

Stefan Sagmeister: Style + Fart = Language

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On the occasion of his first New York retrospective, SAGMEISTER: MADE YOU LOOK, which runs at the School of Visual Arts (601 West 26th Street, 15th floor) from November 9 - December 11, 2004, the artist and designer was asked to reflect on his past and recent accomplishments. While tooting his own horn is not a favorite pastime, we did manage to get a few choice notes.

Heller: It has been over two years since you took-off from the professional grind for a year to do your own work. Are you glad to be back? Is graphic design still an exciting way to spend your creative time?

Sagmeister: Yes, it is. I learned shitloads in my year without clients, including making up my mind about all the fields I did not want to get into (but had imagined previously that I would). I surprised myself by getting up every-day at 6am to conduct little type experiments (with no deadline looming). I love this field.

Heller: But, be honest. What don't you love about this field?

Sagmeister: I love limitations when designing a project. I don't love limitations when they are revealed only after we designed the project. I don't love unorganized clients. I don't love that period when the deadline is looming and there is no idea yet with the pressure slowly mounting.

Heller: This may seem like an unfair question (its certainly demands either modesty or immodesty), but can you describe what you believe is your contribution to the graphic design field over the past decade?

Sagmeister: I agree this does seem like an unfair question. The unfair answer: I have no clue. I think I would like to think that maybe I made an impression: Maybe by bringing handmade type (again) to the forefront (one of my students at SVA MFA Design mentioned that half of her undergraduate class was doing writing on faces), or maybe by pointing towards the importance of design areas that don't simply promote and sell. And I can say that the question of my contribution to the design field does not keep me up at night.

Heller: Superficially, your work has some of the conceits of the age – a marriage of art/ expression and design/communication – but retrospectively it is not just fashionable, trend-spotter stuff. You’ve never fallen into the style uber alles trap, as some have. How, particularly given your more cultural clients, have you avoided this?

Sagmeister: When we started out in 1993 we had a style = fart sign hanging in the studio (it is no more) – we very consciously avoided any stylistic traps. In the meantime I have learned that good (and if necessary even trendy) style (and wonderful form) play an important role in delivering content to the viewer. But I never thought that graphic design has to be timeless. With very few exceptions (say highway signage) I love the fact that design starts to look dated after a while.

Heller: So, what do you think is your most dated looking work, and why?

Sagmeister: Among others, that Marshall Crenshaw CD looks rather old now, because of its holographic printing on the disc (in 1996 this was fresh), its op art patterns as well as the type set in rigid boxes.

Heller: Is there a piece of work that you wish you’d never put into the world?

Sagmeister: Foremost our packaging for the computer shoot-them-up games Deathdrome and Slamscape. They were bad games, CD’s packaged in (largely empty) cereal-box-sized boxes in order to convey heftiness and a reason for the \$60.00 prize tag. We made many mistakes, first by taking on a job I had no interest in (I am not into shot-them-up games), second by presenting lots of directions (the client predictably chose the worst) and last by not insisting to present to the decision maker, so changes kept on coming without me being able to do anything about them.

Heller: With your School of Visual Arts retrospective exhibit it is easy to see what you’ve produced and for whom. But what do you actually want to achieve? What do you want out of graphic design?

Sagmeister: Ultimately, it would be great to use it purely as a language: To produce content that lends itself well to be spoken in that language. There is a certain content that is best spoke in a certain language (say love is easier declared in the language of a pop song than in architecture – the Taj Mahal notwithstanding). I think we made a good start with that whole “Things I have learned in my life so far” series (the current SVA subway poster is part of this).

Heller: So is it safe to assume that you are able to express all that you want to “say” through the graphic design medium? Or do you foresee other media as potentially more efficient?

Sagmeister: I will stick with graphic design, and if I would direct a movie or write some music, it likely would still qualify as graphic design, me being a graphic designer and all.

Heller: I asked before whether this is an exciting way to spend time, but is it a socially valuable way to spend it?

Sagmeister: It is as valuable as the individual designer wants to make it. Just as you can be a socially conscious lawyer (or not), one can choose to be a socially valuable designer (or not).

Heller: Okay then, what is a socially valuable designer?

Sagmeister: Milton Glaser is a socially valuable designer. His persona and his designs are valuable (and belong) to the city of New York in a similar way Lou Reed's songs are and do. I remember going to a horse race around November 2001, - half of the 50,000 people at the track wore the I HEART NY button, which, so close after 9/11, it was an incredible outpouring of support, a truly touching event. Milton's symbol took on all the best (unifying) attributes of a great flag without any of its worst (excluding) ones. His contributions, as a founder of New York magazine, - the Blueprint for dozens of city magazines worldwide, Pushpin Studios - the blueprint for hundreds of design studios worldwide and countless political and social campaigns go well beyond the city of New York and the field of graphic design. He is valuable to society.

Heller: Do you truly believe that work you've done on behalf of Ben Cohen has made an impact on the public consciousness?

Sagmeister: I do think Ben's campaign had an impact. TrueMajority was successful in setting up one of the earliest oppositions to the war in Iraq (at a time when few mainstream groups came out against it), they were instrumental in uncovering the computer voting machine problem (the computer ate my vote), and now, together with Moveon.org play a role in voter registration and general opposition to the current regime. It is impossible for me to evaluate how much our graphic material helped them, I'm sure it did not hurt.

Heller: And as a follow-up do you think of the public good whenever you create a piece of work?

Sagmeister: No. And I don't even have a set list of criteria either. But we do take on jobs with the question "Is this something the world needs" in mind. And erred a number of times, turned out the world did not need it after all.

Heller: You've professed, and you've taught, the idea that design should indeed touch other human beings. What does this actually mean in a pragmatic way?

Sagmeister: In one sentence: You look at a piece of graphic design and you have a moving experience. All of us were moved at one point or another by a piece of art, struck to the core by a movie, changed by a book, touched by a piece of music. Fewer of us experience this in front of a piece of design, - it is possible nevertheless. The last time it happened to me was a couple of months ago, when I was touched by a piece two of my students in Berlin were making.

Heller: How did they touch you?

Sagmeister: We held our final class exhibit in a building called the light tower, a 10-story renovated factory building with an added 5 story glass cube on top, situated in the Friedrichshain section of East Berlin, a young area comparable to Williamsburg in New York. The piece in question was a little kiosk, installed 1/4 mile from this tower, next to one of the busiest subway stations.

The kiosk had two openings with lights shining out of them, which invited passersby to look in. As soon as you did, macro cameras inside the kiosk filmed your eyes, beamed the data to the light tower, and projected a full story high image of your eyes in real time from inside onto the light tower, transforming the entire building into a face with familiar eyes. When you blinked, your eyes on the tower blinked.

I was touched by the experience itself and also by how much the population of Berlin loved it: People stopped all night to look inside, watching their friend's eyes transform the light tower into a face. For the people who were in the exhibition space inside the tower, the experience was totally different but touching nevertheless, whenever somebody looked into the kiosk, these gigantic eyes appeared in the space—like King Kong looking in.

Heller: Whenever I view a retrospective of art or design, I try to sum up what all the work means. Is it simply a collection of disparate items that by its critical mass has relevance as a body, or is there an over-arching philosophical, ethical, or whatever foundation. As you look at your collected work, what is the answer to this?

Sagmeister: I think we are back into unfair question territory. You might try to sum it up, I could not. I can badly misquote one of our clients: Oh fine, its only graphic design. But I like it, like it, yes I do.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).