



Portrait by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders *The phone rang: "Hey this is Lou Reed. I saw your CD covers. Can I come over?"* When Sagmeister received the call on a warm September day in 1995, he was afraid it might be a joke. The friendship between these two artists, who in their own way have made both music and type rock, has produced some of the most arresting graphics in music: from CD packaging for *Set the Twilight Reeling* and *Ecstasy* to *Pass Thru Fire*—a book of collected lyrics—and *The Modern Dance* music video. ■ A passion for rock and roll is obviously their common ground, but they also share similar work processes and philosophies. Since he opened his New York studio in 1993, Sagmeister (featured in *Graphis* Issue 303) has gained the reputation of an agitator while still being granted official accolades from the design community. His most provocative posters for the A.I.G.A. conferences, with body parts and decapitated animal heads will remain in the annals of graphic design history. ■ While the Austrian-born designer has created successful music graphics for such groups as The Rolling Stones, Aerosmith and David Byrne, Lou Reed hardly needs introduction. The protégé of Andy Warhol and founder of The Velvet Underground has since collected many honors, while "always staying on the outside," as he puts it. Turning into a reflective poet-rocker, Reed has expanded his creative endeavors to recent collaborations with director Robert Wilson and his partner in life, Laurie Anderson. ■ Reflecting on Stefan Sagmeister's year without clients, and discussing his most recent book *Made You Look*, the two luminaries met at Reed's West Village



Lou Reed: Where did you study? Did you go to school?

Sagmeister: In Vienna, at the University for Applied Arts. That's also the same school that wouldn't take Hitler. You know, Hitler was an art student and wanted to become a painter.

Lou Reed: And they rejected him? So you went to one place in Austria where one could just say, 'Good for you, Stefan!'

Sagmeister: Well, of course. If they had taken him, maybe it would have saved us World War II, who knows? Instead, we would just have another mediocre artist, that's all.

Lou Reed: You mean graphic artist! [laugh] Honestly, I never thought of the graphic arts as something that could save the world of politics, maybe you do... When did you start?

Sagmeister: I was 19-20. In Austria, you finish high school at 18. The first time around they wouldn't take me either. In the art school, there were about 300 applicants for 10 places. It takes 4 years to complete university, if you do it fast. Although since universities are free, nobody's really graduating in the minimum amount of time.

Lou Reed: How does the selection happen? Do they go by grades? Do you have to submit work?

Sagmeister: No, you go for a three-day examination. You bring your portfolio and then on Day 1 you draw your hand for 3 hours. Then for the next 3 hours, you draw your neighbor who is also there drawing. And then for the next 3 hours you draw a chair set on a table. It goes on for 3 days like that.

Lou Reed: So draftsmanship is essential to your training?

Sagmeister: We had a very old-fashioned professor. His focus was on the ability to draw objects. It was the foundation course and he wouldn't let anybody in without that particular skill. In the year in between I was accepted, I did nature studies everyday. It's a learnable skill.

Lou Reed: Oh, not for me, it wouldn't be! My partner Laurie Anderson told me I could draw. Because I've always admired R. Crumb—he's a terrific draftsman, when he wants to be. Laurie is too. She said, 'You can draw, draw an airplane.' So I drew this pathetic airplane. And she said, 'There you go! Now just practice it.' Believe me, when they say 'He can't draw a straight line,' they're talking about me. I'm made for computer art, where you can disguise all of that.

Sagmeister: But, I think that if you had the desire to draw, you could learn it.

Lou Reed: Well, it's like in music. If you had a desire to learn to play, you sure could, up to a point. You could certainly learn three chords and do a pop song. It's a great democracy. About that, I feel the way that you feel about drawing. But at a certain point, desire won't get you there.

Sagmeister: In my case I have to admit that I was never really interested in drawing per se. It was always just a means to an end. At school, I was one of the very few among our students who really wanted to do graphics.

Lou Reed: See, I think that the earlier you know, the bigger jump you have on absolutely everybody else. It's a big advantage. Because, you do pick up things along the way. If you have a five-year jump on somebody, that's a five-year jump. What's an all-purpose microphone? What's an automatic level control? What headphones aren't going to dissolve in front of you? What machine won't blow up? You see, I didn't study music, I just learned in a bar. I started out on classical piano but I dropped. On the day I heard rock, that was the end of it. I made my first record when I was 14. I lived in bars, all through high school, all through college. I was always the youngest then. So none of this other stuff is any big deal to me. So that's my background, even though I have a B.A. in English. But I was just a guitar player. I didn't move to the front for a while. That took conniving. To get to the front, I had to write the stuff. That was the only way I would get up there, because it wouldn't be the

was pop. I was hired as a staff song writer—"hired" is barely the word—for a label that produced records sold for \$1. Long-playing records, whatever was popular, if songs were popular about cars, we would have an album of songs by make-believe groups about cars. That was it. They would sell for 99 cents in department stores.

Sagmeister: So they just asked, 'Write me three songs about cars?'

Lou Reed: Yes, write four death songs; write some surfing songs. That's what I did. [laugh] I did it for almost a year, I was learning how to use this studio, because you had to record immediately. Boom! In/Out. We're talking about junk! But some of this has since been released on bootlegs.

