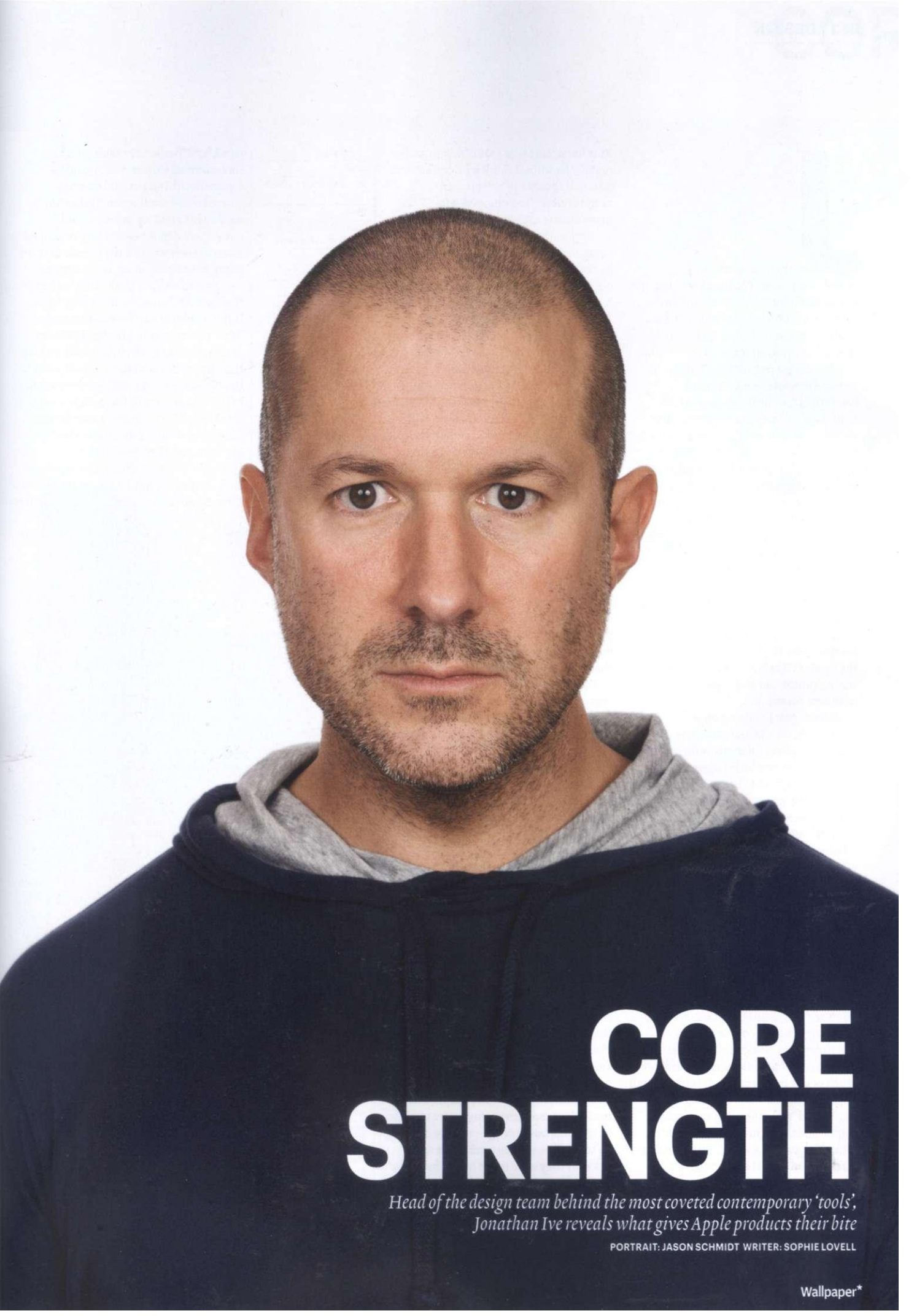
BEARING FRUIT
Jonathan Ive (opposite) has helped build Apple's reputation on a foundation of simple, functional design, with products including (from top) the iPod Shuffle, Nano and Touch, the iPhone and, most recently, the iPad

Still life: Matthew Donaldson

'Our goal is not to make money. Our goal is to make something that is better'



CORE STRENGTH

Head of the design team behind the most coveted contemporary 'tools', Jonathan Ive reveals what gives Apple products their bite

PORTRAIT: JASON SCHMIDT WRITER: SOPHIE LOVELL

Jonathan Ive needs little introduction, which is just as well because not an awful lot is known about him. He was a Chingford, Essex-born lad who studied industrial design at Newcastle Polytechnic and, after a brief stint with London design consultancy Tangerine, joined the Apple design team in Cupertino, California, in 1992. At the tender age of 43, he is now senior vice-president of industrial design at Apple Inc and, some say, the greatest industrial designer of his generation. Ive and his team have brought us one achingly beautiful object of desire after another - iMacs, PowerBooks, iPods, iPhones, iPads - and given shape to a whole new age of multi-touch personal computing, entertainment and communication.

Although he is the public face of Apple's conspicuously anonymous design team, Ive rarely gives interviews. Apparently, he prefers to spend most of his time working inhuman hours in the Apple HQ at No 1 Infinite Loop, fine-tuning prototypes and experimenting with new materials.

After 18 years of living on the West Coast, Ive's Estuary accent is still intact. He speaks intensely, with great concentration and little jargon. He does not need to sell what he does, his products speak clearly enough for themselves, but he does want to communicate his approach and the intensity of his relationship with the company from which he now seems inseparable.

