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Foreword *Stefan Sagmeister*

Stefan Sagmeister

I love being a designer. I love thinking about ideas freely and observing them taking shape; I love working concentratedly on a project all day, losing myself in the work, and, even after having been involved in this field for almost twenty years, I still love getting a piece back from the printer (if it turned out well).

There are so many fantastic designers working today: creators like Jonathan Barnbrook and Nicholas Blechman who emphasize the social role of design; designers who produce breathtaking forms, such as M/M in Paris, Nagi Noda in Tokyo and Mark Farrow in London; designers who blur the boundaries between design and technology like John Maeda, Joachim Sauter and their students; and a new generation who manage to work with one foot in the art world and the other in the design world, like the young Swiss group Benzin and the American designers involved in the 'Beautiful Losers' exhibition, including Ryan McGinness and Shepard Fairey.

I recently taught the spring/summer semester at the University of the Arts in Berlin, and was happy (and a bit astonished) to see how smart the students were. They are better educated, more widely travelled and more culturally astute than my generation was. On the same note, the range of students I currently teach in the graduate design program at New York's School of Visual Arts includes a biology major from Harvard and a senior designer from Comedy Central.

There is also a new emphasis on how design is reviewed and critiqued, driven by Steven Heller's *Looking Closer* series, *Emigre* magazine's reconfigured essay-heavy format, Rick Poynor's *No More Rules* and *Obey the Giant,* and maybe most significantly, by the emergence of design blogs like underconsideration.com and designobserver.com. I don't think there ever was a time when design was reviewed so critically and enthusiastically by so many people in so many cultures.

Of course, as it became a wider discipline, graphic design became more difficult. It now embraces what used to be a dozen different professions: my students compose music, shoot and edit film, animate and sculpt. They build hardware, write software, print silkscreen and offset, take photographs and illustrate. It's easy to forget that routine jobs like typesetting and color separation used to be separate careers. A number of schools have realized this and opened up the traditional boundaries between graphics, product design, new media, architecture and film/video departments, encouraging the education of a truly multi-faceted designer.

For me, it has become more difficult, too: as I get older I have to resist repeating what I've done before; resist resting on old laurels. Before the studio opened in 1993, I was working at M&Co., my then favorite design company in New York. When Tibor Kalman decided to close up shop in order to work on *Colors* magazine in Rome, it didn't feel right to go and work for my *second favorite* design company. So I opened my own studio and concentrated on my other great interest, music. I had experience working for both tiny and gigantic design companies and having enjoyed the former much more than the latter, I tried hard not to let the studio grow in size.

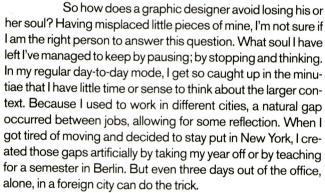I feel a lot of designers starting out want to be concerned only with design and find questions about business and money bothersome. The proper set-up of a studio and the presentation of a project to a client – in short, the ability to make a project happen – is, of course, as much part of the design process (and much more critical to the quality of the process and the end product) as choosing ink colors or typefaces.

How to be a graphic designer, without losing your soul

I learned a lot from my time at M&Co. They used time sheets, for example, and I thought, if it's not too square for them, it can't be wrong for me. I am glad I did too; it's the only way to find out if we made or lost money on a project. If I'm not on top of the financial details, they will soon be on top of me and I won't have a design studio any more. It is much cheaper to sit on the beach and read a book than it is to run a financially unsuccessful design studio.

Everything else about running a studio I learned from a book called *The Business of Graphic Design*. A pragmatic business book giving reasons why you should or shouldn't start your own company, it talked about how to design a business plan and estimate overheads. It described the advantages of both setting up alone and of partnerships.

I was also influenced by Quentin Crisp, now – sadly – remembered mainly as the subject of Sting's song *An Englishman in New York*. He talked to one of my classes, and he was such an inspiring character. Among the many smart things he said was: 'Everybody who tells the truth is interesting.' So I thought: this is easy, just try to be open and forthright, and it will be interesting.

