

2013

Graphic and Gutsy

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Recommended Citation

Silander, Liisa and RISD XYZ, "Graphic and Gutsy" (2013). *RISD XYZ Fall/Winter 2013: Out of Bounds*. 4. https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/risdxyz_fall2013/4

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GRAPHIC & GUTSY

SOME PEOPLE JUST CAN'T HELP THEMSELVES. THEY'VE got an indefinable restlessness—a drive to do things most people don't. When **Jessica Walsh** 08 GD was 11 years old, she taught herself HTML and CSS, learning enough that she was able to make her own websites. Within a year, one of those sites started getting as many as 15,000 unique visitors a day, preordaining a career that would take off with a vengeance a decade later.

By the time she was 26, Walsh had pushed the proverbial envelope enough that esteemed designer Stefan Sagmeister (who had been in the business since before she was born) invited her to become a partner in his NYC-based firm. To launch the partnership, Sagmeister & Walsh sent out an announcement few could ignore—of the two of them photographed side by side, standing tall, buck naked. She stood on a stack of books so that her head reached just a bit taller than his.

Still, as Walsh sees it, she's just doing what any creatively motivated 20-something with a broad range of interests would do. After interning at Pentagram right after graduation, she moved on to *Print* magazine while “working her ass off” taking on as much freelance work as possible—for AIGA, *I.D.* magazine, RISD, *Technology Review* and *The New York Times*, among many others. Her work racked up awards from the Type Directors Club, the Society of Publication Designers, *Print*, *Graphis* and others. *Computer Arts* named her a Top Rising Star in Design, while the Art Directors Club selected her as a Young Gun in its annual roundup of promising new talent.

by Liisa Silander





To top it off, Walsh got the break of her life when Sagmeister invited her to join his firm. Here, she talks about why she likes pushing expectations, straddling disciplines and making her own art through design.

You seem to push the notion of what a graphic designer typically does, Jessica. How do you describe your work?

Well, it covers a really wide range—branding, typography design, website design, photographic illustrations, exhibitions and art installations. In the last few years I've started designing and art directing animations, film and 3D work as well. It's all a mixture of passion, play, concept and form.

How did you first get interested in design?

I started with a very digital background. When I was 11 years old I taught myself HTML and CSS and was publishing websites. About a year into that, I created a tutorial site that also offered free website templates for many of the blogging platforms that were popular at the time. The website took off, getting about 15,000 unique visitors a day—and people began emailing me to say how much it inspired them to go into design. This was right around the time that Google Ads first launched, so I put one of the ads on my site and couldn't believe that I started making a lot of money off of it—that I was getting paid to do what I considered to be a hobby. Since then I've felt pretty lucky to have found something that is not only financially feasible, but that I love and that actually allows me to help other people.



“I’ve felt pretty lucky to have found something that is not only financially feasible, but that I love and that actually allows me to help other people.”

How did you end up at RISD?

When I was graduating from high school, I was a little unsure whether to go into the coding or the design side of making websites. I was deciding among NYU, Carnegie Mellon and RISD, but I've always been a gut-instinct person and my gut told me to go to RISD.

How did that decision affect the direction of your work?

As everyone who's been there knows, RISD puts a lot of focus on working with your hands, so that was a shock for me coming from a digital background where I was glued to my computer 24/7. But during Foundation Studies, I absolutely fell in love with the variety—learning to play with woodworking, painting, drawing, photography, sculpture. Once I got back into graphic design sophomore year, I started incorporating a lot of what I had learned the previous year into my graphic design work. I started combining these things I made by hand back into the computer and making it digital. This merging of craft with a digital background still plays a big role in my work today.

What were your options right out of RISD?

When I graduated, I had a pretty tough decision to make because I was offered a really good job at Apple. At first I thought I should just take the money and move out to California. My other option was to move to New York and intern at Pentagram, which was a modestly paid position in comparison. But again, in my gut, New York was calling, so that's where I ended up.

How did you end up as Stefan Sagmeister's creative partner?

I started working with Stefan about three years ago. I was working at *Print* and at the time, the magazine had a lot of budget cuts, which meant I got to create and photograph many of the covers and interior illustrations and photographs myself. I got very familiar with photography and lighting, which now plays a big role in my work. However, after a year and a half working there, I was ready for a change and I knew I'd be happier in a studio environment. I emailed Stefan, sent him some of my work and asked to meet with him to get his feedback on my portfolio and career. To my surprise, he said yes. I met with him, he looked through my portfolio and after five minutes of flipping through my book he said, "When do you want to come work for me?" I was shocked. I quit my job the next day and I've been working with him ever since.

