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Oral history interview with Stefan Sagmeister, 2012 Dec. 4-5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Stefan Sagmeister on December 4 and 5, 2012. The interview took place in the designer's studio in New York City, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Stefan Sagmeister has reviewed the transcript. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Stefan Sagmeister at the designer's studio in New York City on December 4, 2012 for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, Card No. 1.

Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be here.

STEFAN SAGMEISTER: Thank you. Same to you.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's start with some early biographical information and move through that —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sure.

MS. RIEDEL: — and then we'll get on to the work —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — and some of these other questions.

Basically you were born in 1962 in Austria?

MR. SAGMEISTER: That is correct. I was born in a small town called Bregenz, very close to the Swiss border —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — in a county that is, you know, about 300,000 people in the Alps, very pretty. It used to historically be a fairly poor neighborhood, meaning in the 18th and 19th century the families had to send their kids to West Germany to get basically to work and get fed.

And in the 20th century, mostly through the textile industry and then later through tourism, got actually incredibly wealthy. And if you go there now it's a very well-to-do area with — you know, specifically coming from the outside you will see, like, you know 7 Series BMWs in front of every farm. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: That's unusual.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: What date were you born?

MR. SAGMEISTER: August 6.

MS. RIEDEL: August 6.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And your parents' names?

MR. SAGMEISTER: They are Karl and Karolina.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Karl and Karolina Sagmeister. We had a store at home that used to be sort of called a department store but it was tiny, you know, like not a department store. This is not Saks 5th Avenue.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: This is the big store in the small town.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So this is a town with 25,000 people. And they basically ran the store where people bought the suit for Sunday church.

MS. RIEDEL: Got you. Siblings?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, we are six. I am the youngest of six, three boys and three girls. My two older brothers took over the store and the launched it much, and by now have, I think, probably around 20 stores between them.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: All men's and women's fashion. One brother does men's; the other does women's fashion. And both my older sisters are in education. One of them is a principal of a grade school and the other one is a supervisor of principals of high schools.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And there's a brother who is the one who owns Blue. Is that —

MR. SAGMEISTER: That is the middle brother.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So he's also gone into clothing, into fashion.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Both my older brothers got into clothing yes. Yeah. And so is the sister that's next to me in age. She does — she's actually in New York right now and she does wholesale fashion for a German fashion designer.

MS. RIEDEL: Does that relate, do you think, to the textile history of the area of Austria you were in?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Not really, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: That textile history was manufacturing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: And I think from the turn of the century to, I think, all the way to the '60s there was heavy textile manufacturing, and some of that's died. And some others specialized incredibly and they're doing still well.

You might know Wolford stockings, sort of like women's — sort of like silk stockings. They're a high-end brand that I think you would get at Barney's or Saks or so. They are still manufacturing. And a couple of others that really specialized into something are still doing well, but the medium ones basically died out.

But at that point I would say specifically ski — tourism came relatively late to Austria, and they — well, it came relatively late to Voralberg, where I'm from.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And they were smart enough to learn from the mistakes of the Swiss and Tyroleans and kept everything very small and sort of ecofriendly and overseeable.

And by now, you know, some of the most exclusive and expensive resorts are around there, because they at least have a feeling of authenticity if they are not really authentic. [They laugh.] But they're quite well-organized places. They're beautiful. You know, the mountains are great and the skiing is very good, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you describe your early childhood, sort of up to the age of 10 or 15, before you really became interested in design? What was important? Were you attending many art classes? Did you go to museums? Was art or design —

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, art played a very — I think until I really got interested in design, art played a very minor role. I mean, of course we had art education in school —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — but I did not particularly excel at it. I mean, of course as a child I drew, like every kid does, but I don't think with showing any particular talent, or that I don't remember having been better than classmates. There was one classmate that did stand out, but it was not me.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Okay. Your grandfather, however, was a sign painter.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, exactly, so there was a history in the family, and I think my — well, my grandfather learned sign painting —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and was a pretty terrific drawer and a very good craftsperson. So he could really — he could pull off, you know, modeling a very exact likeness of himself, self-portraits, or he could — I mean, he was technically a good drawer.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: However his dad, as was customary at the time in the region, of course forced him to take over the store. That store has been, you know, in the family I think for at least three or four generations. It used to be an antique store, well, like a low-end antique store, high-end —

MS. RIEDEL: Used furniture?

MR. SAGMEISTER: — used furniture, thanks. [They laugh.] Exactly. Yes. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was the name of the store?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Same — Sagmeister.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: It was always under the same name, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So what did you do? What was of interest to you when you were younger? Was your grandfather still alive?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, my grandfather had died before I was born. So I grew up with his work hanging around the house.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So specifically like, you know, painted signs, portraits of him. So there must have been some influence on that but not directly.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. And I think that — I mean, for one thing my memory is truly bad —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. SAGMEISTER: — of my early childhood, so it's now very difficult for me to —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — separate actual memories from things that I've seen on photos and stuff that's been retold later by siblings.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: In general, I'd say that it was fairly happy and fairly protected, you know. I mean, it was a middle-class family with parents that got along incredibly well —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — where there was literally zero fighting or even zero bad vibes in the air.

I fought of course a lot with all my siblings, specifically the ones — my sister who was closest to me in age. I think the other ones wouldn't even get bothered. Or with the older sisters, they felt quite protective of me because I was, you know, considerably younger.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And the older brothers couldn't give a shit —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because, you know, it was too large of an age difference.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think I was an unexceptional student — you know, in the middle as far as the grades were concerned. Not really good; not really bad. And then I made, I think, a considerable mistake when I was — let's see, was it six or 10? When I was 14, I went to a specialized high school in engineering.

In Austria you have a choice for the last four years of high school to either continue in a general direction or you can go into an economic direction or in an engineering direction.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I didn't want to go into the economic direction because — simply because both of my brothers had done that —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and I wanted to separate myself from there. I didn't want to stay where I was because the teachers there were still from the really previous generations. We had some very tough teachers there, including some actual Nazis. And I don't use that term lightly —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — but meaning, like, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — we had a guy in Latin who was excluded from the far-right party from being too much of a Nazi —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — which at that point, you know, they were still allowed to teach. You know, parents didn't really get involved with the schools. Even in my home it was more like — if you complained about anything at school it was like, "Oh, I'm sure you did something wrong yourself." You know, that sort of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So I changed into the engineering school, and that was a mistake because I really didn't have

a particular talent for it and I just had a tough time there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I stayed there for three years but was already at that point sort of like a, you know, a kind of boy who would talk back —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — but didn't quite have the talent or the grades to allow that to happen successfully.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So I just about made it in the third year and then, with considerable effort and many additional exams, managed to go back into a general direction of high school.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Was there anything about the engineering that was appealing? The way things went together —

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know what? Afterwards.

MS. RIEDEL: Afterwards, yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I actually — me afterwards, I of course discovered that a good number of the things that I learned there came in handy, including, you know, last week when I was at a furniture manufacturing place in the Philippines and, you know, from my engineering background I had quite an idea of these things, of how these things worked, was notably impressed with the expertise because I knew how difficult these things are to achieve.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So I think that in general, yes, I did learn stuff there. At the time I just pretty much hated it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And, you know, I didn't get along with the teachers nor with my fellow students.

MS. RIEDEL: I would imagine.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And that of course then went both ways.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MR. SAGMEISTER: So I really felt like, at 16, when I managed to go back into the general high school, that kind of almost saved my life. And at that point I already had an interest in design and there was a possibility — in the general high school, like, there was, in that town or — yeah, in that town there was sort of like a magazine, a youth magazine —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — that people that went to that high school were also part of it. So I asked about it and became part of that youth magazine, which then allowed me — well, I found out there that actually I liked designing much better than —

MS. RIEDEL: This was *Alphorn*?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, *Alphorn*.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know a lot about it already, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I try.

And now, I've heard that described as a student magazine —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — and also as a little bit of a left-bent magazine.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: But I would — how would you describe it?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, it was a very simple operation.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Was it run completely by students, high school students?

MR. SAGMEISTER: High school students and some university students.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay. And what was the focus?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I would say the focus was culture, some sort of a little — there was a little do-gooding involved, like we definitely had a connection to, at that point also — historically super-interesting now — to poor alpine farmers, that they — like, you know, they delivered cheese to us. And we had like, you know, once a month — whatever, twice and once twice a month — a store opened where you could, you know, buy stuff. But it was also — it was on a very tiny level and I doubt that it helped any alpine farmer in any meaningful way.

And of course shortly thereafter, I think in the decade following, that whole system completely reversed itself where all the poor farmers became rich and all the rich farmers became poor —

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because of course the people who were high up on the mountains were the super-poor farmers because they had the difficult meadows, you know, that were steep that nobody wanted.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, of course those meadows were also the best for skiing and had the best views.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So they actually became very, very wealthy, and the people — and the farmers who were in the valley —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — who were the rich ones because they had the flat —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — the flat surfaces that was easy to farm, became poor just because farming, you know, was not rich or a very financially advantageous profession.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Not through our cheese-selling.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: So as a child were you very athletic? Did you do a lot of skiing?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you spend a lot of time in the mountains just wandering around looking at things?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think I was a mediocre — you know, it’s basically — it’s the law in Austria that you have to ski.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And in that — and I could ski well enough that it would be fun —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — but in the world of skiing I was not outstanding, nor was I particularly athletic. Not at all. I think at 13 I started to be in bands —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — in particularly terrible bands —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. SAGMEISTER: — which we were unaware of.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And again, I think that's — there was still stuff to be learned from there when we were extremely delusional, you know, thinking that we would be just as good as our heroes or as actual bands if we would only have that equipment.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But all very, very helpful for being a designer later —

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because I think I had learned that lesson then —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and never really hoped that equipment is going to save my ass later on.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. What did you play?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I played the flute and I sang —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — both extremely badly. Like, I managed to be the worst member of bad bands. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Ouch.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you all write your own music —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: — and your own lyrics?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay. So it wasn't just cover material.

MR. SAGMEISTER: No.

MS. RIEDEL: You were working on your own —

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, no, we were working our own material and we were composing much too difficult for our — for what we could actually play.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I think that also I would say that the rock scene in Western Austria was quite sparse and not professional. So I only much later, when I studied here in New York, got an idea of where that field is, you know. And much later, when we designed covers for bands —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and I saw some of these bands play, specifically when I was playing rehearsal spaces, it became very, very clear that, you know, there were worlds in between there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Or if they are in bands, then I was never in a band.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, they have nothing to do with it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But there was some stuff to be learned from there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, clearly from the very beginning you were interested in some sort of creative profession. And it seems like you were also interested in — well, let's talk a little bit more about Alphorn. I don't want to put any words in your mouth.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was — when you look back on that now, what in particular seems significant about it?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, it was a big influence on me, until now I would say. And it was an extremely low-budget operation.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, the magazine ultimately was offset printed, mostly professionally, but we also had at one point bought our own printing machine and tried it ourselves, not very successfully.

MS. RIEDEL: Was the focus specifically regional to that area?

MR. SAGMEISTER: It was regional. It was regional, anything from legalize marijuana, to bad architecture, to city planning, to pro-Nicaragua. You know, at the time I was just close by and, you know, how wrong-footed we were. But I think that on the important parts for me that I still think are very valuable would be some sort of political and social engagements —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — with all the mistakes that we made at the time that I could avoid later.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: For example, like, you know, the puniness of our help I think I avoided later. You know, like being — and I see fellow designers making these mistakes still.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, that's — I don't know, I just got an email two days ago where somebody asked me to, whatever, design a poster to be auctioned off. And they mentioned that last year their auction yielded 600 euros. You know, and it's like, are you guys out of your fucking mind?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, 600 euros? What does that mean? Like, you know, if you, I don't know, auction off something and you raise 6 million euros for something maybe we'll talk again.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But, you know, these lessons — these kind of mistakes I wouldn't make again. And it would probably — we probably sold cheese for 600 euros, you know — [they laugh] —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — for the poor alpine farmer. That would be my guess.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Or I would say — I mean, I quickly found out that I have more fun and possibly bigger talent for doing the layout of the magazine and the illustrations rather than the writing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I wrote a little bit but only in the beginning and then really concentrated on the look of the magazine. I mean, it was, you know — the copy was set with an IBM typewriter, an electric typewriter that we then reduced down so we could get more copy into the magazine. And I did loose-leaf print it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, often — sometimes we had the money to have the printer put the magazine together and sometimes we put the magazine together by hand.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, double page by double page.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it monthly? Was it —

MR. SAGMEISTER: It was quarterly.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, four times a year.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. But it definitely formed a community. Some of the writers went on and did really big things. There was a guy called Hans-Pete Martin who — so it's Hans-Peter — it's Peter, so it's —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — yeah, Martin — and then Martin, yeah. And he went on to write two extremely influential books, one called *Healthy Business* and the other one called *Bitter Pills*.

And they were basically big tomes of very popular writing against the pharmaceutical industry that sold in the millions, got franchised by many newspapers and magazines throughout Europe, and I think chiefly responsible for the incredible anti-pharmaceutical company thinking that's for sure in German-speaking Europe.

So you have — you know, from my point of view now it's completely overblown, you know. I know so many friends on mine in Germany or Austria, you know, they wouldn't take any pills, definitely not a headache pill when they have a headache, but they would also not take the pill like, you know, the — well, what's the name of it? The regular —

MS. RIEDEL: Aspirin?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, the pill — the no-baby pill.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, birth control pill.

MR. SAGMEISTER: They also wouldn't take a birth control pill, but they would basically — but they for sure would take — would have no problem taking coke, you know? But if you think of it, they would trust the Mexican drug cartel —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — more than the Swiss pharmaceutical industry.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I think that sort of anti-corporate thinking was also influenced by Hans-Peter Martin, who used to be an *Alphorn* writer.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. And that really is interesting, given a lot you've had to say about the variety of clients that you work with. And you were interested in working with some commercial clients, some, and nonprofits —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — but that it's much — you're much more specific about the particular people, the particular project and the particular product —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — than whether it's commercial or corporate or not.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly. Well, I mean, I found then later — at the time of course I thought that — you know, at 17 I definitely thought that corporations are bad in general.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I thought that poor people are, by definition, more virtuous than rich people and all that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And then I think pretty much — not even through political rethinking, mostly through experience —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — I found out that — and it was just not my own experience but I saw idiots among the poor and lovely people among the rich, and vice-versa.

MS. RIEDEL: So how long did you work on *Alphorn* for?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Two years.

MS. RIEDEL: Two years.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Two years, yeah, basically during my high school years. And then, like, all the others, like Hans-Peter and many others, went to Vienna to study.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Before we leave this part of Austria, one thing that I've read that you've mentioned is there is still a real pride in the craft. So there was when you were growing up in that area.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you feel like that has also influenced your way of thinking?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I would think so, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. And I was still — you know, that's probably one of the few things that I truly miss while being here, and I think it has many — it has many iterations, but it has — there is much to be said for it. I mean, western Austria, southern Germany and eastern Switzerland have an apprentice system that's very well-established and, I think, functioning to this day. So if you were — if you're 14 and 15, you can have — you have a choice of continuing high school, or leaving high school and then going to school into something that's called the polytechnic, that you only go to school one day a week and do an apprenticeship in whatever you're interested in. But these are mostly — well, these are professions that are manual in many cases, so you can be anything from painting a house to becoming mechanic to becoming — working on some kind of machinery, a baker, whatever. And most of — I think either all or most of these professions, you can only open a business in, in all of these countries, if you are a master in that thing. And a master means you have to go through a three-year apprenticeship, through an examination, then I think you are two years an apprentice master, and then you have to do a big examination, and then that's — you know, you have to — whatever, if you're a baker, you have to bake through all of this stuff and there is a written examination, and then you are considered a master baker, and only then are your allowed to open a bakery. That's true for almost anything.

There's some disadvantages. I'm — it's not all glory, but by and large, I think it's — specifically, if I compare it, let's say, to New York City, you have — what it — what it breeds is a lot of people who have pride in what they do. And to this day, if I go to a butcher there, more than — more than likely this is a butcher who has a spick and

span butchery and where the quality is fantastic, the price is not cheap, but it — from what I observe, it yields a happy butcher because there is — there's some real expertise and some real pride in this. And of course, the customers are very satisfied because the quality is great. And this is true for — I mean, you know, here and there, they do some work there for the local museum and I had something to do with apprentice there. It's — they apprentice there that just — that I have not met here. You know, apprentices who suggest — who suggest things that I know make their job — their job much more difficult. But they suggest it just because they want to be challenged, and they would love to try this specific thing out because — and — I've just never happened to meet in 20 years of working here, the apprentice that I'm working with here, they want to have their day as easy as possible, and anything that becomes more difficult is sort of like seen as a pain in their ass.

MS. RIEDEL: So that whole sense of craftsmanship and specific skill and developing the skills and having, for want of a better word, an arsenal of tools and skills at your disposal, is really developed and really valued.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Just a sort of — a tangential question to that. Would you in any way consider your time with Leo Burnett or with Tibor Kalman — would they in any way feel like your version of an apprenticeship?

MR. SAGMIESTER: Yes. Oh, absolutely. Yeah, yeah, totally. No, no, completely. Yeah. And so — and I would say that in — you know, in a profession that's, say, like design, that pride, of course, is still — is also here in New York. But I think the difference is that you would have it in New York, yes, of course, in the arts or in the sciences, you have these kind of — or journalism, I'm sure — there is — you know, there is this sort of pride around. But in so many others, there really isn't.

You know, let's say when my apartment was renovated three years ago, that entire troop, when I — they were a mixture of Asian and American people in that troop, but I would say from the 10 people that worked on the apartment, there was a not a single one who had learned that or went to school for it.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, all were actors or musicians or whatnot that had dreams elsewhere and did this to earn money. And of course they didn't do such a good job because that's not — that was not in the — their — it was just not in their DNA to do a good job because they didn't have pride in that. They would have had pride in doing the — [inaudible] — or so.

Or — I mean, I think that my favorite story there was when we designed an exhibit here for the Austrian Cultural Institute about a museum in my hometown. My Bregenz happens to have a museum for contemporary art called Kunsthaus Bregenz, which is excellent.

MS. RIEDEL: You've worked with them on and off over the years, yes?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. And its quality is absolutely top-notch international — I mean, this place could be in Chelsea and it would be — ah, it would fit right in with the best of it.

And when we did the exhibition, I needed to visualize a principle of the architect, the Swiss architect. I wanted to have this super-exact drawer, because the architect had — he became — this architect, his name is Peter Zumthor, and it's Peter and then Z-U-M-T-H-O-R. He's at — he became an architect because he grew up with his dad being a cabinetmaker and then made these full wood cabinets that were so exact that when you closed one of the drawers, it made this — [pop] — sound. And that's really — that sound made him want to be an architect.