I recently took a year off from clients. I used the time to make up my mind about all the fields I did not want to get into (but had previously imagined I would). I surprised myself by getting up every day at 6 am to conduct little type experiments (without a looming deadline). It made me think a lot about clients. I decided that I would rather have an educated client than one I have to educate. Tibor's line was that he would only take on clients smarter than him (but remember, a client does not have to be design literate to be smart). After reopening, I also decided to widen the scope of our studio to include four distinct areas: design for social causes, design for artists, corporate design and design for music.

So how does a graphic designer avoid losing his or her soul? Having misplaced little pieces of mine, I'm not sure if I am the right person to answer this question. What soul I have left I've managed to keep by pausing; by stopping and thinking. In my regular day-to-day mode, I get so caught up in the minutiae that I have little time or sense to think about the larger context. Because I used to work in different cities, a natural gap occurred between jobs, allowing for some reflection. When I got tired of moving and decided to stay put in New York, I created those gaps artificially by taking my year off or by teaching for a semester in Berlin. But even three days out of the office, alone, in a foreign city can do the trick.

I hope this book helps young designers find their way. I don't think that the 'designers don't read' bullshit is true. A good book will find good readers.

Poster
by Stefan Sagmeister

How to be a graphic designer, without losing your soul

This is Real Art
by Adrian Shaughnessy

Introduction

To paraphrase Frank Zappa: here's just what the world needs – another graphic design book. Graphic design books are nearly as common as celebrity diet books or airport blockbusters. But for the committed designer there are few better ways to spend an hour than immersed in the pages of a luscious design book – we enjoy the bug-eyed envy that comes from looking at work we wish we'd done ourselves, and we are inspired by the dizzying range of graphic expression on view. And of course, as much as we enjoy the work, we also like to find fault with it. Moaning is important to designers; it's something we do well. But although design books can sometimes be accused of contributing to the widely held misconception that design is an effortless activity practised by star designers who never break sweat as they glide from triumph to triumph, they are, on the whole, *a good thing.*

And yet there's something missing in this encyclopedic coverage of design. When we gorge ourselves on the succulent work in the books, and when we slurp through the numerous magazines and websites that chronicle the design scene, we rarely get the back-story; we rarely get the grubby bits that go with almost every job touched by a graphic designer. Designers are quick to tell us about their sources of inspiration ('I'm really into Otl Aicher's pictograms and I like this beetroot-flavored chewing-gum wrapper I brought back from Osaka.'), but they are much less willing to reveal tiresome matters such as how they find clients, how much they charge and what they do when their client rejects three weeks of work and refuses to pay the bill.[1] If you want to learn how to be a designer, you need to know about these and other messy matters. It's as much a part of being a designer as knowing how to kern type or design the perfect letterhead. In fact, how you deal with the grubby bits is how you learn to be a graphic designer.

Stefan Sagmeister's book *Made You Look* is one of the few design books that attempts to show a warts-and-all picture of the working life of a designer. He reproduces his failures ('the bad stuff') as well as his triumphs, he itemizes the fees he received, and in a pictorial cartoon reveals that even superstar designers have their work tampered with by meddlesome clients.

[1]

This is a book about the grubby bits. It is written by a designer *for* designers. It combines practical advice and philosophical guidance to help the independent-minded graphic designer deal with the less glamorous and knottier problems encountered by the working designer. I've added the phrase 'without losing your soul' to the book's title (I toyed with the idea of using 'shirt' instead of 'soul') because it seemed the best way to emphasize a key aspect of my intention: namely, to write a book designed to help those who believe that graphic design has a cultural and aesthetic value beyond the mere trumpeting of commercial messages; a book for those who believe that we become graphic designers because we are attracted to the act of personal creation; and a book for those who believe that design is at its best when the designer's voice is allowed to register, and is not suppressed in favor of blandness and sameness (although I should add that this is only relevant when the designer's voice is worth hearing).

