

Things we've learned so far in life

GROUNDBREAKING GRAPHIC DESIGNER STEFAN SAGMEISTER REFLECTS ON LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

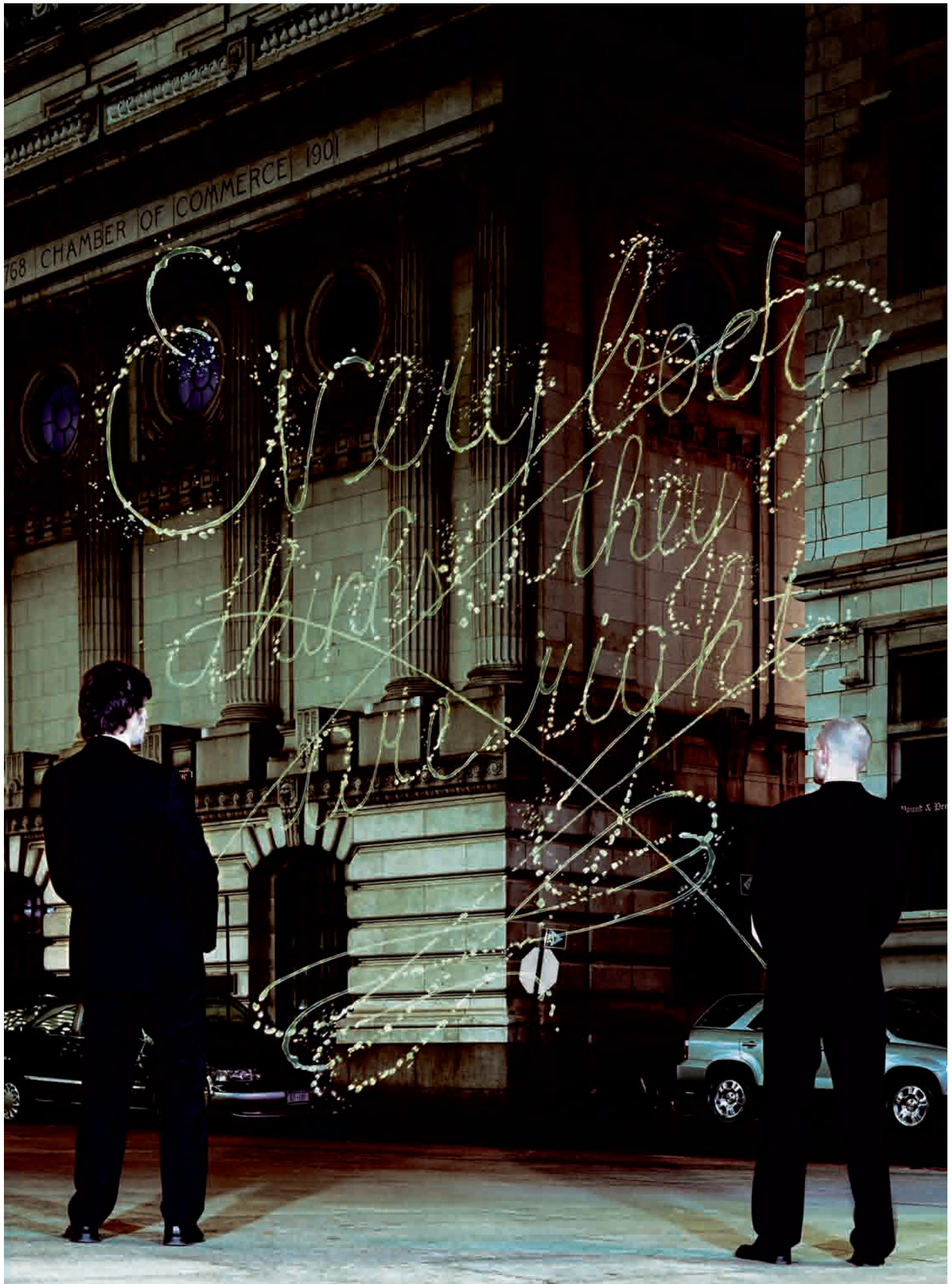


Stefan Sagmeister

He's often described as the rock star of design, but Stefan Sagmeister is really more of a poet. Type, colors and textures are his rhymes. His images wrench the gut, reach for the soul, scream out the deepest fantasies and dreams.

