

Thomas Erben Gallery is pleased to present Stefan Sagmeister *I Look Like This*, an exhibition spanning over 30 years of the award-winning designer's boundary shattering posters featuring himself as a primary figure. While notable past exhibitions and retrospectives have showcased the breadth of Sagmeister's prolific and focused career, this exhibition highlights his unconventional use of the body as material. Emerging from the prestigious *Die Angewandte*, with its lineage of experimentation and innovation, Sagmeister's transdisciplinary practice has itself transformed the world of design.

Since inaugurating his studio, Sagmeister Inc. in 1993 with its infamous opening card, Sagmeister has striven to take risks and leverage radical vulnerability as a design strategy to inspire and connect with audiences worldwide. The gallery's selection of posters exemplifies his history of using surprisingly embodied graphics, hand-drawn elements, and, most controversially, his own self. Sagmeister's physical body becomes a canvas onto which he projects his own dreams and anxieties, intermingled with the desires of a global audience. His tender humor softens the fragility of the body, which itself mirrors the fragility of the mind, making his posters both confrontational and relatable.

His subversive strategies recall the anarchic aesthetics of the Dadaists, as well as his own hometown of Vienna's lineage of "actionists," who often thrust their bodies into abject physical and psychological confrontations. However, Sagmeister is less interested in "pushing against", and more driven to "pull along" in gestures that operate like infectious laughter. Centering himself in these performances, especially in his use of the art historical taboo of the male nude, is much more than a publicity stunt. Sagmeister demonstrates that he has skin in the game, both literally and figuratively. He is seldom hidden from view, complicating modernism's emphasis on the clarity of function and problem-solving in design. Rather, he demonstrates that the self is always complicit, always involved, and always undergoing a process of evolution that is then reflected in popular media, and exponentially so in the age of social media. In this regard, he draws from the Fluxus vocabulary of conflating "art" and "life," through which fluid, creative subjectivity endures an ever-present process of transformation in concert with the groundedness of the physical body.

Sagmeister's use of hand written text shows that he is not content to recycle existing design ingredients, but allows each form to develop uniquely, organically, and in real time. The spectrum of human experiences is not merely reflected in his designs, but embodied in extreme actions such as having text carved into his body, causing pain and activating the suffering that so often accompanies artistic activity. His refusal to be contained by the frame of design manifests in a sense of immediacy and drive. This intensity of urgency underlines the urgency of intentionality that makes his design work both timely and enduring.

Sagmeister is an experimenter at heart, employing systems and a rigorous process of investigation to upend his own ideas about the world, and by extension, those of his audiences. The drive to ask questions rather than merely try to answer them is at the core of the artistic process. Though he applies it professionally to design, Sagmeister is a philosophical and linguistic thinker who prizes the questions at the heart of any endeavor. As Joseph Kosuth argued in his seminal essay *Art After Philosophy* (1969),

“Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art’s nature.”<sup>1</sup> The “dematerialization of art”<sup>2</sup> through conceptual practice, starting with Duchamp and leading to today’s transdisciplinary practices, created new spaces of inquiry for the performance and body artists who emerged from radical circles around the globe. The body was not left behind in the emergence of conceptual art, rather, its inherent instability leveraged towards the act of questioning. Design is grounded in function, but also in representation and symbol use. Sagmeister breaks with design’s conventions using the body to question and rethink the forms of its representational systems, making his practice an important discursive touchpoint for contemporary art.

Ultimately, Sagmeister strives to bring people together. Manifest in playful collaborations with fellow luminaries Jessica Walsh and Matthias Ernstberger, the resulting posters are portraits of friendships, and reveal the pleasures that can be found in making and thinking in community. Throughout his career, Sagmeister has sought to bring design to the people in ways that enhance their experience of life rather than merely sell them products. Operating from a politics of generosity, and by bringing a deeply personal element into his designs, Sagmeister’s projects facilitate participation, empathy and joy.

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Keren Moscovitch is a philosopher and artist based in Brooklyn, NY, whose practice explores radical intimacy through psychoanalytic, ontological and ecological frames. Her book *Radical Intimacy in Contemporary Art: Abjection, Revolt, and Obejthood* was published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2023. In addition to multiple catalog essays and reviews, her philosophical writings have been published in the *Journal for the Pacific Association in the Continental Tradition* as well as the *International Journal for Education in the Arts*. Her film *One More Way to Sink Into My Heart* celebrated its world premiere in 2019 at the Sydney International Film Festival, where it won Best Documentary Feature. Her work has been exhibited internationally, most recently at Penumbra Foundation, Experimental Forum and BEAVER the book project. She is an Assistant Professor of Photography at Parsons School of Design at The New School, and serves on the faculty at the School of Visual Arts.

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<sup>1</sup> Kosuth, Joseph. “Art After Philosophy.” *Studio International* 178, no. 915–917 (October–December 1969): 134–137, 160–161, 212–213.

<sup>2</sup> Lippard, Lucy R., and John Chandler. “The Dematerialization of Art.” *Art International* 12, no. 2 (February 1968): 31–36.