And it is true, he is the most anal architect. He's a Pritzker prize winner in the meantime, but he is extremely exact. So I wanted one of those drawers in the exhibition where that would make that sound that would visualize that. And when I talked to the very high-end exhibition building company here if they could make me such a thing, they said, no way. They just can't. So I talked to the museum, and the museum's like, well, you know, what we'll send you our — two of our woodworkers of our craftsmen that work for us, and they'll just come. They'll build this in half a day. They'll sent them over two days over before the opening because they couldn't ship the — they couldn't — the cabinet couldn't be shipped because the temperature difference would be too — would be too big. You know, if the wood comes from over there, it would move, blah, blah. So these two guys came and true, in half a day, they made this thing, and exactly to the specifications. But seeing those two guys work in the same room as the high-end New York exhibition building company was just incredible because, I think the difference between those two was the same difference that with my band's to a proper New York band, only vice versa here.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, from a pure craft and skill position, I mean, the Austrians were too friendly to say

anything, but you could see them look at the work that the New Yorkers did and just recoil in horror. Like, you know, just for them basically the mere fact that nails were used was already like — nails? Like — [they laugh].

MS. RIEDEL: That's fantastic. That's a great story. And it's — I think this interview is going to be really interesting because you do have such an international perspective both as a designer; you have this sense of craftsmanship behind it. And it's really informative. I think you just understand the magnitude of the difference in understanding and craftsmanship and that whole range of possibilities.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, and it's — I think that a lot of it is culturally very easy explainable. You know, houses there are built for eternity. You completely — anybody who would build a house there is counting on their grandchildren living in that house.

MS. RIEDEL: To this day, do you think?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. It's — people still really move very little. It's including my nephews and nieces. You know, even if they go and study in Vienna, most of them go back.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I mean, by now also very much more understandably so than when — than in my generation because the place — the places are really livable. You know, you can have — let's say unlike in this country, you can live in the provinces there and still get an incredible amount of live culture. There's a huge opera festival there, as I mentioned, a fantastic museum of contemporary art. There is serious theater. There is a good number of concerts. And because people have fast cars, you know, you're in an hour in Zurich, in an hour and a half in Munich and two and half hours in Milano, in Italy. So you're pretty well-connected. And the standard of living is super high. People have nice, well-built big houses here in the mountains and on the lake. So it's the — I can see why people would go back, but it's end — but people — the culture is that you will travel a lot but you would stay where you are, as opposed to, let's say, if I see, you know, U.S. culture, it's you won't travel internationally at all — I mean, so many people don't have a passport — but you move a lot within the United States. You know, I mean, almost everybody that I've ever talked to, lived on — in different states.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, especially here in New York, I would think, yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And almost — yeah. And almost nobody in Austria would do that, meaning that it would — it's still — if you're from Vienna and you move to Bregenz, you're considered a foreigner basically, yeah, with all that means.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I'm not — it's just different. I'm not saying that one is — because it comes with serious disadvantages, too. You know, it's not — yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course, of course.

So you graduated from engineering school when you were 16, 17?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, I left.

MS. RIEDEL: You left, okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I would have — it was a five-year program. I left after three years with some significant extra exams, got myself admitted into regular high school and then graduated in '81 from there.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And that was still in Bregenz?

MR. SAGMEISTER: That was in Dornbirn, close to Bregenz, 10 miles — 10 kilometers away. So it would be six miles away from Bregenz.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was a general education so then that you could go on and study design when you already wanted to do that?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, exactly, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was really the experience of *Alphorn* that made that clear to you.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, exactly. *Alphorn* was in Dornbirn as well.

MS. RIEDEL: Pardon — yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: *Alphorn* was in Dornbirn as well.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So you applied to the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. You were accepted the second time, yeah, in '82?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly, yeah, first I, you know, didn't get in.

MS. RIEDEL: You needed to improve drawing skills or something along those lines?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly, yes, yeah. When the year for the — into the —Kunstschule Wien — which was sort of a private art school, and that turned out to have the advantage that one of the instructors there was also the assistant — she had two jobs, and she was also the assistant of my — of the professor in the — in the University for Applied Arts, where I really wanted to be. And so she could give me good tips of where I needed to improve in that year. And I think it got me at least two appointments with the professor during that year, allowing me to show the portfolio and sort of, like, getting direct feedback on where I needed to improve, which was mostly drawing from a crafts perspective. I mean, he was very much old school, you know. By the time that I was there, he was in his '60s and had basically placed drawing skills above everything else, which was, at the time, I would say, already quite outmoded.

But looking back, I of course thought it was — it came in very handy. I — through daily — through daily training, I got much, much better, which was deeply satisfying anyway, to see — like, you know, you can literally — I put the drawings into the same folder and you could just basically go back and use all — the one at the bottom was the worst, and, you know, it didn't improve from drawing to drawing, but you could clearly see the — see the improvement.

MS. RIEDEL: And was the work — well, and was the work there specifically 2D then?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes. And there was — at the Kunstschule it was very — both at the Kunstschule and at the — and at the University for Applied Arts, it was a graphic design program, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay. And how did you come to decide on this university? Was anything else even a consideration?

MR. SAGMEISTER: There was, yeah. I also had applied to a thing called Wien Graphische Bundes-Lehr-und Versuchsanstalt which was a — basically, technically almost another engineering school, but one that concentrated on graphic design. And that was much more crafts-oriented, and — but not quite — didn't — its reputation wasn't quite as high for the University for Applied Arts, or — and I actually made the entry exam, then, in the second year for both of them. And I got in for both of them and because — but the Graphische started earlier — a month earlier. So I actually started there not knowing I'm going to get in — because I didn't know if I'm actually going to get into the other one.

So I actually was there for a month, and then, when I did get into the other one, switched. And I didn't even — at that point, I didn't even know if it was — I switched with a heavy heart, because I quite liked the craft orientation, and it was just that the other one was — because it also allowed it — from its organizational point of view, it was another high school. So it also allowed 15-year-olds, while I at that point was 19 — but most people who would be there were my age. But there were one or two 15-year-olds among it too.

But I felt very comfortable there. It was just very school-like, there was an attendance — we were forced to attend. There was — you know, there was definitely authoritarian, like, you know — even when we made gallery [Art Nouceau, Jugendstil, Klimt –SS] — like, you know, there was sort of like a drawing that would take you the whole semester; you were not allowed to listen to your Walkman — you know, it was sort of like — it was very school-like in that way. And I think that was ultimately the reason that I left.

But I felt that — it was very craft-oriented, and I felt that that would do me well, because I had always felt that I could have the ideas by myself, that I didn't really need conceptual education, that I'd — that I'd be much better off with just having craft education. But ultimately, I did switch to the University for Applied Arts.

MS. RIEDEL: And now, that was more of a balance between craft and concept?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, yeah. Well, at least, that's what it stood for. We had a — they have an — unlike the other one, or unlike art education here, most university education in Austria and Germany is faculty-based. So basically, these things are called master classes, and you are, for the whole four years, with the same teacher.

MS. RIEDEL: All day, every day, one teacher?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes. And then you might have like — you know, whatever; a couple of side things like art history or maybe typography or a thing like that. But you're basically this one teacher with one professor.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's almost like an apprenticeship or a —

MR. SAGMEISTER: In a way, yes. So these classes depend unbelievably on that teacher, of course.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So if that teacher is fantastic, you will have a great education. If that teacher is — and that school heading in different directions — everything. So they had — let's say fashion was done by Karl Lagerfeld — I'm sure a great teacher, but he was never there. Or — like, you know, now, architecture right now at the school is done by Zaha Hadid — again, a great teacher, but she's never there.

So basically, when you went to them, they ask you — on your final exam was signed by Lagerfeld, which might have been helpful, but from a — you were basically taught by his assistants.

MS. RIEDEL: I see, I see.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Or — and the school traditionally had always looked for sort of stars. And in graphic design, there was a guy who was a prominent Austrian designer, but he was at the very end of his career. And he had given up practicing decades before and was really out of it, and we felt that he was out of it. And I think he was very good in teaching us fundamentals like drawing or like composition — he was particularly strong in composition — but felt that he was lacking in many other — in many other fields. And that's — you know, it was basically true; what was good was that the school's reputation was still big enough that it would attract good students. So you learned from — you know, from your fellow students.

MS. RIEDEL: Fellow students, right. Do you want to mention the design professor's name?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, his name is Paul Schwarz — Schwarz, S-C-H-W-A-R-Z.

MS. RIEDEL: And so you studied with him for three years?

MR. SAGMEISTER: For four years, yes, yep.

MS. RIEDEL: Four years, okay.

Is this where you did the — came up with the idea for the interactive postcards?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes. That was my thesis project at the — at the University for Applied Arts, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So when you look back on that university education, what do you see as the strengths of it and the weaknesses? What did you take away from it that was of value to you, and what do you see, in retrospect, were real shortcomings, other than what we've just mentioned?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. I mean, the composition, some craft orientation, it being in Vienna and having — being exposed to the area's movements, museums, the whole history of possibly still, like, you know Vienna 1900, and so it'll be at the core — Art Nouveau, Jungenstijl — kind of thing and that whole tradition of the equality of all the arts, you know that — you know, many people of that movement, you know, including — Klimt — did posters or what is the applied arts, but also paintings. And there was, you know definitely also still at the university a feeling that everybody there is pretty much on equal footing. It would have not occurred to me to ever think that the guys upstairs in painting are doing — are somehow involved in a more noble direction than we as applied artists. Not at all; there was no such thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know it depends. Like sometimes — I don't know. The fashion department might have had a bigger standing because some prominent guys came out of it, or so — but this was purely on merit rather than, this type action stands above the others. And it was actually only when I became — when I came here and I saw that MoMA catalogue of that famous exhibit, the *High and Low*, when I literally had to ask people here, so who is high and who is low? Like, it was new to me at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: That foreign, yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fascinating. Have you seen that shift when you go back, or is that still the case, do you think?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think that's still the case. I think that's still the case.

MS. RIEDEL: So do you see that as a — very much a European and American differentiation?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I couldn't speak for all of Europe, but if I think now at the universities that I would know — let's say the same would be true in Germany or in Berlin, that it's completely merit-based. Meaning, let's say like — I would say the most — the most sought-after class in the University for Applied Arts while I was there, would be Maria Lassnig class, who was a painter who was — I think she exhibits also here.

But the reason that it was sought after was not because it was a painting class, but because she had an assistant who was fantastic in animation, and some really good animations had come out of this class that everybody in the school was really impressed with. But nobody gave a shit that it came out of a — of a painting class or if that — if those animations would have been seen as applied or not applied. It was purely quality-based, and it's completely — if we would have done the best work, oh, then the graphic design class would have been a much higher standing than the sculpture class.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: It really didn't matter from that point of view.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. So the arts in general, including design and craft are looked at more as a continuum than a device — than any sort of division —

MR. SAGMEISTER: I would think so, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I mean, you know, the same, of course, was true in Germany in the Bauhaus, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: Right. That's — yeah, that's a good point.

You did some work for Schauspielhaus?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Schauspielhaus, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes — some posters that were very significant to you in some way?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes. You know —

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, I think, starting in the middle of the — of the Hochschule für angewandte — for the University for Applied Arts, I met up with a musician who basically was a friend of my sister. He wanted to date my sister, and ultimately did date my sister. And I designed a cover for him that was pretty good and was rejected by his label, and he felt very bad about it, because he and I still thought it was a good cover, and it was rejected out of laziness rather than out of real reasons.

And so he somehow felt — I don't know, he owed me something, and he started to — he started to be in a play for the Schauspielhaus. The Schauspielhaus was basically the foremost theater for new plays in Vienna at the time. Maybe comparing it to the public theater here, roughly. So it's like a real name — very prominent in the city; everybody will know it, all because they advertised very aggressively. So they had posters all over the city, and there was a tradition to them of having very high-quality posters.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So he basically just organized it so that we got a chance to make a presentation to the director of the theater. And at the time they were — they normally played — they normally would do high-end German contemporary theater —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — Handke, Botho Strauss, Jelinek and people like that. And — but here and there they would make a very popular thing, and they did a revival of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" as sort of like an ironic — not a straightforward revival, more like a — like an ironic pastiche kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And my friend was in there. He played a major role in there. And so the — we presented

posters for “The Rocky Horror Picture Show.”

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And the director just happened to love us, and we did the posters for “The Rocky Horror Picture Shows” [sic] and then continued with those presentations and ultimately basically did the posters for that — for that set.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Now the public theater is actually a fantastic comparison because this was at that time quite sensational; that if — as it would be here. If four of my students would take over the public theater, that would be, at least in the little bit of itsy-bitsy graphic design world, quite a sensation, because it’s a — it’s a job that many established designers would love to do —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — that has —and it was exactly the same in Vienna.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I think that turned into the biggest learning experience for the four of us while at school because suddenly we, you know, had to do these posters, had to learn how to do them technically, so we’re forced to ask much more serious questions to our professor, who then in turn turned out to know much more than we knew that he did.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So he really was then also much more helpful than we — than he was to us before.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And of course there was an incredible amount of satisfaction of, you know, working really hard and then seeing your poster anywhere.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, I mean, it was basically all over Vienna. And it led to many other things. I mean, other theaters asked us if we want to do their posters. For me in particular, it led to do a whole series for the Ronacher, which was a much bigger series, for the same director, that I think was maybe the first series that I have done from that time that I still really like, you know, that I would think was a very — really a good piece of work.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was still in school.

MR. SAGMEISTER: This was still in school, yeah. And —

MS. RIEDEL: Was that solo work or was that still a collaborative effort?

MR. SAGMEISTER: That was solo there, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: It turned out that that director liked — out of the four liked my work the best. So when he — when he tried to get that much larger theater, he chose to work with me only.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And in a way the posters before were also all the solo work because we all — we all presented individually and then he chose one.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, which was not great — was not — was not a great strategy, and I would not do it at all like this anymore. But we basically didn’t know any better at that time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: The — [pauses] — now I wanted to make a point that I forgot. Oh, and — no, and ultimately, of course, also, the reason I then at the end of the studies did get the Fulbright was, I think, largely because of those posters too, because when I had originally applied, they told me, oh, for the arts, you basically cannot get the Fulbright, because I think the — in — from Austria —

MS. RIEDEL: Huh.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because I think that the idea of the Fulbright is that you have to prove that you can — that you cannot do something at home, that you have to be able to do it in the States.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I see. I see.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So — which is pretty easy to prove if you're in physics or chemistry, because the programs are so much more advanced.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But in the arts, it's — that's much more difficult to prove.

So when I then ultimately got in front of that commission and showed them my portfolio, I had all these Schauspielhaus posters in my portfolio, and the Fulbright Commission, being cultured people —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — had seen many of those posters and had been to many of those plays and were surprised that they were done by somebody that young or somebody who was still a student, basically. So I think that really made the difference.

MS. RIEDEL: Then how did you decide on wanting to study at Pratt? How did that whole —

MR. SAGMEISTER: It was really a New York thing —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Had you been to New York before?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, I had.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: After graduating from high school —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — I had won a bet with my brother-in-law,

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and so he had to pay a U.S. trip.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And we went on a three-week U.S. trip together —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — that included one week in New York, and that was by far my favorite place.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So we went from New York down to Washington, to Florida, to New Orleans, up to Chicago and back to New York. And I — in — you know, after three weeks I would have wished we would have stayed the whole three weeks — New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I had actually originally gotten the Fulbright for the Art Institute for Chicago and refused to go —

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because I really didn't want to be in Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: So the Fulbright — you weren't able to choose where you wanted to study?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think you applied for it and then it came back with which university will take you.

MS. RIEDEL: I see. I see.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And the Art Institute would take me, but I didn't want to be in Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And then they were like all up in arms and said that never happened to them, that somebody refused to go, and this is like — you know, ridiculous and I will never get another scholarship for the rest of my life. And I said, "Well, tough luck, you know; I'm not going to Chicago."

And then, I think, three months later, the one from New York came through.

MS. RIEDEL: So you just deferred the Fulbright —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — and said, "I'd like to hold out and see if something else comes up"?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. But they said that that is impossible, that will not happen. And then it happened anyway.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I already, strangely, knew that I'd rather be at the School of Visual Arts than at Pratt. I have no idea how I found that out at the time in Vienna, but I must have, because, you know, there was no Internet or anything —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — so it was all — but I knew, somehow, and — but I couldn't because of the — Fulbright required it to be a master's program —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and Pratt was the only one who would offer one in communication design.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. SAGMEISTER: At that point SVA didn't have one yet.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But it — for me, it was definitely — it was a New York thing, like I basically just wanted to be two years in New York. That was the thing. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So how did the — how did the Fulbright unfold? What did you work on here? Did you work with anyone in particular? Was there a particular focus for the work for the two years, or was it all experimental?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, it was basically I did a master's at Pratt —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — you know, and did some — as — I did some freelance work on the side. But because the Fulbright was quite generous — I mean, it also came with a stipend for my apartment —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — it — they had organized it — see, it was — but I even — from — in Austria, I had no idea that the Fulbright was prestigious, no idea, or a big — you know, but it was just not — I don't know — not communicated or — I don't know. It's all — it only became clear once I was here that this is sort of a big deal. And the Fulbright had it organized that some other local foundations had also then given money.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And it came with all sorts of advantages, like there was a woman here, a Fulbright woman, who you could call for free tickets and — because most other Fulbright students weren't — you know, were not in the arts —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — nobody ever went.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So I became like her one student who constantly went to, you know, free theater shows and free concerts. And I mean, she was — basically she had something — almost every day you could go somewhere to see something. So it was excellent. It was wonderful. And I think only for the first three months or so I stayed on campus in Brooklyn, which was a very, you know, dangerous part at the time —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — where Pratt was, I mean, it was pretty — a pretty rough neighborhood —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — then moved into Manhattan and then had some classes at Pratt Manhattan, which at that point was at the — in the Puck Building, and some classes out in Brooklyn.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And who were you studying with? Were there other students that were influential to you? And what came out of that program —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. What actually was nice was — the big advantage of having stayed for the first couple of months on campus was that I stayed or they put us all into an international students building, so you had — I had contact with other people right away, and specifically with people from other directions.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So I became friends with an Israeli photographer, Itai Goral, and with a Turkish product designer, Ayse Birsel. And that was just also very helpful because, you know, Itai would deliver the photographs for my projects, and if I needed something 3D, also I could work with Ayse. It was sort of like there was some big — some — sort of like at some beginnings of interdisciplinary possibilities, because I think universities are notoriously bad in mixing their departments, you know, quite often because they're in different buildings

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — you know, and to this day I think that faculty is trying — you know, I'm trying to do the same with my students. I try to push them to go into other departments, but because it's not all on the same campus and, you know, where — you know, this might be over there, the — and the students are very busy. They have difficulties in really taking advantage of these incredible opportunities.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was just part of your structure when you arrived.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Anything else that was particularly strong or that came out of the Pratt years? Any new —

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, I would say that there were — [pauses] — I'd say overall, as a program, it was not particularly strong.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I definitely remember thinking that — good thing that I don't have to pay for this,

because it wouldn't be worthwhile.

MS. RIEDEL: What would have made it stronger? What was it lacking?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I would say that the program — the overall program wasn't particularly well-structured.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: It was a bit old-fashioned. It — the — out of the many teachers that I had, probably three stood — really stood out. The rest was more mediocre. There were some very weak ones that weren't really weeded out.

[Audio break 23:39 to end.]

