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“Obsessions create good designs and bad lives.”

Stefan Sagmeister, *Designer*

Signed portrait by Henry Leutwyler

Stefan Sagmeister: The Art of Introspection

Stefan Sagmeister's latest project, Things I have learned in my life so far, is based on a list of life lessons jotted down in the Designer's diary while on sabbatical in 2000. These very personal lessons have been represented typographically using a variety of mediums — everything from hangers to body paint, furniture to food, lightboxes to giant, white, inflatable monkeys — and have become both a book and an exhibit at New York's Deitch gallery. The success of Sagmeister's venture comes as no surprise to his fans and peers; he has trained us to expect the best. His trailblazing role in the Design community is well-established; from his self-mutilation for an AIGA lecture poster, to his collaborations with Lou Reed, to his branding work for True Majority, he has consistently wowed us. In this particular case, however, it's the marriage of broadly resonant, personal statements and innovative design execution that make his latest project so intriguing. And what's more fun than watching someone who knows all the rules break them? We caught him while on tour promoting his latest project.

Your new book features a collection of typographical representations that spell out life lessons in an astonishing variety of mediums. What new lessons have you learned from and since the project?

There are a couple of new ones on my list, but I have not learned them from doing this project. They are:

— Don't work with assholes.

— Obsessions create good designs and bad lives.

Did you ever imagine, as you were listing these lessons in your diary, that they'd find a niche in the public sphere?

No, not at all. They were jotted down quickly as a summing-up list for myself. The idea of publication did not enter my mind at all. Which is a good thing, too, since that idea has skewed the content of my diary ever so slightly ever since.

Why do you believe this project has struck such a chord with people?

At the core many of us, no matter how and where we live, are somehow similar and concerned about similar things. By and large I can assume that most things that are important to me resonate with other people too. Or, as a contributor to our site, *ThingsIHaveLearnedInMyLife.com*, put it: "If what you do does not resonate with you, it does not matter to anyone else."

Daniel Nettle writes in his introductory essay for the book, "Reflection is a deeply personal activity that takes different forms for different individuals." How does this quote apply to the year off that inspired the series?

I had more time on my hands to write in my diary (I have kept one since I was 13 or 14). I had jotted that list down quickly just to see for myself what I do think I know by now. At the same time, I was contemplating becoming a filmmaker, which then seemed appealing to me. I also thought this would be a ten-year process. It occurred to me that it might be more fruitful to see if I have something to say in the language I already know how to speak — Graphic Design — rather than throwing that language out and concentrating on learning a new one (Film).

Where did you go during your time off? In retrospect, what was the most important aspect of your sabbatical?

I traveled but generally stayed in New York. The most important outcome of the sabbatical was that I found the joy of being a Designer again.

Where do you plan to go on your next break?

I want to design the next experimental year differently, so I said: Not New York, and not another city, which meant a landscape, not in the US or Europe (know too well), and not Africa or South America (don't know well enough), which meant Asia. The most beautiful landscapes I know in Asia are in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, and considering Sri Lanka still has a low-level civil war going on, Indonesia it became. I am going there next week to make sure.

Is this the most personally satisfying Design project you've done? And which typographical installation was the most fun to execute?

Yes, I'd say that this is the most satisfying one. From a pure-fun point of view, the filming of "Keeping a Diary supports personal development" in Singapore was a whole lot of fun. We shot in the August heat in Singapore and were in a good mood all the way till October.

Any highlights (or lowlights) to speak of?

A highlight was signing the show about the book up at Deitch Projects in New York and witnessing audiences' moods being lifted by the show. Most people in that gallery had smiles on their faces (the intense smell of bananas helped).

How has your design style evolved over the years?

From trying hard not to have a style (unsuccessfully) to allowing one. Your work often contains a definite shock factor. Is stirring up controversy part of the fun of Design, or do you consider it an obligation?

As I get older, stirring up controversy is much less of a factor. Shock, like humour or any kind of surprise, can be an effective communication tool if it is put in the right context and for the right purpose.

You spend a considerable amount of time on personal work, and you seem to go out of your way to pursue projects that you are passionate about. Do you think that staying true to yourself is crucial to success as a Designer (or otherwise)?

There is an incredible amount of inauthentic work in the public sphere, and I am bored by it (I suspect many other people are too). As a person, I can feel if someone is authentic, be that in a personal contact or in a piece of communication designed by a Designer.

