

# VOICE MACHINE

No GPS, no diary, no Google and definitely no diamonds. And yours for the price of a car.  
Why one Danish entrepreneur is betting big on the mobile phone you'll love, cherish and never upgrade

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**CALLING CARD**  
At the Alliance MIM factory in France, a micro laser engraves the keypad of the new YB1 phone, designed by Yves Béhar. Made from either gold or stainless steel, the phone also features a sapphire crystal screen  
Photography: Jonathan de Villiers

Wallpaper\*





**A**t Wallpaper\*, we've always been about the long term. We like objects we can keep and treasure. Disposable culture seems like such a waste of beauty and resources. Apple's Steve Jobs' nifty little elves might be beaver away, but we all know that even the iPhone 5 will be landfill in two years. So when a courier arrived from Copenhagen with news of the YB1 – a handcrafted mobile phone created by Yves Béhar through Æsir, a new Danish company – our ears pricked up. When the courier told us the new firm was publishing a design manifesto, we instantly dispatched a correspondent.

Béhar's vision for his first ever phone is simple: 'I wanted to show an alternative to the sea of smartphones and their deluge of features. Now that the industry seems to think that phones aren't for speaking anymore, I wanted to focus on the idea of voice, clarity and simplicity. The YB1 champions the idea of craftsmanship in an age that is obsessed with more and making last year's phones obsolete. Instead, we propose better and longer lasting as our starting criteria.'

The phone is made – nay, wrought – from either 18ct solid gold or brushed stainless steel by French and Swiss watchmakers. It boasts a sapphire crystal screen and Dutch-made ceramic casing and looks and feels more like jewellery

than a chuck-away handset subsidised by a state-owned telecoms giant.

The idea, perhaps surprisingly, began with a Danish entrepreneur who started his career in the shipping industry. Thomas Møller Jensen – Æsir's founder – quit his engineering degree to work for Maersk. After a few years running operations in Copenhagen, Manila, Rotterdam and Johannesburg, he quit to start importing wines, selling to most of Denmark's Michelin-starred restaurants. In 2007, he read an interview with designer Karim Rashid bemoaning the lack of a truly desirable mobile phone and decided to remedy the situation.

Three years later, Wallpaper\* caught up with him, in a stone lithograph print room in the heart of Copenhagen's Christianshavn, where British graphic designer Tom Hingston of Keep Agency was running off copies of the design manifesto he helped Æsir create. The giant stone Hingston helped winch into place had been carved from the granite bottom of a nearby lake. Which means, in some small way, the overall Æsir design concept began 150 million years ago.

'My interest in mobile phones is that I don't really have an interest in the mobile phone market,' Møller Jensen says with engaging candour. 'My father used to work for a company that developed

early mobile phone technology and I used to import handmade turntables from the UK, so I guess there's always been an interest in technology. But when Rashid pointed out the absence of a mobile phone with real design principles, I got excited. That, to me, seemed very Danish – to create something beautiful and simple and functional. The phone will not be for everyone – it's a niche market for sure – but that means we can devote time and effort to details that wouldn't be possible in a mass-market product.'

As we talk, Hingston lays out pages from the manifesto and he and Møller Jensen discuss Æsir's design philosophy. So seriously does the company take this that, at the end of last year, it assembled a diverse group of design writers, cultural editors, gallery curators and architecture critics from around the world to produce a full-scale manifesto that echoes the principles of creative movements such as futurism. 'In a world where everybody does everything via Google or Wikipedia, there are many half-baked ideas that create middling rather than meaningful results,' the group concluded, in words printed out on one of Hingston's hand-crafted typefaces. 'It's time to embrace real expertise and experts again.'

Referencing San Francisco's Long Now Foundation (which is building a >>

**THE LONG VIEW**  
This picture, Thomas Møller Jensen in the Edition Copenhagen print room, holding a poster that is part of Tom Hingston's design manifesto for Æsir  
Photography: Sacha Mario

Opposite, prototypes and parts of the YB1 on a table at design manager George Hines' Oxford studio  
Photography: Thomas Haywood





monumentally sized clock that ticks once a year and houses a cuckoo that appears only on the millennium, as well as Jem Finer's *Longplayer* (a thousand-year-long musical composition that has been playing since New Year's Eve 1999), the manifesto hails artists and architects who value community and cooperation and resist quick and easy solutions.

'With millions of blogs online, new content is required constantly, regardless of the quality,' it argues. 'The new content marks the beginning of a death cycle. Whatever's posted is over in an hour or a day only to fade back to make way for something new. In the 'I-blog-therefore-I-am' world, many designers now design specifically for blogs, solely to gain exposure. Their goal is the creation of an image sufficiently cool to get reposted, retweeted and "liked". Communication on this instant feedback loop travels at the speed of light. The process is the enemy of depth and the killer of meaning.'

After Béhar's bespoke phone, Æsir plans to roll out a new concept by a new designer every 18 months. Helping to forge the company's relationships with designers is Danish designer Jens Martin Skibsted, the mind behind the Biomega ethical bikes and the co-founder of design firm KIBISI. Skibsted has worked with everybody, from Marc Newson to Philippe Starck to Alexander McQueen. Indeed, the next designer has already signed up, but Æsir is keeping the deal secret to avoid stealing Béhar's thunder.