How have you and your work changed as a result?

I feel eternally grateful to Stefan for giving me so much creative freedom and putting so much trust in me over the years. It's definitely an honor to be his business partner now. He has really shaped my philosophy on how to run a design studio. I respect that despite numerous opportunities to grow over the past 20 years, he has always managed to keep it small. I think that allows us to be much more selective with the work we take on; we pick clients that we really like and want to do work for. We also only show one option to our clients versus showing a plethora of mediocre options. I was surprised by that strategy at first, but it really seems to work. The work ends up being better and the clients are less confused.

Sagmeister & Walsh's work for the Middle Eastern luxury department store Aizone (*opening spread and left*) stands out on billboards and in magazines in Lebanon and beyond. Their *Take it On* poster series for the School of Visual Arts in NYC (where both principals teach) are bold enough to conquer the visual noise in the NYC subway system.



“This merging of craft with a digital background still plays a big role in my work today.”



l-r from top:
 From the new fall/
 winter 2013 Aizone
 campaign, a still
 from Walsh's recent
40 Days of Dating
 project, posters for
 RISD's 2012 *Shared
 Voices* lecture series
 and the entrance to
 the studio's exhibition
The Happy Show.



Why do you think you've ended up working beyond the traditional confines of graphic design?

Well, as I said, I loved the exposure to working with my hands and making things in all sorts of media during Foundation Studies. So I still incorporate a lot of woodworking, painting, drawing and photography into my work. In the editorial illustration work I've done—like for the *Shared Voices* posters I did for RISD a couple of years ago—I create these set design-like installations that I then photograph. A lot of them are a combination of making things out of wood and paper, painting good objects and taking pictures of them, and then bringing them into Photoshop and manipulating them. So it's a diverse combination, using different tools. Working this way now just feels very natural. It's what I do.

How did the recent *Six Things* show happen and what did you learn—about happiness or anything else—in doing it?

Six Things is a spin-off of *The Happy Show*, an exhibition we created several years ago for the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. Stefan and I have collaborated on a number of film projects based on maxims from his diary entries and his exploration on happiness. The show touched people and has taught me the power of bringing human and personal elements into graphic design work.

With your *40 Days of Dating* project last spring, you again exposed a very intimate part of your life. Where does a project like this fit in with your creative practice?

40 Days of Dating was a social experiment I did with my close friend Timothy Goodman. We had opposite relationship problems: he couldn't commit to a girl, and I was investing too much in relationships that kept failing. We found ourselves single at the same time and decided to date each other for 40 days and journal about it as a way to better understand ourselves and work through our fears and insecurities about relationships.





“Graphic designers tend to shy away from the personal or using design for expressive purposes, but they have the skills and tools to communicate with a wide audience.”



Again, the reason I wanted to try this is that the project touched so many people. We had more than four million people visit the site and have received thousands of emails from people of all ages and nationalities. Some told us the project inspired them to improve their own relationships, helped them move past their ex or encouraged them to finally seek therapy. Some said it gave them the courage to date the friend they’ve always been curious about, or gave them solace that they weren’t the only ones struggling in dating. These messages are inspiring. I want to create more work that touches people in a meaningful way.

Also, it’s not unusual for creative people to bring their lives into their work. Songwriters, filmmakers and artists have been doing that regularly for a very long time. Graphic designers tend to shy away from the personal or using design for expressive purposes, but they have the skills and tools to communicate with a wide audience. I’m most attracted to work that has a personal angle and clearly comes from someone’s heart.

Do you have any thoughts about where this is all headed? Or are you just letting things unfold and seeing what happens?

I love the studio and the work we do. I’m so grateful for the opportunities I’ve been given, but there’s always a part of me that’s really hungry for new work and challenges. I think that a lot of the work I’m doing can be pushed to be better. Most creatives are probably discontented with what they’re doing; that’s what drives us to create better work. If I felt completely satisfied, I’d be more likely to recycle the same ideas and styles into my work. And to me content creation and expression through design is just as important (if not more important) than designing other people’s content. I want to continue to spend at least 25% of my time on my own personal projects. ■