Sagmeister: Were you credited for these songs?

Lou Reed: As one of the writers, yes. And I sang some of them. But it would all be made-up groups like The Beach Nuts. Or Wave Bunnies or Sand Demons. You know, just trying to cash in.

Sagmeister: It sounds like something that you could also learn a lot from, isn't it?

Lou Reed: Well, I learned to write quickly, that's for sure. 'What are you doing? Write another song! Okay boom! There you go.' It was easy. One day a guy there showed me a trick: he tuned all the strings on the guitar to one note. He was kidding around but I thought it was amazing. So I did it and then I turned the amplifier loud, it was feeding back and it had to be in key because it's all one note. And then one day, while we were there recording our 20 surfing or death songs, I made up a song called *The Ostrich*. And they thought that this one could actually be a real record. They needed other members to say it was a group and that's when we found John Cale. Then I ran into Sterling Morrison on the subway—we needed a drummer—and his friend Jim Tucker had a sister named Maureen who loved to play drums and had a car, and that was it: The Velvet Underground. It's weird the way things work. Was there any plan? Was there any goal? Not really, just playing. And 3 out of 4 of us were college graduates, of all things. One of us was even here on the Leonard Bernstein Scholarship. So, it's a weird conglomeration. Sterling was going for his M.A. in Classical English Literature. And there we were. We played these dives like no one else. While I was writing this crappy stuff, I was also writing my own stuff. Why? I don't know why. Did I hope to get recorded? No. I was just writing. That's what I have been doing since I was 9. I had read somewhere that ostrich feathers were supposed to be popular, so I wrote a song called *The Ostrich*—the feedback made the people at radio stations think the record was defective and they sent it back. That was the end of it, but by then we had become a "band" called The Velvet Underground. We couldn't get jobs anywhere, but we had this material, and eventually we played a dive. Once, somebody brought Andy Warhol in, and the next thing you know, he said, 'I have a week at the Cinémathèque (which is now the Anthology Film Archives on Second Street). Oh, I don't know what to do. I have a week. What shall I do...?' (This is Andy) 'Oh, I know. You'll play, and I'll show movies. We'll get lights.' So I said, 'Okay, fine.' Then it went from there. Andy adopted us. Did this happen to you, has anyone ever adopted you?