"The overall desire of our studio is that the work we do will be emotional and will touch the heart of the viewer," says the New York-based, Austrian-born designer in a soft voice marked by a sharp German accent. "A lot of design is really well done but it's cold, and as a viewer it doesn't really connect with you." Sagmeister is tall, very tall, and dark, with thick wavy locks that caress his forehead. He sits in a conference room at Aishti's headquarters in Downtown Beirut, where he is working on the brand's new visual identity. Transcending industrial graphic design, he paints, handcrafts, builds interactive projects and imagines performances or films that ultimately question the role that images play in our lives.

The groundbreaking fusion of art and design has won Sagmeister four



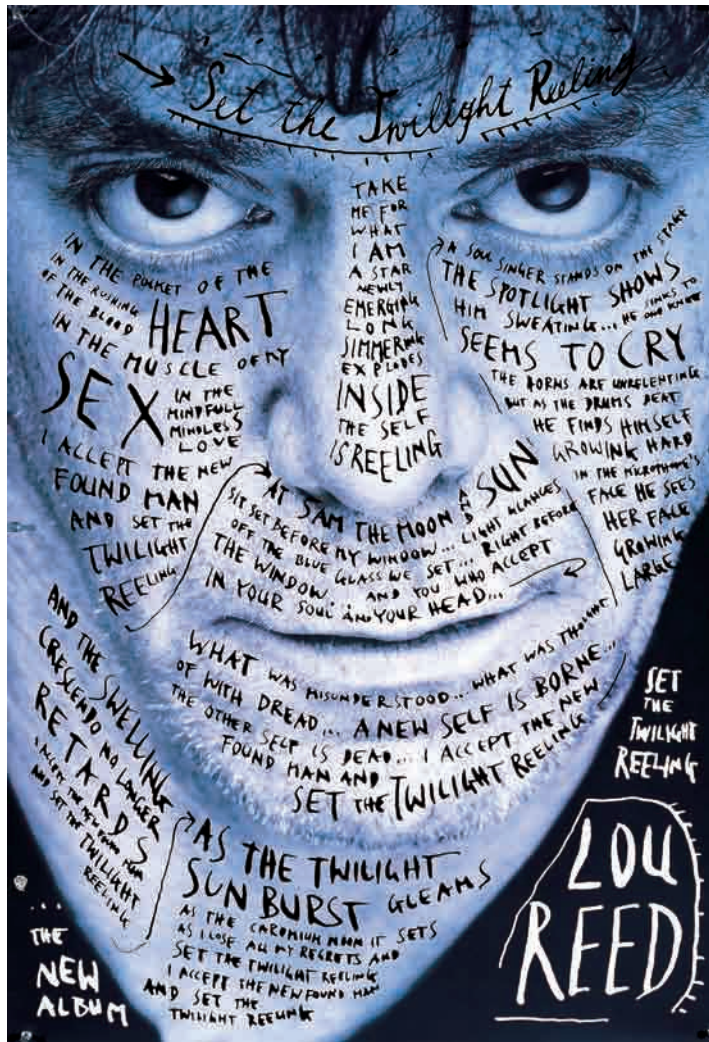
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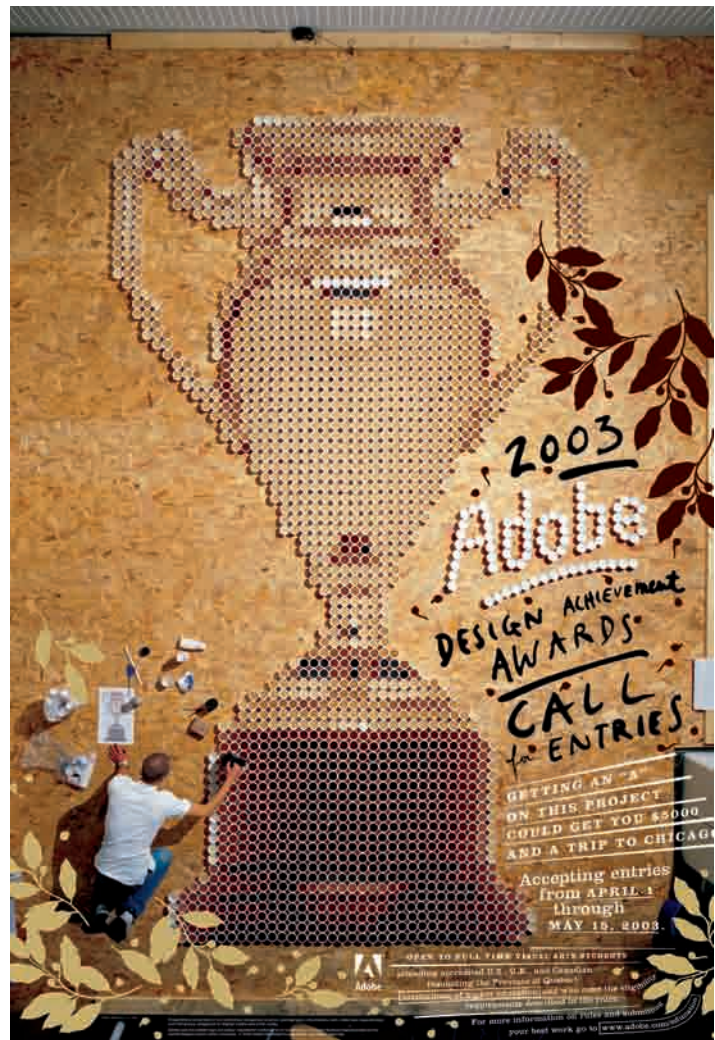
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AIGA New Orleans poster

