

Stefan Sagmeister

... formerly known as Stefan Sagmeister.

Born in 1962, Stefan Sagmeister grew up in Austria and studied graphic design in Vienna. After having worked at a Hong Kong advertisement agency for two years, he moved to New York in 1993. He has begun his career in an era –the 1980s– in which the development of graphic design was mainly a series of stylistic experiments. Stefan Sagmeister couldn't care less about style. His motto became 'Style = Fart'. In fact, stylistically his work is extremely varied: from seemingly chaotic to awe-inspiringly precise; from baroque and busy to cool and chic. To Sagmeister, the form of each piece –although painstakingly controlled, and often technically brilliant– is not more than the final stage of a thinking process. The ideas are what counts.

Stefan Sagmeister became famous as a packaging designer for the music industry, making CD covers for the likes of David Byrne, the Rolling Stones and Lou Reed. His provoking posters for graphic design conferences and lectures won him the admiration, astonishment and rage of his peers. For corporate and cultural clients he conceived identities and publications that did exactly what they were supposed to do, though usually in a way that the client had not expected.

In 2001, Stefan Sagmeister published a wonderful monograph ('another self-indulgent design book') titled *Made You Look*, written by Peter Hall. It's a unique book.

Which designer would scribble sarcastic commentaries on top of his old design work, recount juicy anecdotes about his clients (the Stones!) and tell you exactly how long each project was worked on, and at how much it was invoiced? Nobody but Stefan Sagmeister!

February 22, 2006 12:45:47 CET
Subject: Nice questions to Stefan

Dear Stefan,
I remember buying your book immediately after it was published, started browsing it with growing fascination, viewed it and discussed it with my students and (SHAME ON ME) never found the time to read it. But: YOU MADE ME LOOK! A few weeks ago, at last, I started reading... Again with upgrading fascination. I was touched with a certain feeling of recognition: YOU MADE ME HURT! How many times did we share –as designers– similar experiences working for clients and how many times did we push our ideas as the best fitting answer to their needs? Of course, we were all looking for ultimate satisfaction and recognition, not an easy thing to accomplish since clients can be so demanding. Therefore, a few years ago, you decided to get out of the business for some time. A very honest way to keep things pure, I must admit. So, this leads me to the first question:

Would you recommend this 'out of business period' to every designer worldwide?

Recommending things to others that worked out for me is often a questionable endeavour. This period did have a lasting impact on me because of my particular situation: when we took our year without clients, the studio had then been open for 7 years and we were overworked on one hand and lust-less on the other. Ed Fella's visit to the studio showing us his experimental typography sketchbooks has also had a big influence.

Over those 7 years a whole slew of questions had accumulated waiting that I wanted to investigate. So, as a result and for example, I would not recommend it to anybody fresh out of school.

It is not a coincidence that there is a relation between you and Tibor Kalman, since you have worked together in M&Co.

I don't think neither Tibor nor you are just graphic designers. Is 'graphic design' as a term not too narrow-minded? I have a new one in mind but first I want to know yours?

Sorry, I find a discussion about the exact terminology on what to call our profession beside the point. I have seen dozens of terms being suggested over the years (and now I can not remember more than three), this is simply not where my interest lies. I myself do not mind being called simply a designer. That's what I studied when I went to art school.

About Art. Artists mostly look down on designers. In some way, both worlds keep quite separated. How is this still possible?

For all the talk about how the borders between the two fields are merging, in day-to-day operations they are almost still fully separated. There is different media reviewing the work (art magazines rarely concern themselves with designers and design magazines only superficially deal with art).

The most elegant definition I had come across is from Donald Judd: Design has to work, art does not. Our output has to work.

About ugliness. We are living in a world of a good designed and very colourful 'grayness' that often finds its inspiration in the so-named 'ugliness' of the streets. However most designers always want to make things more beautiful or more spectacular than they really are. Is this 'the didacticship of lifestyle' and do you have a message for these designers? Get up early and start doing the difficult things first.

Please make your choice:

~~I really have a bad good taste–~~

~~I really have a good bad taste–~~

Neither. I really have my taste.

Any comments on this choice?

It is important for the designer to bring his own point of view into the work. The faux objectivity of modernism is responsible for lots of successfully solved problems to which nobody pays attention to, resulting ultimately in cold and indifferent work.

'Style is Fart'. Oh God, I like this statement.

It reminds me to 'Art is (f)Art'.

Is there a movement that I can join?