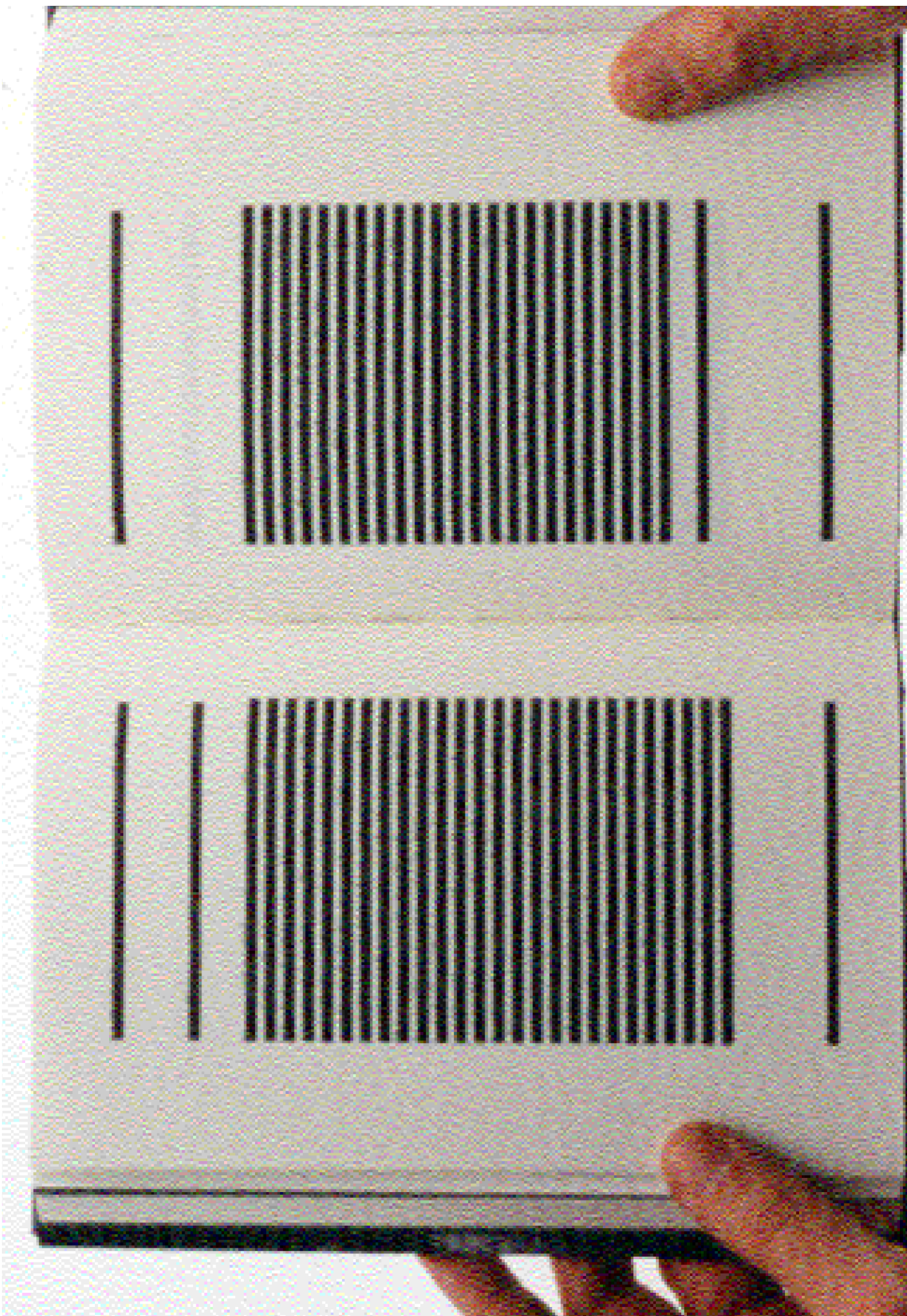
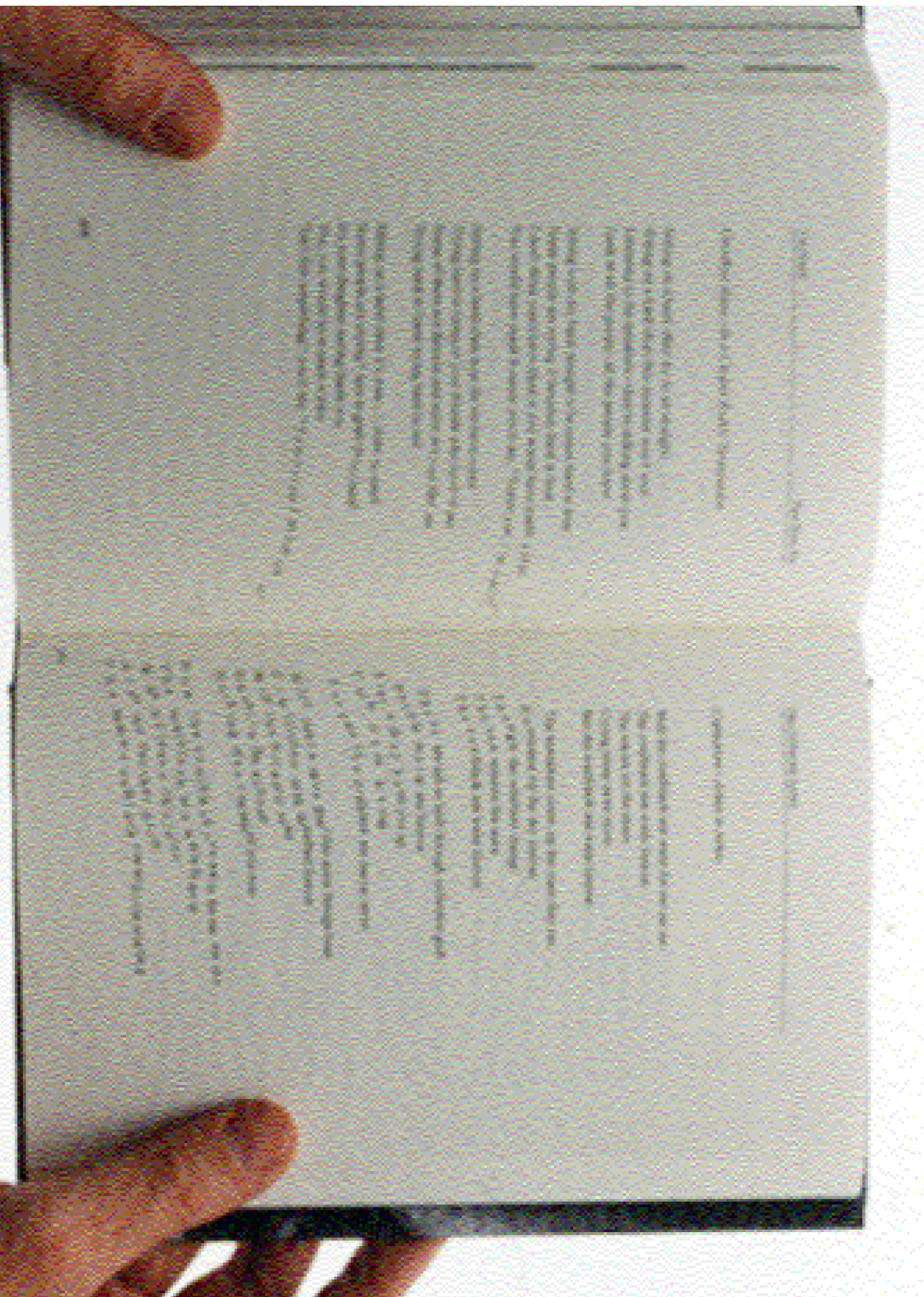
Sagmeister: Yes, in Vienna there was this theater director Hans Gratzler who took me under his wings. He commissioned a bunch of students to design posters for an excellent modern theater. At the very end of my studies in Vienna, I saw this ad about an application for a Fulbright Scholarship. Initially I thought I was too busy to sign up for it. Then I sent the form off anyway and I eventually got it!

