

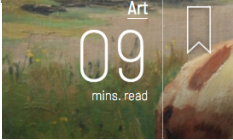
see

think

inspire

reflect

10



STIR > INSPIRE > PEOPLE

## Stefan Sagmeister on thinking long-term and the positive side of human evolution

Sagmeister presents the idea of long-term thinking and a positive outlook to world events through his art in a solo exhibition, *Beautiful Numbers*, at Thomas Erben Gallery in New York.

by Rahul Kumar | Published on : Apr 27, 2021

1  
2  
3  
4

*How has your day been?* Chances are, the response to the question is that it has been alright in all other respects, but the news of the world around you – crisis owing to **COVID-19** pandemic, polarisation in politics, economic war, falling stock prices, and recessionary trends in global trade are all weighing you down, emotionally. Five-minutes of scrolling through a news app or a social media platform on our handhelds leave us somewhat restless. And this phenomenon is fairly universal. Just the other day a friend joked, "...after seeing the news today, I am watching a serial killer movie to relax!"

But have we considered how the world has changed for the better in many, many aspects? Many more people have access to better technology, education, and life in a democratic country than say even a hundred years back. Fewer wars, better medical facilities, and freer access to information was all unthinkable till just 25 years back in many parts of the world.

It is this belief and understanding that forms the basis and core of the creative practice of graphic designer and artist, Stefan Sagmeister. And his positive outlook is contagious!

When asked how he describes himself as a designer, he says, "I am interested in creating an emotional connection to an audience. I have always been jealous of our music-clients, who can often achieve this much deeper, quicker and more immediately". Beyond his own work, Sagmeister regularly engages with creative professionals from across the globe through his social media handles to provide feedback and critique on their projects.

I interview Sagmeister on the eve of his solo exhibition at Thomas Erben Gallery in **New York (USA)**, titled *Beautiful Numbers*.



Carbon II  
Image: Stefan Sagmeister

**Rahul Kumar (RK):** The approach you have towards your creative practice is unconventional. For instance, you have used yourself as the investigator and also the investigated in your 2016 work, *The Happy Film*. What are your aspirations from your viewers through such works?

**Stefan Sagmeister (SS):** I was always interested in how design touches me emotionally, and eventually put a talk together titled *Design and Happiness* (which had slowly evolved out of another presentation called *Can Design touch someone's Heart?*). We have received a lot of excited feedback about that talk.

During our second sabbatical in **Indonesia**, I was looking for something meaningful to design, and *The Happy Film* seemed to fit the bill. It forced me into doing a whole lot of research and experiments within this field. It also allowed me to work in a challenging media, as I had never done a film before. Most things I do every day are somehow geared towards this goal, often just not in a very direct way. And it seemed more challenging to attempt to get a handle on the subject in film rather than print, trying out a new medium prevents me to become too complacent.

When we started out, it was supposed to be a general film on happiness. As this quickly proved impossible as the subject was just too large, it became a film on my own happiness (as I am an expert on it). This then required that it would be personal, and it slowly evolved into a film about me. This certainly was not the plan when we started out.

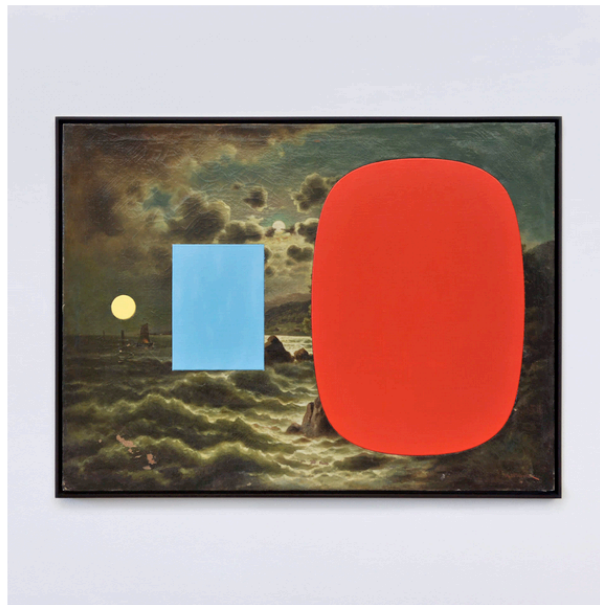


Water, 1990/2015  
Image: Stefan Sagmeister

**RK:** In continuation, there is an underscored belief of 'thinking long term' in almost everything you do. And the way you look at the 'long-term' is over centuries. That said, as a designer you need to solve problems of today. As an artist you react to what you have experienced in your lifetime. How do you balance the two attitudes?

**SS:** I feel I can only solve the problems of today if I have a good sense of the world I live in. In order to achieve this sense, looking at developments from a long-term perspective is absolutely crucial. Short-term media like Twitter and hourly news create an impression of a world out of control, with democracy in peril, ubiquitous conflicts and an overall outlook of doom. But if we look at developments concerning the world from a long-term perspective - the only sense making way - almost any aspect concerning humanity seems to get better: fewer people go hungry, fewer people die in wars and natural disasters, more people live in democracies - and live much longer lives - than ever before. Two hundred years ago, nine out of 10 people could neither read nor write, now it is just one out of 10.