[END SD1 TR1]

MR. SAGMEISTER: Like to this day — or I remember already then feeling that, but to this day I feel that's why I teach at the School of Visual Arts. It was a much more modern, more up-to-date —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — where the people who run the program really look who is out there, and they immediately call young designers up that start to do good things. If they're going to come over and teach, they give them a lot of freedom to do so and try to get — I would say that the school of visual arts has a knack to allow people who are very busy to teach a course and make that so hassle-free —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — that they are happily doing so.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Pratt has a more entrenched kind of faculty that, of course, in the best cases, let's say like — Tony DiSpigna — or Alisa Zamir is very good. But then in many other cases it's just not fast-moving enough and it's just a bit too late [ph]. And I think by now that also changed. I mean, the guy who ran the program when I was there is gone.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But, you know, in my experience it always takes about 10 years to build a program like this up, and it takes another 10 years to ruin it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. [They laugh.]

So it sounds as if the New York experience was most fruitful with your fellow students, especially the international students, and through the exhibitions and concerts, plays, theater —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: — that you were able to take in —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — that was more the New York experience.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, absolutely. I came to — [inaudible] — to be New York, and I was extremely aware at the time what an incredible privilege that is and enjoyed every minute of it, and was really — like, I remember — oh, I just saw a poster that I printed that had some crazy 30 colors, silkscreen poster, that I had given a copy to my sister too. And I just recently reread that, and it said somewhere on this poster, you know, something along the line that I will look back at this time as some of the best time of my life, even though I was 22. But it's true; it was just fantastic.

And, you know, all of New York — you know, this was in the mid-'80s —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — you know, had some danger to it but not crazy danger. And it was also very cheap, so there was a lot of people who did the stuff that they liked and financed it with a two-day a week kind of job.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sorry.

MS. RIEDEL: That's all right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So there was — you know, I then was living in the Lower East Side in some crappy place, but there was a lot of people surrounding me that all did the stuff that they loved to do and were able to make a living by, you know, waitressing somewhere or doing something. But I don't know — it actually the energy was fantastic.

MS. RIEDEL: Were there particular art movements or artists' exhibitions that felt very influential to you at the time, or nothing in particular? It was more the overall experience? Music clearly has always been a huge influence certainly —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — early on.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, so it was — I would say it was definitely music. There was a lot of — I'd say it was more music than particular exhibits. Yeah, I would say so. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you able to see a lot of independent small bands around the city? I mean, was it that sort of thing?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I was at CBGB's a lot —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and a lot on the Lower East Side, some clubs. I was in a band again here but a little bit better than the Austrian version but still not great.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, I did go to the galleries in SoHo at the time but I don't remember them being a huge influence.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And no museums either?

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I mean, yes, of course I did go to all the museums, but not with the same — with the same regularity or vigor that I would go now.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So you graduated from Pratt in '90, '91?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, no, much earlier. I graduated from Pratt in —

MS. RIEDEL: '87?

MR. SAGMEISTER: '89.

MS. RIEDEL: '89, okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Or '88. Let's see; I graduated from the University of Applied Arts in '86.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But then it must be two years later, so probably '88 or '89, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And then you had to return to Vienna —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: — briefly for community service?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: I think that's just an interesting question that I'd like just to touch on briefly, is was it always very clear to you that you were not going to go into the military, that you were going to choose community service instead?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that something that was common then?

MR. SAGMEISTER: It was not — I mean, it was not sensationally uncommon.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, you didn't go into prison or anything if you didn't.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So there was a possibility to do community service but you had to prove it, meaning you had to prove that you're a conscientious objector —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and you had to bring whatever, letters from anybody that would — you know, from your priest or anybody, and you read it in front of an interview. But I had so much social engagement, blah, blah, before that I think that my interview was not particularly difficult.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay. And so community service was for one year?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Was for nine months I think, at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Nine months, okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, nine months. And it was at a refugee camp outside of Vietnam. It was not a — I actually always felt that it would do me good to basically — to be outside of design, but I didn't feel that comfortable then anyway and wound up doing a lot of designs for that refugee camp and for freelance clients then in Vietnam, because I really missed it.

The refugee camp was built up in a former village for Austrian young workers —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and so I think it had, whatever, 12 houses, and two of them were still occupied by Austrian young workers and the rest were refugees from — mostly from Eastern Europe and a couple from Africa.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And the Austrian young workers, the few people that were still there, were basically losers. So they were people who like, you know, who were already then older but couldn't find their own apartment and were — not all of them but some of them were real right-wing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So they of course hated the refugees. They also hated the community service guys because real men go to the military of course. So there was some friction there, and I have to admit I was glad when I was out of it.

MS. RIEDEL: When you say you did some design at the refugee camp, what did you —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, like draw a proper map of the village —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — including door signs for the individual houses and the individual doors and, you know, that sort of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Posters for fundraisers for the village, stuff like that, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, I know the Hong Kong story has been fairly well told, but in summer you went for a brief visit and then ended up looking at a few different design firms and were offered a position at Leo Burnett. Is that correct?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And this is in ‘91, correct?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes. I stayed until the end of ‘92, beginning of ‘93, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you summarize what that experience was like for you or —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Hong Kong or —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, both, and Leo Burnett.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What were the strengths of it? What were the weaknesses? What you left with it was of value; what was positively learned and perhaps problematically learned?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, in general it was a situation where you could move and grow very quickly. I was originally hired as a typographer to help their, you know, art directors with type, and I think two weeks into the whole job was offered to restart the design group as a profit center, so basically as its own entity, to work with existing but also possibly new clients in the design world. And that of course, for somebody that young, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — it was a big opportunity.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I think from my portfolio they had also assumed that I had more experience than I really had —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and I definitely didn’t go out of my way to correct these assumptions. And that, in combination with people there working very hard to start out with, it was an incredibly busy and stressful situation.

MS. RIEDEL: I would imagine.

MR. SAGMEISTER: We worked 16 hours a day, often without breaks, often for months without — you know, including Saturday, Sundays.

MS. RIEDEL: Seven days a week?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes. Yeah. It was crazy.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, to the point where I remember being often — you know, getting four hours of sleep, dreaming in those four hours about some catastrophes that happened at work —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — taking a shower in the morning; after five minutes in the shower realizing that it was just a dream, that there were not real catastrophes, and then having that 10-second space of, oh, it was just a dream,

but then all the real catastrophes would come into my mind of stuff that would actually be happening. So it was — yeah, it was very hard —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — partly self-inflicted because there was really also stuff that I was supposed to know that I just didn't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And partly just because I was new, which, you know, mean that I didn't really know which vendors would deliver on time, who you could trust —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — who you couldn't. So it was a lot of learning experience just from the newness of it all — who to hire that could help me, like, you know, all that stuff.

And at the same time because, you know, it was very much a learning by doing, because the clients — well, because printing and production and general was very cheap there and because clients were big, you could of course try out many printing techniques, very fancy finishings — [inaudible] — sometimes totally ridiculous, you know, where I would design a brochure that, you know, had a content that would fit on an 8.5-by-11 sheet and it would wind up, you know, as a 60-page hardcover brochure that was, you know, French-bound and have, you know, pieces of vellum in between every single page, just completely over-produced pieces of luxury shit.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But it was possible. Now as I look at it, you know, total waste of resources.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But at the time it was, you know, possible. And of course you could learn how all this would work and what advantages and what the disadvantages of it were.

MS. RIEDEL: Were there projects that were particularly interesting, particularly successful, particularly sensational?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I would say that from a design perspective, the best stuff that we did there was stuff that was done for either ourselves or for industry-related things.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So we designed the material for Leo Burnett meetings —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — that we sort of put aside as possibilities to do something good, and then, you know, basically designed the shit out of them, like really worked hard and took them very seriously and designed these, you know, very considered notebooks or boxes with stuff inside. You know, we worked long and hard on it.

And, you know, at least there in Hong Kong or in Asia, people hadn't quite seen these things, then won sort of the major awards at design competitions and really put us on the map —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — as far as, you know, as a design group is concerned. For clients it was more difficult because as they are —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think ultimately we designed some proper stuff for Cathay Pacific, the airline there. We designed some proper stuff for Shangri-La Hotels.

But the situation of course was that, you know, we were a design group and a couple of the people that worked in my design group were Westerners, so that meant that the salaries were comparatively high.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And because it was a profit center, we needed to do an incredible amount of work to make this financially viable —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — which was almost — and the design fees there were unbelievably low —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because you had — in Hong Kong you still had a situation where the sophistication of clients were so low that even very large, you know, listing on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange kind of clients went with design groups that were basically sweat shops.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, with all these groups that, you know, they would design annual reports for page rates. You know, a cover cost 12 U.S. dollars, the inside pages cost $6, and of course we could never compete against those.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But the sophistication was so low that many clients either didn't see the difference or — well, they probably saw the difference but they couldn't give a shit.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, as long as it had a red cover with gold embossed type on it, it was fine.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And so the only people that basically had to go with us were high-end luxury clients, because if you sold high-end luxury, you couldn't get your material be done by some sweat shop.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Which put us into this awkward position that even though none of us really was interested in high-end luxury, that's all we did client-wise. Well, not all but mostly. So, you know, Cathay Pacific First Class was our client even though none of us had ever flown first class. Standard Chartered Private Banking —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — even though none of us had a private banking account. Lane Crawford department stores and Shangri-La Hotels, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You just were talking about doing the private work for Leo Burnett and then having these other clients and just working really hard on the Leo Burnett design. Did that begin to plant the idea of the importance of designing things for yourself and doing that consistently throughout your practice, or was that already a clear part of your practice?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think it was already clear.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: That was already clear. I mean, within the role of design it's always easier to do something for yourself —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — you know, because you basically determine it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I found out later on that even if we do something with clients, it if it originates from us then clients are much less involved in it because it's not really their baby.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, let's say, like much later when we did all the things like the *Things I Have Learned*

in My Life So Far series —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — even though all of them were financed by clients and published by clients, we had much, much less client interference in it because the content was mine basically —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — which of course is, you know, more logical.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Like, you know, because in so many cases, you know, I don't know, if you do — I don't know, say you would do an annual report for a large company. That thing is basically the CEO's baby.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, it's what they did in that year.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, and it's basically like you're designing the outfit for the baby of the CEO. So of course he or she wants to be involved in how that outfit looks like.

Well, if you deliver your own content, they are much more — [inaudible] — to your own content. You know, "Design it whatever you feel fit." So it was much easier from that point of view.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And so that makes a distinction as well between clients that come to you that have an idea or want something that is specifically theirs and then clients who want something that's specifically yours.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: When did that begin to happen?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, it started to happen after the first sabbatical —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — when we first got a couple of clients by chance that allowed us to basically what we wanted —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and when we did what we wanted after some real long search. And that stuff got published by these clients, and then consequently got republished and republished and republished. That then over time gave the idea to other clients: Oh, they're doing this stuff in this direction.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: That actually could also work — something like this could also work for us.

MS. RIEDEL: I know I'm jumping us around a little bit, but let's talk about one of those very first ones, whichever you feel is a good example of how that process evolved.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, immediately after the first clients, for a year there were two clients that came. One was a suburb of Paris, Saint-Denis. And they had some sort of biennial going on there.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And at that year's biennial they had the idea of putting up billboards in parks —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and commissioned I think a number of designers to do stuff on these billboards. And there

the brief really was: Do whatever you want. And they gave us the billboard format and they said they can do five in a row.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And we did that. But we could have done anything.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, literally if I would have given them five spots of bananas —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — or a few tape recorder, they would have put them up —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — I'm pretty sure.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So it was a complete free-for-all.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And that was difficult to do in the beginning —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because we were not used to work that way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And for the longest time I didn't know what to do. And I remember there was this one time —

MS. RIEDEL: Was that 2004, 2005?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, it must have been much earlier —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because the sabbatical was in 2000.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So it must have been 2001.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And this was one of the first quotes from *Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far*, right?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly. That was everything — no, that was *Trying to Look Good Limits My Life.*

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. And at the same time there was an Austrian magazine who had these dividing pages between their different chapters.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And that was *Everything I Do Always Comes Back to Me.*

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And both of them — we did both of them very similarly in time. I think the magazine was first and Paris was second.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And both of them at the time felt self-indulgent. Like, I really thought of them sort of like more — well, a project that nobody is going to give a shit about.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I was surprised that we got feedback — very strong and good feedback from both.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Like in Paris, a billboard company saw them and they then published them on billboards not just in that park but outside on their billboards. And from the magazine we got readers' inquiries, if we can send them prints to hang into their home from that stuff. So it clearly had resonated.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And that really then was — from there we tried to talk existing clients into it. And I think the first one was a Japanese annual report where we put one of those things on the cover.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: It seemed almost ridiculous to me at the time, like, to even — like, it seemed ridiculous for me to suggest it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But they went for it. And it was one of those things that must have drove home, like, how much self-censorship there is always among me and among designers that you — that you would like to do something but just thing, oh, they're never going to go for it, and you just basically don't do it —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because of that thing. And nicely, the stuff that we did for the Japanese annual report, the line was 'assuming is stifling', which of course talked exactly about that —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — about that notion.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

From Hong Kong did you move directly to Sri Lanka?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You went there for three months for a break?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. And then you began to work with M&Co.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Went to New York, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about that. It was very brief, but I know that you — I mean Tibor Kalman was an institution at that point.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: It must have been an extraordinary opportunity. Was it disappointing? Was it what you'd hoped, or realized it was brief?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, I was a huge fan of M&Co in — of Tibor in particular throughout my studying years here. Like, I really loved it.

MS. RIEDEL: And what in particular?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think that the fact that they went their own way. Like, that sort of look, that sort of vernacular, that sort of thinking outside of academia. It had a very much a New York wit. There was, like, hidden

jokes throughout. It was from the — —

MS. RIEDEL: So who —

MR. SAGMEISTER: — like who for the right clients, you know? So the fact that — well, it had that mix of being cultural, commercial, a little bit intellectual but at the same time very down to earth, sort of a little bit cynical, little bit ironic.

MS. RIEDEL: A little provocative.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Yeah. It just had a wonderful mix. It was very New York, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And so then working — you know, being able to work there was definitely great. People had outlined the job for me very much like running your own company. And the key basically is, oh, he wants to concentrate more on covers and needed somebody to run the M&Co. And I was very much interested in that because at that point I had already had the design group in Hong Kong for three years and it seemed like the right thing to do. When I came here though, it turned out that he didn't really tell anybody else at M&Co that I was the one to run it.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah. And how big was the company then?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think M&Co's pretty big — 12 people?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah. And you were in your mid-20s, late 20s?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I was — no, late 20s, I think. So I came here, that was in '93.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So that — no, I was 31.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah — 31. Yeah.

And so that definitely created some friction also because it's only — it's funny, only now I talk to some of the other people about that. And that's exactly, like, how they saw it. They were, like, who the fuck is he, coming here and, like, telling us what to do? And I was, like, oh this is so much more difficult because, of course, in Hong Kong I had hired everybody, while — you know, and it was clear that, like, you know, who would be the one to lead everything because I had put the whole — I had founded the group, basically. But here, everybody was already there much longer and established.

And so I would say that I very much enjoyed working with Steve Poll [ph], and particularly enjoyed being part of planned presentations and see how he would do them and how good he was at them, and how passionate he would defend something or — and so there was a big learning experience there. And I think I did some jobs there that I'm still happy with or proud of. But —

MS. RIEDEL: Anything in particular — [inaudible] —

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think that probably the best projects that I did while I was there that we did — I was responsible for was a CD cover for — Yellow Magic Orchestra, that I think was good, and then sort of like an invite for a gala dinner for sort of like a major fundraiser for the Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

MS. RIEDEL: It was fruit box, right? Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly, yeah, which was a production nightmare but at the end worked well anyway. That probably was the best stuff that I did there. It was also, I think, I felt — it was sort of like toward the end of M&Co, which of course I didn't know, but it wasn't that busy. There was, you know, a good number of jobs around, but it wasn't that crazily busy.

But I think most importantly I didn't feel like I was running it. And basically, I was just another senior designer. And I wasn't really ready to go back to that. Like, I definitely wanted to be in charge also in deciding who we would work for and who we shouldn't work for, even though the M&Co clients were basically fine.

But like I definitely remember when people told me that he wants to close it and move to Rome, you know, and

do covers fulltime, I was ecstatic because I would have stayed longer. And I don't think I was ready to quit, but I was super happy that it was basically quit for me. You know, I would have stayed just because I would have stayed. And this way, I didn't have to make the decision.

And I think pretty much — for a second we talked about me taking over M&Co, like basically buying it from him, but it was a short-lived idea. It was clear that — from two major points: One, it was not the kind of company that I wanted. It was too big for me. The people that I worked with I would have had to make — I would have had to make many changes.

And we were so tightly associated with Steve's [ph] work that it would have meant that I would have basically to work — you know, walk in his footsteps, which I wasn't particularly interested or eager to do, having to constantly suffer comparisons and, you know, taking on that whole thing of, oh, M&Co is not what it used — blah, blah, you know, all that stuff —that I would have much rather started afresh. And that's what basically then I did pretty quickly.

MS. RIEDEL: What — you could have gone anywhere after Hong Kong. I mean, you could have — was the intention always to come back to New York? Was it to come specifically to work at M&Co and then you could have gone anywhere? Or were you always — [inaudible] —

MR. SAGMEISTER: It was just from the Hong Kong experience, because while in Hong Kong, I had — you know, most of the clients that I — that I mentioned were at least international in Asia-Pacific. So I had traveled a lot within Asia at the time, and some outside of Asia. And through that travel, it became also clear that New York really is my favorite city, that — there was a good comparison there.

And when I came back to New York, I also came back with the — with the desire to stay because before, you know, I was five years in Vienna, then two in New York, one in — three in New York, one back in Vienna, two in Hong Kong — that those two, three, four year trip things became boring — you know, constantly to make new friends then lose them again or, you know, after a particular — or after, you know, a relatively short period of time.

Like, I knew that I'm not going to — I didn't want to stay another two years in New York. And so when I came here I also — I had saved a good amount of money in Hong Kong, so I was able to buy a place here. And it was, like, I knew I'm going to stay here for a long while, yeah? And from the — and I knew that I was pretty sure that New York is the place.

And I feel like that now, you know, even now I've been here for over 20 years. And New York is still my favorite city in the world, it really is. And by now, because I do so much lecturing, you know, I've been to more cities in the world than most people and have worked in more cities. And, no, I think that's — for my particular desires and needs, New York is the optimal place.

MS. RIEDEL: And is it primarily the sensibility? What — how you would describe it? I mean, clearly we've established it's not the craftsmanship, but what is it about New York that is that way for you, other than any other city?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I'd say it's all the clichés. So they're all true, you know, I mean, from being truly international. Then very important for me is the density. So the fact that it has a density that really allows movement by walking. And so many other cities that are like — London or Tokyo — just don't do that. You know, the distances in London are hilarious. You know, where if you want to visit somebody it's an hour and a half or two. And that's — you know, New York offers that more than any other place, I think.