I am very sorry, but sadly you won't be able to join my movement, because I have changed my mind. I do not think style is a fart anymore. It actually started to smell rather fine to me when I realized that good content gets distributed much earlier and more efficiently if it comes in a good form and considered style. It is like meeting a person on your first date, and he or she looks fantastic (=good form) and dresses well (=good style). Now, if that person has nothing to say, it will be a short relationship anyway. But chances that I am going to stick around to find out if he or she has something to say and a good heart, are higher.

One of the quotes of Tibor Kalman that has stuck me is: 'Mistakes, misunderstandings, and mis-comprehensions provide fresh ideas'. Do you agree?

Much has been written about the subject since, I think mistakes are at this point overrated as a strategy for the development of useful ideas.

Do you consider a proper briefing necessary? YES.**And how do you manage briefings?**

We look at it, question it, and if necessary, come back to the client with a revised version.

You will probably agree that most of your work is quite provocative. Is this something you are always aware of? Or does it just happen?

We employ provocation when the project makes it necessary. It can be a very useful strategy. At the same time, I have no desire to be provoked by my toothpaste packaging in the morning.

What I appreciate so much in your work and personality, is the way you keep the boy in you alive. Does overprofessionalism not kill the intuition of a designer?

There surely is a lot of beautifully photographed, well illustrated work out there, complete with carefully letter spaced typography that leaves me and I suspect many other viewers, completely cold.

In different parts of your book, I read that 'staying as small as possible' (as a studio, I mean) was one of your worries. Is this so important?

Keeping the studio small was one of the most important (and difficult) conscious design decisions I have ever made.

It allows me to remain a designer (and not

become a manager), it makes us financially independent from our clients (because there is no huge overhead to meet), it lets us pick and choose between jobs (because there is more work out there than we could possibly design), and it makes us efficient: almost all of the work we design gets produced (because there is no bureaucracy).

Is it true that the bigger an agency becomes, the less inspiring and more boring it gets?

Advertising agencies have sometimes been able to avoid this, but there is not a single large design company out there that I respect. No, sorry, I am wrong, IDEO does good work, and Landor manages to pull off a successful project every once in a while.

But there is one problem with this: very large clients want to work with large design consultancies, it gives them a level of service and security that smaller places like mine have more difficulties to convey.

This leads to the sad fact that many of the most talented designers work for smallish projects in the cultural realm, while the work that really influences the look of this world, the gigantic branding programs for the multinationals are conceived by marketing idiots who could not care less. This is as much the fault of clients (who find the pseudo scientific reasonings of the consultancies comforting), as it is of designers (who are not willing to deal with the far more complex approval and implementation process). I have the highest admiration for the person who can pull off a large project in good quality.

It's BY FAR the hardest thing to do.

What do you think about this so called 'communication consultancy industry'?

I am wary of consultants in general, because of their getting compensated no matter if the advice they give is right or wrong. A person who produces a product or service on the other hand, can risk everything by making a wrong decision.

How far are you right now in completing your list 'Things to do before I die'? I know, you've taken a break for a year (or was it two?) without clients. You've probably already driven that truck across Siberia and you've already touched at least 10 million hearts with your work. So please Stefan, do me a favour: make a new list, since we WANT MORE from you!

No, there are a number of things open on it, I have not been through Siberia yet with that truck.

Oh, by the way, what did your mother say about those carvings on your skin?

She did not like the poster.

You love to show it all. The lot. What do you expect back from your audience?

I have no expectations from the audience.

Regrets? (why do I always hear this Frank Sinatra's song ringing in my head when I ask that question)

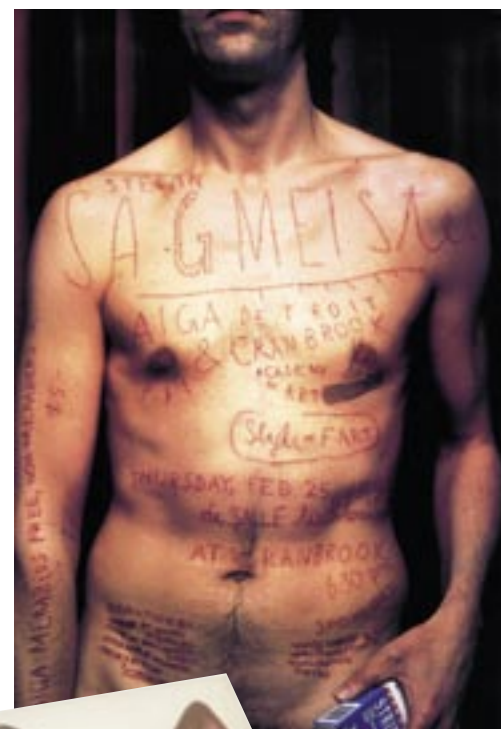
I've had a few, but then again, I'll mention them anyway: I should not have taken on that Aerosmith job. And I should have taken that cover for Smith's book White Teeth...