Lou Reed: You must've been really good to get a Fulbright.

Sagmeister: Well, I was really, really lucky. When it came down to the most important interviews, it turned out that the Fulbright Commissioners in Vienna were all big theater-goers. So they all knew my posters.

Lou Reed: Did you know that beforehand?

Sagmeister: No, I did not. [laugh]



kind of attitude. Sometimes you have to be able to read the lay of the land when it's time to claw and fight and bite. And then other times it's time to take a hike.

Sagmeister: Talking about things falling in your lap: when you called and said, 'Do you want to do the video for my next single?' From my perspective, that for sure fell in my lap.

Lou Reed: From our point of view, trying to find someone creative who would be fun to work with and not the same old sh... is very difficult. There are a lot of people out there, but not many you could get along with who are really good and fun. We're not worried about things being seen here anyway, it's Europe that we're interested in, it seems that there's a bigger market for creative and interesting ideas. That narrows the gap a lot. Of course, I didn't know I'd be wearing a 25-pound chicken outfit. That was a bitch! [laugh]

Lou Reed: [Looking at Sagmeister's *Made you Look*, Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2001] Tell me about your friend, Reini. He's mentioned in your book *Made You Look*: a friend of yours who was afraid to come to the United States because the women here are arrogant and would never talk to him? And you had a solution for him: the poster says 'Dear girls, please be nice to Reini.' [laugh]

Sagmeister: Yes. We had plastered those posters all over the Lower East Side to prove to him that his bad opinion about the New York women was wrong.

Lou Reed: Actually, I think his opinion is pretty on the money, except the extraordinary creatures we both work and live with. [laugh]

Sagmeister: We actually gave a party for him. And the poster turned out to be the conversation piece of the night. He talked to a very nice woman and they did go out afterwards. Sometimes in lectures, I refer to this project as my one successful advertising campaign.

Lou Reed: What is "Call for Entry"? For the Four As. Assholes, you mean? [laugh]

Sagmeister: It's the Asian Advertising Agencies Association, the Four As.

Lou Reed: That's hilarious! Did they appreciate this?

Sagmeister: Actually, they did sign off on it. But then Hong Kong really hated this poster. It actually wound up on the cover of *The South China Morning Post*, which is sort of *The New York Times* of Hong Kong. It created this big controversial debate.

Lou Reed: What happens when you have a controversy? Do you get paid? Or do you become like a black-market item?

Sagmeister: In this case, it was a pro-bono job I did when I was working at Leo Burnett Hong Kong. So payment didn't really matter.

Lou Reed: Let's step back one second: What did you do with the Fulbright?

Sagmeister: I was here in New York for three years studying communication design at Pratt. After that I went back one year to Austria and then two years to Hong Kong.

Lou Reed: Jeez-us! That's a global background! Didn't you go to India or Brazil, something to balance it out?

Sagmeister: I love big cities. I grew up in a tiny town in the Austrian Alps, so...

Lou Reed: [Referring to Move Our Money logo, featured on pg. 169 in *Made you Look*] And what's this, it's very beautiful

Sagmeister: It's a little pin that's also a logo for an organization of about 500 businessmen and retired military people, called Move Our Money. The guy behind it is Ben Cohen from Ben & Jerry's fame.

Lou Reed: Nice move, Stefan! Ice cream for life! High cholesterol guaranteed! I know what I should've done: I should've said I'd do this interview if you design a logo for me, as good as your trademark "S" for Sagmeister. Because it's so easy for you.

Sagmeister: [whispering] It's not easy at all.

Lou Reed: You mean, It doesn't fax well? [laugh]

Sagmeister: Move Our Money is an organization that wants to cut 15 percent of the Pentagon budget and move it over to healthcare and education. Everything that's red in the pie chart is the Pentagon's

here was to make these unbelievable numbers that are associated with military spending into an identity, into a logo. Ben Cohen originally wanted a logo based on some sort of mascot.

Lou Reed: You mean like a giant dog?

Sagmeister: For example. And in the same meeting, when he mentioned the fact that half of the United States budget goes to the Pentagon, I just couldn't believe it. Then, when we were trying to design the logo and all these mascots, none of them seemed as strong as those numbers that he had mentioned.

Lou Reed: So the power of what he said with numbers wasn't translating through the design.

Sagmeister: Exactly. And then the idea just came up. Why don't we just make the numbers into the logo?

Lou Reed: The thing is, though, so pretty, it's almost like a little sun.

Sagmeister: As you wear it, it's definitely question-inducing. Whenever I have it on, people immediately ask, 'So what's this all about?' And then of course that gives you the possibility to talk about it for a couple of minutes.

Lou Reed: Hopefully to women. [laugh]

Sagmeister: Exactly.