It's strong in the arts. In some of the arts, in contemporary art viewing, for sure the best in the world. I mean, uncomparable. If you, you know, look at the galleries in Berlin or London or Paris, it's a joke of — you know, in comparison. It's the incredible — I think that very important for me, the incredible ability to blend in immediately as a foreigner and be taken on equal terms.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, in the 20 years, not once did I feel that I lost a job or didn't get something or was at some sort of disadvantage because I have an accent. That's not the case in most other cities; possibly the case in other American cities, but definitely not the case in European cities.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: If you are in Barcelona and you're not Catalan, you're fucked. And I heard it from Austrians who worked in London and Paris, that they — true or not true, I'm not sure, but they definitely had feeling of having a disadvantage.

MR. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: In Tokyo, super-strong. You know, in Tokyo you can learn Japanese and speak it perfectly; you will always remain a foreigner. So I mean, that's a big — makes a big difference. And I would say that in China, although I very much enjoyed, specifically for such a large city, there is still a — a sort of like groundation [ph] level of friendliness, that makes it fairly easy and definitely possible to meet better people. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: The clients come from all over, though. And has that always been the case or is that increasingly so?

MR. SAGMEISTER: That's probably increasingly so. You know, I think that once we, you know, were known internationally in the community, that happened more so. And I didn't see that to happen. Like I definitely, from the very beginning, wanted to keep the studio small, and —

MS. RIEDEL: Right. That was something that you learned from either your experience at Tibor or his recommendation.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, both. And from my experience, of course, also at Leo Burnett's. We had, of course, the opposite. And, you know, I had, I think, quite often said — and I still think this is true —probably the stuff that I learned the most in Hong Kong was about all the stuff that I never want to do again in my life, which is — sounds flippant, but is, of course, very, very true, and it was very, very helpful.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I think if just — people would have said it, you know, that it's the most important or the most difficult thing in running a design studio is to figure out how to — not to grow. I'm not sure if it would have resonated as much without the Hong Kong experience. But when I made the decision to keep it small and not to grow, one of the disadvantages that I foresaw was that I probably wouldn't be able to travel as much and that we wouldn't get an international profile.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And we just went out differently.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

Let's talk about some of the significant early projects. You opened your studio in 1994, yeah?

MR. SAGMEISTER: 1993.

MS. RIEDEL: 1993. Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So I worked at Tibor's from — I think from January '93 until August '93, and then opened the studio in October '93.

MS. RIEDEL: And almost immediately didn't you begin working on projects that were really of interest to you and a lot of music projects?

MR. SAGMEISTER: "Almost immediately" is overstating the facts.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I'd say that in August or — as soon as I stopped working at M&Co, I began to see all the record labels.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Both here and in California. And I would say the advantage was that having been at M&Co, they mostly saw me. Like I — M&Co had a big enough name that they would see me. And I had at that point a couple of CD covers but also — you know, a pretty deep portfolio. And they would all say, oh, yeah, we'll definitely want to work with you; this is good work; we'll come back to you. But just not enough of them did.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I think the first couple of jobs we really did as a studio was one for Blue, which was for my brother, one for a Pratt colleague, for Ayse Pirsel, who — you already have her written down, I think. So her named is spelled Ayse — A-Y-S-E — and then Pirsel — P-I-R-S-E-L — who had — her thesis was on a bathroom,

and she from that got a Japanese toilet — well, bathroom company called Toto. They're sort of like the American Standard of Asia.

And she designed a — basically a toilet for them that needed — because it also washed your behind and, you know, cleaned the air and did all sorts of things, needed some pipe on it. And I designed the pipe for that toilet. And because they were happy with that pipe, it then, you know, yielded some other jobs, like brochures, and ultimately an identity for their American subsidiary. And that was an advantage.

It was a great job because it was a proper corporate, well-paying job that allowed us to then also take on, you know, jobs like for a friend of mine who was in a band, that we designed a CD cover for, that then did — the cover — did then get nominated for a Grammy, which then made a difference really in the music industry, which I really wanted to be in. Because even the opening card, even though we had not a single client in that world, set for music.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was *Mountains of Madness*?

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know it all. Exactly, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And that also is interesting because that CD cover, in my mind, established one of the ways of working that I really associate with your design style, is that sense of optical illusion.

MR. SAGMEISTER: That came. I think I also had — I always had an interest in that world, one from the thesis in Vienna, which were these interactive postcards that all did something.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Two from the thesis that I wrote at Pratt, which was called *Amazing, Exciting, Spectacular Gimmicks in Graphic Design*, something like this, and it was a pretty — I think a 450-page written thesis, very extensively researched, into all sorts of stuff that had been made starting in the 19th century all the way up till now. And I'd done a lot of work, had gotten interviews with all the big players in New York in that world. That's actually how I originally met Tibor, interviewing him for the thesis.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was focusing on optical illusion.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, optical illusions was one part of that. It was everything from things that made sounds to things that — I don't know, that displayed movement in print, to optical illusion kinds of things.

MS. RIEDEL: So somehow interactive, somehow transformative.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly. Yes. Specialty printing, kinetic, exactly. All that stuff, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So was Lou Reed, then, in '96 really one of the first big covers that you designed?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Was it '96?

MS. RIEDEL: I think so. *Set the Twilight Reeling*?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Was it '96?

MS. RIEDEL: I think. That's what I have here.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, it's easily possible. My guess would be that —

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible] — was '94.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sorry?

MS. RIEDEL: I have the *Mountains of Madness* of '94.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Then I would think so; '93 we opened, that would have been '94, and then we — I think we did a good number of independent ones in between.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, independent labels. And — yeah, that's very possible that Lou Reed then was '96. That probably came in '95, published in '96. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And '95 started with David Byrne.

MR. SAGMEISTER: That's also possible.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's a very long-running collaboration, perhaps one of the longest. Do you still work with him?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No. I think the last time we — I still meet him. The last time we did work was probably two years ago. That's very long.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And it was funny because we got to David Byrne without him knowing that I was at M&Co. So you would have thought that because, you know, M&Co did a lot of Talking Heads stuff, that there was a connection here, but it wasn't at all. Like we actually did some ads for a David Byrne album that came through Warner Bros. that they had —sort of like ads in music was sort of like all this low-level work, like the big thing was always the CD cover, or the album cover before. So the ads were mostly like — because mostly then the photo shoots were done and they were sort of more like rearranging existing photo shoots.

So I think Warner Bros. had given us, I believe, some ads for David Byrne to do as a little, well, let's try these guys out and see what they can come up with. And apparently we did a job that everybody had liked, and then they —we did a cover. Also I think that Warners were in — they were headquartered in L.A., and so they put us more on the things that were New York-based artists because they didn't have an office here. And for us, this was very ideal working conditions because it meant that you basically worked here with the artist, and Warners had a very inspired art department of people that were well-established, who knew the process, who knew what was involved. And they were basically of the view, if the artist and the designer that they had carefully chosen think this is good, we won't interfere — unless you put penises or, like, you know, the stuff on the cover. So we very much loved working for Warners.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like a nice client [ph].

MR. SAGMEISTER: So Blue was their — but they had — you know, they published many projects in a year, so they knew about timelines and reinforced them, so it was also, you know — basically the lyrics came from them, which was also ideal because if the artist didn't deliver the lyrics, the album immediately got — you know, got postponed.

[END SD1 TR2]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Stefan Sagmeister in the designer's studio in New York City on December 5, 2012 for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is Card No. 2.

Yesterday when we were finishing up — we just wanted to start today with some final thoughts about that infamous AIGA poster of the carved torso. And I think you had a couple of final thoughts about that?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, influences I think — did we talk about yet?

MS. RIEDEL: No, but that's right on the list, so by all means please feel free to start.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Okay.

So I think a couple of years after I designed the poster I went to Vienna, and at the Museum — [inaudible] — they actually had an exhibition on the Viennese Actionists.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So these will be people like, you know, Brus and Rudolf Schwarzkogler. And I was very aware of them while I was a student, but because they weren't really that big in New York while I studied here I forgot about them again.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But clearly that was a direct influence there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I had also seen a news photo and — I'm not sure if it was *The New York Times* or *Time* magazine or whatever it was — of some supporters of President Sadat at the time who had cut "Sadat" into their skin. And that was just a strong image. So I think there were a couple of things that came out of it.

What happened then was that the poster took on its own life way beyond the design community, and to the point

where I really stopped showing it at all because it became so — the poster itself became so big and was reproduced so, so many times that I think a good number of people assumed that that was all we did.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I definitely remember, I think, you know, Massimo Vignelli saying something to that extent: "Oh, I felt you guys were just doing, you know, sort of like cut-type-in-skin things, that sort of thing."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So for I think — I haven't shown this poster in a lecture or anything in many, many, many years. But it has its own little life.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I'm completely, you know, fine with it. I, you know, still from this point of view think it was a strong sort of piece, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And something that you'd mentioned yesterday that I thought was worth repeating here was that it was the antithesis of what you'd come to think of as that traditional design poster, which was a colorful, happy —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sure.

MS. RIEDEL: — bright sort of thing.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: But this was more focused on the difficulty and the pain —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — of the actual process.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's take some time now to look at the work I guess really starting around 2000. We've covered some of the early work, but we can go back as far as you like and just look at what you consider at this point in time some of the more significant commercial and noncommercial projects.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, I would say — I don't know; should we start with the commercial stuff?

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, there are a couple of things that stand out for me. I mean, I would say that identity work we did for — Casa da Musica —

MS. RIEDEL: That was 2007, I think. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: That sounds familiar. Yeah. For — that's a music center in Porto in Portugal. And it was, I think, for us maybe the second identity that we tried that we did that was changing constantly. And I think it was probably the most successful one to that point.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: We had done one before for a — for a science magazine —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — which I think worked quite well too, but —

MS. RIEDEL: Was that Seed?

MR. SAGMEISTER: For *Seed* magazine, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: In a sort of a different sort of way but somehow Casa da Musica really seemed to work really well.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think that — they were both fine.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And you know, it was a — I don't know — an example, like, you know, that it was — it allowed us to go back into music, because music basically, you know, from the CD covers we kind of had enough from anyway and were lucky to stop the — to stop working in that direction before the music industry collapsed.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And by the time that I would have been ready to maybe do another CD cover or so, that thing really had gone away —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — or maybe had gone away as a proper job.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You can do it as a hobby, sort of like on the side, but as a proper job, it has gone away, because, you know, files don't need to be packaged.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But of course doing an identity for a big music center was, you know, juicy in a similar sort of way.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I thought that we — that I'm still quite happy with the work we've done for Levi's, particularly because it was a really inspired client; again, a good product, which in all — [audio break] — to pursue. That's the — that there's sort of like a little test in the beginning, like would we want to — would we want to use this product or service?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Does it have a right to be — does it have to be a right in this — to be in this world, or is it useful? You know, is it — are people better off with it or without it? And I don't think that we have a completely clean track record on it. I mean, not absolutely everything — I've made — definitely made a couple of mistakes, but by and large —

MS. RIEDEL: Anything you want to mention?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sure. Did a couple of computer games, like packaging for computer games, even though I'm not a gamer, so I'm not particularly interested in — I have nothing — but just the fact that I'm not a gamer prevented me from knowing that these were not good computer games. So we — it turned out that we basically packaged not very — not very good games. They were — at the time, the format was awful, because they put them in these big boxes that were basically the size of cereal boxes. Even inside there was nothing more than a CD and a little booklet.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So it was this — that the outer box format was basically designed to fool the customer —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because you're supposed — you had the impression you were getting something big when you only got a CD inside.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: There were just a couple — a number of problems with it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And we — [audio break] — wouldn't go in that direction again.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Then of course we've done — in the last couple of years we've done a lot of work for a Middle Eastern department store called Aishti. It's a high-end department store, you know, comparable to — I don't know. It's probably — from the brands, it's a mixture between Saks and Barneys, somewhere in there. They're very prominently — they're the market leader in Lebanon, and they're the — they have a couple of stores also around the region, so in — a little bit in the Emirates, a little bit in Dubai and a little bit in Syria. But they're very prominent in Lebanon.

And that job actually came through our noncommercial work —

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because that — the owner of that store is an — is — collects art, and he bought one of our pieces from the Deitch show.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And then Jeffrey Deitch basically told him, "Well, these guys are actually doing commercial work also" and that "Oh, I might need something for the department store." That's how it came about.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And that's been a very fruitful and very pleasant relationship since. We've been working, I think, for them for three or four years, but quite intensively, like, you know, doing all their advertising also, which is unusual for us. But it's because the owner is visually sophisticated —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and we — and he's interested in it. So we only have to deal with the owner. The process is relatively simple —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — you know, because he comes a couple of times a year, we show him what we want to do, he says "Yes" or "No," but often "Yes," because we have similar tastes or also by now know each other well, and then produce it. So it's been a — it's been a good relationship. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And then EDP, which is a — you know, the Portuguese utility, you know, they deliver 95 percent of all of the electricity in Portugal, and that was a big rebranding job.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And that I enjoyed, again, I think, out of three reasons: one, because they're a good company — we talked about it quickly yesterday; 60 percent of their — all the — of what they do is renewable energy, which is, I guess, a world record — they are also number one in the world sustainability index, meaning they're the —

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. SAGMEISTER: — they're the leader in energy production. Yes. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And is that a criteria for you when you select a client? Is that —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Oh, if BP would have come, we would have said, "No."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. And I'm not even saying — like, you know, that rebrand of BP has been of course, you know, slaughtered, you know, because it pretends that they're all green and then they have one catastrophe after another.

But my understanding even there was that at the time of the rebrand, the then-CEO apparently was quite serious about changing BP around, only he was fired, you know, consequently, and then it changed again.

So it's very — I'm not — like I'm very aware that if you do work, that it can go sour.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, well, let's say like the bank that we did a commercial for, Standard Chartered — we did some — I knew them. I had banked with them. I knew them as an old client. And they were fine. They were very conservative. They didn't participate in the — in that whole mortgage dilemma, I don't think out of the goodness of their heart; I think because they were too conservative to do these shenanigans.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But they were a fine bank, as far as I could tell.

And then recently, I think, two or three years after we did the commercial, it's — there was some sort of news in *The New York Time*s that said that they had — that they banked illegally with Iran and washed their money also. But I think that went away again.

But — so it's — you know, what I'm saying is that I think that it is impossible to keep a completely white track record if you're in business.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But I think that you can choose to be on the lighter shades of gray or of the darker shades of gray, and everybody, you know, has to make those decisions how — I don't know — you know, where you want to be in that space.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting, though, that that's — it is a question for you; it's a concern in the first place.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I would think it's — but that's the case. If I think — there's numerous — I mean, it's — we're not the only design house who would consider that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I was — as I want to continue on with the significant commercial projects, but I think at some point we should we too look at what criteria do you use to accept clients or to —

MR. SAGMEISTER: We can do that very quickly.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Basically, as I said, is the product — would we use the product?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Number two, are they nice people? Do I want to be in many meetings with them? Are they intelligent? It's — normally intelligent people have intelligent projects with intelligent systems in place, and there is so much less hassle.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Do they have a proper budget and a proper deadline? We normally don't expect — people who are in a hurry, a new client who needs things done next week, more often than not are unorganized in many other ways.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And for us, unorganization on the client side is so often anxiety-creating —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because then you get lots of changes last minute. It just — it's just a pain in the ass.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So that's basically it. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Other commercial projects that you'd like to discuss or mention and why, perhaps —

MR. SAGMEISTER: I'm sure — I'm sure there are, but — [inaudible] — I think that we've covered a good number.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

Do you want to any anything about the Darwin show? Was that a commercial project?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Not really.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But I can.

MS. RIEDEL: No, that's fine.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But I mean, basically all these chairs — the entire furniture was designed in the second sabbatical. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And let's talk about the sabbatical, because that's on —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You've done two so far, correct?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So 2000 and 2008?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: And the 2008 was in Bali in Indonesia, correct?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What happened in 2000?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Just in New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, but —

MS. RIEDEL: And you wrote the book.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — basically this was so big for me at the time —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — that this was the only thing I could — I didn't — I couldn't do that plus leave the city.

And no, the sabbaticals — I didn't write the book in a sabbatical.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, the sabbaticals — really both of them were there just to explore things that I wouldn't have time to explore otherwise.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And the — many — there was an impression that I wrote the book in 2000 because it came out after the sabbatical.

MS. RIEDEL: In 2001, right?

MR. SAGMEISTER: In 2001, yes. But we literally had sent it to the printer before the sabbatical, and I made very much sure that that thing is totally done before the sabbatical started because I knew that of course I can put another year into the book, you know, and I would have.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But we sent it to the printer, it was gone, and then the sabbatical started.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But they needed a year, you know, to print and put it all together and shift it over, blah, blah, bah-blah, which was then — it was not really planned that way, but of course it turned out to an incredible advantage because when we reopened, the book came out, generated a lot of publicity and also of course helped that the studio was working pretty right away, specifically because we reopened in September. That was the September of 11th, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. SAGMEISTER: That was, you know, the 9/11 September.

So that September, October, November, December we basically then didn't do any commercial work, not — I think partly because there was none available but also partly because we didn't feel like doing commercial work at all.

So in those months following 9/11, we mostly were involved in 9/11 work —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — on all levels — small charities, large charities, stuff that worked, stuff that didn't work, but I think that — well, so many people who were in New York — were you here?

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. But so many people who were here wanted to get involved in some way.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And since there was a big desire — there was a big need and some desire for graphics or for communication kind of work surrounding that, we did a lot of that stuff. And then just — it all worked out beautifully because just by the time, I think, by January we should have, like, had enough of 9/11 and we were sort of, you know, when somebody just said "after," you were already like, "Oh, my God."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Dot, dot, dot 9/11, like it just —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — it got so much. Just when we had enough of dealing with this one subject only, commercial clients came again or other clients came again and we switched over.

And then the second sabbatical was in Bali, simply because I didn't want to repeat the first — the same thing as in the first. And I'd say the first was very concentrated on thinking and on trying out different directions, but only a little bit. So at the end, all I really had was a sketchbook.

MS. RIEDEL: So what does that mean? Did you — what was — was there a particular working process? Did you spend the mornings walking and the afternoons drawing? Did you do whatever you wanted to do? How was it structured? Was it not?

MR. SAGMEISTER: In the beginning it was purposefully unstructured —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and — because I didn't want a plan, because planning is my normal modus operandi.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And that turned out to be a fiasco. It didn't work without a plan.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: When there was no plan, I basically did only busywork that was generated — that was started from outside. So I was reacting to the outside world, because, you know, Japanese magazines still called for whatever — images to be sent to them and, you know, emails to me to be answered. So I was basically busy —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — but nothing came out of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And it became clear — that became clear after 10 or 14 days of frustration that I had nothing generated.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And then I switched and made a very — really tight plan.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I had — the diary came in handy.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And in the diary I had mentioned here and there things that I would love to pursue if I would only have the time. I looked for all of these, made a list, put them in some sort of hierarchy of importance —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — then made a weekly plan, where, you know, the important things got four hours a week and the less important got an hour a week, and they were — they got one assigned hour and day to them. And I had a plan very much like you would have in kindergarten.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, Monday at, you know, 8:00 to 9:00, free thinking.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, literally it was like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And that was very helpful because that also meant that I then could only do emails starting from 4:00 in the afternoon or so.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And that was — and it was, you know — and I was in control of what I would do.