This book is also a response to the fact that more people than ever are studying and practising graphic design. It is an increasingly attractive career. Where once it was seen as a purely artisanal occupation with not much status attached to it, it is now regarded as a meaningful, even mildly glamorous activity. Today, you can say that you are a graphic designer without people looking at you as if you've just announced that you do nude salsa dancing. Fashion designers, architects and product designers are already part of the new cultural elite: Tom Ford, Frank Gehry and Jonathan Ive are frequently interviewed with breathless reverence in newspapers, magazines and on television. And although graphic designers are not yet regarded with such slack-jawed wonder, David Carson, Peter Saville, Stefan Sagmeister, Neville Brody and a few others have a star rating that lifts them into the lower reaches of the celebrity designer cosmos. (At a guess graphic designers are seen as occupying a position in the media jungle somewhere between cable-TV game show hosts and tabloid journalists.)

2　This report, among others, can be found at www.bls.gov/oco/ocos090.stm

According to a recent US Department of Labor report,[2] there are 532,000 designers employed in the United States; 212,000 of these are graphic designers. In her book, *The Substance of Style,* Virginia Postrel points out that at least fifty graphic design magazines are regularly published around the world (there were three in 1970); and she quotes Pentagram partner and noted design commentator Michael Bierut: 'There's no such thing as an un-designed graphic object anymore, and there used to be.'

'The Devaluation of Design by the Design Community.' *AIGA Journal,* New York, 1994. Reprinted in Robyn Marsack, *Essays on Design 1: AGI's Designers of Influence* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions), 1997.

However, despite all this graphic abundance, most of the design that surrounds us lacks emotional character or aesthetic value. It's just there; clogging up the arteries of our visual lives. As the designer Paula Scher (also of Pentagram), noted in a 1994 essay published in the *AIGA Journal:* 'Everyday I find myself in supermarkets, discount drugstores, video shops, and other environments that are obviously untouched by our community … just plain old-fashioned non-controversial bad design, the kind of anonymous bad design that we've come to ignore because we're too busy fighting over the aesthetics of the latest AIGA poster.'[3] The prevalence of 'bad design' is a consequence of an increasingly competitive and globalized economy, where risk is anathema, where the herd instinct predominates and where sameness is the default position. It is unthinkable today that a powerful global brand would employ a contemporary designer in the way that IBM once employed Paul Rand, or that a commercial magazine sold on the newsstands would grant the freedom *The Face* gave Neville Brody in the 1980s. Focus groups and marketing imperatives would smother such initiatives at birth.

Design itself is now intensely competitive; so much so, in fact, that many designers have become browbeaten into timidity and compliance. This is hardly surprising, since it's hard to take a stand on matters of principle when there are countless other firms and individuals willing to do the work if you don't. But, hang on, what's so bad about giving clients what they want? Isn't design a service industry?

This takes us to the heart of one of the most important debates in design over recent years. On the one hand, we have those who believe that graphic design is a problem-solving, business tool and that designers should suppress their desire for personal expression to ensure maximizing the effectiveness of the content. While on the other hand, we have those who believe that although design undoubtedly has a problem-solving function, it also has a cultural and aesthetic dimension, and its effectiveness is enhanced, and not diminished, by personal expression.

The former remains the dominant view amongst professional designers. But this traditionalist view of graphic design has always been subjected to critical attack and skepticism by radical voices in design, especially since the anti-globalization movement threw down a challenge to corporate behemoths in the late 1990s. And this pragmatic view of the designer's role doesn't hold true in other areas of design: we don't ask architects or fashion designers to suppress their personal voices – quite the opposite. In fact, we value most those who are capable of investing their work with personal statements. Nor, paradoxically, does the pragmatic view seem to have a basis in commercial reality. Increasingly, the messages that get noticed – the ones that cut through the drizzle of unremarkable one-size-fits-all communications – are the ones where the designer's thumbprint is clearly visible: the ones that contain a rebel-yell of defiance.

