

stefan sagmeister

DESIGNER ON SABBATICAL

Sagmeister Inc.'s Experimental Outcamp is located in Bali, Indonesia, far from Stefan Sagmeister's headquarters on "wonderful West 14th Street" in New York City. For the second time, Sagmeister is scratching the proverbial "seven-year itch" by dropping out for an entire year, leaving clients behind, to refresh and renew himself as a designer and artist. Sagmeister began his first client-free year in 2001, when he was 38, and he is now beginning his second at 46. He says he has only two more sabbaticals to go before his retirement age of 65 and argues that it is much more useful to take those years early, interspersed throughout his working life, rather than pin them to the end of it. In fact, after it became clear that the ideas he developed during his first sabbatical subsequently inspired his most successful design projects, he became convinced that he needed to make a respite integral to his creative regimen. How many of us dream of doing the same? Sagmeister has certainly become a model for those who can consider such a radical leap; for the rest of us, we'll live vicariously. It was in this spirit that I caught up with him via e-mail to find out how, a few months into this adventure, his expectations are meeting reality; what inspired him to select Bali; and what he misses, if anything, now that he's so far away.



As part of a series of type treatments, Sagmeister created the letter *s* floating on water, using flowers that fell from the tree in front of his studio.

HELLER: This is your second in a seven-year cycle of "sabbaticals"; what gave you the idea to make this a regular part of your life? **SAGMEISTER:** My desire for the initial experimental year had many reasons, among them my experience that I often did the best thinking in time periods without pressure. After my studies, I had moved from city to city every two years, so this kind of thinking was often done in between jobs and places. After running the studio in New York City for seven years, I had no intent to move again, so this year allowed for time to explore. Ferran Adrià, who is now considered by many to be the best chef in the world, closes his restaurant north of Barcelona for six months every year—while keeping a full kitchen staff—in order to experiment. That's half of

his time put aside for experimentation, compared with my paltry 12.5 percent. If this second year turns out to be as enjoyable and influential for the subsequent work as the first one, I might increase the percentage considerably. **HELLER:** Did anything else specifically trigger this? **SAGMEISTER:** When the 60-year-old Ed Fella visited our studio in New York and brought a number of his fantastic four-color ballpoint typographic experiments, I was completely blown away. He self-mockingly called it "exit art"—art he does before he dies. I was in love with the sheer inventiveness and quality of the work and at the same time felt that it would have had a bigger impact on a working life if interspersed regularly throughout one's life. **HELLER:** How easy is it to put your

client-driven work on hiatus for an entire year? **SAGMEISTER:** I had all sorts of fears before the first year—that we will lose all our clients, that we will be forgotten, that we’ll have to start from scratch. As none of these fears became true the first time around, I started this second one with few worries. For me, it was simply a matter of proper time planning. I just put it into the plan agenda, worked out the finances, and told the clients. **HELLER:** What appealed to you about Bali for your year away? **SAGMEISTER:** I had spent the first sabbatical in New York City because the idea of doing this was as big a bite as I could take at the time. As I wanted the second year to be different, my initial thought was not New York. I know the U.S. and Europe too well to generate much excitement—I couldn’t see myself in Arizona for a year—and don’t know South America and Africa well enough. So Asia it was. I had worked in Hong Kong for two years and know it a bit—and the two most beautiful landscapes I had seen in Asia were Sri Lanka and Bali. As Sri Lanka still has a low-level civil war going on, my decision fell on Bali. Aside from the possibility of living in the jungle and at the same time being five minutes away from a small town that would not only have good restaurants but also sell printer cartridges, it was the incredible craft culture that attracted me. There are entire villages of woodcarvers, stonemasons, wig makers, textile weavers, and silversmiths close by. **HELLER:** Is there anything you regret about leaving for a year? **SAGMEISTER:** The Obama campaign asked me to design a poster, and I was really sorry to not be able to oblige. It was just before my sabbatical started, and I had sworn to myself that I would not take anything on, no matter how tempting. And anyway, I am very aware that the tiny influence my little poster might have had would be only on the converted. **HELLER:** I can’t help but presume part of your retreat is a critique of contemporary practice. Do you believe that the contemporary design language is vital or stagnant? **SAGMEISTER:**



The view from Sagmeister's Bali studio. He observes, "If I can't make it here, I can't make it anywhere."

There is lots of good design work being done today. I think of Ji Lee, or Rick Valicenti, or Marian Bantjes, or Maira Kalman, and many more. It is true, though, that most people I really admire have experimentation institutionalized into their practice. **HELLER:** In your own work you play with various forms—there is never a single stylistic underpinning. Do you foresee a new aesthetic emerging from your travels? **SAGMEISTER:** Today I badly copied a page from an 18th-century Turkish Koran I had seen in the Museum of International Muslim Art in Kuala Lumpur. I truly hope this has an influence on my aesthetics, as typography rarely reached a pinnacle of such absolute and total gorgeousness as it did in 15th- to 18th-century Islamic culture, which didn't allow pictorial imagery. All the creative desires had to go into type and ornamentation. **HELLER:** You are connected, albeit intermittently, to the rest of the world. How do you determine who and what to let through the doors during this year? Are there any demanding clients who *must* talk to you *now*? **SAGMEISTER:** No. All clients were warned as much as two years in advance, and most were envious. So far, they are all very respectful. And of course it

helps a lot that Joe Shouldice is in the studio in New York City, keeping a low profile while finishing up some jobs and being there to answer questions. Richard The and Joe just installed a new maxim in Amsterdam, "Obsessions Make My Life Worse and My Work Better." It consisted of 250,000 Eurocents carefully and painstakingly laid out with the help of many, many volunteers in a public space in Amsterdam. [Editor's note: The coins were removed by Dutch police, who worried about theft.] Other than that, we shifted all possible new sentence installations to September 2009. **HELLER:** But what have you actually learned so far? **SAGMEISTER:** When attacked by hollow-eyed Balinese dogs, I can make them scatter by pretending to pick up a stone. **HELLER:** So, are you happy? **SAGMEISTER:** As I am very aware how boring it is to hear about other people being happy, I say only this: I get up every morning at 5 a.m. simply because it's more exciting to start working than to turn around and sleep some more. I do seem to have a lot of energy. After enjoying a giant pot of coffee and a medium-sized cigar for breakfast, I start my daily schedule of little experiments. This is coming along very well. ■