Lou Reed: [Turning to pg. 238-239 in *Made you Look*] Ah, well, here we are. My finest hour! This is my chicken video which we were talking about. Twenty-five pounds of latex and feathers, some heavy suit! There was ice under my shirt because it was so hot under this costume. I was very proud of it. Under the theory of: if we like it, there must be somebody else out there who likes it. We're not from another planet, we're just in a minority, but that's okay. It's such a beautiful video, were you happy with it too?

Sagmeister: I was scared shitless during the whole shot. But yes absolutely, it was such a sweet combination of you being in a chicken suit and by contrast, the elegant execution which was very similar to a pretty old cabaret scene.

Lou Reed: It's amazing what you can do with pretty much no money and in 10 or 11 hours with a 25-pound chicken suit out of the bowels of Brooklyn. Have you done any more videos since then?

Sagmeister: This was pretty much the last job before this whole year without clients?

Lou Reed: You took a year off. Are you back in? Is this the beginning of "back into the fray"?

Sagmeister: October 1st, 2001, was the first day.

Lou Reed: Why did you take time off?

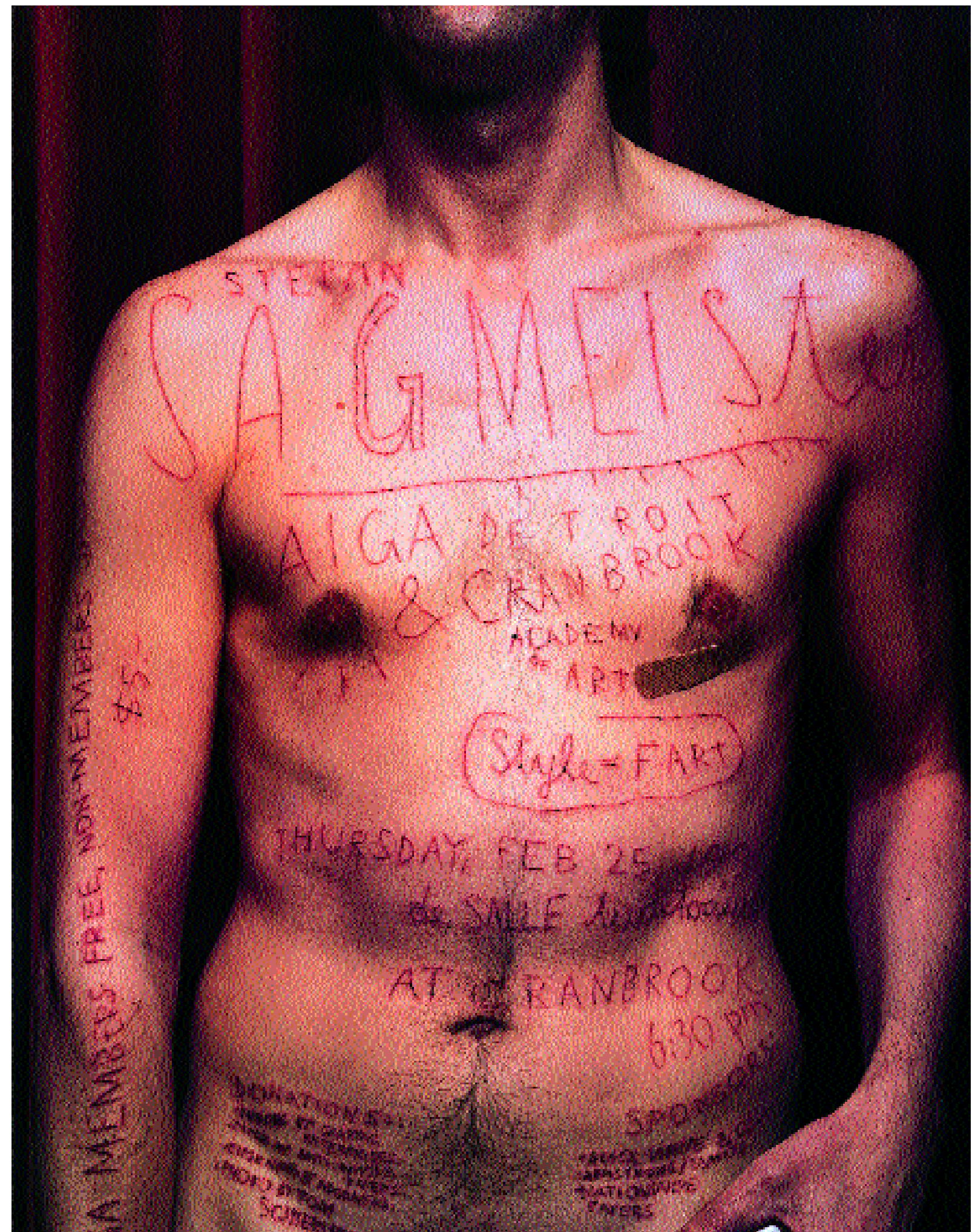
Sagmeister: For one thing, the work was becoming repetitive. We were starting to redo ideas we had done before, and in retrospect, having worked in many different cities, I was missing this gap in between that allows for re-orientation. I also had led a workshop at Cranbrook where these mature students created a two-year space for themselves just for free-thinking experimentation, and I got really jealous. So I told all my clients a year in advance I would be taking a year off.