And I think four or five months into it so many different strands then were running that I could take that I didn't really have to adhere to the schedule anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And the same happened in the second sabbatical. But then I already knew, and during the seven years in between I collected things that I wanted to do, and when I drove, when I — when I flew to Indonesia —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — I had a whole list of stuff and I made — I think I made the plan, the weekly plan, in the plane, just filled it out, but again, very much a very tight plan.

And same thing happened. I think I adhered to it for four or five months, but with a slightly different direction. In

Indonesia we executed more.

And in Indonesia, I had four people working with me, also on self-generated things, while before I was pretty much by myself, plus having a friend maybe come in for a day, and we would do something photographic together or — but it — Indonesia was much more structured, and —

MS. RIEDEL: And you decided that before you arrived, or did that evolve once you were there?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, that evolved. I decided that I'm going to have an intern be here, and I thought, I'm going to have a Balinese intern, also because it's — sort of to take more advantage of the Balinese culture, and that didn't work out. It was just impossible to find somebody good enough. You could have done it, but it was more — it would be more of our school, and then I widened it out for — to Indonesia, and even that was very difficult. There just is — like right now — I mean, you could definitely do it as an educational exercise, but I didn't go there to educate local designers — which would be another interesting thing — well, it could be, you know. But I really wanted to generate things, and so right now that quality was not there. Yeah. But there was many, many other qualities there, of course; you know, unbelievable craftwork — you know, you could collaborate, you know, like, you know, on a crazy level, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely, yes. And so was that something that really developed because of the location? Was that one reason you chose Bali, is because of that history of craftsmanship?

MR. SAGMEISTER: It was one of the — yes, yes, exactly. Yes, absolutely, that was a big pull for me.

MS. RIEDEL: There's also a - very much of a large spiritual content alive in Bali. And is that something that is an important part of your own work? Is it something that figures in indirectly?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think it figures in, but it was not the reason why I chose Bali. I turned out to be one of the reasons why I was so content there, because I think that the spirituality of the Balinese people has a lot to do with their own well-being. And so, you know, just — I mean, clearly, we all know how infectious the people are that surround us. You know, if you sit in a plane that's six hours late, and everybody is pissed, it's extremely difficult to stand out of there.

And in Bali — and I can say this even after having now spent serious time there — there are — and — but every tourist would talk into that direction. There is an incredible — an unusual contentment of the people to be observed. And I think that — and that's — without a doubt, relates to their religion — without a doubt. And their religion is, in many ways, very practically — more practically-oriented than others that I would know.

MS. RIEDEL: I think of such a transitory sense of daily practice there and daily offerings, and makes me think, sometimes, of your work and the transitory quality of your work. It's transitional — in a sense — so I'm thinking, and specific of that sweat room or whatever you called it in the Deitch projects where those things were written by the designers, and then they were gone in 20 minutes. So I would think that there would be some sort of affinity, whether it's specific or not, for a lot of what you would experience there.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, there were definitely people there who saw the *Things I have learned* book and very, sort of, like, matter-of-factly said, "Oh my God — you're a Buddhist?" And I said, "No, no, no — I'm not a Buddhist. I have nothing to do with Buddhism." And then they, being Buddhists, pointed out, pretty much booklet-by-booklet — [they laugh] — this is — the Buddha said this, and then this, that — even though — I mean, Bali, of course, is Hindu, but — and I — when I wrote them originally down into the diary, had absolutely no Buddhist connotation or connections or desires, but, you know, clearly, you know, arrived at similar things.

And — but other thing is also natural, because — you know — I don't know, when I was a teenager and I thought I was very special and unique, and like I said, the older I get, the more I realize how usual I am and how similar I am to other people, which, you know, sometimes can be a little bit frustrating, and often, though, it's also quite satisfying, because it's — also, as a designer, I can — I'm now pretty sure that when I'm working on something that I really like, there's going to be other people out there who like it too or who can relate to it also. I'm just not that — like, my mind is not that unique that it's — that I would — that I think that this is fantastic and everybody else is flabbergasted by its obvious horribleness.

MS. RIEDEL: But you've got — yeah — yeah, that does sound like a Buddhist tenet or something — [inaudible] — inside, you get a universal something or rather, but —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Possible, yes. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm not a Buddhist either, so let's bounce back to the work and look at some of the more significant noncommercial work.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Well I'd say that really started — you know, I would say that if I look at the time of the studio, I think you can divide it by the sabbaticals. There were the first seven years — '93 to 2000 — which was largely informed by the music industry, you know, and that really was our focus, you know — designing for these bands that I loved.

From 2000 to — sorry, from 2000 to 2008 it was very much under this things I've learned in my life stuff, and being started — and while none of these things were done in the first sabbatical, I had made that diary entry — it was that same title, and what —

MS. RIEDEL: Did that happen during the first sabbatical?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, during the first sabbatical. And that whole idea of working in that direction was manifested in first sabbatical. Like, I definitely remember writing a lot about — [inaudible] — what happened with the first sabbatical was that for a second, I wanted to give up design and become a film director. And having — being not naïve about these things, I thought it's going to be about a 10-year process to become that.

And when I — and that — I quite liked that, and I — when I sort of made a plan to — how to go about this, it occurred to me that I might go through that process — you know, learn about film technically, historically from a craft perspective — from a content perspective — it occurred to me that if I go through all that, what happens after 10 years if I have nothing to say?

And then I thought, maybe it's much smarter to stick with the language that I already know — design — and see if I have something to say in it rather than learn a new language — film — and maybe have nothing to say. And so I forgot about the film direction and thought, maybe there is a possibility to say something in design, to use that language — you know, combination of image and words to say something more personal.

And literally immediately after we opened, we had these two clients — I think we talked about them, no? I'm not sure now — the French author — [inaudible]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah — [inaudible] — everything — or trying to look good. [Inaudible.]

MR. SAGMEISTER: Look good, and the Austrian magazine called Dot Copy [ph] which had the 60 lining [ph] pages inside. And so there was a — quite a bit of a struggle of what it could be when I could do anything, and then that sort of — literally last-minute, that list came in — fell into my hands from the diary again.

It was not — it was never written — that was never written down with this idea to become a project. Never — was literally just for myself. And I think the only reason that I chose it was because, I thought, okay, I wrote this down in the diary, so this must be true. I'm sure I didn't lie about it.

And so at least, when I publish them or make a project out of it, I know this to be true. And then, I think I mentioned them because of the feedback from it — and from that, then, tried to talk our regular clients into applying it — surprisingly successfully, like the Japanese annual report that we won for the school of visual arts here.

MS. RIEDEL: Which one was that?

MR. SAGMEISTER: There was — it was, thinking life will be better in the future is stupid; I have to live now. And basically, the school of visual arts had asked me to do their poster — they have a pretty significant poster campaign in the New York subway system that they pay a lot of money for, and they do it, I think, every year, it's a different designer that does it.

And the owner of the school of visual arts, Silas Rhodes, had written a line that in the brief I had accepted, and taken with me to work with for the poster. And I don't remember the exact line, but it said something like — the content of it said, if you study the school of visual arts, your life will be better.

It wasn't that pedestrian, but it basically said that. And I couldn't design anything with it. And when I thought about the line, even though I had accepted it in the meeting, I had — I didn't even agree with it. Meaning, like, I didn't even think that studying art would make your life better at the school of visual arts or anywhere.

And so I thought, for a second, maybe I can just use one of my own lines. And then, I — look, I can't, because it's just — you know, it's crazy. I had already accepted that line in the meeting. I cannot do that. And then, the annual report came in from Japan — the printed annual report came in that said assuming is stifling on it.

So that, of course — I got a reminder of my own thing, and then did go back to the school of visual arts and say, well, you know what? I'll try out a different line than the one that you gave me. And I presented it to them and they loved it, even my line basically said the opposite of their line, because their line said, you study here, your life will be better, and my line said, thinking the life in the future will be better is stupid; I have to live now. So it

really said the opposite.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I can see how — [inaudible] — in some ways, it's almost the exact same thing: If you don't change it now, don't expect it's going to be any better later.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sort of, yeah. But it's — you can — I think — I would think that many people — specifically, many master students would also think, you know, oh, my life is really shit now; I'm in a terrible job. Why don't I do a master's and then my life will be better, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: That's true — that's true, yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Once I have the master's, things will change, which is, I think, probably true for some people, but not true for many. Most people have a good time, I would think, at the school — or many people do. I think that many of my students have a good time while they are there, but, you know, then some go back and have a shit job again. And some go back and have a — you know, are managing to have a fantastic, very open, very free career.

But in any case — so there are — that worked, and all of these initial projects — the first four or five got heavily republished. I think that sort of work just hasn't been done for awhile, I think because it was somehow inspirational, or it had its own little space there, because it was — it was clearly not cynical or not ironic.

Strangely, there, it was also accepted, at least by parts of the art world — maybe also because, you know, I think that if you look at — I don't know, the world of contemporary art, somehow, to be didactic is very much pooh-poohed on, or to be overtly inspirational or to — like, you know — which I find — which I find awful, often. I mean, I'm very much interested in art and contemporary art, and I think that it's — you know, probably go through its golden ages, or if I would have to pick a decade of my favorite art, I would pick the last decade. You know, I'm much more interested from 2000 to 2010 then I am from — then I'm interested in any other previous decades.

MS. RIEDEL: And is that true consistently throughout your life? That the past 10 years are always the most interesting, or is it just those —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Definitely the last 10 — definitely the last 10, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What in particular has struck you?

MR. SAGMEISTER: There's a lot of good people work on it. I think there's many more artists working the last 10 years than, probably, in previous decades. There's much more of it, probably because you can also make a living off it. There is many more - I don't know, smart — very smart, intelligent people went into it. You know, they probably would have gone into a more commercial area before. You know, it just — actually, I read the fantastic Chuck Close excerpts yesterday, and I mean, he said that he basically initially studied commercial art, because he thought — well, there is no living to be made in fine art.

Now, that's clearly not the case anymore. You can now study very freely, and even your parents will probably support you in it or — I mean, sometimes it's completely — [inaudible] — if you're in certain parts of Beijing, all the little kids, if you ask them what they want to be, all of them want to become artists, because the artists are the ones that drive the Hummers and have all the prostitutes and the champagne parties all night long because they're the richest — they're the richest guys around.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right. Had you thought of — had you looked at Jenny Holzer's work?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Had you thought at all about — you mentioned the Viennese actionism — what about Fluxus? Had that been an influence at all?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think to a certain extent, but Jenny for sure. I had actually met her at — [inaudible] — company and even was involved in a little project with her, because, I think, people helped Jenny to do some stuff for a German magazine — like, they printed, sort of, like certain lines in blood, and it was partly in German, so I did some of the handwriting. So I was a little bit involved, and I found her, also, as a person wonderful, and I loved the work.

So there is definitely a direct influence there. No doubt about it. I mean, formally — unrecognizably, and I think even contentwise, quite different, because Jenny, of course, picked her truisms from other people and is not really — that's not really her opinion. So mine is much more — whatever you want to call it — either banal or sincere.

MS. RIEDEL: Personal, to be sure — yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, yes. But the — in — nevertheless, of course, there is — I would say there is that influence. At the same time, I always found, and I was very happy about — that all of our projects were published commercially for a mass audience. And from that point of view, they also firmly remained in the design world as opposed to the art world. And — that's also why I always insisted on, even if they were shown at — let's say, at Deitch, that they were shown as pieces of design, because I always — I mean, out of a number of reasons, but because I felt that they were stronger as design pieces, because it's much more difficult to get them published, supported by a client in a commercial setting for a mass audience and then having to work for a mass audience then just doing them here in the studio and just showing them at Deitch.

You know, in many ways, we showed the leftovers at Deitch, but the real things were shown for a mass audience outside, which was the real thing. I mean, I think that was the strength of the project. That's — and, like, for me, it was — like, as a designer, but, thinking, in general, it was always — like I had always thought it's the most difficult to do work that is good and finds a wide audience.

So from that point of view — I don't know — like, I would say, something like Elliasson's sun at the — at the — at Tate Modern would be a great example. It's a really good piece of work, and — but it's loved by a very wide audience. Or *The Bean* in Chicago, or the Simpsons. I actually got to be friends with Matt Groening; you know, I would think that he's basically the pinnacle of that. Like, if you can — if you can make a TV series that's the longest TV series in the history of TV series on FOX — on the shittiest channel and keep the quality on that height for two decades and put a system around it that continues to attract the best writers — you know, that now it's basically sort of like a — you know, basically almost like an academy. You know, for fantastic comedy writing, you have to have done a couple of years on the Simpsons.

I think that's basically — I don't think that you can do better than that. And I'm extremely aware that this is so much more difficult than writing a little fanzine with a couple of jokes or doing some very obscure artwork in a small gallery that is only — that only has to talk to a couple of curators. I just think it's a — it's a level of difficulty.

Of course, it's — and so for me, the fact that these were published commercially — and, I mean, I of course would have been the happiest — in the world of an art book, *Things I've Learned in my Life* was a huge bestseller. You know, it sells 10 times as much as a Guggenheim catalog. But I would have — I would have been even happier if it would have sold 10 times more. But it's when I do — whenever I talk in front of a regular audience, a design audience, I can absolutely feel that it resonates with a mass audience, that you don't need to be a — you don't have to have a degree in art history to relate to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Why is that important to you?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think that was of part it why I became a designer. I just always felt that being part of people's lives was a wonderful thing to be able to be, and somehow popular music was always able to pull this off beautifully to have really high quality but still talk to huge audience, be emotional. So I was — sometimes, I mean, not — you know, quite jealous of our clients, you know. I mean, partly because of the incredible quality that they could do, you know, I'm just in awe of somebody — I don't know, we had many, you know, that I would listen to, and I would just be totally taken by this thing that this person made, just completely taken. And I would be one of 2 million people who would be — who would be taken enough that they would go out and pay 20 bucks to get this thing to be taken. I mean, that's just a wonderful thing to do with your life. Or I'm a huge Christo fan, you know, and think that the ability of both of them to make these few selective projects, raise all the money themselves — you know, what a fantastic thing to do with your life. I mean, what a worthwhile thing, be totally apolitical, have this one thing, like, be very form-related and do these very time constraint massive projects that finds, you know, an incredible strength in large audiences. I mean, that thing in Germany, you know, basically, you know, I don't know, think like a holiday in Germany, bang that thing on the Reichstag, what's going on, yeah? Or even what a big deal the Gates were, which I didn't even think was one of the best projects, but it was just a joyous thing to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

So how is it similar and how is it different as you try to prefer [ph] his music — [inaudible] —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Oh, and I have to make sure — and I'm not comparing myself to any of these things — [inaudible] —

MS. RIEDEL: No, we're talking about the influences or — yeah — [inaudible] —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, I think that these guys are great, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And me or the studio is not there at all. But this is I think — like, I heard them — I met them a couple of times but I also heard them lecture once. At the end of the lecture I was just — I just thought, what a great thing to do with your life. What a wonderful thing that everybody is better off. You know, they seem to have — I mean, with all the troubles to go through, but if they make the trouble part of the work—also what a fantastic idea to just say, okay, that's what — that's what I'm dealing with, I'm dealing with red tape trouble. This is — instead of oil paint, red tape trouble is my medium, and — [they laugh] — and that's what I'm wrestling with. Just — there's a lot of stuff I think that's to be learned from them.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm.

What in particular did you take away from that, and is there anything that you are using as you're preparing for these museums exhibitions, for T*he Happy Show* in Philly or coming up in L.A., you're on film — because those are — those are departures for you in some way, yes?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, I think T*he Happy Show* in Philly is — you know, has something to do with the film, of course — came there —

MS. RIEDEL: Of course.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and then that all is connected to the things I've learned. So, I mean — [inaudible] — there's definitely connections, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like it's a very — and it's designated specifically to be a very interactive exhibition with your audience?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, but there again, that's just taking the audience or the situation seriously, you know what I mean? Clearly, if you're showing something, we would display it in a different way if you — for a person that can actually physically be there than what — than we — than if we know that somebody can only experience that on a screen or can only experience this in a book and so on, you know, like, I don't know, if we ever — if we ever get around or will do *The Happy Book* — which is possible; I mean, there's definitely a good number of publishers who asked for it — I'm sure — I would hope it would be different. You know, I would hope that the things that we would do in a book would be more than doing still images of the film. I would very much hope that we would take the advantages of what a book can do that, I don't know, that you can fill it out or that you can — whatever the way that the — the kind of storytelling that you can do in a book where a book is best is very different from the kind of storytelling that an exhibition can do because in the exhibition, you can interact, you can — I don't know, your shadows are visible, so you can do something with the shadows. You know that you can ask a visitor to do something, to pick something up, to react to something, to follow instructions, to behave a certain way — I mean, there's all things you can do in exhibition that you can't do in a cinema or you can't — or doesn't make much sense to do in a book.

MS. RIEDEL: What becomes, for example, of all those books and all those notes and all those drawings that the audience contributed in Philadelphia?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think they were just basically on a website.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. They were used as — I think as social media messages. I mean, they were, like, you know, on Facebook and Twitter, and then they became a giant collection on a website. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. So the actual hard copy is — was just —

MR. SAGMEISTER: They — the museum has them. And I'm not sure — I mean, maybe — I mean, literally, now that you say it, I might look at them again and see if they're — if it's interesting to display them somewhere at a consequent show. I'm not sure. Possibly.

MS. RIEDEL: So there's no point — yeah, there's no plan to have them be part of the L.A. submission? L.A. will be an entire new blank book?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, the L.A. — basically, I mean, the — definitely all the stuff from Philadelphia got created and, you know, is going to Toronto now, to Los Angeles later. But because the spaces are very different and because we are not in Toronto and in L.A., There is a designer in those spaces who adapts the show. And we of course will see how successful the adaptation is. But it could be that, I mean, literally, now that you say it, that — you know, that these — because the spaces are very different, that these — that these cards could play some sort of role. I would have to look at them again and see how interesting or not interesting they are, yeah?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm.

A couple just technical questions about sabbatical. What happens when you close down the studio for a year? What about the — well, you don't even [ph] have very — well, you've only ever had one or two employees, yeah?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: But you just closed down. And do they head out? Do they know — how does that work?

MR. SAGMEISTER: It was different. The first time I had — only Hjalti was working for me, and Jan was an intern. And they formed basically — me going on sabbatical was the kick in their ass to open their own studio, which was excellent, and they probably would have — sort of, like, similar to me, I would have stayed in M & Co. longer, they would have stayed longer, but this was the cake.

MS. RIEDEL: Gotcha.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And they opened Karlssonwilker, a very successful studio. They're very close here. They're on Sixth Avenue and 15th St. And we are still very good friends. I might actually see Jan tonight, I'm not quite sure of that.