Antti Ylönen from Finland's Navicron – ex-Nokia people keen to break out and design their own phone platform – leads the software team and was pivotal in ensuring Hingston's work appeared exactly as the designer intended on the phone's screen. Suki Larson, who ran M&C Saatchi's luxury division before setting up Keep Agency to work with clients from LVMH and Corinthia Hotels, was in charge of the entire marketing strategy and the commissioning of the various creatives who worked on the project – including Vietnamese-Danish jazz bassist Chris Minh Doky, who created the phone's original sounds, and Hingston, whose distinctive typefaces adorn handset and screen.

This team, Møller Jensen says, along with the watchmakers involved in creating bespoke screws and crystal components, shows how community-minded and permanent Æsir's thinking is – fittingly, the company takes its name from the collective denomination for the principal group of Norse gods.

For George Hines, design manager at Product Development Technologies, the engineering design firm responsible for taking Béhar's concept and turning it into a functioning reality, Æsir is true to its >>



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#### STRONG TYPES

British designer Tom Hingston (top) created Æsir's phone icons and typeface (above). George Hines (left), design manager at Product Development Technologies, was responsible for turning Yves Béhar's phone concept into reality

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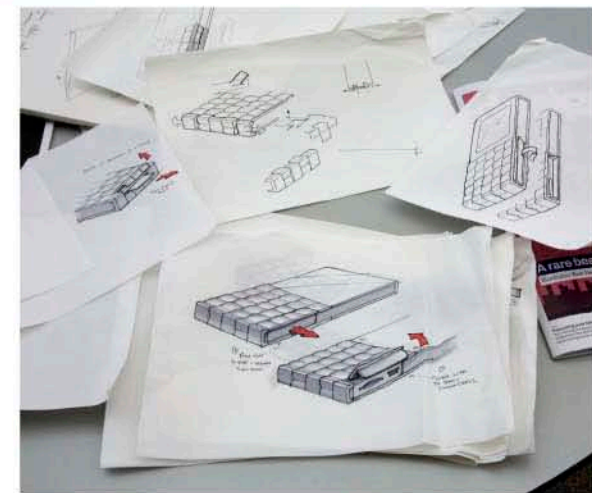


Photography: Jonathan de Villiers, Thomas Haywood

manifesto. 'They are very hands off – inspiring so,' he says. 'They have a vision, but they trust the expertise of all the different people they work with.'

Hines explains that the challenge in building the phone was dealing with tiny changes that could throw the entire project off track. 'We had to make sure the exterior matched Yves' vision exactly, but also ensure the antenna could work perfectly with the new materials we were using. Sometimes, adding just one small detail – the hand-carved phone keys, for instance – meant we had to realign everything else all over again. When Yves' prototype arrived, it was not technically feasible to fit a working phone platform into something that thin. It took time, but we made it work. Æsir had the confidence in us to simply let us get on with it, unlike some companies who tell you to make it like an iPhone, and then turn up at the office every day to ask why it isn't ready. Trust was everywhere here.'

It was that sort of collegiate atmosphere that persuaded watchmaker craftsmen to join the collective. Æsir met with the CEOs and owners of luxury watch brands such as Hublot, MB&F and Graff to get their recommendations on the best artisans in the business. In the end, Møller Jensen went with Formatec in the Netherlands to create the ceramic case (the world's first ceramic mobile phone casing of that size); Alliance MIM in France for steel and gold working parts; Settler Sapphire in Switzerland for the crystal screen; precious metal watch bracelet maître Jean-Louis Burdet for the



**CREATIVE ALLIANCE**  
Top, the Alliance MIM factory in France was chosen to create the phone's steel and gold working parts  
Above, early sketches of Æsir's YB1 phone

gold elements; and ERAM in Switzerland to create an entirely new kind of screw.

'If you have a problem with your phone, we basically have the name, address and inside leg measurement of the guy who worked on it,' Hines explains. 'If you drop it – well, it will be fine if you just drop it – but if something terrible happens he can fix it up and make it as good as new. Or, if it's the gold phone, he could keep that dent there for you if it reminds you of your partner's birthday bash. No one else is offering this kind of service.'

And what about Vertu, Nokia's luxury phone subsidiary, which is handmade in the UK and sells models ranging from €3,000 to over €200,000? Møller Jensen cheerfully accepts his rival. Indeed, he points out, among the consultants he employs is Dr Peter Ashall, one of Vertu's

founders. 'Vertu is a diamond-studded statement phone, which is appropriate for its target markets – China and Russia,' says Møller Jensen. 'Unlike Vertu, we did not set out to make an expensive handset specifically – the cost is more a by-product of wanting to use select materials, employ skilled craftsmen and push technology.'

Æsir is taking a risk with the YB1 in only offering voice and text. With the brushed-steel version starting at €7,000, it could cause BlackBerry users to think hard before swapping SIM cards. 'Most brands try to cram as much technology into a product as possible, rather than consider how we use that technology,' Béhar explains. 'Good design uses the process of elimination. Which is why I really wanted to focus on the essence of a phone.' To which Møller Jensen adds tactfully: 'Perhaps on a future phone, a designer will want to add other features. If they can justify why it is integral to the design, then we might do it.'

Æsir only needs – indeed only expects – to sell handsets in the thousands. In part, the company is actively discouraging people from upgrading to a new phone – it is even offering a free service two years after the purchase in the hope customers will keep their handsets. Béhar, of course, is behind the One Laptop Per Child computers, which are intended to be used for life. Møller Jensen hopes that, when grandchildren are clearing houses in 70 years' time, they will find worn but still unscratched mobiles that work perfectly as soon as they are plugged in. ★

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