In pursuing personally motivated projects, what challenges have you run across?

Financing them.

Knowing your propensity to list, we couldn't help but ask: Considering your career thus far, what are your five favorite Sagmeister design projects to date?

This, of course, changes; newer jobs tend to be closer to my heart than older projects. Right now:

1. This series, *Things I have learned in my life so far*.
2. The True Majority work.
3. The David Byrne CD plus book.
4. The Casa da Musica identity.
5. The Zumtobel annual report.

What about beauty? What makes your top five list of beautiful sights?

1. After wandering the narrow streets of the old city in Jerusalem, to get outside on the plaza and see the Dome of the Rock Mosque.
2. Watching the sunrise at Ankor Wat, Cambodia.
3. Just last week, visiting Steven Holl's extension to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City at night.
4. Rio de Janeiro, seen from above, next to the statue of Christ the Redeemer.
5. The cathedral in Cologne, Germany.

Five examples of outstanding Design?

1. Art Spiegelmann, Maus.
2. Jonathan Barnbrook's design for Damien Hirst's book *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now*.
3. Joerg Zintzmeyer, Swiss bank notes
4. Rick Valincenti: Herman Miller trade show video.
5. Andrey Logvin, Russia, Trinity poster.

What has been your greatest professional learning experience?

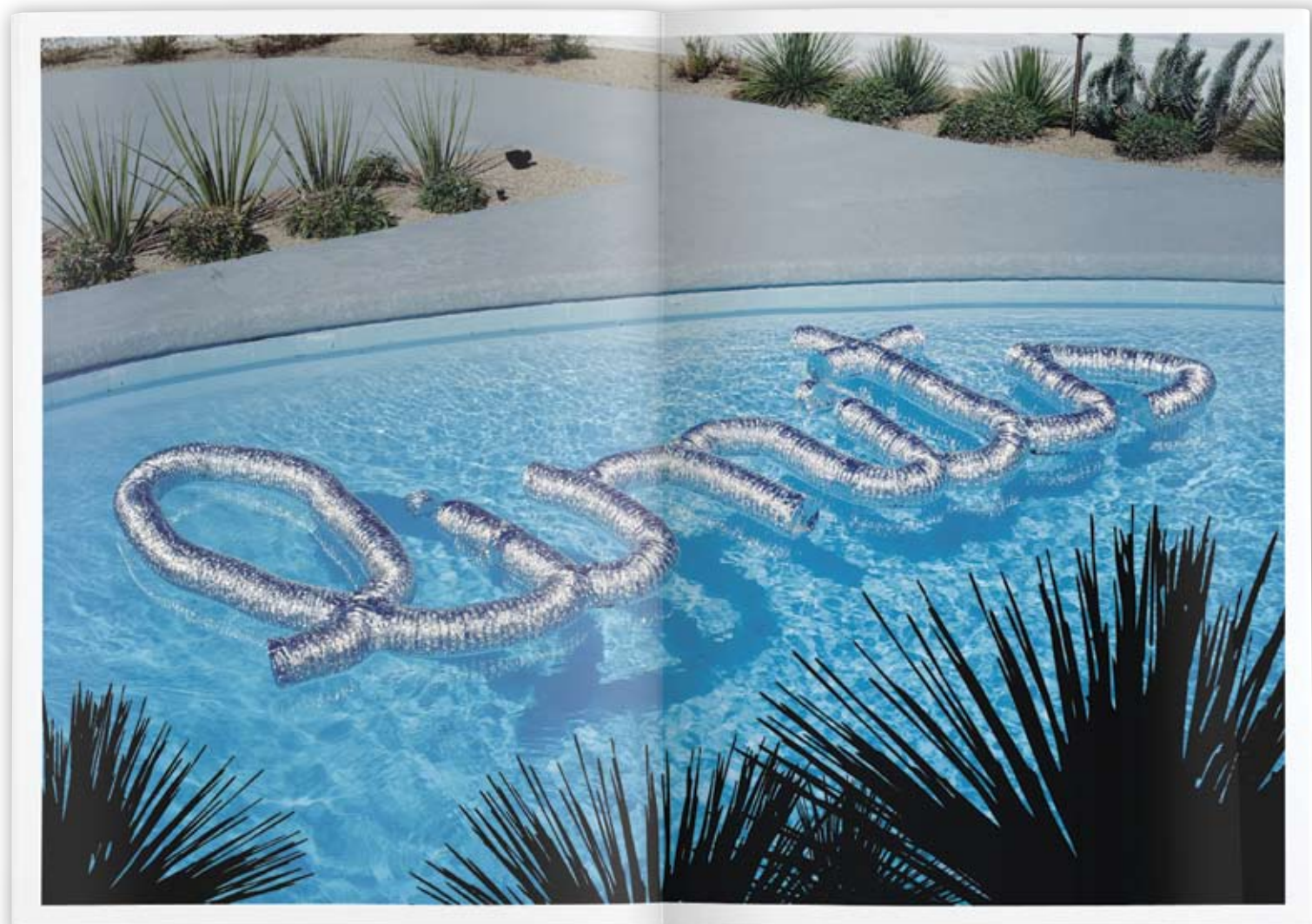
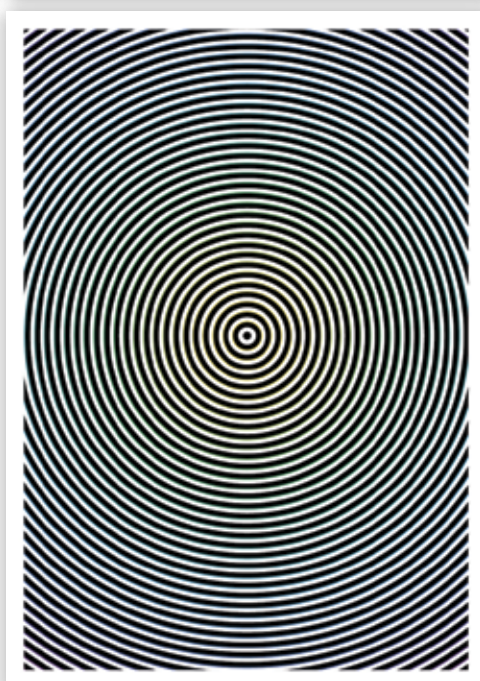
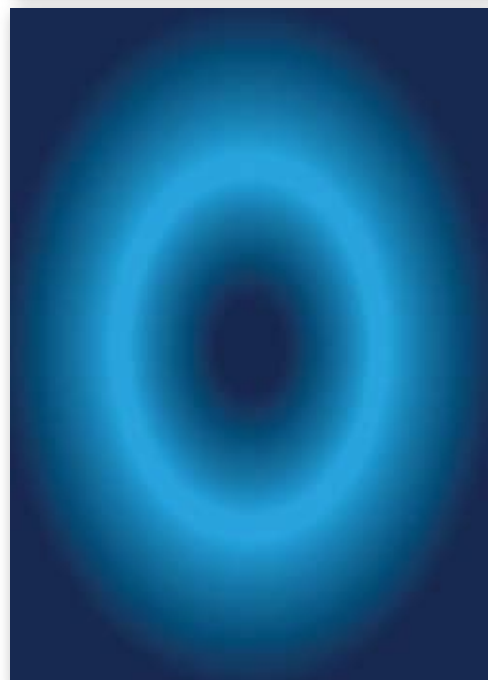
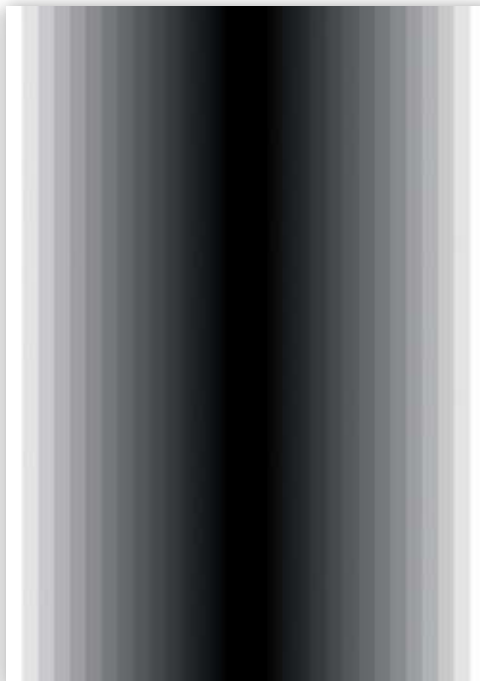
When I was in Hong Kong, I learned in two short years everything about all the things I don't want to do in my life.