Many greetings from Stefan.

Introduction by Jan Middendorp

Interview by Hugo Puttaert

www.sagmeister.com





ANNI KUAN
HAPPILY INVITES YOU TO PREVIEW THE
FALL AND WINTER 2005 COLLECTION AT
THE FASHION COTERIE FROM SUNDAY,
FEB 27TH TO TUESDAY, MAR 1ST 2005,
PIER 90, BOOTH 622, NEW YORK CITY

**ANNI KUAN - FASHION DESIGNER
ALL BROCHURES**

Anni Kuan is my girlfriend.
That means that whatever we do for her, it better
damn well work, I would not want to spend money
for printing (which is tiny but still...) and postage
on something that does not improve her business.

It also means that we can do basically what we want
(and think is good for her).

The reason for doing all these newspaper items
came completely out of her tiny budget. Before we
took over the graphics, she had sent out a single 4C
postcard to all her buyers. A very friendly designer
mentioned this Korean newsprint place in New York.
They literally can print a 32 page for the price of a
postcard. So that is what we do each season.





The cheap newsprint, which is still rarely employed in the fashion world, became part of Anni Kuan's identity. For us it's a pleasurable job because of the tight limitations (it has to be on newsprint, maximum two colours, orange and blue, it has to look good in a rough half tone dot and it should be different from the previous since the mailing list stays roughly the same).

The feedback has been great. She meets and talks to many people on the mailing list and the buyers always praise the mailer, put the plastic horse on their computers and ask for additional copies. Many designers (who are not on her mailing list but are potential customers) know her brand only from the award books.

for Anni Kuan, 1999 - 2003
www.annikuan.com





ZUMTOBEL ANNUAL REPORT

Zumtobel is a leading European manufacturer of lighting systems. The cover of this annual report features a heat molded relief sculpture of five flowers in a vase, symbolizing the 5 sub brands under the Zumtobel name.

All images on the inside of the annual report are photographs of this exact cover, shot under different light conditions, illustrating the incredible power of changing light.

for: Zumtobel AG, 2002



STEFAN SAGMEISTER BUSINESSCARDS

A two-fold businesscard revealing the Stefan Sagmeister logo as a pop-up

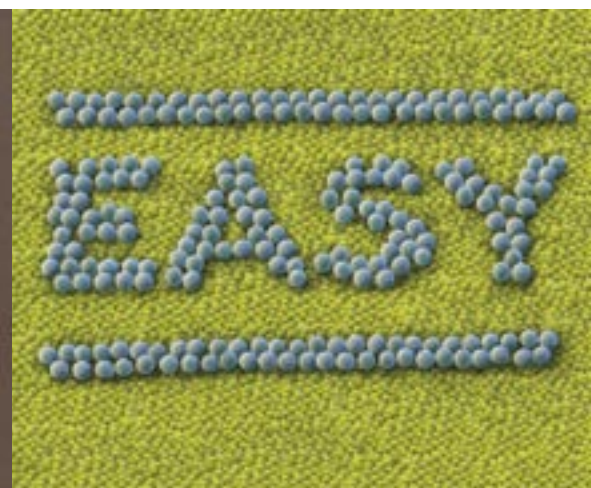
for: Ourselves, 2005



DOUGLAS GORDON - GUGGENHEIM

Gordon's entire exhibition 'The Vanity of Allegory' at the Guggenheim Museum Berlin packaged as postcards into a portable box. The cover incorporates a slanted mirror thus crating vain, reflected typography.

for: the Guggenheim Museum Berlin, 2005



COPY 4

A view on the series of 'things I have learned in my life so far' such as these dividing pages for the Austrian magazine '.copy', spelling out: 'Starting a charity is surprisingly easy'. Every month the magazine commissions another studio/artist with the design.

for: .copy magazine (Austria), 2005

JOHN LENNON NYC T-SHIRT

A rendition of John Lennon's 'New York City' shirt.

for: Ourselves, 2005







GGG/DDD GALLERY ANNUAL REPORT

This wrap around annual report cover for the GGG gallery in Tokyo and the DDD gallery in Osaka features a hidden sentence among all the flowers: 'Assuming is stifling', a statement applying not just to our own design practice but also containing truth for designers everywhere.

for: Dai Nippon Printing Company, 2005