

A portrait of Stefan Sagmeister, a man with dark, wavy hair and green eyes, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a dark corduroy jacket over a quilted vest and a light-colored collared shirt. The background is a blurred view of a library with tall bookshelves filled with books.

# MADE YOU LOOK

Stefan Sagmeister is back.  
(Clear Issue 33's cover designer!)

interview : anna carnick





Staying power in the creative world is a rare feat. Stefan Sagmeister has it in spades. From his unforgettable '99 self-mutilation for an AIGA lecture poster to designs for music greats like the Rolling Stones, Lou Reed and David Byrne, to his widely successful (and mimicked) 2008 book and exhibit, *Things I have learned in my life so far* (based on a diary list of lessons learned during his 2000 sabbatical), Sagmeister has consistently raised the bar for the design community. Sometimes provocative, other times pure and simple, his work is always powerful. It resonates with us because there is palpable truth to every project.

Of the 2000 sabbatical, which was spent primarily in New York, Sagmeister (a Fulbright scholar and Grammy winner) says, "In this time I ... developed the desire to use the language of design outside of selling and promotional activities (but have nothing against either per se)." From September 1, 2008 to August 31, 2009, Sagmeister went on sabbatical again—something he likes to do every seven years or so—this time in Bali. He dedicated his time away exclusively to "design experimentation," declining to work on any new projects for clients—only exploring his own. And on the eve of his return to New York, Sagmeister (our cover artist!) kindly agreed to share his thoughts with us on the last year's creative exploration.

**What's the importance of a sabbatical to you? Do you see exploration as necessary to your creative development?**

Yes. There are just so many things for which there never seems to be enough time with the studio running at full speed. Sabbaticals ensure that I can continue to see my work as somewhat of a calling instead of a 9-5 job.

**Exactly where have you been exploring? With whom?**

I rented a small house with a studio in Sayan, a village outside of Ubud, the craft and spiritual center of Bali, Indonesia. A changing group of designers worked with me—up to four at a time—with various backgrounds: motion designers, architects, graphic designers.

**Why Indonesia?**

Eight years ago I had spent the first experimental year in NYC; for my second one, I wanted different influences. If it was not going to be New York, I did not want to move to another big city—I had no interest in changing to London or Paris—so the countryside it would be. I had previously traveled a lot in Europe and the US, so neither seemed exotic enough. I did not know Africa and South America that well and I did not feel like spending the first half of the year looking for that perfect spot, so Asia it was.



The most beautiful landscapes I had seen in Asia were Sri Lanka and Bali. Sri Lanka still had that civil war going on, so Bali it became. This proved to be the perfect choice for my purposes: gorgeous landscapes, a highly craft-oriented society, kind people and a fairly sophisticated infrastructure (so I could get toner cartridges when I needed them).

**What images stand out most strong in your head from Indonesia?**

Getting up every day at 5 a.m., sitting outside with a giant pot of coffee and two medium-sized cigars, watching the sun go up over the Sayan Ridge and plotting out the day ahead. Beats checking e-mail.

**How would you describe your time away? What have you learned?**

It's too early to tell, as I will only be able to properly judge the influence of this year once I've been back at work for another seven. I did learn that meditation makes my days calmer, jungle leaves greener and music sound better.

**What is your approach to work/life balance?**

Seven years of work (with plenty of living) vs. one year of living (with plenty of work). I might change that in the future, though, to nine months of work (with plenty of living) vs. three months of living (with plenty of work).

**Is another, similar trip in your plans for the future? Any ideas where next time?**

I'll try out the three months-per-year system and see how well it works. I'll be back in Indonesia, simply because I can't think of a spot more perfect.

**What's next?**

I'm returning to New York and we'll design a whole bunch of jobs for clients who were nice enough to wait around for us. We'll also continue on a few projects that we started in this experimental year, like a documentary movie and a small book.

**How do you plan to celebrate your homecoming?**

June Cohen from TED was nice enough to organize a little party. Other than that I have always enjoyed small gatherings of six or eight people coming together more than big gatherings.

**What have you missed most about NYC?**

I am not someone who misses much (sounds like a Lennon/McCartney song), but I surely did miss plenty of friends (but many



## **“I did learn that meditation makes my days calmer, jungle leaves greener and music sound better.” Stefan Sagmeister**

eased that by visiting me in Bali). I did miss Saturday mornings going to Chelsea for gallery tours.

**What’s on the agenda the rest of the year? Any new projects you can tell us about? Exhibits?**

I hate to talk about projects we have not done yet, not because I'm secretive, but because I lose the desire to do them when I discuss them beforehand.

We were offered a number of exhibits, but I am conflicted. Exhibits are a crazy amount of work, and since I have little desire to be part of the art world, the customarily desired benefits of exhibiting (a bigger profile in that world, higher prices for art works) are somewhat lost on me. But I thought our exhibit at Deitch Projects in NYC was one of my favorite projects to have been involved in ever.

**You’ve been designing for quite a few years now. It’s been a while since the Detroit AIGA poster, for example. How do you think you’ve changed as an artist since then?**

I have never seen myself as an artist, always as a designer (not that the distinction keeps me up at night). My brain is getting softer as I get older, but this sorry development has so far been leveled out by improved experience and increased power to implement ideas.

**Where do you think you need to grow still?**

Plenty of room: Being able to turn the other cheek as well as not shying away from confrontation. To know what to do when.

**What moves you most in your life right now?**

Women.

**Is that different than five years ago? 10?**

No. And yes, as five and 10 years ago I was in a single, steady relationship that moved me, albeit in different ways.

**What/who are you enjoying most creatively now—musician, writer, painter, etc.?**

Oh, boy, here we go: James Turrell, Amish Kapoor, Janine Antoni,

Walter DeMaria, Olafur Eliasson, Theo Jansen, Marian Bantjes, Jenny Holzer, Rick Valincenti, Ji Lee, Fumio Tachibana, Brian Eno, The Artichoke Monkeys, Chris Garneau, Mathias Mental ...

**I love the David Byrne/Brian Eno album design. You’ve also done Talking Heads covers. How would you say the working relationship has changed over the years? How do you think the work you’ve done for music clients in general has changed over the years?**

Well, it changed rather drastically insofar as we're not doing graphics for music anymore. We all but stopped designing album covers after the first sabbatical in 2000—there were just too many other interesting things to design and music stopped playing the same role in my life as I approached 40. The 2008 Byrne/Eno project was an exception as the music was terrific, David being wonderful to work with and having been massively influenced by Brian's published diary, I had the strong urge to meet him.

**Any thoughts on the new Absolut Vodka television ad that is very similar to your “Things I have learned” project? [Some people in the design community have called ad agency TBWA/Chiat/Day out for stealing the concept.] Did the ad firm have any contact with you prior?**

They contacted me in Indonesia, and I declined on the ground that we did not take on ANY jobs during this year. On reflection, I would not have taken the job for a number of other reasons too: I don't drink alcohol and always did well by being involved only in projects where I myself use and admire the product or service. The ad agency went ahead and did it anyway themselves, which is not nice.

**Your work has always demonstrated an appreciation for the other arts—music, photography, etc. How do you think the creative disciplines feed into one another?**

Because so many professions—music, film, graphics, architecture—now use the same tools made by the same companies, it has become much easier to move from one to the other. At the same time, I don't think I have anything significant to say in architecture or product design, but at least can dabble about properly.





Clockwise from top left: Seed Media Group identity; Chaumont exhibition poster; Kunsthau Bregenze 10th anniversary paper; Vilcek Award; Anni Kuan fashion brochure. All images courtesy of Sagmeister, Inc.

