – 'organic essentialism' he calls it – Lovegrove is every inch the ultramodern design guru. A perma-travelling exponent of the art in finding new ways to solve old problems (Ikepod's Marc Newson is another), his every move inspires him to create globally relevant artefacts.

"My job is to bring something that is disruptive and unexpected from my world to TAG Heuer."



Lovegrove's recent update of the old, entry-level Formula 1 model, (€550).

Trained at Manchester Polytechnic before collecting an MA in design from the Royal College of Art in London, Lovegrove first went to work for the influential Froggdesign agency in Germany – working with clients such as Sony and Apple – before returning to the UK to pursue his own projects in conjunction with the likes of British Airways, Olympus Cameras and Herman Miller. A tiny amount of this output is collated in a new monograph, *Supernatural*, to be published by Phaidon in May. A series of essays attest to Lovegrove's design ethos, referencing his desire to "create products that are only made possible by the technologies at the time in which we live". Which, together with his wish to "invest value in objects that talk of impermanence," whilst maintaining "an aesthetic consistency as a reflection of modernity" could encapsulate the hugely exciting crossroads at which TAG Heuer finds itself presently.

Tentative beginnings

In 1996, following an invitation to speak at a TAG Heuer sponsored event, Lovegrove was brought in to consult on the idea of sports performance and its relationship with TAG Heuer as a legitimate sports brand, for which he experimented with a breathable, ergonomically designed strap. "You know when you were a kid and there were these cheap watches with a metal bracelet with the holes? Well I did a watch where I tried to perforate out the bracelet. And of course, some bright spark says, 'What happens if you've got a hairy wrist?' End of project. But they liked the way I presented ideas and understood the brand. So then they said, 'We'd like you to look at diversification'. And we said, 'Well, eyewear is the next

legitimate step,' because in eyewear I'd put all the technology that goes into watches."

TAG Heuer asked Lovegrove to present his formidably engineered Sport Vision sunglasses at a series of gallery events in key cities, becoming a default spokesman for the brand in the process. "It helped TAG Heuer when I showed the other work I do too," says Lovegrove. "It's all part of the same philosophy; that TAG isn't just this insular, isolated brand."

Lovegrove's next task was to help refocus TAG Heuer as it sought to step up to the level of sporting luxury traditionally redolent of Rolex or Omega. Lovegrove became the very essence of the brand's DNA; worldly, impatient towards mere market-driven evolutions, determined to re-establish TAG where its founder Edouard Heuer had so boldly placed it – at the forefront of technological innovation.

Ground zero

"As a designer there are little icons that you have in your mental list which you have to do before you snuff it. One is a kind of anglepoise lamp, there's furniture typologies, there's a car if you're up for it, perhaps a house, a telephone and a watch..."

We are talking in Lovegrove's recently completed studio in a quiet mews in Notting Hill, West London. Part 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, part Issey Miyake showroom, it's a starkly white and suit-

(Previous page) The first of Lovegrove's TAG Heuer projects was the Sport Vision sunglasses range. This is the Physics model (from €215).



Photo: John Ross

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The DNA Staircase, leading down from Lovegrove's Notting Hill house to his basement level design studio.

ably stellar space – an extension of Lovegrove's elemental ethos, designed by his Danish wife Miska. A basement level design studio bathed in artificial daylight is approached via a spectacular if slightly unnerving fibreglass stairwell designed by Lovegrove – the 'DNA Staircase', now somewhat of a trademark of his. Down here, his team of essentialist elves busy themselves at flatscreens, designing everything from packaging to aircraft cabins, while Ross talks *QP* through the process and practice of designing TAG Heuer's

future. First up: a series of re-imagined Monacos with pearlescent faces and reflective straps. Then literally hundreds of computer models leading to the all-new Carrera – a stunning piece that manages to unite Jack Heuer's 'all-time baby' with a compellingly contemporary finish.

