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Stefan Sagmeister: *I Look Like This*

Thomas Erben | 526 W 26th St. 4th floor

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In the incessant visibility of advertisement and marketing material, it's unusual to be confronted with images of startling or grotesque subject matter. The veiled authorship that sales strategies demand is upended in the design work of Stefan Sagmeister, whose exhibition *I Look Like This* on view at Thomas Erben presents a selection of self portrait posters. Although almost oxymoronic to attach "self portrait" with "poster", Sagmeister finds a way to use the body itself as the tool for communication, playing with the very notion of authorship in design. *I Look Like This* is the first exhibition of its kind devoted to Sagmeister's promotional materials, which demand the same formal considerations as photography or painting.

The field of design is still primarily shaped by the objective concerns of modernism, which has been co-opted to streamline corporate communication styles. What Sagmeister asserts with his signature approach to design is instead, a renewed subjectivity in the art of visual communication. When we look at a poster like *AIGA Detroit*, 1999 for example, we see the text scratched into the designer's torso. It announces his lecture at the American Institute of Graphic Arts in Detroit with all of the associated dates, location, sponsors and ticket fees. Not only does the image communicate a specific event, it records a series of actions on Sagmeister's body; an *impression* made by the gesture of communication. We see the author with voyeuristic clarity reaching for a box of bandaids on the edge of the frame, caught in the painful moment between articulation and reception.

In this collection of posters, Sagmeister displays his body with an almost exhibitionistic drive. From a McLuhanist perspective, his body is the medium which the promotional message acts and speaks through. The message frequently takes the form of expulsions from the body; blood (in *AIGA Detroit*), piss (in *Everybody Thinks They are Right*, 2005), hair (in *Paris*, 2011) or even fat (in *GGG Tokyo*, 2011). For the latter, Sagmeister gained thirty pounds in a week, showing before and after pictures of himself on a couch surrounded by the packaging of all of the sugary products he consumed. The text reads "Sagmeister Inc. on a binge". If design language is built to appeal to the desire of the viewer, these images function as acknowledgements of the designer's own desire, flipping the usual script, or at least, creating reciprocity out of a formerly one sided relationship.

— Jonah James Romm