I am working on creating intriguing visualisations of these developments with the goal that viewers might want to hang them as artwork into their living rooms, as reminders that the latest tweets are just tiny blips in an overall rather healthy environment.

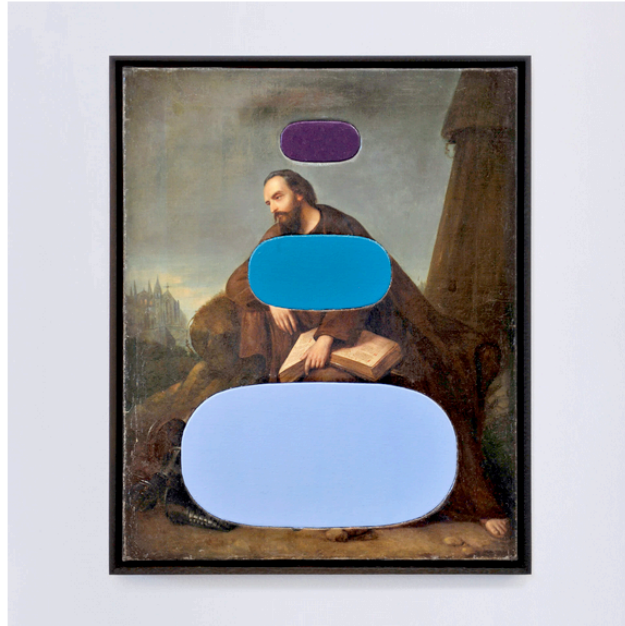


Carbon I, 1800/2020  
Image: Stefan Sagmeister

**RK:** You track couple of factors to define the evolution of mankind, and in general increased 'happiness' levels. But what makes you happy is subjective. For instance, mental health has deteriorated in just past decade. And often numbers do not communicate the underlying emotion and psychology. Thoughts?

**SS:** Numbers never communicate the underlying emotion. This does not render them useless; it just means they are not, all by themselves, good communicators. Sadly, for most mental health problems, there is little good long-term data available, as it simply was not measured and recorded in the 18th and 19th century.

If we take one aspect of mental health, depression, the overall total numbers over the past 25 years have gone up, from about 170 million in 1990 to about 260 million in 2015. But we were only about five billion people in 1990 and about 7.5 billion in 2015, so you would need to weigh for that. Also, it is good to remember that uncertainty about mental health numbers is unusually high.



Literacy I, 1900/2000  
Image: Stefan Sagmeister

**RK:** The year 2020 has been unprecedented for all of us. It is interesting how you conceived of a new body of work titled *Beautiful Numbers*. Please tell us about the process of a daily engagement of gathering information that became the very basis for this work.

**SS:** I have in the past met up with people like Steven Pinker at Harvard or the late Swedish statistician Hans Rosling, both of whom have been instrumental in creating research over the long term. My thinking has been influenced by the people behind the Long Now Foundation, Danny Hillis and Stewart Brand. And I have been spending many hours on sites like OurWorldinData.org.



Suicide II, 2000/2015  
Image: Stefan Sagmeister

**RK:** Why the use of historical works, like the 19th century paintings as the 'background' for graphical representation of contemporary data?

**SS:** Most of the data I represent starts in the 19th century, so these painting actually, physically existed at the time this happened, say, when my great-great grandmother lost six of her children. This makes conceptually a lot of sense.



Life, 1800/2020  
Image: Stefan Sagmeister

**RK:** Also, one must be aware of basics of statistics to fully interpret the works in your exhibit, *Beautiful Numbers*. Do you believe it will be limiting for those who do not?

**SS:** Most of my graphic representations do not require a sophisticated understanding of the world of statistics. For those who are uninterested in the conceptual underpinnings of the pieces, they might still enjoy the compositions.



Democracy I, 1945, 2015  
Image: Stefan Sagmeister

**RK:** You have said that visual strategy defies cynicism. Please share from your research on how design (like typography) tricks the senses?

**SS:** I don't believe that all visual strategies defy cynicism! I hope there is no cynicism in my own visual strategies. There is so much cynicism to be found that I don't feel the need to add.



Women I, 1900/2000  
Image: Stefan Sagmeister

**RK:** In conclusion, while most would agree that we are in a better world than what prevailed 100 years back, there are distinct issues of our generation. Climate change being a case in point. Would that reduce happiness levels considerably?

**SS:** While we started to put massive amounts of CO2 into the atmosphere during the industrial revolution 200 years ago - which makes Europe by far the worst culprit when you look at CO2 cumulatively - the problem became truly acute only recently. It is a huge problem. I feel we have a better chance fighting it from a platform that acknowledges past successes rather than from the edges of doom.



Stefan Sagmeister

*Image: Karolina Ciecholewska*

## About Author



### **Rahul Kumar**

Editor, Arts

Rahul is responsible for curating the Art section. He has been a Consulting Editor with Arts Illustrated and has written for various publications like Mint-Lounge and Vogue. Before retiring from mainstream corporate roles, he led an art venture for NDTV and was also involved in its television programming. He is a Fulbright scholar and a practicing artist.