



# HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS

## Why Aren't We Happier? Stefan Sagmeister Explains

Dahlia Schweitzer | May 2, 2013



All images are installation views of *Stefan Sagmeister: The Happy Show* at MOCA Pacific Design Center, March 20–June 9, 2013 (all photos by Brian Forrest, ©The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles)

LOS ANGELES — Somehow, our rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness have become life, liberty, and happiness. Happiness — not merely its pursuit — is now something to which we are entitled. Which we deserve. Which capitalism, with its eternal seduction, has convinced us should be available with

each and every purchase. And if we are not happy, something (the right product? the latest gadget?) is missing. Because we should be happy all the time.

Art, in 21st-century America, is in a state of crisis. Budgets have been slashed, classes cut, and a stigma attached to the very practice of making art: it is not useful, and by not being useful, it is not necessary. Drones are useful. Oil is useful. Math and science are, occasionally, useful. But art?

And yet, we are not.

So what are we doing wrong?

According to [Stefan Sagmeister: The Happy Show](#) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, it is not simply that there are happy people and unhappy people, or people who are flawed and people who are “perfect.” In fact, our happiness quotient can be determined by several specific choices.

This is not the only radical statement made by Stefan Sagmeister’s art. The other radical statement is that it is even art in the first place.

Art, in 21st-century America, is in a state of crisis. Budgets have been slashed, classes cut, and a stigma attached to the very practice of making art: it is not useful, and by not being useful, it is not necessary. Drones are useful. Oil is useful. Math and science are, occasionally, useful. But art? Art is frivolous. Even when aesthetically satisfying — which, to be honest, it is not always — art still has no real “productive” component. At least not the kind that can be justified on a budget spreadsheet.

The thing about art, though, is that it is sneaky. It keeps reinventing itself. It has a stubborn habit of responding to the zeitgeist and asserting its cultural relevance. It makes you think. Just when you think you have defined what art *is*, you realize you have no idea what it is *not*.



Pre-postmodernism, pre-readymades, pre-Duchamp, *The Happy Show* would have been met with confusion, if not outright derision. Even today, there are probably many who would dismiss it as more contemporary art shenanigans. Where are the paintings? Where is the craft? It is more a science project, notes and graphs scribbled on the wall, quirky statements with the occasional lewd image.

How is this even art? At best, it is design. Or maybe typography. Why is this here, in a museum? Taking up space and time?

While fine art has been languishing, subject to those aforementioned budget cuts and a shift in contemporary priorities, we are more obsessed with design than ever before. And design, unlike art, is embraced by America, because, in stark contrast to art, it always has a purpose, a reason, an intention. (Art on the other hand, is less didactic; it wants you to think or feel but does not always insist upon what.)

This prompts an interesting question: Is art as we know it dead? Has art, like literature and all of the humanities, become a cloistered, monastic, insider practice, while design is available to everyone through magazines, furnishings, apparel, and shows like this one?

And then you realize that, much as Sagmeister is encouraging you to redefine your idea of happiness, he is also encouraging you to redefine your idea of art. What is art, after all, if not an exploration of the artist's consciousness? What is art, after all, if not a visual response to life? What is art if not a way of processing emotions and feelings about the world around us? What is art if it does not make you think? What is art if not everything that Sagmeister has drawn and scribbled upon these walls?

The exhibit opens with a disclaimer. “This exhibition will not make you happier,” proclaims Sagmeister’s text, black bold letters on a bright yellow wall that faces you head-on as you enter the museum. Before you see anything, before you have rounded the corner, Sagmeister wants to be very clear. This is not a show about empty promises, or promises at all. He, unlike capitalism, is not out to seduce.



Instead, this show is a contemplative exploration of one man’s attempt to find happiness — with a lot of that bright yellow and black text. Contemplative it is, since wandering through the exhibit feels like wandering through Sagmeister’s head or diary, exploring his thoughts as he provokes ours. Notes and graphics are scrawled on every available wall surface (bathroom stalls! elevator doors! in the stairwell! around the fusebox!), thoughtful revelations and whimsical imagery interspersed with facts and statistics gathered from the social research of people like psychologists Daniel Gilbert and Steven Pinker, and there is even a mounted bicycle you are encouraged to ride, since riding it lights up a neon sign.