Nor is this schism as simple as a mere divergence between conservatives and radicals. If you read the design press you might think that the desire for creative freedom, or self-expression, was confined to superstar designers: it's not, it's actually universal. We become graphic designers because we want to say something. We want to make a visual statement for which we can stake a claim for authorship; in some cases it is a very modest claim, but it's a claim nonetheless. And even for those designers who fervently subscribe to the notion that the designer's contribution is always subservient to the client's needs and wishes, these individuals still want to perform this function their way. Let me put it another way: I don't think I've ever met a designer who didn't have the instinct for self-expression. You can see it in the universal reluctance to have ideas rejected, tampered with or watered down. There's a mule-like instinct in nearly every designer – even the most accommodating and service-minded – that bristles at the command 'Oh, can you change that' and the 'Just do it like this' attitude so frequently adopted by design's paymasters – the clients. It's an instinct, inherent in all designers, that says: a little bit of my soul has gone into this and it is not going to be removed without a fight.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that all graphic designers agree that there are, unquestionably, purely practical and utilitarian roles for graphic design. Applications such as road signs, medicine packaging, timetables and the presentation of financial, scientific or technical data, require design of the utmost clarity and precision. It is broadly agreed that there is no room in this sphere for notions such as personal expression or experimentation. A badly designed road sign might kill you: death by typography is a real possibility. And yet, show me a designer who doesn't want to execute even these tasks in the way he or she sees fit?

How to be a graphic designer, without losing your soul

To arrive at a definition of what this book will tell you, it might be easier to say what this book will *not* tell you. This book will not tell you how to work the trapping functions in QuarkXpress. It will not tell you anything about hardware, software or the minutiae of Apple's latest operating system. There are countless books on these subjects, and in my experience designers learn these skills only when they need to, and they learn them from other designers or by working them out for themselves.

This book doesn't tell you what sort of designer you should be. In matters of styles, trends and schools of design, this book is agnostic. It will not tell you what typefaces are cool nor what the current trends in layout, photography and illustration are. It will not advocate the supremacy of formal design over vernacular design, or the desirability of Helvetica over Bodoni. You can get this information by looking at books and magazines, by reading about graphic design history, by talking to other designers and by experimentation within your own work. And although the great Josef-Müller Brockmann said 'All design work has a political character,'[4] this book assumes that political questions are a matter for individual consciences. If, for instance, you are asked to design the packaging for a canned drink which contains dubious chemicals, you have a moral decision to make. Your conscience might tell you not to do this work, but if you are struggling to pay your bills, or have a family and financial commitments, you will find it hard to say no. This book doesn't tell you what to do in this situation: only you can make the decision.

Nor does this book tell you how to file your tax returns, prepare management accounts or deal with the complexities of employment law. There are much better equipped writers than me to tell you these things (a bibliography and appendix are provided at the back of this book), and in my experience, designers are, as a rule, not interested in this sort of information and also not very good at absorbing it until they have to. However, if you are going to survive – either as a freelance designer or by running a small studio – you are going to have to know about these things. So, rather than tell you how to do these things, I am going to tell you how to find accountants and other professional advisers to do them for you.[5]

4 Interview in *Eye* 19, Winter 1995

5 In America, the aptly named *How* magazine covers practical issues relating to professional practice, with many useful articles on the less glamorous aspects of life as a designer, often written by practising designers. In the UK, *Design Week,* which claims to be the world's only weekly design magazine, regularly devotes space to practical matters.

Introduction

I think the reader is now entitled to ask, well, what *does* this book tell me about? It gives the answers to some questions that designers ask themselves repeatedly. The urge to write this volume came from speaking to – and more importantly, listening to – students and young working designers. As a frequent visitor to design schools, I am asked questions such as: 'How do you respond to crap briefs?'; 'How do you stop clients demanding unreasonable changes to your work?'; 'How do you find interesting work?' I hear similar questions when I talk to designers who've been in practice for two or three years: 'How do you do good work and make money?'; 'How do you stop clients changing your work?'; 'How do you avoid spending your whole life doing unpaid pitches for low-budget work?'

