





STEFAN SAGMEISTER HAS BEEN CALLED “HOT”, “CRAZY”, “BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES”, “FULL OF BOLLOCKS” AND, MORE COMMONLY, “ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL DESIGNERS IN THE WORLD”.

However, on a sunny afternoon in his compact conference room at the top of a red-stepped, spiral staircase near the trendy Meatpacking District of New York City, he shrugs off such terminology. What animates his conversation is talk of making things. At the mention of engineering – which he studied in high school – he talks at length about his respect for engineers as unsung heroes who are “creative at the very meaning of the word, in that there’s actual creation going on.” Bring up typography – which, in his work, is made from materials as various as sausages, straw, or most famously, cuts in his own skin – and his thoughts turn to uncovering the person behind the forms.

“I was never that interested in picking the right typeface,” he says. “It seemed a tedious exercise. When we needed something that was beyond the general form, I felt the need to create it ourselves. Much of the type usage out there seemed so cold. I felt that the audience outside the design industry wouldn’t even know a person was behind it.” In fact, Sagmeister is famous – or perhaps notorious – for making it clear exactly who is behind his work by featuring his own scantily clad body in memorable posters. Yet for him, there is nothing outrageous or even self-aggrandising about this approach. “It’s actually quite logical,” he says. “In all those pieces, the project was about myself. So using a picture of me in a lecture by me is the most conservative possibility that will work.”

For Sagmeister, design must make a direct, immediate, and logical connection. He started out wanting to make album covers for his favourite bands – which he did, for Lou Reed, The Rolling