The second time around I had two designers working with me. Richard The went to MIT to do a masters and teach, and he came back afterwards. And Joe Shouldice stayed actually here to finish up a couple of jobs. He also oversaw the renovation and stayed afterwards for another year and then opened his own studio. And Richard by now went to Google and is pretty much a bigwig there. And — but again, we are all still in contact, which I'm very happy to — for one thing that — there's a good amount of good design studios came out of this studio already, either from interns or designers who used to work here. Very few designers went to other design studios afterwards.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Most opened their own studio after here, which I think is great and very similar, not — you know, I mean, it's sort of like — was a teebo [ph] legacy, of course, you know. I mean, for a while, after M & Co., closed, it seemed that every design studios whose work I liked was an ex-M & Co. studio in New York. You know, I mean, it was so many that — of M & Co. alumni. So I'm super happy and also — and also very happy to them that we all still get along where we are.

MS. RIEDEL: That's saying quite a bit.

Any other projects you'd like to mention?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, I think — did we talk about *The Happy Film* properly, or —

MS. RIEDEL: No, we haven't said much about it. Let's talk a little bit about that. It's the first real film.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, it's a documentary film. It's small. You know, our budget is probably going to be half a million dollars, which in the world of — in the world of graphic design, it's huge. In the world of documentary films, it's nothing.

MS. RIEDEL: And is this privately funded, or do you have a client who's helping — or clients that are helping fund ?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, that's actually — be funded — that's — I'm quite happy about this — to be funded through talks.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, we did a little bit of fundraising also. We did some through Kickstarter. And we did — we did some fundraisers. But I found the much easier and hassle-free way to raise the money was through lectures.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So I talk about the film. I challenge the people who organize photography, and that fee goes directly into the film. And that is — I like doing those lectures so it is — it's not a big effort for me. It makes conceptual sense. That — it's actually quite neat that a talk about the making of the film would actually finance the film. And I like how all of these things sort of like are stepping stones towards each other. And at the end you'll have the film. And then hopefully the film — I don't know; if the film sucks, of course, well then there is that. [They laugh.] We'll see.

MS. RIEDEL: How long is it — is the projected length?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Oh, it's like a 90-minute sort of — you know, like a full length's feature thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: The way it came about was really in Bali, when we were designing furniture because it was on my agenda because the studio was renovating and building new furniture — this is on 14th Street. And the furniture that I really loved I couldn't afford. And so just decided, oh, I'll take sort of, like, what an Eames chair would cost, like, 3,000 bucks or so, and I take that as a — as a prototype budget. And then we designed all this furniture in Bali. It was one of the things we're working on.

And now my best friend came to Bali and said he's actually quite disappointed in the stuff that we're doing, but he thought it was more of a waste of time. Or he thought the furniture was nice, but he thought I could — I could do things of better usage than that. And that somehow, I don't know, slipped [ph] through. And I thought about what it — what could — what it could be that would be of better usage. And that's the idea for *The Happy Film* came about because I had done this lecture for a good while on design and happiness, with good results and with good feedback, and when the film — and I had never done a film, so I thought it could be interesting to try out this, you know, new medium, but keep its still type influence or designing influence so I would know — [inaudible] — at least. Yeah. And then, of course, it will not be much more difficult than I had envisioned, and my background — my visual background was less helpful than I had hoped for. And we'll see. We are pretty far along this filming. I mean, we started editing. So — and hope that by next fall we have an edited version that we'll submit to festivals.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Fall 2013?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So — and is it — it's semi-autobiographical, yes?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. It's —

MS. RIEDEL: And it's this pitch for happiness through cognitive behavior, psychology, medication and drugs, correct?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Exactly. You know it — you know it all, yes, yes. In a way it's a self-experimental film somehow following — you know, it's in the mold of "Supersize Me." I try something out, and here is what happened. It will be a very different film from "Supersize Me," but, I mean, that sort of the — you know, one of the models.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

Now, let's see —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, I very much liked the movie "Rivers and Tides."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: By Goldsworthy.

MS. RIEDEL: Andy Goldsworthy, right. Right, right, right. That was beautiful.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. I thought that it was wonderful. Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So somewhere between the two.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, we'll see. I hope — hopefully it's something totally different than either, but there is definitely — I think there is some sort of relations in both — if it would be half as successful as either, I'd be more than happy, no pun intended.

MS. RIEDEL: Quite pleased.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: A question here about the studio. In 2012 you took on a full-time partner?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What inspired that?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, it was mostly the possibility. I mean, you know, Jessica at that point had worked here for two years. She was exceptionally talented. She's a very unusual person, you know. She designed the website that taught other designers how to design websites when she was 13. So it's — not many 13-year-olds do that. She — you know, when she started working here, she was 23 or 24 but had the experience of a 30- or 35-year-old.

And I think that she has a knack of really understanding a situation and designing accordingly, like, very deep common design sense, which I had always thought was incredibly important, like, that you, you know, see something, you take a lot of information in, you see the situation, you talk to the client, you read between the lines, you ask the proper questions, you really listen, you really listen, then you go back, and you can come back with a solution that hits that nail.

And that is a — that, then the fact that she's very good craft — from a craft perspective, you know, as far as art direction is concerned, as far as the ability to make things happen, to get them done within a timeline and a budget is concerned or have good ideas and execute them properly. She was very good in all of those things. And so I think that was the foundation.

And then knowing from my own experience that if you are in this — in a situation like this, and if you are in a small studio like there — like mine, that you can't really grow, you know what I mean? You're not going to take on routines, particularly — [inaudible] — you know. So I knew that if I would be her, I would only stay at a studio like mine for about two years and then move on.

MS. RIEDEL: I see. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So I — it was one thing that I wanted to prevent that. Another thing was that she was very good with clients, that I — that are — that she could take on more of our commercial work — it was freeing me up to do more of the self-generated work — and her desire and willingness to do so and the deal seeming for both of us being an advantage, you know. And we basically said let's try this for three years, and then we'll see. And then three years we are free to, you know, either go our own ways or continue for more, or we'll see.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: That seemed basically advantageous for both of us and has so far to be — to be exactly that, advantageous for both of us. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you plan to continue with the plan of closing every seven years?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes. Yeah, absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. And would she — would you alternate so she would continue to be here while you were away, or would you just close down — [inaudible]?

MR. SAGMEISTER: We'll see. We'll see.

I think what I would love to do would be, if we are in that financial situation, if we can make that happen, will be wonderful to close but keep everybody, you know, that we would all go on sabbatical. And, I don't know, depending on, I mean, you know, then what your family situation is, what mine will be, we'll have to see, but, I mean, I could — it would be a choosy [ph] thing to basically say, let's rent a house and studio, whatever, you know, in Iceland or in Mexico or in Brazil and move there knowing each other so well, knowing the — knowing the work so well and basically just move the studio there and, I don't know, set a couple of tasks. I think that would be an — would be a — that would be significantly different from the two previous sabbaticals. I could — I simply couldn't do it financially previously. But who knows, it depends on how good these years are and how disciplined we also are in saving money. I mean, that's — you know, you can do anything that you want if you — if you really set the parameters and do so. Of course we could, you know, because you can also rent a cheap house in a country that's cheap and do it that way, you know. Or — so we'll see. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

Do you think about specifically political and social commentary in your work, or is that an indirect presence as well? Or does it depend on the project?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, basically, the — of course we do projects for nonprofits.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And probably the most significant and the biggest one that we've done was for this organization Move Our Money that, you know, wants to cut 15 percent of the Pentagon budget and move it over to education. We worked for them — I think it's done — but it's done now, but we worked for them I think over the span of about eight or 10 years. They had many, many, many, many projects. And of — [end of disc].

[END SD2 TR1]

MR. SAGMEISTER: — there's a political slant of that, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and — you know, the — [inaudible] — basically, we pick our nonprofit projects, I mean, obviously, according to —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — if I believe in the — in the cause.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: If the — if the people who do — who are doing the project have the means and are in the situation to actually do something about it —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — if design can be helpful in that —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMESTER: — you know, not every project is a design solution —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMESTER: — or it's — or even though not every organization, specifically in the nonprofit world, is design-centric or understands or understands its powers.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yeah.

MR. SAGMESTER: And that was an ideal situation because it was a group of 500 CEOs who came together. So they had the believability when it came — when it got to budget issues.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: My direct line was Ben Cohen from, you know, Ben & Jerry's —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMESTER: — but there were people like Ted Turner, or — there was a couple of celebrity CEOs part of it. And, I mean, it's obviously debatable about how big of an impact it had or not —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — but I myself do believe that part of the reason why the Pentagon budget is really on the table right now is also that, because they made, you know, big — there was big forays into that world of, you know, how much money was wasted there, you know, that you can basically — that even if you love the military, you can run — you can do the exact same — the exact same strength — I mean, some people think you can cut 30 percent, not just the 15 that we — that we required —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMESTER: — without any — without doing anything. And if you — I mean, the stories there are just

hilarious.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And most of our initial identity for the whole project was basically just statistics, because statistics are so crazy.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, if you look at, whatever, how much money we spend as opposed to how much money everybody else spends — you know, the U.S. outspends the next 10 countries combined.

MS. RIEDEL: I knew Russia and China, but I didn't realize it was quite that bad. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Yeah — no, it's — like, that whole thing that we always — you know, like, when I grew up in Austria, the story was always, well, like, if it — we just all have to spend that much on the military because the Russians force us to, you know, because of the Cold War and because they spend so much money, so we have to match it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, that turned out to be a total, utter, complete lie. Because now that the Russians are gone and spend almost nothing, we are — we are keeping — we are actually quite — much higher than we used to be.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So there is — there's — it's definitely a peeve of mine. You know, and I see it's so unbelievably bad for this country —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — because it's the — you know, the taxes that I pay actually here are very — 2 percent lower than the taxes that my brothers pay in Austria, but what we get back is incomparable. You know, Austria has fantastic, brand-new infrastructure that doesn't collapse when a storm comes. You know, Austria has free education from kindergarten to university. Austria has — every village has, you know, a wellness area, where you can go into a spa for three euros that's government paid. All the museums is all paid for.

So what you — what you see when you get back is completely different.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And the biggest part of that is free health care, of course. I mean, there is — just the services that you get back for your tax dollar are uncomparable to what you get back for your tax dollar here. And to some large extent, that is because of the crazy military spending, you know. You know, I mean —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. That was a great example. Absolutely.

On that note, do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition? Do you think of yourself as part of an American tradition? Do you think about it in that way at all?

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, I think — I still think of myself as Austrian, that — as an Austrian who lives in New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So I'm very New Yorker-ish —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and I definitely — now when I go back to Austria, I feel — I still feel like I'm from there, but I developed very differently.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I feel very much how I should feel, because, I mean, even if I — even when I'm together with my friends who stayed, we just developed very differently.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, that's their — from that point of view, I have very much New York or maybe American influence, but — because I spent all of my time in New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And it was New York that I came for. I didn't come for America.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So —

MR. SAGMEISTER: And if it wouldn't be New York, I wouldn't live in this country, I'd have to say.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Like, my second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth and 10th favorite cities are not in this country.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So when you look at your work, does it feel like it's part of what you would describe as a New York tradition? Does it feel like it's part of an international tradition that combines all these different influences? Clearly it's not American. And it doesn't sound like you would describe it as Austrian either. Maybe —

MR. SAGMEISTER: No, it's international by now, because I did — there's some Asian influence.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. That's right. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. But I still feel Austrian in some way. I can definitely see an Austrian influence in there.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure. Sure.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, and we talked about sort of, like, the equality of the applied arts and all — like, there's a good number of things that come out of there. But —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I think that's obvious, too, in the work when I look at just the fluidity between the commercial and the noncommercial work, between the different media, the museum exhibitions, that Austrian sense of fluidity between applied and fine arts can be, I think, seen in the body of your work in many ways.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I would think so. And then I would say that — I don't know, if you look at, you know, the later work — like, let's say *The Things I've Learned*— or even *Happy Film* — an American or a New York influence —

MS. RIEDEL: Sure. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — like a friendliness in there or an affirmation of life or so that's probably more popular here or more desirable here than, you know, in Vienna. Happiness is still seen as something for stupid people, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: If you're actually — if you're intelligent, you would understand the horror that life truly is, and you would be miserable.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And many people actually believe that in Vienna.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. How have your sources of inspiration changed over time, or have they? Certainly we talked about music and we've talked about sabbaticals.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, I would say that, you know, the big inspiration for sure is that I travel so much.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So that is —

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, so there is — so I see a lot. And I see a lot of things, you know, in actuality, you know, as opposed to on TV or on the Web.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, that definitely plays a role. And I think that being in foreign places quite often makes it

easier to envision something that you don't know how to do, because while you are there, you don't really have — you don't really need to do it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So it sometimes might be easier to — like, I remember the bananas for Deitch. I made sketches for that in Tokyo when I didn't really have to think about how these bananas would attach to a wall or how they would actually rot or not rot also. But it was sort of — it was — sometimes it's easier to tap into something new that I haven't done before when I'm far away.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting. That's very interesting. Do you think that's been true throughout your career?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, I mean, I would say — I mean, definitely before the studio. The — I would have made chapters like Vienna or Hong Kong or New York also.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And since the studio it's more with the sabbaticals, but then in between, of course, in those — in those seven-year blocks, I also always traveled a lot — a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, that was one of the, you know, wonderful things that even with the small studio we have a very international client base —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and I lecture a lot and mostly internationally. And, you know, I had the opportunity to go to dozens and dozens of places that I would have never gone normally. You know, and — but are still fantastic to go.

You know, I mean, last week I was on a small island in the Philippines. It's absolutely gorgeous, but probably not even on an Asian holiday would have brought me to that island in the Philippines. You know, you tend to go to — I don't know — the more popular places or — I was — you know, three weeks before, I was in Quito in Ecuador and then in Lima, all — but, you know, it's many, many, many places. And it's a wonderful way to travel because, you know, it's — you know, you're immediately connected to local people because you do a lecture, you don't feel quite so touristy, so you behave a little bit differently.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I now went back to apply to do at least three days there so that I really have a chance to see something else, that I don't just do the lecture and out of there again. I did that for a while, but that was a mistake because then it's just boring. Then you're just, like, on a plane, you do the lecture, you go to the hotel, you get up, you do the — get into the plane — that's — and that's not fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And it does strike me as interesting because from the beginning of your career in Hong Kong, you were already someplace different from Pratt. You were someplace different. It does seem that there was a real pattern there.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, I think that change was just always very important to me. Or the — our scientific adviser for the film thinks I'm an — what does he call it — sort of word that I particularly like, but he thought that I was an experience junkie.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] An experience junkie.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But, I mean, I'm extremely aware, and maybe more so than others how repetition can make me dull in all sorts of ways.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And so it's so easy to get used to things and start taking them for granted, even the best of things, even the most wonderful things. And travel — particularly travel to new places is a great way to get out of there. Or — well, before that, before it became tiring, you know, being two years here and three years there was interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So then do you find that you do a lot of your more interesting work either in someplace different or in the plane as you are traveling to or from?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, I'm talking now concepts, of course.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, of course. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. I don't execute —

MS. RIEDEL: I didn't think.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — in the aisle seats. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. What do you see as similarities and differences between the early work and what you're doing now?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Early work, like, as in — early, like, as in student work or early as in early —

MS. RIEDEL: Actually, it could go either way. I know you've mentioned in the past that you think some of your seeds from your work comes from the student work, so taking it back as far as you feel is accurate.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, let's say if I look at the Ronacher campaign, which was —

MS. RIEDEL: The which campaign?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Ronachar — that's — it's for a theater — it's R-O-N-A-C-H-E-R.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And so if I look at that campaign, which was basically a very similar format done in different executions —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So it would be, like, made out of different materials.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So you basically would have a poster that was made out of theater tickets that said "Ronacher" and then some expression, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But it was — perforated and you could take a ticket — or the same format, but it was — the poster was made out of glass, and a goldfish was swimming inside.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Now, we just did a film that — where a goldfish played a role, but more significantly I think that this idea that you would have a theme and then really play versions of that theme that I think is consistent —

MS. RIEDEL: Consistent?

MR. SAGMEISTER: That's consistent, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So theme and variation?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Even there, in that comparing, let's say we had one poster, that had a little toy cable car attached to it and was going across the café for an indoor poster, and a viewer could roll the cable car from one side to the other. So, like, you know, this slight interaction of the viewer — so I think that's now definitely there. And they're still interested in that.

The whole idea of unusual materials or unusual production techniques — like, the production techniques that are not normally deployed in design, the idea of working very hard and obsessively on something — so basically that nobody else would not bother. It's funny that apparently Richard Serra told that to Chuck Close — I just read that before in that — in the book that you gave me —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — that — and he worded it actually nicer. Like, apparently — I mean, they talked about — well, Chuck Close talks about that. At the time, you know, it was all about uniqueness, like, you want to do work that nobody else could do. And, you know, way before appropriation, of course.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Now that's not so much — so much interesting in fine art anymore, but at the time, this was sort of, like, the thing. And Richard Serra gave the advice to Chuck Close. They were classmates at Yale.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And he gave that advice to Chuck Close, saying that whenever you get into a fork and — you know, a fork in the road — and, you know, you get to many forks through any project — always take the one that's much more difficult.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And so — and by that, you would just find that there's a piece that's so idiosyncratic that — because it's just too big of a pain in the ass.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And we've definitely done that numerous times, where we would use a production technique that's so outside of the graphic design world that you would have to find new people, that you would have to — like, new manufacturers, that all your regular production people wouldn't know how to do that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And of course then you wind up being the only one doing that, because everybody else is, like, oh my God, what — I wouldn't even know — like, it's — what a pain in the ass.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Anything that's different? Sounds like a lot of similarities, a lot of theme and variation.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, I mean, now for sure, I think the work has become much more personal —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — that in — you know, now we are more in charge of the content.

MS. RIEDEL: It also seems that the media has really expanded. Does it feel like what you do —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sure, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — yeah — so that a lot of these ideas maybe are — date back to very early days, but the ways of exploring them have really broadened through clients and through media?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, and, I mean, you know, it used to be — I don't know — it used to basically be all print, the stuff that we did, you know, because that's —

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And things were static. If they moved, they moved — you know, there was tiny little movements in there. And that, of course, changed, you know. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Has collaboration become more important, do you think, or was it important from the start?

MR. SAGMEISTER: It definitely increased, yeah. Also I think — you know, when you wanted to try different things out, you needed collaborators from different areas, you know, I would think had increased. There was definitely — I don't — pieces even in the early days of the studio that I did totally by myself or maybe just with a little bit of help of an assistant. While I don't think that anything has left this studio in a long while, we're not — many people had their hands on it on some ways, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. I think this will be a helpful question. Would you describe your working process and how it's changed over time?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well — from a concept point of view?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, maybe a concept point of view but also execution, maybe — were you not — certainly not hanging bananas, but something along those lines?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Well, let's say on the commercial project — well, we meet the client.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: We see what the project is. We decide on if it's worthwhile or not.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And let's say it's worthwhile, we, if at all possible, definitely visit the client. We try out the project. We try to get as much information about it as possible.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: If it's a branding thing, we normally come back with a couple of attributes, words that we think would describe the brand —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and really nail these first before we start working on it, because I think there you really want an overall direction agreed upon. And then we try to come up with ideas. Internally, often there's many. Often there's different techniques that go with —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — again, go just — well, very rarely it just happens to come.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: More often it's hard work that can involve — I don't know — the writing of many, many, many cards, where every idea, every direction is written on a card, and we see if there's connection between the cards or if something comes out that way, very often this need of trying to think about the idea from a starting point that has nothing to do with the idea —

MS. RIEDEL: How do you do that?

