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PHOTOGRAPHY AND DESIGN

Stefan Sagmeister: I Look Like This

by **Debbie Millman**

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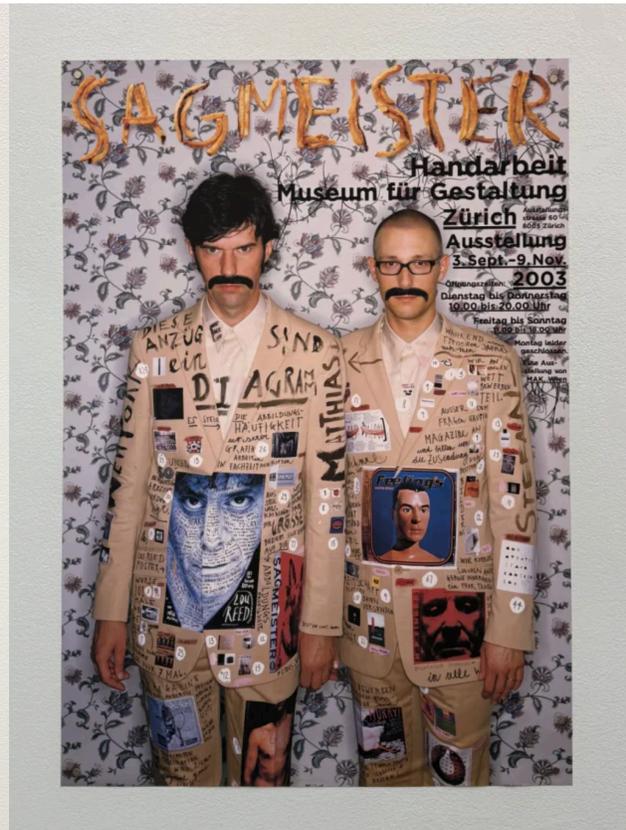
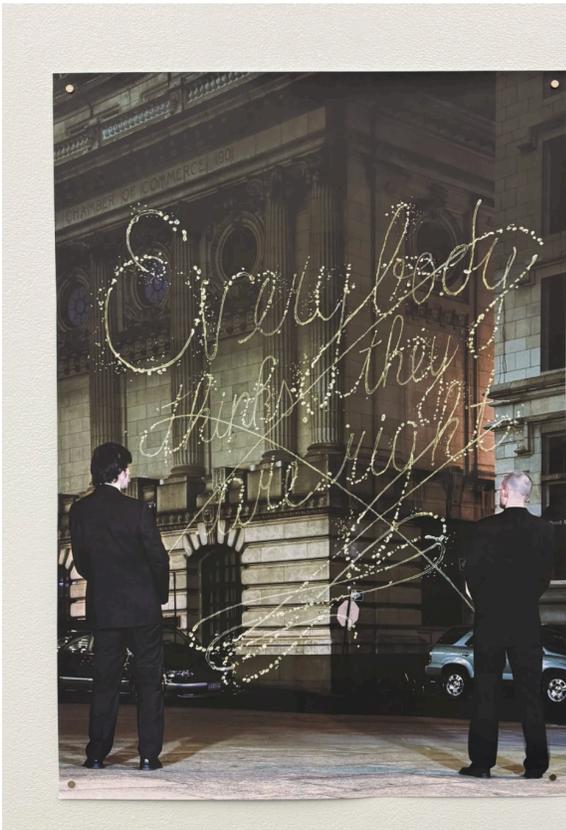
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For more than four decades, [Stefan Sagmeister](#) has used his body as both subject and medium—sometimes literally, sometimes conceptually, but always with a distinctive mix of humor, vulnerability and philosophical curiosity. His latest exhibition at Thomas Erben Gallery, [I Look Like This](#), threads together a collection of posters that share a simple premise: each one, in some way, is a self-portrait.