Now you teach as well. What is the most important lesson you can pass on to your students?

It is possible to do the kind of work you want to do.

Finally, who has been your greatest professional mentor, and why?

Tibor Kalman. 15 years ago, as a student in NYC, I called him every week for half a year and got to know the M&Co receptionist really well. When he finally agreed to see me, it turned out I had a sketch in my



portfolio rather similar in concept and execution to an idea M&Co was just working on. He rushed to show me the prototype out of fear I'd say later he stole it out of my portfolio. I was so flattered.

When I finally started working there five years later, I discovered it was, more than anything else, his incredible salesmanship that set his studio apart from all the others. There were probably a number of people around who were as smart as Tibor (and there were certainly a lot who were better at designing), but nobody else could sell these concepts without any changes, get those ideas with almost no alterations out into the hands of the public.

Nobody else was as passionate. As a boss he had no qualms about upsetting his clients or his employees. I remember his reaction to a logo I had worked on for weeks and was very proud of: "Stefan, this is TERRIBLE, just terrible, I am so disappointed." His big heart was shining through nevertheless. He had the guts to risk everything. I witnessed a very large project where he and M&Co had collaborated with a famous Architect and had spent a year's worth of work. He was willing to walk away on the question of who would present to the client.

Tibor had an uncanny knack for giving advice, for dispersing morsels of wisdom, packaged in rough language later known as "Tiborisms." "The most difficult thing when running a design company is not to grow," he told me when I opened my own little studio. "Just don't go and spend the money they pay you or you are going to be the whore of the ad agencies for the rest of your life" was his parting sentence when I moved to Hong Kong to open up a design studio for Leo Burnett.

These insights were also the reason why M&Co got so much press; journalists could just call him and he would supply the entire structure for a story and some fantastic quotes, to boot. He was always happy and ready to jump from one field to another: corporate design, products, city planning, music videos, documentary movies, children's books, and

magazine editing were all treated under the mantra, "You should do everything twice; the first time you don't know what you're doing, the second time you do, and the third time it's boring."

He did good work containing good ideas for good people.

*Interview by Anna Carnick
With Melanie Madden, Contributing Editor*

About Stefan Sagmeister:

Stefan Sagmeister formed the New York-based Sagmeister Inc. (www.sagmeister.com) in 1993 and has since designed for clients as diverse as the Rolling Stones, HBO, and the Guggenheim Museum. Having been nominated five times for the Grammy he finally won one for the Talking Heads boxed set.

He has also earned practically every important international Design award. In the beginning of 2008, Abrams published his comprehensive book titled *Things I have learned in my life so far*. Solo shows on Sagmeister Inc.'s work have been mounted in Zurich, Vienna, New York, Berlin, Tokyo, Osaka, Prague, Cologne, Seoul and Miami.

He teaches in the graduate department of the School of Visual Arts in New York and lectures extensively on all continents. A native of Austria, he received his MFA from the University of Applied Arts in Vienna and, as a Fulbright Scholar, a master's degree from Pratt Institute in New York.

*(page 10) Stefan Sagmeister Portrait by Henry Leutwyler.
(pages 12-15) Things I have learned in my life so far by Stefan Sagmeister; Art Director/Artist/Author/Writer: Stefan Sagmeister; Designer: Matthias Ernstberger; Editor: Deborah Aaronson; Illustrators: Yuki Muramatsu, Stephan Walter; Photographer: Henry Leutwyler; Print Producer: Anet Sirna-Brude; Typographers: Matthias Ernstberger, Stefan Sagmeister; Essays by Steven Heller, Daniel Nettle, and Nancy Spector; Published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. (www.hnabooks.com)*