MR. SAGMEISTER: So let's say — I don't know — let's say we would have to design — I don't know — a telephone. And the client wants us to come up with concepts for a new telephone. And so we probably would do the research anyway, but instead of just doing that, we would also start thinking about the telephone from the point of view of a banana, just because I see it here.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Then we think, okay — oh, maybe it opens differently. Can it open like a banana, if that makes sense, or maybe it's a bunch of things that fit together. Maybe instead of having it all in one bundle, maybe we have the three major items. Maybe this is the phone, this is the camera, and this is the web browser. Maybe that makes sense. Maybe there is just a lens in here that's very small that's still connected to the cable but that you can — but that you can go around freely. Not a bad idea — possibly.

Would have never gotten there if I would have just thought about the telephone.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And the reason that — there's a guy called Edward de Bono, who developed many thinking techniques — it's basically just tricking the brain to think outside of its groove.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Because if I just think about a telephone — starting from a telephone, it will always stay in the — in the — it will always stay in the telephone mode, first conjuring up images of existing telephones that I've seen.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And then it's very difficult, because the brain is so fantastic to think in repetitions to make it think something new. So the banana thing helps in that way. And we've done many successful projects in that

way.

MS. RIEDEL: Does it matter what that other object is? Is it always something — is it something just selected at random like a banana?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yet — no, totally — yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Completely random, yeah. Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, as far away from the original project.

MS. RIEDEL: Original — yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So, for example, when I look around the table, I would have not started designing the telephone with headphones. It's just too close.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Do you want a banana?

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] No, I'm good, thank you. And in execution — in terms of execution?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Then once we have it — once we have sort of a direction —normally we have plenty of directions or more — we decide — me and Jessica; me, maybe Jessica and another designer — we see what looks juicy and might try that out — I mean, might try out or three directions, see what the next level or next couple rounds of execution survives so it looks juicier. But we will make a decision, and only then we'll execute one for the presentation to the client. We never show five.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. You show one.

MR. SAGMEISTER: We show one, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. And that comes out of — the reason for that is that I'm convinced we're the better judges of what works and what not. The client will always know their business much better than we do, but I actually do know more about how to communicate that business than the client most of the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I've made mistakes, of course, but most of the time — I mean, you know, I spent much more time thinking about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: It would be sad if — I wouldn't. And I think there is — if you show three or five, there are two major problems. One is that internally, mediocre ideas are allowed to survive, because if you know that you need five, you think, oh, okay, I'll show that too, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And externally at the presentation, the client knows and feels that they paid for all five, so there is this strong urge on the client side to make a combination, you know, so that — because they think I want the best of all five.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So you wind up with the type from here, the colors from there, and the shapes from there, and that often yields these Frankenstein solutions that don't work at all. But still the client sort of has the feeling they got the best for their money.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And very often — I mean, I've heard so many designers say — and they say, "Well, like, we

had so much better stuff, and the client picked the worst," you know. I was, like, "Why the fuck did you show the worst?" You know, if you — if you already knew going in that it was the worst of the solutions, why show it if you didn't recommend it?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, but there is then — so many designers have to — they want to impress the client by the amount of work that they've done, which is also completely stupid, because it's so easy to do 10.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, Jessie and I could put 20 sort of good proposals out in an afternoon, no trouble —

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — and then give it over to the interns, who sort of could execute them. Oh, we can generate 200 in a week.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, but basically — and I've seen specifically international branding agencies go in with 200. And I think it's a crime, because basically you're pushing the job back to the client that they pay you for.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, like — I mean, it's basically because nobody can actually come up with 200 original solutions. So there are 200 kind of stolen solutions that other designers developed that sort of — okay, let's do something like this and something like this and something like this. It's super easy, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: It's the next step — I mean, you basically could also go into a client with a logo book and say what you like and then you just do that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But because they feel too stupid to do that, they develop 200 solutions that kind of come out of a logo book in all directions. I think it's extremely easy and very frivolous. So we do one. And if we do get it wrong, which had happened, after a client says, no, no, that's not what I was looking for at all; we talk about it and talk about all the stuff that's wrong with it. And then the second time we basically always get it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right. How does that differ in a noncommercial work in the working progress? Does it differ?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Quite a bit.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Let's say — like, right now, we're doing this exhibition for the Jewish Museum for — you know — it's — we're showing five videos in an installation. So there we'd look at the room, see what's possible there, look at the budget, see what we can actually build over what's possible there. Then it's a mixture of what we would like to do where we are as a studio, what the needs are going forward.

In this case, we sort of wanted to make a show that's connected to the Happy Show, but the room there — it's in the project room; is too small to do a full-blown *Happy Show*. So we said, let's just do one aspect. So we're doing — it's called *Six Things*. So we're doing six things I've learned in my life, five of them being projections, one an installation. And I think three of them are old, meaning three of them are videos we've already done, three videos we are actually going to do new specifically for the show — no, two videos we're going to do new, specifically for the show; and one is — and one is an installation.

And there it's — is there a new sentence -that — and how do we execute it for a show, the reason we do two as videos is also because we can also use it for the film again.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And the kind of room that it was, it lent itself well to five projections. But there, of course, also the likelihood that the museum comes back — the museum comes back and says no, I don't like that sentence, can you change it into this, is very little.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, I mean, of course, you have — an amount of — freedom attached to it. I think there is more, like — you know, they probably would get concerned if we go seriously over-budget —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — or — I don't know — if we would do something anti-Jewish, would be my guess it would be a problem. But, you know, we — well, I'm not even sure if that would be a problem. I mean, I have no desire to —

MS. RIEDEL: Of course.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — but, I mean, they did some quite provocative shows in the past.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Have the notebooks been a close link to the work for quite some time? Is it —

MR. SAGMEISTER: You mean the sketchbooks?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And is that true for pretty much all the projects; commercial and noncommercial?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, from my — from my particular point of view, for sure. Less so from Jessica.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, Jessica keeps sketchbooks but very differently, not as — I don't know — elaborately, as neatly as I have.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But it has a lot to do with age, because I sketch out everything, while Jessica works differently.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, she would start with a really crappy sketch and then — go digitally — quite fast. She would also look for references much faster in a much wider way than that. But I would probably develop fluider alone and don't go for references at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So it's just a different way of working. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting — way of working. We've talked about humor, and we've talked about bananas with phones, so it seems that there's an inherent sense of quote, unquote "play" in the process of working, that that's an important part of the process and humor of the final pieces. And that seems to have been true for quite some time. Does that seem accurate?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, and, I mean, you know, I think that humor would always be a strategy for anybody who wants to communicate anything. I mean, specifically if you want to make it something fast, you know, every joke has a surprise — that's the definition — of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So would you want to have a surprising there, if you have to tell something that only has five seconds to be told.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So I think it was also very clear idea. And there was an influence from — M&Co — I'm sure that, you know, was quite humorous in many ways.

MS. RIEDEL: There's a really good description, I thought, of your work. Somebody described it — I can't remember — one the articles that I was reading — "humorous in an unsettling way."

MR. SAGMEISTER: Hmm?

MS. RIEDEL: “Humorous in unsettling way —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yep — yeah, yeah, yeah. Nice.

MS. RIEDEL: — and “sexuality with wit and a whiff of the sinister.” Do those feel pretty accurate?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I thought those were pretty good summations. I can’t remember exactly where I found them, but there’s so much material about you online.

Technology has played a huge role in the work, clearly, of course, from really early on.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sure.

MS. RIEDEL: A lot of the work wouldn’t happen without it.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: You know, it’s interesting because many of these questions have been asked to many different artists over the 10 years or so that I’ve been doing this, and many of the artists are 80 years old or 70 years old —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sure. Sure.

MS. RIEDEL: — and technology has made absolutely no difference. And it’s interesting as I begin to talk to younger artists that a lot of the work simply could not exist without technology.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sure. Yeah. And at the same time though, you know, like, in the world, let’s say, of design, we’d probably be also quite a bit known for doing a lot of things by hand —

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — you know, making things actual, , like, you know, that the physical — that there’s a lot of combinations of real things and digital things and — sort of at the intersection of — virtuality and haptic. And I — well, whenever we have to try something specifically in an exhibition or a book also that people can touch something or move something physically, we normally go for it simply because it — you know, I find that it’s a deeper engagement than if you just press a button.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And — yeah, and I think that in many ways, you know, doing something by hand and having that be clearly visible also makes it deeply human.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I think part of that just translates or it still is in the final piece. Like, I deeply disagree with this entire, you know, machine-made look and dictum from the Bauhaus or — you know, that might have made some sense in the ‘30s, and it was troubled enough then. But the fact that you still have, you know, 90 years later people building boxes, you know, is just hilarious to me. You know, it’s just — I mean, this is just the most conservative — being stuck in old thinking schemes. I can imagine — that, of course, is, you know, also true — like, relevant, let’s say in graphics would be white space; you know, like, the use of the clearly cropped photograph with a piece of Helvetica on top and a lot of white space. Yes, maybe in the ‘30s possibly interesting when you had to get rid of all that ornament from the 19th century. By now, since it’s been the status quo corporate style for basically a hundred years, it’s just — it says nothing, other than “I have been made by a machine,” which is not an interesting statement in 2012.

So there, I think quite often obviously we, you know, bring the handmade in because so much of basically almost anything — you know — I don’t know — if you ask anybody on the street who designed the thing that — you know, this Poland Spring label, people would say, “Well, some machine done it.”

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And they’re completely unaware that, you know, there were many, many people sitting in many, many meetings designing that thing. This type actually has been designed by hand. But even though it

has been designed by hand, specifically, I'm sure, because this is not a fixed type — specifically for Poland Spring, it still has been designed in a way to make it look like it's been done by a machine —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — which is sort of — and this is the status quo, you know, I mean — you know, including the fog machine here or anything, which is, you know, not wrong for everything. I mean, there's definitely cases still that it makes sense. But it's wrong that this is — that the vast majority of things are designed that way.

MS. RIEDEL: It just made me think of your experience very young — when you were younger of, I think, the titles had to be used — they had to be created using a Letraset that was donated from somebody else —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — and then you began to actually hand-letter many of the titles. And so actually from very early on you must have been experimenting with handwritten titles.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, but there, basically — there, of course, I would have loved to have machine-made typography, but I just couldn't afford it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And it was, you know, just made out of necessity, because it was so much cheaper to hand-draw it than to — than to — do it — than to have it set, of course.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting how it has come completely full circle.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Absolutely. Now it so much more expensive to handwrite it. Yes. Yup.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk a little bit about teaching, where you've been teaching for the past 10 years and what in particular it is that you have taught and what are specific philosophies you might have for teaching.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, I taught — since a — long time.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, School of Visual Arts.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, that's — I'm there now, since, I think, a dozen years about.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I've taught also at Cooper Union and before that at Pratt — sorry, no, before that at Parsons. And then I taught at Pratt — Parsons. And I've done lectures or workshops in many, many other places. I've done a semester at the UDK in Berlin, Universitat der Kunste.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And I've done a semester at — in Salzburg. So I like it, and I can easily see going forward doing more of it, maybe even in older age becoming a full-time teacher.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I could see that, yeah, or taking on a significant amount of it. I actually — I'm convinced that we are designed that way by evolution. You know, if you look at the strengths of the brain, I think it peaks at 28. And then you can do better work for a while still because as you gain more experience and power, you can actually do better work than when your brain is at peak.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But, you know, that relationship goes down. And I would — I'm not sure if that's a — I never read about this from evolutionary psychologists, so this is my own theory. But I wouldn't be surprised that the brain specifically has been designed to be lamer as you get older, so that you would have a reason to give the knowledge that you have to other people, because if you always have that incredible satisfaction of becoming better and better or doing more and more things, why stop and give it to other people?

And, I mean — you know, in my field, in design, there is nobody who is 17 and does new significant work, nobody.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I'm not sure if that's true for fine art. I mean, there's many 17-year-olds who do excellent work —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — but it builds on the stuff that they've basically started to work on and created when they were 30. So I would have to think about if I could think of a fine artist where that would be different. In graphics, I know them all. And that — again, there's many people who do fabulous work, but it's all stuff that they have created a long time ago and they do more of it, basically.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So when you teach at these different schools, is there a specific course that you've taught over many years?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Well, I used to — for a long time, at Parsons and elsewhere, I used to do — I have a class, design for the music industry —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — which was when I designed for music, which was, you know, when we did that. And now for a long while I've done a course that I quite like that's called, how to touch someone's heart with design. And that's what they have to do. There's three projects. And all three of them have to have a specific target audience. And they have to deliver what they designed to that target audience and then measure or see if they touched them.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So it has to do with something with emotions, of course, against the Bauhaus, you know, which so purposely was unemotional. It has something to do with the stuff actually has to work and function —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — meaning that the designer has to create the reaction. It has to have something to do with this — that they have to pull this off, meaning they have to not just show something in class, but go — like, present it to an outsider, and it has to work there. So it's — I'll probably do this for a while longer. I very much enjoy it. I — you know, yesterday in class, there were again some good projects. And every year, there's a good number of students who completely, utterly, you know, hit the ball out of the park and very clearly touched their target audience, very clearly.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And do you have a set syllabus that you work with, just year after year? Do you fine-tune it?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, I change it slightly, yeah, depending on, you know, how the projects turned out. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And are there certain — there are specific exercises that you use — I imagine there are examples you use as well — to try to help them figure out how to do that?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, but it's basically — it's a studio class, so they bring in the work as it progresses, and, you know, I help them as much as I can.

MS. RIEDEL: When it comes to lectures, you said you've given many, certainly have given many over time. Did the lectures evolve based on what you're doing in the studio? Do they break down pretty much along those seven-year lines that we were talking about between sabbaticals? Is there a set number of lectures that you've given? Or how do you — how do you —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Meaning from just the amount of lectures or the kind of lectures?

MS. RIEDEL: The kind of lectures, what's covered, the material that you cover in the lectures — Take your time. You're eating the telephone.

MR. SAGMEISTER: [Laughs.] They develop slowly. I normally roughly do sort of one new lecture a year and then change it as I go along.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Stuff that works well stays in there —

MS. RIEDEL: Variations on things I've learned so far, that sort of thing, the *Happy Film*?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Okay. This is going to be an interesting question for you. What do you see as the place for universities — in universities for designers?

MR. SAGMEISTER: What — meaning, like, as far as faculty is concerned or —

MS. RIEDEL: Well, if a designer could learn to be a designer in a university or in a specific design academy or strictly being self-taught —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Oh, what's the difference?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, what's the difference —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Do I think that universities are good, that — is it good to study design in school rather than being self-taught?

MS. RIEDEL: Or to study in a university versus a specific art school or design academy, so "university" being a broader, more general sense of education as well.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Oh. Well, I do think that most designers who I really respect have some serious interests or education outside of design.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, [name inaudible] was a social engagement — I don't know — John Maeda is a — deep computer programming skills and so on. Because design is so much a part of everyone's life, to have a mere interest that's not completely steeped in there, I think, is very helpful to get your own directions together. On — I myself loved being in art school and was there as long as I could. There was no Ph.D. in design, otherwise I probably would have made one simply because I felt very comfortable in that environment. But many of the designers that I love never went to art school. Thibaut never went. James Victore hardly went. David Carson hardly went.

I think — so I don't think — it's clearly not a prerequisite. You can also do it without it. I would think that for me — and I think we talked about that — the best thing about it was you met people who were like-minded, fellow students, that you wouldn't have met otherwise, that just makes things easier; the pursuit of it makes it much easier than if you would have to figure this all out by yourself.

And, you know, like, I don't think that you can study design in university, I mean — or — I'm not quite sure in what sense. I mean, you know, in Austria, of course, I studied at something that's called the University for Applied Arts.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But it was an art school. It was not at the main University of Vienna, where you have, you know, the entire, you know, arts and sciences.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But let's say also at the School of Visual Arts, we definitely — for sure, Steven Heller makes sure that the student body comes from a very diverse sense of backgrounds. You know, and we had students who studied biology at Harvard and had no design education at all and dropped in and students who had massive amount of design experience but little — knew little about the world and very — particularly so they could all influence each other.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. It seems from what you've said too about how to — the importance of touching the heart through design, that substance is essential and that you don't want to just make a bunch of pretty fluff. And in order to do that, you have to have some other education either from yourself or from a university, things you're passionate about, one or the other. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sure. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Is there a community that's been important to your development as a designer? We've talked about the Tuesday Group and —

MR. SAGMEISTER: The Tuesday Group — I would say that —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. And the students at Pratt.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — yeah, I mean, the students specifically in Vienna and at Pratt. And then for sure — I think that — from a larger sense the AIGA — you know, for decades now, was, you know, able to deliver a lecture program and in a smaller sense an exhibition program over on Fifth Avenue in that location that's just, you know, helpful.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, I was at many AIGA conferences and talked at many but also — worked with — many people. I think that was, you know, definitely helpful. Then, you know, like, of course designers that I'm friends with — you know, which are many — you know, here, whether James Victore or Harry Pearce in London, Rick Valicenti in Chicago; then definitely in Vancouver, Marian Bantjes; Paula Scher here in New York; all — I mean, there's a community around people that used to work here that, you know, we all still meet each other — you know [name inaudible] and [name inaudible], Joe Shouldice and Richard The, Matthias Ernstberger.[Roughly in 1984, there was one in a gallery called Scala. –SS]

MS. RIEDEL: And so it's a community of peers really and colleagues?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Have there been writers or critics, art historians, who have been significant to you?

MR. SAGMEISTER: In the design world?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sure. I would say Rick Poynter in the U.K., Steve Heller here. I always enjoyed the writing of Michael Bierut.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But this is — like, these are, of course, specifically graphics.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, and in a wider sense, like, all the essays of David Foster Wallace, then from a conceptual point of view very much Edward de Bono. Did I already mention him?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, you did, right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And a big influence was the diaries of Brian Eno. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Dave Hickey at all?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sorry?

MS. RIEDEL: Dave Hickey?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Lesser so.

MS. RIEDEL: Lesser. Okay. Over time, has there been any sort of specialized periodical that's been important, any sort of art or design publication that you've referred to frequently or that was significant at some point?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think more like — more in — when I was a student. Much less so.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, I might flip through a design magazine or so, but I think that probably most designers would feel that way, like — you know, that you're, like, very eager to look at all these publications as a student or as a young designer and probably less so now. And, you know, as a student, it was *I Magazine*, and *Print, Communications Art* to lesser degree, graphics — but that was all, like, literally like as a student. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm going to pause this here, because I think this card's about to end.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Okay. Yeah.

[END SD2 TR2]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Stefan Sagmeister in the designer's studio in New York City on December 5, 2012 for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, card number three.

Let's talk about the books, and in particular you wanted to talk a little bit about *Made You Look*.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: That was the first one, yes, in 2001?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes. Yep, yep.

Well, it was a collection of all the work done until then — starting literally

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right. The good and the bad, as you said. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, starting from the student work all the way to the latest.