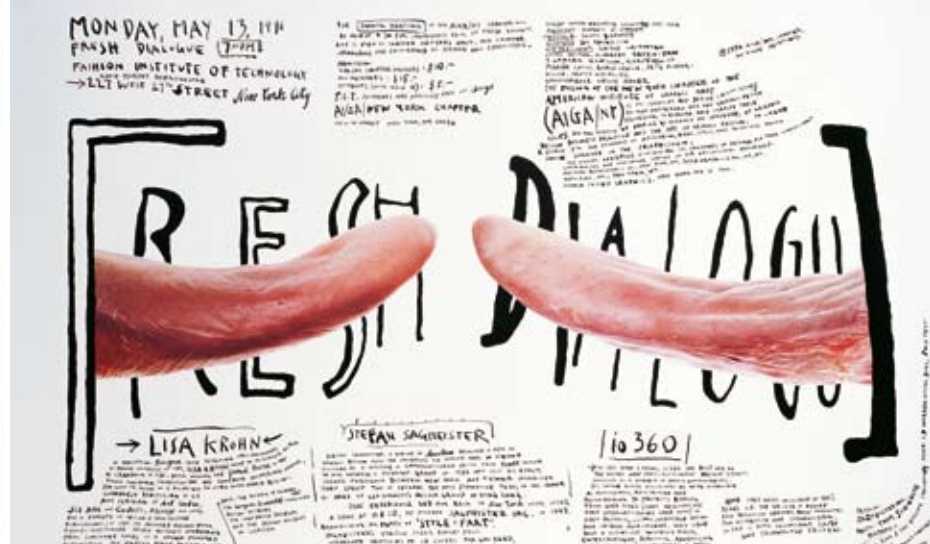
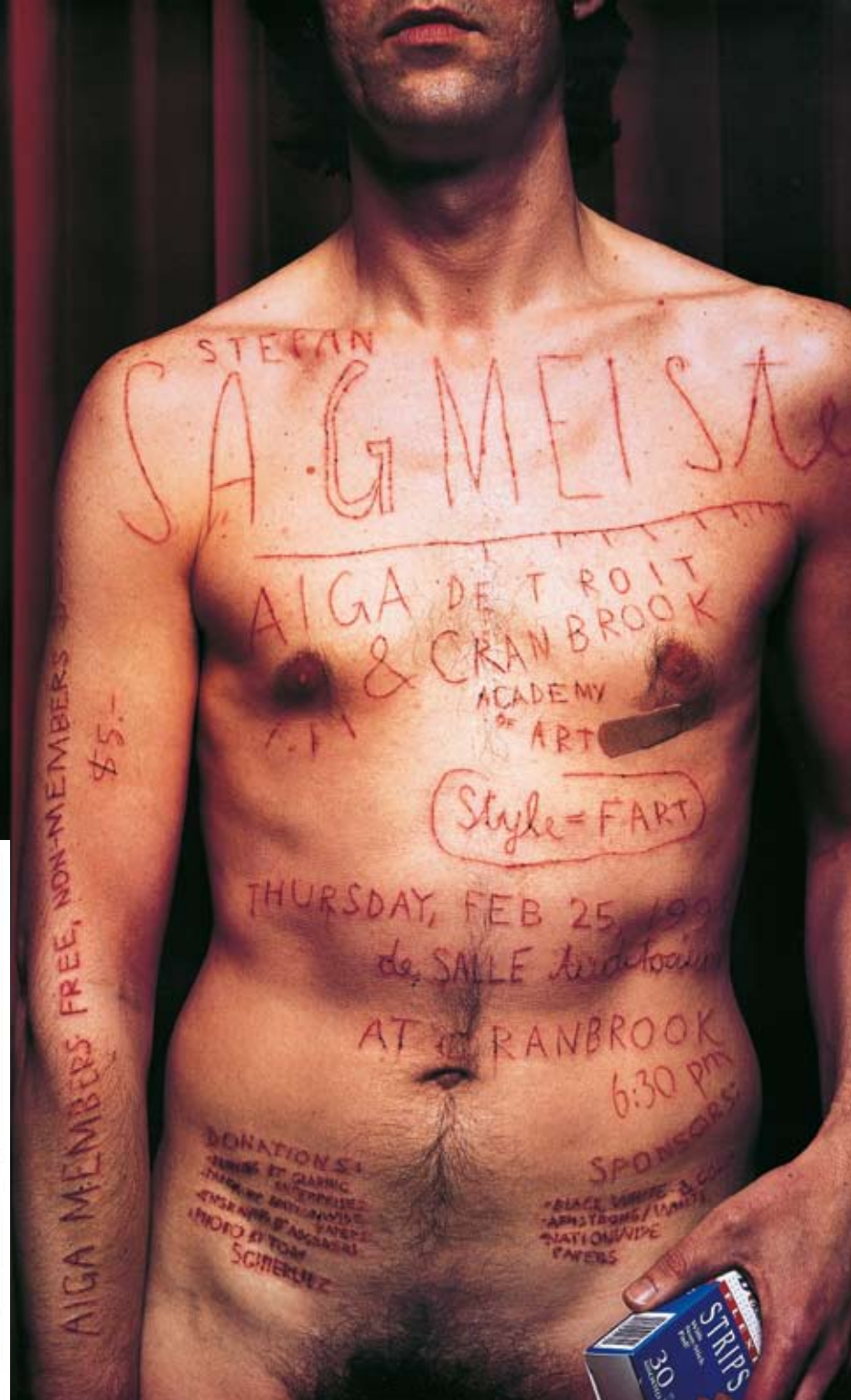
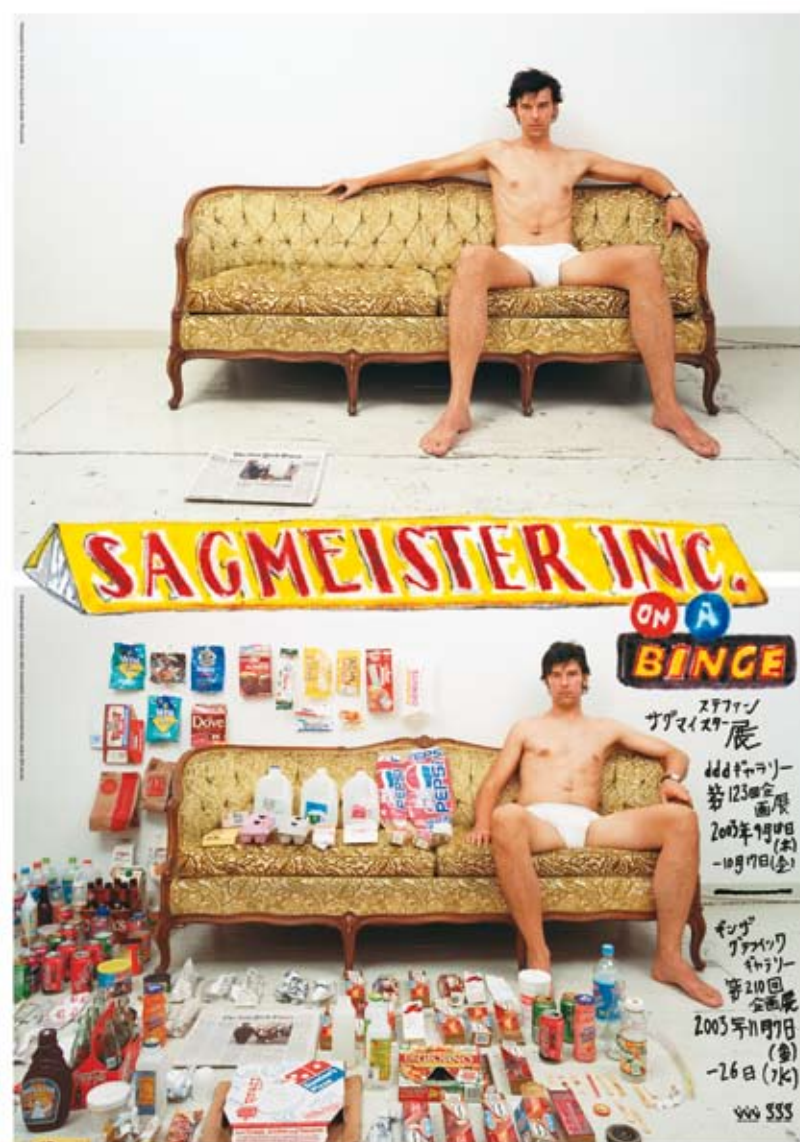
Stones, David Byrne, and Talking Heads. He even picked up a Grammy Award along the way. But the deeper desire was to make connections. “One of the reasons I became a designer was a fascination with mass communication,” he says. He has no interest in being a ‘designers’ designer’, comparing that approach to the attitude of some directors he worked with who were contemptuous of the people in their theatres. “They didn’t really care for the audience; they cared for newness,” Sagmeister says. “At 19, I admired that. But then I began to realise that they only directed for their friends, and that seemed morally reprehensible. If that’s your role, there’s no need to do it for an audience. Do it in your living room.”