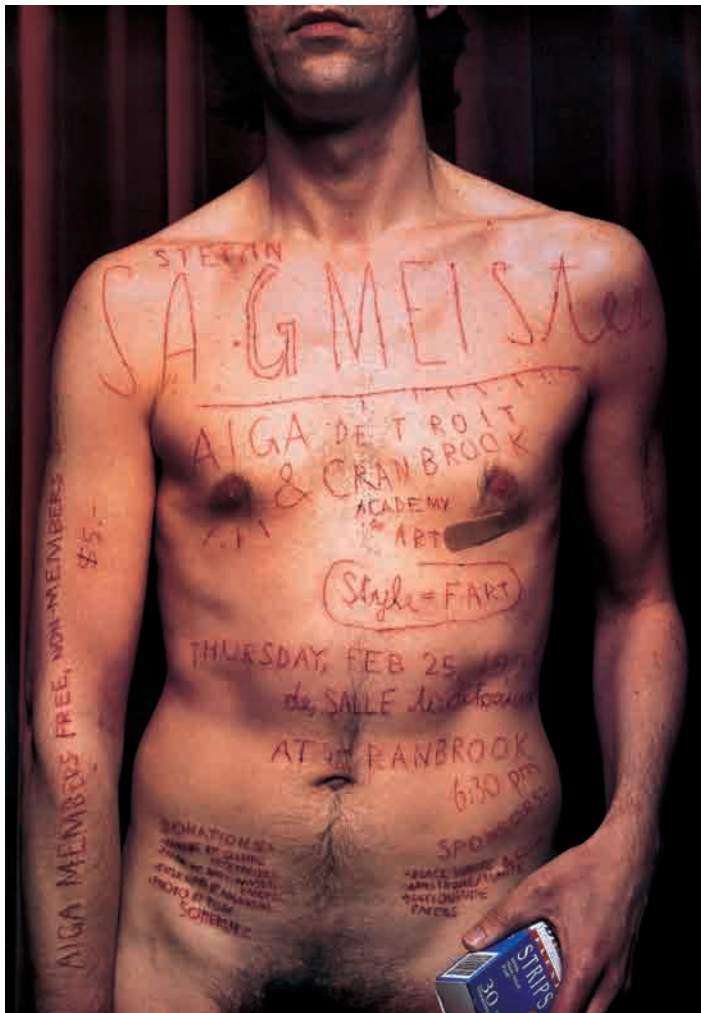


Lou Reed poster



Adobe Design Achievement Award poster

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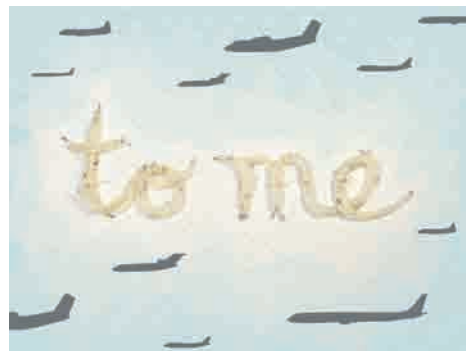


AIGA Detroit poster

Grammy nominations for his CD covers (for Talking Heads and David Byrne, among others) and many other prizes. His studio's projects are humorous, conceptual, lyrical, provocative and viscerally striking. For example, on a poster designed for AIGA (the professional association for design) in 1997, two headless chickens run on a grass field, asserting the need for design professionals to reassess the purpose of their work. The word "Hurry" is spelled with chicken feet. Messy handwritten scribble gives the images a rough, expressive feel that has become Sagmeister's trademark.

Joy, fear, repulsion, laughter, lust: these are some of the reactions that Sagmeister's designs provoke. His most well-known project, a poster for AIGA carved on his naked body with a knife, expressed the painstaking creative process. Reminiscent of Sagmeister's punk-inspired posters for the Gruppe Grut collective in Vienna, done after his studies at the prestigious School of Applied Arts there, the poster's powerful emotional impact reflected Sagmeister's new take on design. While the Modernists promoted stark, purely functional design and the digital age produced minimalist or formulaic images, Sagmeister strives to suffuse his images with the intensity of life. "It's important to have an exchange that's not just through the eyes, but through the heart and through the guts," says the designer, who also uses design to illustrate his personal journeys.

Things I Have Learned in My Life so Far, which started 10 years ago



