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**What Stefan Sagmeister
has learned in his life so far**
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Above, a report cover for GGG gallery in Tokyo and DDD gallery in Osaka with a hidden sentence in the flowers: "Assuming is stifling." Below inset, a cover for Worldchanging reports, meant to yellow over time with sun exposure.

By Alice Rawsthorn

NEW YORK

Doodling on the misty gallery window were Milton Glaser and Massimo Vignelli, the venerable designers of the 10 NY logo and New York's subway signs respectively. Above them, a giant inflatable monkey clutched an "Everybody always thinks..." sign. The slogan ended in "...they are right," emblazoned on a sign brandished by another enormous monkey inside the gallery, where thousands of bananas covered a wall. Most were still green, but some had yellowed to spell the words: "Self-confidence produces fine results."

It was the opening Thursday of an exhibition by the graphic designer Stefan Sagmeister at Deitch Projects in New York. The monkeys, bananas and slogans are still there, but Glaser and Vignelli have been replaced by younger designers whom Sagmeister has sweet-talked into doodling in shifts until the show ends on Feb. 23.

Dubbed "Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far," the exhibition and accompanying book — or wittily boxed booklets, to be precise — celebrate a seven-year project in which Sagmeister dreamed up unorthodox ways of spelling out slogans in public places around the world. One set of letters was made by floating plastic piping in an Arizona swimming pool, another by sticking leaves into a chain-link fence in Berlin, and a third by twisting some 60,000 wire coat hangers into shape in the Austrian city of Linz.

Everything about the project — its energy, humor, ambition, ingenuity and sheer chutzpah — is typical of Sagmeister's work. "It's a sublime mixture of violent and subtle, gross and endearing, direct and pensive," said Paola Antonelli, senior curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "Stefan is a razor-blade wielding, gracefully brutal, always surprising master of communication — the Johnny Depp of the design world."

A very tall Johnny Depp. Not that the original is exactly dinky, but the 45-year-old Sagmeister is seriously lanky at 6 feet 5 inches, or 1.95 meters, in his stocking feet. With his shock of black hair, he cuts an imposing figure, and might seem intimidating if not for his ready smile and rollicking laugh.

Antonelli attributes Sagmeister's D-I-Y brio to "his punk past." His teenage love of The Ramones' music and Jamie Reid's Sex Pistols graphics was undoubtedly an influence, but his zest for the impromptu began much earlier, when he was growing up in the Austrian city of Bregenz surrounded by the wooden signs painted by his grandfather, a professional sign maker.

"Going really, really back, that would be part of it," Sagmeister recalled. "But there's also a practical reason. My first real design job was for Alpbach, a left-wing magazine, when I was 16. We used old Letraset sheets donated by design companies, and the most popular letters — 'e' and 'y' — were always missing. Rather than making a new 'e' from an 'f' and a 'y,' it was easier to draw them."

After studying graphic design in Austria and the United States, Sagmeister worked in Vienna and Hong Kong, before joining the New York office of his design hero, the late Tibor Kalman, in 1993. A few months later, Kalman moved to Rome, and Sagmeister stayed in New York to open a studio.

He improvised from the start. Asked to design business cards costing no more than \$1 each, Sagmeister scrawled the contact details on dollar bills. He once made an invitation for his fashion-designer girlfriend, Anni Kuan, by spelling out the details in clothes draped on the floor, and created a lecture poster by having the details literally carved into his chest with a knife.

The scars took a month to heal. The same raw humor colors his conceptual projects. For the cover of David Byrne's "Feelings" album, Sagmeister commissioned a series of Byrne dolls with different expressions: happy, sad and angry. Recently he created an identity for the Casa da Música cultural center in Oporto, Portugal, based on a digital silhouette of the building, designed by Rem Koolhaas. It is programmed to change color and perspective, depending on what the staff members want to say.

Sagmeister's work isn't to everyone's taste. Graphic purists tend to prefer the formal elegance and sophisticated visual codes constructed by M/M in Paris, Graphic Thought Facility in London and Experimental Jetset in Amsterdam. Sagmeister relies on instinct: deploying an eclectic repertoire of styles to elicit an emotional response, often shock or laughter. "What I'm drawn to is his uncanny ability to reinvent himself," said a fellow graphic designer, Jessica Helfand. "The only constant in Stefan's work, other than its superior quality, is that there's nothing constant about it."

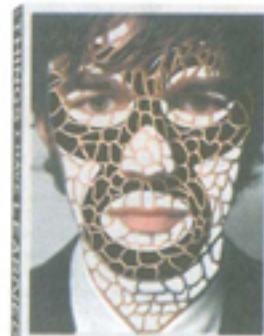
Mostly Sagmeister uses design to explore things that interest him — the work of favorite artists and musicians, and political causes, like the environmentalist Web site Worldchanging, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace group OneVoice. "The identity Stefan designed for us is incredible, but he has contributed much more," said its president, Daniel Lubetzky. "He has helped us to think about the positioning of the movement, and how to get it off the ground."

The "Everything..." project was spawned in 2000 when Sagmeister took a year off, and considered ways of working more expressively. "I thought about becoming a filmmaker, but decided to use the language I knew — design," he said. "Back in Austria there never seemed to be a difference between art and design, but in the U.S. I became very, very aware of it. As a viewer, I couldn't care less. Work is either good, or not good. But as a doer, there's clearly a distinction between the two worlds, and their different distribution systems." He conformed to the design system in "Everything...", which was shown on media paid for by clients, such as French billboards and German television. But the Deitch show takes Sagmeister inside the art system. "Jeffrey hopes to sell the work, but who knows?" he said cheerfully, referring to Jeffrey Deitch, the gallery's owner. Though with the opening behind him, Sagmeister is now looking ahead to September, when he'll head for Bali for another year off hoping to hatch another big idea.



Images from Sagmeister Inc.

What Sagmeister has learned in his life so far



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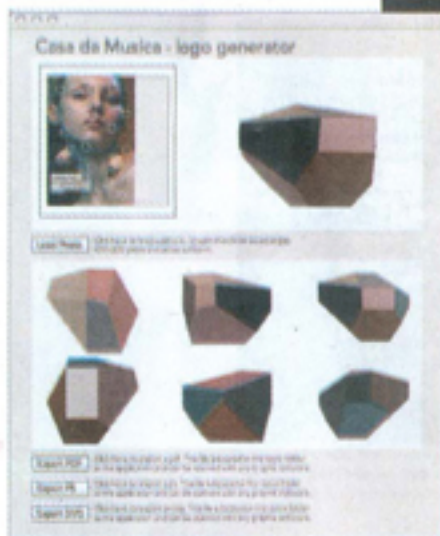


© by Chris Cassidy

Above center, one of the "Monkeys in Scotland" by the designer Stefan Sagmeister, left. When seen as a whole, the monkeys display the maxim "Everybody thinks they are right." Top, Sagmeister, in a lecture poster for AJGA Detroit, visualized the pain associated with design projects by having his intern carve type into his skin. Above, the cover of Sagmeister's "Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far," also the title of his New York show. Below left, the designer created a brand identity for the Casa da Música cultural center in Oporto, Portugal, based on a digital silhouette of the building, below.



The scars took a month to heal.



iht.com/design
More designs by Stefan Sagmeister.