Lou Reed: But weren't you worried that they'd forget you? It's so competitive out there, that right when you come back, it's like you disappeared?

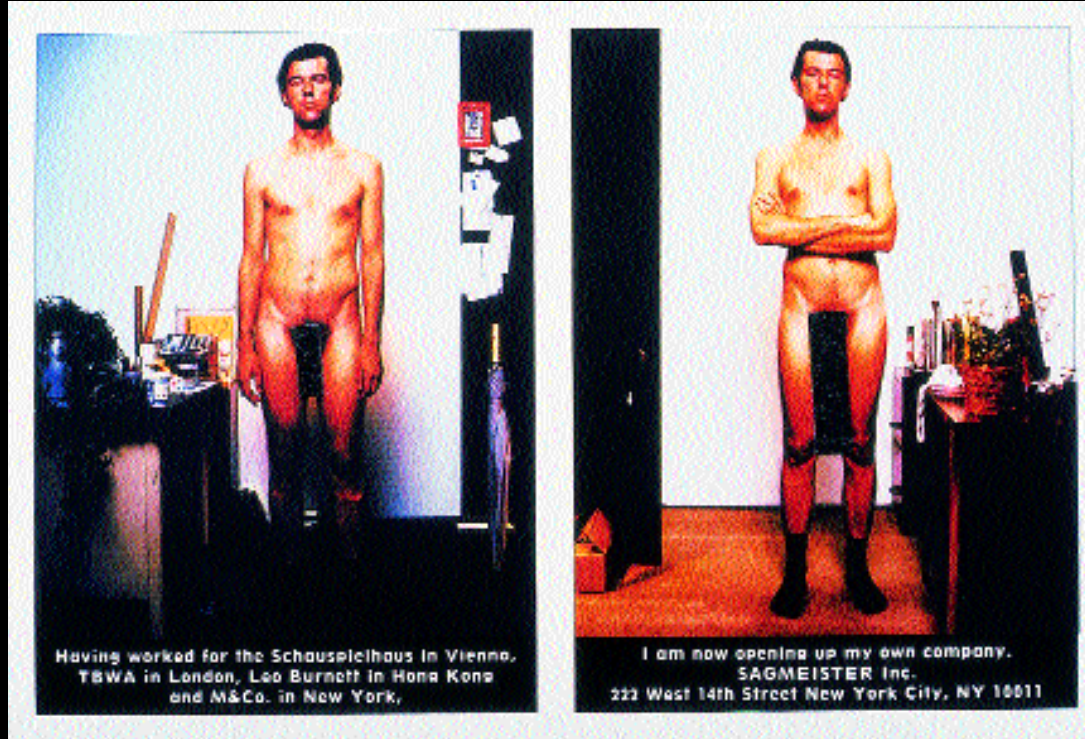
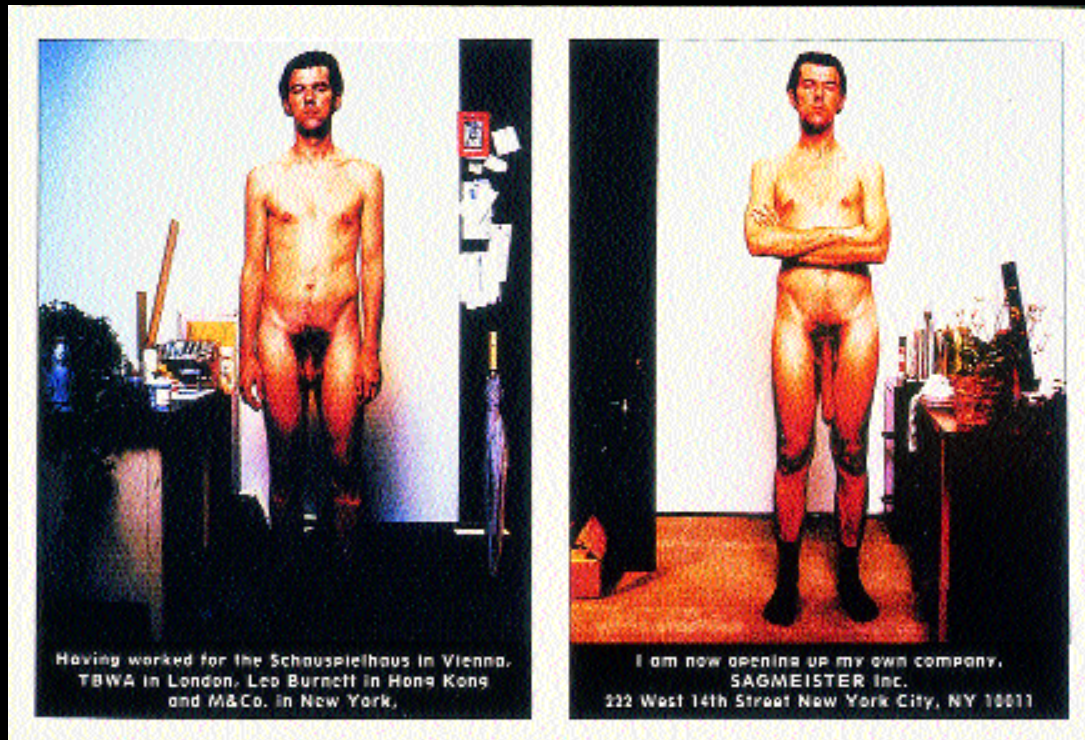
Sagmeister: I think there was a little bit of that worry, however the reaction I got from my clients was pretty encouraging. "Good for you, I wish I could do the same," they'd say. Whenever I do things that feel right, they turn out alright.