Ive's design team at Apple is small, 'you would be very, very surprised at how small', he says, but it is clear this is not going to be a conversation about names and numbers. They have worked together for a long time and he values their ability to understand and communicate with one another. 'We can be brutally critical of our work and the personal issues of ego have long since faded. We are very clear on what our priorities and goals are.'

Ive talks in the first person plural for much of our conversation. It is hard to tell where the use of 'we' - meaning Apple - begins and 'we' - meaning the design team - ends. This integrated view of himself as part of a whole, rather than a discreet, individual is reflected in how he describes the goals of both his design team and the company. 'What we try to do is to design and make the best products that we can' is a phrase he repeats often; for him it is the foundation upon which everything else is based.

'It is important that I said "design and make",' he adds. 'I think it is absolutely essential that the process is seen as continuous. The object and its manufacture are inseparable.'

For Ive, the problem of products being manufactured with scant attention to design arises when designers work outside the manufacturing company: 'I think there is a huge difference between "overseeing" the manufacturing process [as an external designer] and being deeply involved right from the beginning.' By 'involved' he means collaborating with Apple's material scientists to truly understand the attributes of the materials they are working with, or liaising with mechanical engineers and the individuals designing fixtures that will hold parts in place on the assembly line: 'This level of involvement is incredibly hard if you are working externally from a company. I think that the part we play [as a design team] at a very basic and fundamental level in deciding how something is ultimately going to be made is critically informing of the work that we do.' This is why, he says, he decided early on in his career to stop working independently and throw in his lot with a group of people who happened to have formed a company that he felt had similar goals.

Many see Apple as being a design-led company, where design and the designers are valued and cherished to such a degree that the quality and 'difference' of the ensuing products is the result. Ive disagrees: 'I think you can understand Apple much better if you think of us as a product company whose primary goal is to make the very best products that we can. Our goal is not to make money - although, of course, we trust that if we are successful in meeting our primary goal, there will be some other consequences, like: people will want to buy the products.' This might sound like poor business sense, but given that Apple's revenue for the 3rd fiscal quarter of this year alone topped $15.7bn, it seems a profit-follows-product formula pays dividends in this case. Fiscal goals, says Ive, usually lead to products being made that involve 'the least amount of energy, the least amount of research and the least amount of innovation'. Thus, objects in our manufactured environment, 'testify to the sets of values of the people that made them. So many things were made to be churned out quickly - so were driven by schedule - or they were made to a price, or they were made just to be made.'

Another goal that Apple doesn't have is one of self-expression, or to make things that are just new or different. 'That is trivial, it's easy and can be a distraction,' says Ive. 'What is truly difficult is to do something that is better. We make tools,' he adds. 'Whether our tools enable communication, or enable people to create something that didn't exist yesterday – we still consider them to be tools.' This view, he believes, 'builds within us a deference at a very deep level towards their use and the people that are going to be using them, our customers'.

Apart from clear goals, another key to the company's success, according to Ive, is the relatively narrow product range. 'If we are truly going to stand a chance of meeting our goals, in terms of making the best products that we can, we need to be able to focus on a manageable number of them.' In this way, the design team can think small and concentrate on aspects such as quality and function in both products and their production.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Ive's designs for Apple is their simplicity, their essentialness; everything that's there is there for a reason and has been thought through with meticulous care. Materials are developed specifically for purpose. For the iPhone 4, for example, a custom steel alloy was developed by Apple (five times stronger than standard steel) that provides structural support as well as an integral antenna. The aluminosilicate glass for the front and back is chemically strengthened to be 30 times harder than plastic. This attention to material detail is matched by a set of controls that are completely self-explanatory. As a tool, the iPhone 4 has, Ive hopes, an inevitability about it. It is packed with innovations yet seems familiar and comfortable.

Of course, if you are working with the outer edges of technological innovation, there will be glitches. The iPhone 4 has had its technical problems, but when you bear in mind that the iPhone as an object, an absolutely revolutionary mobile tool, has only been around for three years, this is understandable. Perhaps part of the reason people get more than usually upset when this happens with Apple products is that everything about their design language speaks of reliable quality. It is somehow harder to believe that such a reliable tool might not be perfect.

Simplicity is a much misunderstood quality in design, says Ive: 'There is a tendency for people to think about simplicity either as an aesthetic style or as an absence of clutter. Few understand how hard it is to design something that is absolutely essential, clear and simple.'

Achieving simplicity in product design is expensive, time-consuming and requires an utterly integrated approach. This is the hardest part of what Jonathan Ive does and actually the key to his brilliance, the difference between a good designer and a great one. ★

IVE'S TIME

1992
Jonathan Ive joins Apple design team

1994
Power Macintosh – the workstation mainstay

1997
Power Macintosh G3

1998
Ive appointed vice-president of industrial design

iMac – colour, curves and cuteness make the all-in-one desktop iMac the fastest selling PC

1999
iBook
Power Mac G4

2001
iPod – the now iconic hard-drive MP3

PowerBook G4

2002
iMac G4 – with a 'floating' screen

2003
Power Mac G5

2004
Ive appointed senior vice-president of industrial design
iPod Mini
iMac G5 – all the technology fits behind a super-slim screen

2005
Mac Mini – the desktop computer shrinks to just 20cm by 20cm square and less than 4cm deep
Shuffle and Nano – smaller additions to the iPod stable

2006
Mac Pro – Intel-based successor to the Power Mac series
MacBook

2007
iPhone – multitouch smartphone with multimedia and internet connectivity
Apple TV – digital media receiver

2008
iPod Touch – often described as an iPhone without the phone
MacBook Air

2010
iPad – the tablet computer

Fonte: Wallpaper, London, n. 141, p. 060-062, December 2010.