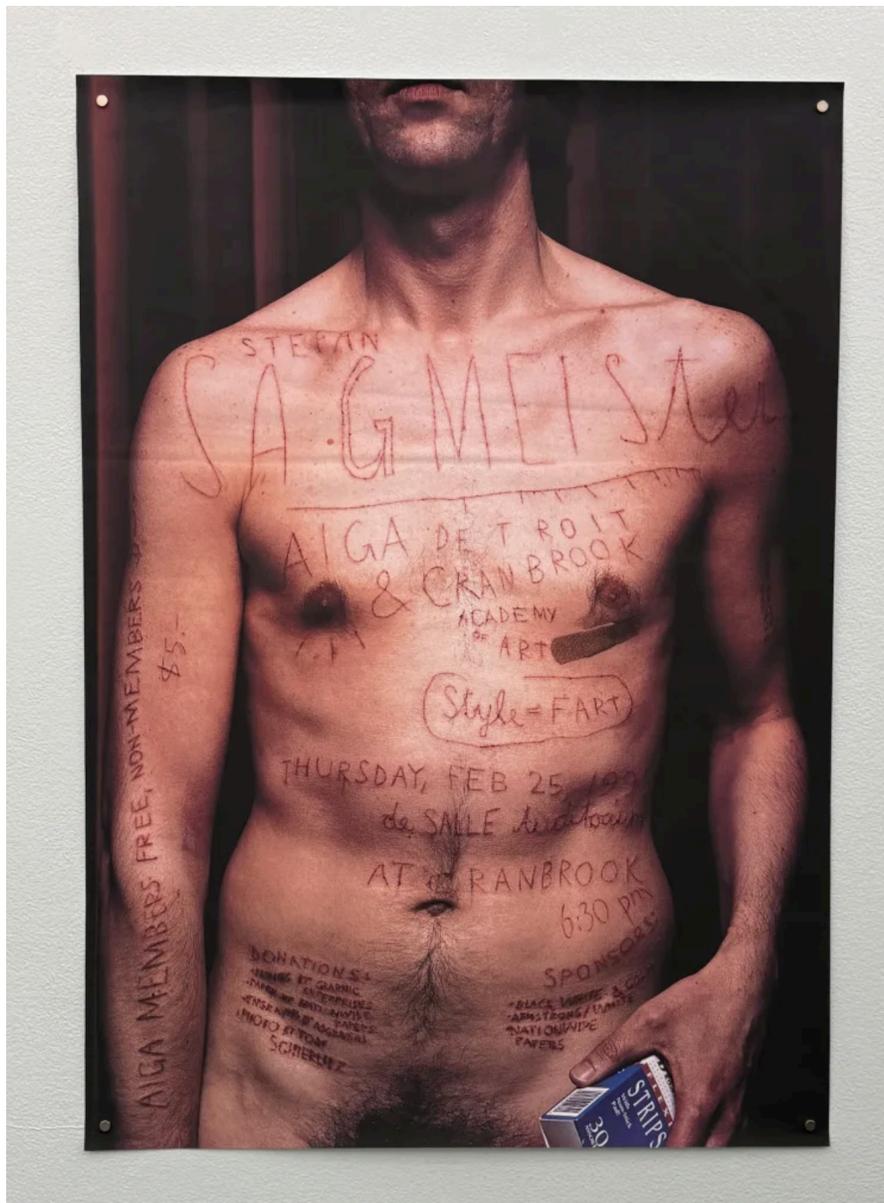
Sagmeister introduces the idea with characteristic wit: these are images of him taken by others, designed by him, debated in the studio, printed, and sent out into the world. If that qualifies as a self-portrait, he suggests, then the exhibition is full of them.

The earliest work dates back more than thirty years; the newest was designed recently. Seen together, they exhibit both a visual autobiography and a portrait of an evolving creative identity. In doing so, they reveal how Sagmeister has continually experimented with the relationship between the designer, the message and the medium itself.



From early in his career, Sagmeister showed little patience for the sterility that dominated late modernist graphic design. The field's emphasis on neutrality and clarity left little room for the messier realities of human

experience. Sagmeister responded by introducing something rarely seen in graphic design at the time: himself. Sometimes he appeared playful, sometimes awkward, sometimes intentionally provocative, sometimes he was naked. In other works he appears staged, photographed, distorted, or placed into unexpected environments. Perhaps most famously, he allowed the details of a lecture to be carved directly into his skin. The imagery collapsed the distance between designer and message in a way that was impossible to ignore. The body became typography, and the designer became part of the communication.



At first glance, these gestures might seem narcissistic. But look longer and something deeper emerges. By inserting himself into the work, Sagmeister acknowledges something many designers know but rarely show: design is never neutral. It is shaped by the people who make it: their personalities, their relationships, their quirks and curiosities, and their sense of the world.

This exhibition also connects Sagmeister's work to a broader Austrian artistic tradition in which the body becomes a site of psychological exploration and social commentary. That lineage runs from Egon Schiele's charged self-portraits to the radical performances of the Vienna Actionists. Sagmeister translates that legacy into the language of contemporary graphic design, bringing the self into a field that primarily seeks to avoid it.

Yet unlike many artists who use the body confrontationally, Sagmeister approaches the subject with a unique combination of humor and generosity. Philosopher Keren Moscovitch describes his strategies as operating like "infectious laughter"—gestures that invite viewers in rather than push them away. The posters also reveal the deeply collaborative nature of Sagmeister's practice. Although his likeness appears in each image, the works emerge from conversations with photographers, studio collaborators, printers, and friends. These posters are therefore portraits not only of the designer, but of the creative relationships that surround him.



Throughout his career, Stefan Sagmeister has pursued projects that aim to enhance people's experience of life rather than to sell or promote. Whether through exhibitions exploring the definition of happiness and beauty or design commissions blurring the boundaries between art, performance and philosophy, Sagmeister's work consistently asks how design might make life richer. The body of work included in *I Look Like This* reflects this ongoing inquiry and forms an essential meditation on identity itself.

Stefan Sagmeister's exhibition [*I Look Like This*](#), will be on exhibit at Thomas Erben Gallery in New York City from March 5-April 11, 2026. 526 West 26th Street, 4th floor, New York, NY 10001