Next up: the extraordinary Monaco 69, which caused a sensation at Basel last year, cleverly combining a traditional TAG Heuer shape and movement with the latest quartz technology – the

latter represented by the 1/1,000th accuracy of the Microtimer. "It had been in the pipeline for a while; the idea of a reversible watch," explains Lovegrove. "How smoothly the entire engineering element of the two faces works is a testimony to TAG Heuer's precision manufacturing. It clips down very satisfyingly and, technologically, it just works like a dream."

Was its unique flip-top construction the most difficult element of the design? "No, it was the thickness. What the customer doesn't appreciate is that when you're talking about designing watches, you're talking about fractions of millimetres and how that can change the perception of an object. You don't want to make it look as if you've artificially made it big, but that it's loaded up. It's like when you used to buy one of the first

Walkmans, they were fabulous because they were stuffed full. Same with the iPod. An iPod is stuffed right to the corners. That's an emotional thing I want to put across in the work I do."

Unique approach

Lovegrove is a designer whose response to an idea isn't tailored to any particular concept of what merits prestige – value is imprinted rather than inferred. "When you're involved in the manufacture of products you realise what the real cost of something is. There's this old distrust in my book of anything that's too cheap. You just wonder whether it's facadism."

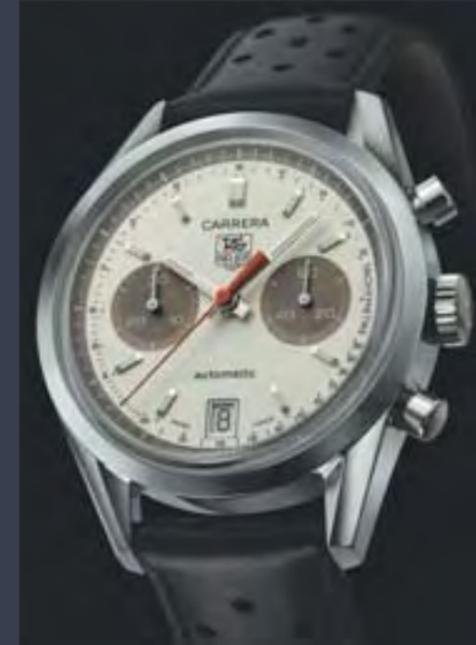
Does this ever bring him into conflict with his ultimate masters at TAG Heuer? "When I meet with Jean-Christophe [Babin, TAG Heuer CEO], he'll



PHOTO: Alastair Laidlaw

(Above) TAG's revolutionary Monaco 69, launched at 2003's BASELWORLD. It has the original hand-wound mechanism from the classic Monaco model – famously endorsed by Steve McQueen – combined with a 1/1000th Microtimer on the flipside.

(Right) The all-new Carrera 1964 – an update on TAG's classic (€1,750).



say, 'I want to see the badge big,' and I'll say, 'Well hang on, if you're going to the opera, perhaps you don't want TAG Heuer loud.' So it's how you play that. But Jean-Christophe knows his stuff. And it's quite interesting to deal with someone like that because he'll say, 'TAG is black, TAG is bold'. And if you just made notes and went and did it, as straightforward as that is, there's something in there that is really cool. But my job is to bring from my world to TAG Heuer something that is disruptive and unexpected. And that's a value system in itself."

The common direction in which both designer and brand seem to be headed is with the new entry-level F1. This brings fond memories of the 1986 piece back to life with an entirely new watch, served by a vastly improved brand image

and Ross' first love: a perceived value placed on plastics.

"I went to one of the meetings wearing an original and said, 'You were selling this 12 years ago, what's wrong? Everyone loved that watch, why did you pull it from the market?' 'Nah, it's plastic.' 'Well hang on,' I said. 'That's your entry point.' So now you're talking about €500 or less for a TAG Heuer product that is flying off the shelves because it's giving people the chance to buy into the brand. And in 5 years when polymers are developed to level where they're weighty and scratch-resistant – I'm not talking about any plastic we know now..." Ross momentarily stops to catch up with his own enthusiasm. "Wow!" ●

Bill Prince is Deputy Editor of GQ magazine

Further information:

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Supernatural: The Work of Ross Lovegrove. Texts by Ross Lovegrove and Paola Antonelli, £39.95 / €69.95, Phaidon Press, May 2004 www.phaidon.com