Lou Reed: Well, that's what I find, that's called instinct. Even if it may take a little while to see the results. Something really flops into your lap like a giant bird with a golden egg.

Sagmeister: Whenever I do something that needs a little bit of my guts, it turns out fine and whenever I go the wimpy way, it doesn't. In the beginning I was very happy to have all this empty time space in front of me but I found very quickly that all I did was returning emails, laundry and videos. From the seven previous years, I had a little list of things I wanted to do but always thought I was too busy to



language that I knew, graphic design, and to spend my time figuring out if I had anything else to say.”—Stefan Sagmeister



“On *Pass Thru Fire*, the book of my lyrics, I wanted Stefan Sagmeister to do the book because he’s the only person who would

CD cover including the 12-page booklet, not because I tried to become a faster designer, but because I wanted to see how this time pressure would influence my thinking and the process. Mondays, 10 to 11: free thinking. As you see, I put all the difficult things in the morning. In the afternoon, I'd check out books I had bought but never looked into, or would go to galleries.

Lou Reed: So what was on the top of your list?

Sagmeister: The objective was not to end up with completed projects, but to experiment. At the very beginning, every possibility was open, maybe I'd go into film or music. I dropped both of these paths very quickly, realizing that it would take 10 years to learn to the point where I could speak these new languages. I decided it would be more productive to use the language of graphic design I know and spend my time figuring out if I have anything else to say. Aside from experimenting, one of the challenges I had given myself was to try to think BIG, BIGGER, always in bigger terms. I also started to seriously rethink the direction of the studio from an entertainment-related studio towards socially-conscious assignments.

Lou Reed: Do you own your own company or are you part of a conglomerate?

Sagmeister: I own it, and have no desire to be absorbed in the future. [laugh]

Lou Reed: So you're still staying on the outside, so to speak. That's where I exist. I was telling a friend of mine, Oscar, a novelist, that I was born on the outside, and have stayed there. Probably one of the reasons I'm still around is because I've never made any attempt to be on the inside. I have less to do with these people and I can't fulfill their expectations. Anyway, they don't like what I do, and I don't like them either actually. I walk away because I can only take so much of music industry nonsense, before it starts to get debilitating or depressing. There are so many similarities between what you and I do: the people you deal with, the judgments they're making, what they want, what they expect, how they hope to sell, who they're aiming at, how low the bar gets to be. But at a certain point, I think people learn not to come to you for certain projects. You're just the wrong person. They know that it's hopeless. Nonetheless, I'm exposed to the horrors of these people. And you? Are you coming back refreshed after a year away?

Sagmeister: I would definitely hope so.

Graphis: Can you discuss, a bit more, your collaboration on *Pass Thru Fire*, the book of Lou Reed's lyrics?

Lou Reed: I very badly wanted Stefan to do the book because he's the only person I could trust who would know what I was talking about. We sat down, song by song, album by album, trying to find the feeling behind each song. Because everything I do is emotionally-based. That's the deal, period. Forget about any particular idea, it's just about emotion. I sat down with Stefan who, I guess, knew this right off, and he said, 'What's this one? And what's this one?' And the book reflects this progression, literally, through design. I don't know if anyone's ever done that on such a scale. And we had these amazing discussions with some of the people at the publishers' who would sit there and really not get it.

Sagmeister: We wanted to give an overview of Lou's career. If you look at the music, he stuck pretty much to a basic four-piece rock'n roll format. In a similar way, we took one typeface and stuck with it throughout, but changed it depending on each of Lou's emotion.

Lou Reed: Actually, Stefan would ask me 'What are your favorite lines?' 'Oh, that's really easy!' No one's really asked me that one before. For every one of my songs, I know which line is my favorite. So now, in the book, all of those lines jump out at you in some way. They're upside-down, or they're darker, or they come out at you. I don't know whether people consciously know that but subconsciously they absorb that line. Because it also gives you the rhythm. How do you get the rhythm of the words when they're printed like that? Anybody could've just printed it straight in a classical way. As

tions, touching other people's hearts than design is. Probably most people around here have five, ten songs that are really milestones in their lives and upon hearing them, just change their mood.

Lou Reed: Everybody remembers the song from their first date or the wedding song. We really do attach songs to moments.

Sagmeister: When you write these songs, is there something you have in mind? How do you start in the first place?