#### talk the talk

In contrast, Sagmeister’s designs have appeared on billboards, magazines, books and galleries all over the world, which has led to a renewed effort to describe and define the man and his work. Nancy Spector, chief curator at the Guggenheim Museum, calls his output “design masquerading as art”. Designer Debbie Millman says, “Sagmeister is letting the world know that graphic designers are indeed artists.” Graphic designer Steven Heller splits the difference and refers to him as an “artist/designer”. Sagmeister prefers the simplicity of artist Donald Judd’s phrase, “Design has to work; art doesn’t” and uses it as a standard to judge what he does. “I first define what the design has to do, and then I test if it does that,” he says. “When functionality declines and becomes unimportant, then it morphs from design to art.”

**clockwise from left** *Things To Do*, Sagmeister’s invitation card for the AIGA Atlanta lecture in 1999. > Sagmeister and co-worker Matthias Ernstberger on a poster for an exhibition in Zurich. The suits the two are wearing represent the number of appearances each of the Sagmeister design pieces have made in magazines and catalogues. The Lou Reed poster has put in 101 appearances, which is why it is the largest; the smallest is the Anni Kuan brochure, with only seven appearances. > The infamous poster for Sagmeister’s lecture AIGA Detroit in 1999. The text was carved into Sagmeister’s skin by one of his interns with an X-acto knife in a visual interpretation of the pain that seems to accompany most of his design projects. Says Sagmeister of the process, “Yes, it did hurt real bad.” > For a design lecture called *Fresh Dialogue*, two tongues wrestling was a perfect image. However, because human tongues aren’t quite long enough for what Sagmeister had in mind, photographer Tom Schierlitz used two fresh cows’ tongues from a local butcher. The resultant image was a little too phallic for comfort for some of the commissioning AIGA members. > Never one to shy away from putting his body on the line, this poster for Sagmeister’s design exhibitions in Tokyo and Osaka shows the artist in a before-and-after scenario. In this case, Sagmeister is shown with the food items he consumed in the week between the shots and the 25lb (11kg) he gained on top of his previous 178lb (80kg).

IMAGES COURTESY STEFAN SAGMEISTER







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**clockwise from left** The Deitch gallery in New York routinely decorates its facade to reflect the art showing within. For Sagmeister's *Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far* interactive exhibition, which showed in January and February of this year, one of his giant white monkeys from *Everybody Always Thinks They Are Right* sat on the gallery roof, regally ignoring patrons. > While it makes an (appropriate) appearance in *Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far*, *Everything I Do Always Comes Back To Me* was originally commissioned by Austrian magazine .copy. Sagmeister was asked to design the six double page spreads that open each section of the magazine. With no further briefing for the commission, he took a phrase from his diary and, using found materials, transformed it into a six-part collage. > After the project for .copy, Sagmeister was offered a commission with similar freedom: five blank billboards in Seine-Saint-Denis, a suburb of Paris. The brief: "We have billboards; do something." Sagmeister and right-hand man Matthias Ernstberger flew to Tucson, Arizona to create the images, letting the desert landscape generate the typographic forms, and created *Trying To Look Good Limits My Life*. The five billboards were displayed in a park like a giant five-part greeting card.



selling visions

He also recognises that design has to sell. “My parents were salespeople and proud of it,” he points out. “Great salesmanship is inherent in all aspects of life.” He specifically admires the salesmanship required to get a big, bold idea, whether it’s a movie, television show, or the St. Louis arch,executed. “You have to get hundreds of people to share that vision,” he explains. “Even people that might want to change that vision into something much more mediocre.” However, he also realises that design, as an industry, has the potential to move beyond gross commercialism. “I know that the profession can do much more,” he concedes. “But if there is a responsibility, it is from the individual designer. It’s responsibility as a person. But no more than a streetsweeper or a mayor. The designer doesn’t have a special responsibility, any more than a restaurateur does, to do good work and be a good person.”

For his part, Sagmeister is continually looking for ways to express his own sense of responsibility to the larger world. “Considering what a rich language design is,” he says, “it is peculiar that we use it for only these two things, sales and promotion. Wouldn’t it be strange if we used only French for this, for example, instead of for poetry.” One of his riskiest ways to step beyond these limits involved taking an entire year off from design in 2002. He returned to his studio with a different set of professional priorities. He still takes on projects for music and corporate clients, but also for artistic and socially responsible organisations. These interests are not new to him.

For someone with the reputation of a design shock jock, look beyond the hype and you find someone who is surprisingly gentle in person and in his interests. This is a man who teaches a class on using design to touch the heart. He gives extensive thanks to his colleagues, heroes, collaborators, and friends – three spreads of tiny type worth – in his latest book. He speaks frankly about striving for happiness, being good, helping others and loving his girlfriend well. He even credits much of his success to being a good boy who got positive press early on simply because he was responsive to requests from the media; as a former magazine art director, he was sympathetic to their needs.