The exhibit also features an excerpt from a feature length film Sagmeister is working on that explores whether we can train the mind to be happy much as we train the body. Perhaps the secret to happiness, he posits, is actually to be found via research, science, and planning. Perhaps, for instance, something as simple as the occasional year-long break from work, rather than working straight through until retirement, would result in increased productivity and enjoyment.

In the entrance, Sagmeister emphasizes that low expectations are a good strategy, and so we should lower ours before entering his version of an artist’s journal, before even beginning to think about happiness. Like a nervous kid on a date, he wants to make sure we are not expecting miracles. Ironically, however, lower expectations may also be key to finding happiness.

Low expectations notwithstanding, *The Happy Show* is one of the best exhibitions I have seen this year. It is not a conventional art show. Instead, it is a radical and invigorating approach to exploring ideas and creating visual statements, while redefining our very vision of both art and happiness.

Sagmeister, as the exhibit's wall text tells us, is "a designer who blends typography and imagery in striking, fresh, ambitious, and unsettling ways," and Sagmeister has made a career out of doing this. Born in Austria, Sagmeister now lives in New York, where he has his own design firm and is known for his work for clients as diverse as Lou Reed, David Byrne, the Rolling Stones, and the Guggenheim Museum. Beyond simple product packaging, his creations are known for their unorthodox approaches and unconventional results. *I.D.* magazine writes that Sagmeister's "CD package designs are what poetry is to prose: distilled, intense, cunning, evocative and utterly complete. His intentions have set a new standard."

But the exhibit is not only appealing because of his brilliant typography and design. The exhibit appeals because it focuses on Sagmeister's ten-year pursuit of happiness, through science, research, pharmaceuticals, and clinical calculations. Because Sagmeister tackles headfirst the question that occupies all our minds — *why am I not happier?*



And the answer, as he presents it, has little to do with such whimsical notions as one's state of mind. In fact, as Sagmeister discovers and then diagrams all over the walls of the museum, happiness (or unhappiness) is a direct result of how we choose to lead our lives. For instance, once you make over \$80,000 a year, your happiness levels off, or, in the words of Notorious B.I.G., "mo' money, mo' problems." Children, as another example, often yield increased stress and decreased happiness, despite cultural conditioning that asserts the opposite.

Sagmeister wants us to rethink our expectations, not because we should lower the bar, but because we need to rethink the bar entirely.

Happiness, and here I am referring to the intoxicating bliss that is the cinematic equivalent, is not realistic or sustainable. In fact, the cinematic version of happiness could not be further from the truth. Happiness should *not* be confused with ecstasy or delight, because those feelings are fleeting.

Happiness, instead, comes from an acceptance and appreciation of things exactly as they are right now — even if/when we wish things were different. The decision to be happy must be followed with not only an awareness of what things make one happy, but also the patience and persistence to then follow through. The decision to be happy must, perhaps most radically of all, be acknowledged as a decision. As a choice. Not as a random state of internal Zen, or as a guarantee afforded with the right purchase.

So what are the steps to happiness, as outlined by Sagmeister? An acknowledgment that passionate love is not sustainable. That children do not guarantee happiness. That satisfaction comes from accomplishment. That money is not directly tied to personal fulfillment. That happiness is, most of all, a result of steps and not a random blessing.

Most important, however, is the realization that, according to Daniel Nettle, author of *Happiness: The Science behind Your Smile*, “Happiness was invented by evolution as a carrot dangling in front of me, close enough to show the way but always a bit out of reach.” Happiness, after all, is the great incentivizer. If we achieved permanent happiness, Sagmeister scrawls on the back of a bathroom door, we would stop developing. Happiness is not a constant, a given, an inalienable right. Rather, it is the *pursuit* of happiness that keeps us moving forward.

And if Sagmeister’s search for happiness yields experiences as rich and provocative as this exhibit, I hope he never finds it.

[Stefan Sagmeister: The Happy Show](#) is on view at [MOCA Pacific Design Center](#) (8687 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles) through June 9.

 **comments (0)**