I had been to a lecture by Quentin Crisp, who was this old gay gentleman who used to live in the East Village, and my school had organized this lectures series — the School of Visual Arts — and I sneaked out one afternoon to hear him talk. And one of the many quotable things that he had said was — to the students — it was frankly students there — was that everybody is interesting. And apparently journalists came back to him and said, "But this is just not true, Mr. Crisp; you know, there's so many boring people out there."

Then he had to amend it — amend the thing and said, "Everybody who's honest is interesting."

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And that was really a little eureka moment for me because I thought — we were just in the middle of designing the book, and of course we wanted to make an interesting book. And I thought, well, that's just — we just have to be super honest and it's going to be interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And so we'll include the bad work and the good work. We'll talk about the stuff that didn't go well as well as the stuff that did go well, and I'll include all the stuff that for — at lectures he would dare people, sort of like asked how much money we make. And I was always avoiding it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, I thought about it. I never really gave them a straight answer. When I thought about it, it was like, "Why didn't I?" Like, why — like, what's there to hide? And that doesn't — it really doesn't matter.

And so we included on every project how much we charged and how many hours we actually worked on it. All — not in a big way. I mean, I wouldn't say it's huge, but for people who are interested could look it up in the back, that said, "Oh, at this project we worked — took so and so many hours and this is how much we charged them for it."

This feels "oh my God" because a lot of these were low-budget projects. Maybe clients will look that up and then they come back and they say, "Why did you charge me this much? When you did that project you only charged that much." But it didn't happen at all.

But it did prove to be an interesting book as an — it's, you know, it's in its — whatever — sixth or seventh reprint. And it still sells, which in a design world book — in a design world monograph on top of it is unheard of.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, this book is now 12 years old and it still sells, and it still — I think it sells — it sold last year as good as it sold in the third year. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That is interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So clearly there are still young designers who get it recommended or who are still interested in it. And I would think that this is mostly because of the text, would be my assumption, and not — you know, we designed it carefully and all that stuff, but I think that I wanted it to include a lot of copy. I wanted to include all the stories of — you know, definitely at the time there was this stupid thing about designers don't read, which I never believed. But, you know, that — and most monographs of course were picture books —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — you know, I mean, one after the other, with maybe a title of the project on it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And so that really worked well, and it worked well for the studio. I think it — that book really put the studio on the map.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, also, I'm not sure if you could now design a book that would put a studio quite on the map in the same way, you know, because there's so much — so many other influences out there. You know, in 2001, books were still the major medium. There other designers would learn about you.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Books and design magazines. Now design magazines are basically all gone, with, you know, the exception of one or two.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And books of course are still there, but I would be convinced that they wouldn't play the same role. You know, I mean, there was many design companies out there now who make their reputation completely differently — you know, through the Web or through YouTube or through things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

I think you're right, though. When I think about that book, the content is so dense. There's so much there.

MR. SAGMEISTER: There's a lot of stuff in there, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You spend a lot of time — there's a lot to be learned, not only — and there's a lot of diversity in that book, too. It's not only in the projects but in the way the content is delivered. So it feels as you're going through it — it doesn't have continuity in the way that a traditional book does, I don't think, but it has a different kind of continuity that I think is kind of captivating and educational in its own way.

And then I think there is something also, as you say, about that brutal honesty of revealing what didn't work that's kind of a thrill to actually see. And when you look at that in its entirety, it's incredibly insightful, I think.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Maybe — yeah. But we were — I remember it was one of those few projects and I felt actually the same on the second book. I mean, we worked hard on it. We are at that point — like, when we sent it to the printer, I could say: "I'm not sure if it's good or not good, but what I'm sure of is is that this is the best we can make it right now." Like, we worked so long on it that there was — on the day that we sent it to the printer there was nothing that I knew how to improve it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Like, this was — basically I could say, this is the best we can do right now. And I didn't have that that often, but I had it all through the *Things I Have Learned*, and I had it with the Deitch show —

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — more so than with — well, it would be like this is — this is where we are right now.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And it's a — it's a satisfying feeling, of course.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So that was 2001. The Deitch show was 2008. The next book was 2010, right — *Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far*?

MR. SAGMEISTER: No. The book — the Deitch show and *Things I Have Learned* came out at the same time.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Because we had the *Things I Have Learned* book there at the show.

MS. RIEDEL: At the show. Okay. That was 2008.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And it just came out.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And then there was another book in 2010?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, there is a — that one of our old interns designed.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. That was basic — it's more — it's a book but it's more of a catalog.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. It came with that show — *Another Show about Promotion and Advertising Material*.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

Are there any of the monographs that you've worked on — the Ashley Bickerton, the Vienna Now book — any of those that you'd like to mention in passing or in depth?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, I still love — still love designing books. You know, designer who is not here today but is a German designer that works with us, Philipp Hubert, who loves to design books, and so we've done now over the last couple of years many books together that I'm also very fond of still.

You know, I don't know if we can pick any, but let's pick — let's pick the Bickerton book, you know. I think we worked on it for three years, three and a half years very extensively with many redesigns.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But it's just like with a book still, it's still such a pleasing moment when it's done, and it's so portable and so compact and in that sense unchangeable. There is definitely something that — there is a satisfaction that comes in a book, from designing a book that you — that we don't have in designing a website.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. That makes me think of the *Worldchanging* book — that comes to mind immediately.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's a fairly recent book, right?

MR. SAGMEISTER: It was, like, five years ago maybe.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah — also a pleasure to do. You know, great content, wonderful publisher, very smart editor. That's actually — that was to be — why we then changed to Abrams afterwards because that very smart editor was there and she edited *Things I Have Learned*.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: When did you first begin to exhibit in museums or in galleries?

MR. SAGMEISTER: In galleries, very early.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think that the first exhibit in galleries would have been in '83 maybe, '84?

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, that is early.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Roughly — [crosstalk] — student.

MS. RIEDEL: So just barely out of school.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, not even — during school.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. How have the exhibitions changed over time?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Oh, totally. Like, you know, those first ones were basically poster exhibits, you know, like, you had a hall and you had, whatever, 18 posters in it. And since they were all A-1 they fit it quite nicely because they had, you know, the same format and that was it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Then we had sort of like more studio exhibits that were more difficult to do since, you know the formats were so incredibly different, you know, from whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: A CD cover to a matchbox to a large poster to a billboard — blah, blah. We did a good number of those in often design-related spaces or universities or museums.

And then, you know, recently we've done more exhibits that were, you know, based on self-initiated work like the stuff at Deitch, which was, you know, a *Things I Have Learned* exhibit or *The Happy Shows* that we're doing now, which are, you know, around the scene, but we are — the work itself is where we don't show any of the commercial work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And so purely work that relates to that subject.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Yeah, that is quite an evolution. Do you see that continuing further in that direction in the future?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I could see that. I could see that, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: This far into the film, do you see doing more films?

MR. SAGMEISTER: That will depend on how good it is at the end. Difficult to say right now, because we just started editing, how good the — actually the 90 minutes, how well that holds up. I think if it's a total piece of shit and it turns out that I'm very far away from producing anything that I would be happy with, then maybe it's the last one.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you have any — you have no sense of it at this point?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, I mean, there's a sense of it. There are definitely elements that I love.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But I have no sense of how well these elements then fit into an overall bigger story and how well the whole thing is really going to hold up. Of that I'm not sure. Or —

MS. RIEDEL: Are you collaborating with an editor, a film editor?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Sure. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, there is an editor.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, yes, I give her tips and hints, but, you know, she edits. Yes. Yeah.

So we'll see.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And with the museums, it's always — it's, we'll have to figure out a way going forward on how to do this properly, because, you know, the museum system doesn't really work that well for design.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Because, you know, of course, all artists exhibit for free in museums, meaning artists don't get paid for their exhibitions because the assumption is that the value of their work increases — and, which it does, of course. But we really don't have anything right now to sell in that way, you know?

So it's — we need to figure this somehow differently because for us, you know, a show like the ICA, we spend hundreds and hundreds of hours on it and — but there is — so we'll — you know, right now it's of course paid for because we work commercially.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But maybe — I'm not sure, maybe going forward there is a system for that. I'm not quite sure.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What sort of changes have you seen in design in the past 25 years since you were a student and what you see now?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, from a process perspective, total, utter change. Complete. You know, from, you know, a profession that had many, many different techniques that you needed, many crafts that you needed to learn that often were incompatible with each other — meaning, like, you had to do them in different rooms or buildings because this one smelled and this one was dirty and this one required this machine.

And so that was often a hassle, but at the same time it made your day very elaborate and different because you needed to — just to achieve this one thing you needed to change buildings three times.

Now, of course, you can — you have on one hand the luxury to do all of these techniques and many more in the privacy of your own bedroom and sitting, you know, behind the same screen — behind the same screen. But of course the profession has also become incredibly boring because of that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Because basically you're doing it sitting in front of a screen, and part of the reason why we try to do things manually is also to escape this stuff, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And you know, this crap or this stuff, and some of our also — you know, let's say I'm almost sometimes astounded that all of our interns, but also the very young designers that I meet at conferences who are so apt digitally, so much in love when we give them the possibility to — I don't know, you know — explore balloons, and you know, go out and buy various balloons and project type on it and put — you know blow them up with pigments and things and see how they explode and what kind of effect that has. Or — and it's just — you know, it's a better day.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Like, it's a nicer day sitting on the roof playing around with balloons than it is to Photoshop another one.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So, I mean — so, from that point of view, changed totally.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's interesting that it does seem — your career seems to have included that complete shift from the totally hand-done to the absolute emphasis on digital, and now swinging back to include some fusion of the two.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. And from a — from — [inaudible] — the profession got much bigger because, because of the possibilities to be in — because the tools are so similar it's so much easier to be involved in many aspects of those tools. So the profession now, you know — you know, you can go with not much — that big of a stretch

into something that's much closer to architecture or into something that's much closer to storytelling or something that's much closer to really — to programming or — you know.

I mean, even if I just look at last month's — works and projects, you know — working on the film, we're working on furniture, we're working on branding, on books, on our website, on our business card.

So it's incredibly varied, which also is — which I'm also super happy about. I didn't know that when I started in there because I would be bored shitless if we would still do CD covers, you know, every day.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: It's just not possible.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fascinating. So the variety not only in scale but in medium that you work with and in medium — final medium.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Oh, I don't know. Maybe you could make a — I don't know. Maybe you could make an interesting problem out of it that could say, "All I really do" — I mean, you couldn't now, but you would say, "All I really do is brochures that are 8 ½ by 11," and that's all we do, and see the variety in that. You know, maybe. I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] I don't know either. That sounds actually a little frightening.

How has the market for design changed?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, I think in many ways I think the general public is more interested in design than it ever was.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. It seems that way.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I think that has something to do with the fact that everybody knows a little bit of design from their own doing because everybody has a hundred typefaces on their computer and, you know, designed, whatever, at least an invite for the birthday party for their daughter or so.

And I compare that to, you know, whatever, somebody who played soccer in school is more likely to watch the professional leagues in the same way I think that because people now know the difference between Times New Roman and Helvetica they are a bit more interested in what the professional people are doing.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So, you know, 30 years ago nobody had an interest in that at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But, you know, my friend's film about "Helvetica" — Gary Hustwit's film, you know — was — you know, it had a run of forever — I think it ran three months on Sixth Avenue. And when I saw it — I saw it very late — I mean, from my guess was that there was a very mixed audience in there. This was not all designers. For sure not.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. So from that point of view there's much more of an interest in communication, has happened for sure in design in general. I mean, you see it everywhere, from the — from the designer hotel that you see in every city to some real household names like Philippe Starck or so, or star architects. I mean, there's definitely a bigger interest there.

And I would say we're still — of course, you know, I didn't even mention it, for sure because the largest company in the world just happens to be the most design-centric company in the world.

MS. RIEDEL: That's right. Right. That's a good point. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And of course, you know, played an incredible role in business because now every business wants to be design-centric and they all think that that's, you know, where heaven is.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. [Laughs.] Yeah.

Have you seen a change in your clients over time as well?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, sure. I mean, we, of course — from many angles we've found out that it's better for us and for clients if we do fewer jobs for larger clients rather than many, many jobs for smaller clients.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Of course, we used to be so music-centric, so that's a big change.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: We think now to get more clients that know our work and come for something specifically.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: So that — from that point of view, I think things have also gotten a bit easier because they come to us for a specific thing then basically go with that, or so.

MS. RIEDEL: How do you see American design ranking on an international scale, and does it seem to be moving in any particular direction?

MR. SAGMEISTER: American design as far as graphics is concerned or in general or —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, both. Either. Whichever you feel — do you have a sense of it? You certainly travel so much, it seems like it would be a good question for you in particular.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, if I think of architecture, none of my favorite architects is American.

If I think of graphics, I think there's very solid stuff here, but I would say my favorites would still be more London, Amsterdam, Zurich, Tokyo rather than New York, Los Angeles, Seattle.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And so what is it —

MR. SAGMEISTER: And that's in graphics.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And what is it that is going on in those locations that's not happening here?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Well, it would be different things. In Zurich you have a very young, very active scene.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: In Amsterdam you have — maybe not quite so much anymore but used to until a second ago, a scene that was quite intellectual and heavily supported by the government that allowed very high-end designers to do very big projects that were for a mass audience, supported by the government — you know, anything from postage stamps to police cars.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, I mean, the postage stamps are a total catastrophe in this country, including — do you see that thing with the — that's the Statue of Liberty? Oh, my God, they're such fucking idiots. They put the Statue of Liberty on a postage stamp and then they found out that they photographed the one in — the one in Las Vegas.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, the one from — [laughs] —

MS. RIEDEL: That's —

MR. SAGMEISTER: — from the New York New York casino.

MS. RIEDEL: The New York New York Hotel.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Is that true?

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yes, that's true.

MS. RIEDEL: Unbelievable.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. And — but they already printed a billion.

So, no, but that's the level of catastrophic oversight and ridiculousness it is because, I mean, on top of it — like, you know, to put a Statue of Liberty on a postage stamp now is so utterly meaningless, is so completely devoid of any thinking that —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, that is already such a catastrophe, but then the audacity of stupidity is just mind-blowing, while you have actual little pieces of art like jewels and — you know, for sure in Holland.

And I pick postage stamps, but the same is true for government forms —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — you know, where the right president gets elected, not what happened in Florida. Like all that stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, I mean, there's vast implications. But also of course because Holland doesn't have to — doesn't spend a third of all of its money on the military so there is actually some money left over to do government communications correctly or play, you know, to make that — I think Holland might be the only country where there that is true, where the stuff that the government puts out is among the best that's done.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And before they sadly changed into the euro, the Dutch money was just beautiful. I mean, literally beautiful. I mean, you could literally frame it.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Which, you know, the dollar is just a joke. I mean, those redesigns with the numbers and stuff — I mean, it's not even close — I mean, I'm not talking even good. I'm just talking not even close to professionalism. I mean, this is done by idiots, by — and it's — you know, nobody does anything about it, nor does Obama. I mean, there's — just like everything, it's a total, utter mess. Yeah.

Like, I would — the dollar now, the U.S. dollar is so badly printed that I would reject any business card that would come back that's as badly printed as — and I'm meaning — I mean this seriously. The craft of it is so awful.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But that's not what we're talking about. That's —

MS. RIEDEL: But that — but that does say something about design in terms of the craft being appalling —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — and just the absolute lack of accuracy.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah.

So — and London I think has a — I've never quite figured out what the U.K. is so successful in the arts. But I mean, in Europe they're basically leading in almost anything.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, they're leading in literature, in theater, in music for sure. Basically across the board — in architecture, and for sure in design, both in products and in — and in graphics.

You know, I mean, yes Apple is an American company and it's — and I very much understand that that's essential, but its chief designer, the one since Jobs 2 — since Jobs is back — since Apple's design is really good, is a British designer, of course.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I didn't know that.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah. Jonathan Ive is a British designer.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So is there then the possibility that you would consider moving someplace else in the future, or is New York still —

MR. SAGMEISTER: Possibly. I mean, New York is still my favorite city, no doubt about that. And — it just fits me the best. I could see moving simply because I don't know if I have to spend my entire life in my favorite city, and it could — there could be something to be said to spend, you know, five years in my second-favorite city or third-favorite city simply for variety.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But not for — it wouldn't be for being sick of New York, which is astonishing considering how much I love change otherwise.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: And, you know, I've been here for, you know significantly over 20 years now and I still very much like it. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, there's certainly a lot of change here. I mean, there's constant —

MR. SAGMEISTER: That is of course an advantage.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, yeah. You can actually remain here and get the change anyway. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Yeah.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, that's true.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think we've done really good job of moving through most of these questions.

A couple final summary questions and then any final thoughts you might have.

What do you see as the strengths and the limitations of design as a means of expression — so, as separate from fine arts? We've talked — I mean, we've sort — we've talked about many things, but in summary, what does design do better, do you think, than anything else — the essence of it that's really held your attention and matters to you?

MR. SAGMEISTER: I'll have to do it somewhat fast because, you see, I have to be somewhere at seven.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: But I think I have a quickie answer to that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I mean, I think that the biggest — the one significant difference between design and fine art is that design has a function by its very — in its very definition.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Art can just be. It doesn't have to do anything.

And this function can be wonderful because it does something and there's an anchor to it and it has many advantages also to it from a doing point of view, meaning like you're doing something purposeful —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: — as well as it makes it easier to evaluate than fine art.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: I can very — I have very, very strong opinions of pieces of design, where I say, “This is good” and “This is bad.” And many other people do, and I think this is great. And very often when I’m in a jury, even though the age difference might be 60 years, there is an astonishing agreement over what is good and what is not good.

I would think this would be much more difficult in fine art because there’s so many directions, and it’s like how do you even compare, you know, whatever — something from Maya Lin to something from Pollock.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right. Exactly.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, which is better. In design that’s somewhat easier.

At the same time, I think this function of course can hinder because it doesn’t quite have the same possibility of contemplation or purity, specifically conceptual purity, because the function is always sort of on the forefront.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SAGMEISTER: You know, in the same way that most people find a senseless walk in the park more pleasurable than a commute. Yes, the commute gets them to work and is necessary for them to make some money, but from a pleasurable point of view, just a walk around the park with no other reason than it being nice to walk around in the park, to stroll — it’s just more pleasurable. Both are needed, for most people, but I could see that being involved in the design of the walk in the park could be quite more inspiring than to be — while you’re a park designer or highway designer.

So there was — in the second sabbatical I had a couple of experiences down that road that — I don’t know, I could see sometimes in the future to figure out a way how to remain a designer but get rid of the function, like to possibly design something that would be functionless design, but maybe still not art.

So, I don’t know. Maybe there’s something there. I don’t know.

MS. RIEDEL: That’s very — that sounds a little bit like *The Things I Have Learned So Far in My Life* a little bit because they don’t necessarily have — sometimes I guess there’s an advertising thing, but in many ways there’s not — there’s less and less function it seems and more and more pleasure and room for contemplation.

MR. SAGMEISTER: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

Great. Thank you very much.

MR. SAGMEISTER: That was pleasurable. Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]