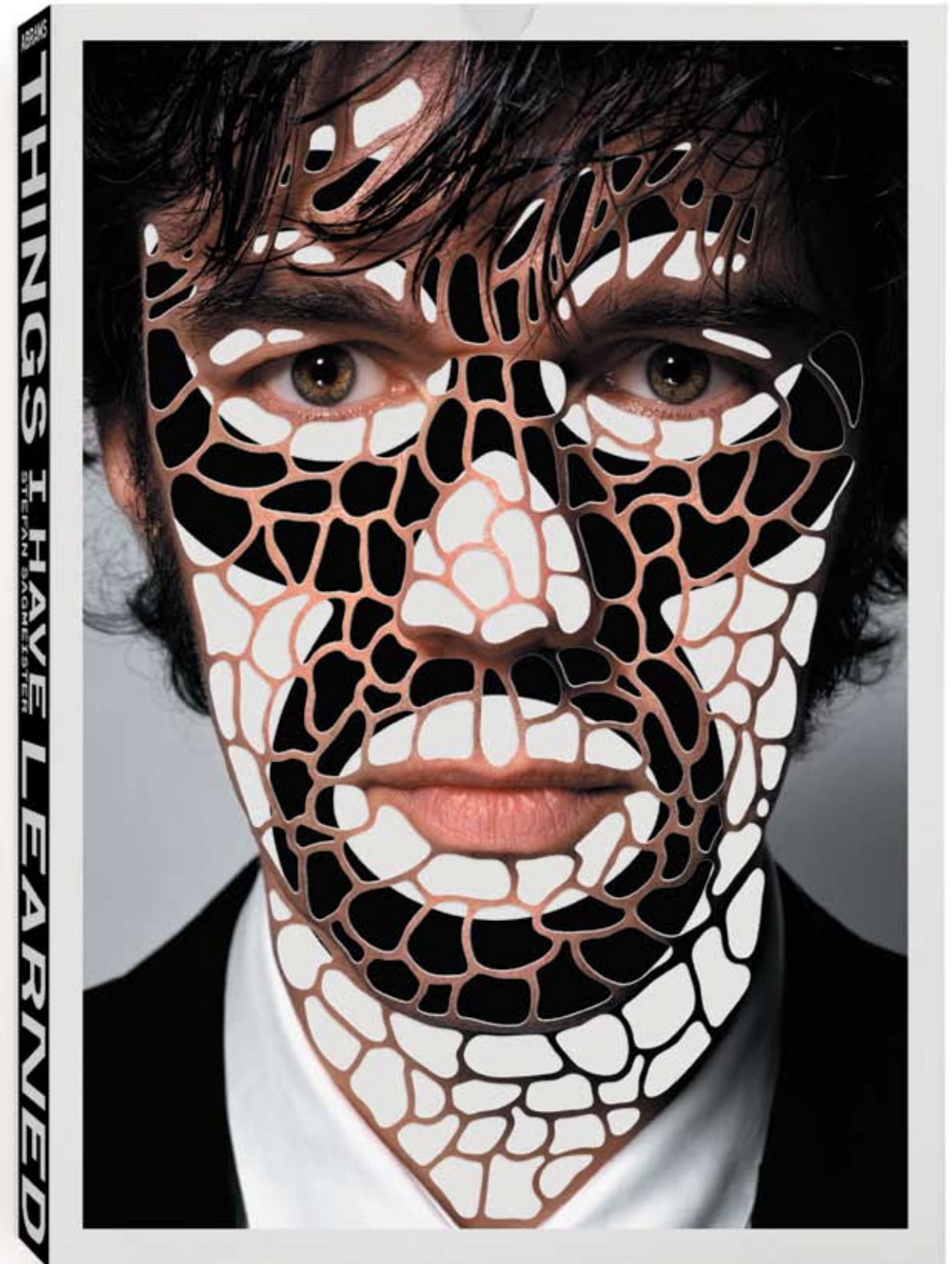
“Stefan has redefined the basic description of what it means to be a Graphic Designer in our time.

Because so much of his work is self initiated,
he operates outside the usual conventions of most professional practice.
By any standard, his work continually disrupts our expectations and
makes us think deeply about everything he shows us.”

Milton Glaser, Designer

“Stefan is able to meld Art and Graphic Design so perfectly as to make you
question where one ends and another begins.
He not only made me look but made me think!”

Henry Leutwyler, Photographer



“It gives me the biggest thrill to find the hidden message ‘Stefan loves Anni.’

This message has appeared in different publications, always tricky to find! Sometimes friends ask,
‘Did you see that?’ I’m like, ‘See what?’ This secret message has kept my heart warm at all times...
Stefan, Anni loves you back.”

Anni Kuan, Fashion Designer

“Working with Stefan has and always will be the high point of my Graphic Design adventures.
He is a staggeringly talented wonder and quite the artist himself.
He has designed logos for me — album covers, lyric books — each and every project a pleasure
not only for his talent and generous spirit, but because he is also great fun. I love him.”

Lou Reed, Artist & Musician