Lou Reed: I do it automatically. The only reason I write a song is if I have a project. Otherwise, they sit in my mind. That's why everything set up around me is: push the button, it'll record. There is no time to be concerned with details. All I'm ever interested in is getting the idea. Once I get the idea, then I can tie it in. If I don't put it down, it will go away, and will never, ever come back, so it depends on what kind of schedule I'm on. We've got one night, it's really got to be, Boom! As a result I have a lot of very expensive equipment but I actually use this \$29 Sony with a built-in speaker. That's how I do it.

Sagmeister: So you start with an idea?

Lou Reed: Yes, it's either a written phrase or some kind of melody line. Something that's, for whatever reason, going on. On and on until you say, 'Okay, this one's freedom.' And that's it.

Sagmeister: That's how we work too: start with an idea. Once the idea is decided we look for the most appropriate format and style that the idea should be presented in. During my year off, I read this very interesting article by Robert Rauschenberg in *The New York Times*, who said he never starts with an idea. He even said that if he has an idea, he goes for a walk to get rid of it, because he thinks that if he does start with the idea, he will only repeat either what others or himself have done. He'd prefer the process and all the insecurities to be part of the project.

Lou Reed: And the more pressure, the better.

Sagmeister: You mean the more pressure, the better for the piece or the better for you?

Lou Reed: Both. I don't want to sit around and obsess. If there's no deadline, it could go on forever. I always leave things for the last minute anyway. It's pointless to tell me a long time in advance. It just doesn't look like anything's being done if I don't do it right away. The actual dirty work will take place on the last day. But it's been gestating there [pointing to his head] for God knows how long, because I decided so. I used to have a notebook where I put stuff down. I stopped. Enough is enough already. I'm tired of hearing it. I'm doing other things. It's like a permanent radio station into my subconscious.

Sagmeister: I have to get it out and keep a lot of notebooks. In the last year, I filled one and a half of these large notebooks. And if I don't put it down on paper, it's just gone.

Lou Reed: See, I never have old songs around. If something's due I want it to be a new one that just showed up. They say, 'Why don't you put some of these ideas down?'

Sagmeister: Meaning, things left over from a previous album?

Lou Reed: Ideas that are floating around right now that I could put down. And then, if something came up, I wouldn't be under the pressure of getting anything done, and they'd be sitting there already. But I don't do that. I just don't. I always wait until the night before. I did that in school too.

Sagmeister: Because you would be afraid that they would be stale?

Lou Reed: Yes. I would lose interest in it, literally. I guess I have a very short attention span.

Sagmeister: Sometimes I go through old sketchbooks to get an idea. They are concepts that did not work for a project then, but might be very useful as a seedling for a project now, leading to something completely different. I also find that when the concept sparks from outside of the parameters of the project itself, the results are often more interesting.

Pg.126 Memory Lanes, *proposed memorial for 9/11, 2001*. Design: Stefan Sagmeister, Mathias Ernstberger, Copy and Name: Karen Salmansohn, Photo: Zane White

With this Memory Lanes Project, we plan to put a name and legacy on every street corner, as an ongoing memorial to the loved ones families are sadly missing. Families will then be able to gather on the corner that honors their loved one and pay their regards. The front of the sign shows the name and dates of a missing person, the back a little story connected to that person, a philosophy or in some cases an eggplant parmigiana recipe we can all benefit from having. With this memorial, New Yorkers can be stuck in a taxi, or stuck standing waiting at a red light, but still be moved.

Pg.128-129 Pass Thru Fire, *Lou Reed book of lyrics*, (6" x 8-1/2"). 2000. Art Direction: Stefan Sagmeister, Design: Stefan Sagmeister, Hjalti Karlsson, Jan Wilker, Photo: Lou Reed, Client: Hyperion Press

The collected lyrics of Lou Reed features a self portrait with embossed type on its cover. The lyrics are divided into chapters according to each album. Every album has its own typographic style reflecting the overall mood and feel of the words and the music. The steadiness and simplicity of his work is reflected by the use of one single typeface throughout the book. This typeface gets drunk, does drugs, becomes incomprehensible, dresses up, is mean, visionary, gorgeous and glowing. It's Lou's voice.

Pg.131 Sagmeister Aiga Detroit poster, (27-1/2" x 39"), 1999. Art Direction: Stefan

Sagmeister, Photo: Tom Schierlitz, Client: Aiga Detroit

For this lecture poster for the AIGA Detroit we tried to visualize the pain that seems to accompany most of our design projects. Our intern Martin cut all the type into my skin. Yes, it did hurt real bad.

Pg.132 Studio opening card. Concept: Stefan Sagmeister, Design: Stefan Sagmeister & Eric Zim, Photo: Tom Schierlitz

Sent this card out with removable tape over the private parts. Copy underneath the left picture reads: Having worked for the Schauspielhaus in Vienna, TBWA in London, Leo Burnett in Hong Kong and M&Co in New York, underneath the right picture: I am now opening up my own company. Sagmeister Inc.

Pg.133 Sagmeister Inc. Business Card, 1998. Art Direction & Design: Stefan Sagmeister, Client: Sagmeister Inc.

Pg.135 Sagmeister Inc.'s studio on West 14 Street in Manhattan. Photo: Tom Schierlitz

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