"Everything I Do Always Comes Back To Me" posters

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"Trying to Look Good Ruins My Life" installation

as a page on the designer's diary and has become a multidisciplinary, ongoing project, reflects Sagmeister's deepest convictions. Branches on a billboard placed above the logo of a mall spell out the phrase "Thinking life will be better in the future is stupid. I have to live now." Butterflies, larvae and water puddles symbolize blooming, coming alive. "Trying to look good limits my life." "Self-confidence produces fine results." "Everybody always thinks they are right." These, and other idioms, are illustrated in wildly imaginative, humorous and poetic ways. Today the project, which was the basis for an exhibition at Soho's Deitch gallery in 2008, includes an interactive website and a book.

Some might be surprised to see a graphic designer's work in a gallery, but for Sagmeister the division between art and design is nonexistent. While the modes of distribution differ, both use visual impact to express concepts and feelings.

Despite its international success, Sagmeister's small New York-based studio only works on selective commercial projects and creative experimentations, and every seven years, the studio closes for a sabbatical year. Back from a creative break in Bali – for which he had to decline an offer to design posters for Barack Obama's campaign – the designer is now working on a new video documentary about how drugs, meditation and cognitive therapy affect his own happiness. "As humans we do things that are fairly complex," he says, "but ultimately we do them to increase our level of happiness."

Shirine Saad

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