Instead of chasing the money machine, as he refers to it, he has kept his studio very small; just four people working cheek-by-jowl in a spare, un-walled, window-lined space, looking out over the rooftops above 14th Street and beyond. And he is generous with whatever wisdom he has acquired in the process. Not only is his latest book called *Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far*, but he is collegial and collaborative in his work. Studio designer Joe Shouldice points out, “We all work side-by-side and we’re super collaborative in everything. I mean, I can throw a paperclip and hit Stefan, so just listening to him on the phone and as he works, I’ve learned so much about every aspect of design.”

And even without chasing the big corporate dollars, Sagmeister has found some impressive financial and professional rewards. His current client roster not only includes The Azuero Earth project, Levis, TrueMajority, Museum Plaza,

Columbia University and Universal Music, but he is regularly paid to do whatever he wants in magazines and on billboards. He currently has “about ten times the amount of work offered than we can possibly take on.” His year off was met with an outpouring of new commissions, and he plans to shut the studio again in 2009. He has two books out and another in development. His designs are collected by major museums. He is widely sought-after as a public speaker, everywhere from design schools to the TED conference. He is a lecturer at the School of Visual Arts and has held chairs and professorships at the Cooper Union and the University of Arts in Berlin, among other places.

And instead of being a young designer plotting ways to get the attention of his design hero, Tibor Kalman (founding editor of *Colors* magazine, with whom Sagmeister worked at the beginning of his career), now he’s got designers happily waiting three years to start a coveted internship at his studio. “It sounds cheesy,” says Richard The, a staff member from Berlin, explaining how he came to work with Sagmeister, “but I took his course about how to touch someone’s heart with design, and compared to what we were doing in digital design, this was super refreshing.”

Refreshing. It’s a word that certainly applies to the surprises to be discovered not only in the work, but also the man.

Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far, by Stefan Sagmeister, Steven Heller, Daniel Nettle, Nancy Spector, is published by Abrams and distributed in Australia by Thames and Hudson.

clockwise from left *Things I Have Learned In My Life So Far*, rather than being a single volume, consists of 15 booklets inside a slipcase. Each features a pattern or image on the cover, and the slipcase itself features a die-cut image of Sagmeister’s face, so you can see the patterns through it. Of its contents, Sagmeister rather self-deprecatingly says, “Astonishingly, I have only learned twenty or so things in my life so far.” The maxims themselves were constructed of found objects or computer graphics or inflatable monkeys and appeared all around the world before coming together in one volume. > For the anniversary poster for Design Austria, the banality of a (mismatched) pair of brown socks is interrupted by an intricate die-cut of a variety of tiny sausages. > True Majority, a group of American business leaders led by Ben Cohen, tries to convince the US government to adopt policies designed to prevent another 9/11. One of these is to cut the Pentagon budget by 15 per cent, moving the money across to the education sector. The pig mobile, designed by Sagmeister, drives around the country trying to drum up support. The sizes of the pigs refer to the difference between the Pentagon budget and government spending on education and foreign aid. > In 2004, Neenah Paper commissioned limited edition posters which were then auctioned, raising \$US14,000 for the Books for Kids Foundation. Sagmeister’s punctuation mark was the apostrophe – whose job it is to eliminate letters.



IMAGES COURTESY STEFAN SAGMEISTER





When asked to design the cover for an issue of *Esquire Japan*, and promised complete freedom, Sagmeister produced this image (featuring himself and Ernstberger). Upon submission of the image, however, the team was informed that the it had been rejected on the grounds that "'Street piss' is a crime in Japan, and it is against the moral," and "It looks that piss targets the car, and when reader turns the cover, Nissan car appears." All was not lost, however; *Esquire* was very apologetic and ran it as an inside cover, and the image later appeared on the cover of Belgian magazine *DAMn* (issue 5).