It occurred to me that here was a stratum of questions – a mixture of the practical and the philosophical – that graphic designers found hard to get answers to. The art schools are preoccupied with producing 'broadly based' graduates and have insufficient time to prepare students for every aspect of working life. The glossy design press devotes its energies to chronicling the work of the latest hot designers, but avoids the practical issues facing working designers. Design writing and critical discourse rarely touch on the practicalities of life as a designer.[6] And as more and more designers emerge from higher education only to be faced with the realization that there are not enough jobs to go round, designers are having to acquire levels of entrepreneurial determination that previous generations didn't need until much later in their careers. 'How to be a graphic designer …' sets out to fill some of these gaps and offers advice and guidance that suit the sensibilities of independent-minded designers.

The US writer and designer Kenneth Fitzgerald touched on this subject in an *Eye* magazine article titled 'Fanfare for the Common Hack' (*Eye* 27, Spring 1998), in which he urged theorists not to turn a deaf ear to 'down-in-the-trenches' designers.

[6]

So who is this book aimed at? You might say that this is a book for designers who accept design's conventional role, but who also see a parallel role for design as a culturally and socially beneficial force. If you want to narrow the book's focus still further, I'd say it is a practical and philosophical guide for students emerging, or about to emerge, from higher education and for working designers in the early stages of their careers. It is first and foremost a book for the free thinking designer.

But who am I to tell you about these matters? I am a self-taught graphic designer. I started out as a trainee in a big studio in the pre-digital era. I was informally apprenticed to a group of experienced designers who taught me the basics of typography, showed me how to prepare mechanical artwork, gave me a CMYK color percentages chart, and left me to get on with it. This was daunting, but it was also my lucky break. I'd been a bit of a slacker up until this point. But within a few weeks I was producing acceptable commercial design and artwork, and as a reward I was given a full-time job as a junior designer. You could say that graphic design saved my life.

How to be a graphic designer, without losing your soul

Until recently I was creative director of a design company called Intro. I co-founded the company in 1988 with my then business partner Katy Richardson. We won awards and built up a small but steadily growing reputation in the UK and abroad, as a reliable, well-run and inventive design company. Our clients were an assortment of record labels, blue-chip corporations, arts organizations, educational bodies and media companies; we even had the British National Health Service as a client and managed to produce effective work for them, while also working for bands like Primal Scream and Stereolab. We were early proponents of the new cross-media approach to graphic design; we were among the first companies in the digital era to combine design and film-making (digital and traditional) under the same roof, something that has become more common since.

As the company grew (we were forty-strong at one giddy point) I did less and less design. As creative director, I was involved in finding and developing young designers, and acting as the bridge between our designers and our clients. I discovered a talent for advocacy, and I learned that communication skills are one of the most valuable skills a designer can have. In December 2003 I left Intro and set up as a freelance art director, writer and consultant. At Intro we came as close as is possible in a tough and unforgiving world to being a profitable (although not rich) design company that also did ground-breaking work. Our combination of creativity underpinned by business rigor worked well; but it was hard graft, and after fifteen years I began to feel the strain. Intro continues to prosper and do excellent work.

The book also contains contributions from leading designers. In a series of interviews they reveal their approaches to common problems faced by young designers making decisions early in their careers; you'll find elegant and insightful contributions from a cross-section of talented individuals including Neville Brody of Research Studios, Rudy VanderLans of Emigre, Natalie Hunter of Airside, John Warwicker of Tomato, Peter Stemmler of quickhoney and e-boy, Angela Lorenz, among others.

A final word before we start: you can ignore every piece of advice contained in these pages and still become a successful and fulfilled designer. All my advice comes with an override button: there is no such thing as a set of rules that will turn you into the complete graphic designer. In my vision of how to be a graphic designer there is always room for the maverick, the difficult and the downright contrary. I'm not trying to create homogenized designers. Far from it: what I want to do is provide the reader with a series of clues, hints and prompts to help make working life more enjoyable and rewarding. I want to talk about subjects that are not often discussed, and matters that are 'assumed' to be understood, but which rarely are. I want to help you avoid making the mistakes that I made. I want to help you become an effective and self-reliant graphic designer – without losing your soul along the way.