



OMNIUM CREATIVE NETWORK

a global online community

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What The World Needs Now

By Andy Polaine & Rick Bennett

In the first of a series of short essays and interviews for the *Omnium Creative Network [OCN]* we probably raise more questions than we are answering. This is deliberate, as we want the Network to generate its own questions, issues and debate. Throughout the last seven years, *Omnium* has run several large-scale global online projects where the communities have existed for several weeks/months - but when the projects finished, we were constantly asked, "Where can we continue this debate?" The conversations in these communities have been rich and engaging. We want to continue that degree of conversation with you.

Designer and artist, Stefan Sagmeister, has been one of the many inspirations for the OCN and here he answers, briefly a few of our musings just before taking a well-earned break. We will be drawing Stefan into a lengthier debate within the OCN later on in the year along with other art and design luminaries. Given Stefan's background, this essay has a graphic design flavour, but we are equally keen to hear voices from a wide variety of disciplines and especially a wider variety of cultures.

In some disciplines, such as industrial design and architecture, there appear to be more obvious avenues towards social responsibility. Using fewer materials and ones that have been and can be re-used or recycled, using less energy, designing buildings to be self-sufficient and sustainable are just some examples. Apart from, perhaps, using less packaging, non-toxic inks and recycled paper, many would probably assume that graphic design doesn't really harm anybody - or does it? Surely, all designers are responsible for a culture of seduction into consumption as well as communicating some kind of message for our clients. Artists are, perhaps, less constrained by this as they tend to communicate a message for themselves. The answers are never clear, but we feel they need a place to be discussed.

There certainly appears to be a groundswell of thought and action in the area of ethical and socially-aware design and this is exactly what the *OCN* is a response to. Whatever our discipline area, we are all engaged in trying to see the world differently from before and, in many cases, trying to persuade others to do so too. This is surely a powerful force in an age when perhaps there is general sense of helplessness and frustration felt by many in terms of influencing the current political climate and maybe this groundswell has to do with people taking things into their own hands with whatever skills they have available to them whether political lobbying, architectural u-turns or simply designing a poster or a website.

As with many emerging areas or disciplines, terminology is often rather loosely defined and/or jumbled. Descriptors such as "ethical" and "sustainable" seem to be attached to almost every design and art discipline at present and in some cases appear to make less than perfect sense. It appears that such descriptors are sometimes used to simply label a project to give it some sort of instant credibility - perhaps making the producers feel better in them selves. On our own behalf, we deliberately used the terms "ethical" and "socially-aware" from a genuinely concerned and interested position.

We also feel the same ambiguity with the words "designer" and "artist" too. Sagmeister, in particular, has talked about design being more than just "fluff" and pretty pictures, but rather having a socially valuable role to play. He points out, however, that this is not just restricted to designers and perhaps the term "ethical design" is a distraction from the wider issue of our personal behaviour. It is easy to imagine one feeling good about working on a 'worthy' piece of eco-design and then driving home, alone, in a 4WD.

"I do not think a designer has more of an obligation than a member of any other profession. Electricians, politicians, street-sweepers and designers all have the same obligation as people: To behave well towards their fellow human beings. How you wind up calling that is not so interesting to me," says Sagmeister.

A common topic of discussion amongst those in the creative industries is the balance between making a living and walking an ethical line when it comes to taking on clients or certain projects. Some have debated that this is simply a case of "educating" your clients or simply choosing "good" clients, but this seems rather a simplistic view of the reality of the situation. Ethical issues are grey and constantly shifting depending on the variables in play.

For example, taking on a tobacco company's ad campaign might seem ethically deplorable on the one hand, but on the other it will keep several designers employed, a studio running and means you can (if you wish) use that money to undertake a pro-bono campaign for a more 'worthy' cause. After all, some other agency is going to get the job if you don't take it, and they might be less concerned about the underlying ethics. It is never as simple as a die-hard set of principles - or is it?

"There is no way to be alive, do a job and remain completely on the white side," says Sagmeister. "Some of my friends would think of a visit to a Philip Morris sponsored museum as ethically problematic, whilst others (who smoke) would love to design a campaign for Marlboro. But I myself can choose to remain on the lighter side of the grey scale. And yes, this is constantly shifting in my life, things I enthusiastically engaged in 5 years ago now seem problematic to me..."

These questions of boundaries and principles will, no doubt, remain open to fierce debate and ultimately a large part of the conundrum is dealt with on a personal level. Yet does this really help art and design as disciplines? When dealing with the medical profession, for example, we have certain, generally cross-culturally, accepted expectations of ethics. Most design and educational associations have developed policies on ethical behaviour - should we be defining and policing these more strongly within our creative industries as [Paul Nini has suggested](#) - in particular to "act as an advocate for concerns to the client"? Or should these issues remain a personal decision?

Milton Glaser, perhaps one of graphic design's most respected godfathers, with more than 50 year's experience in the discipline (and who will feature in a future interview on the OCN), suggested a shift from the designer-artist moniker to "Designer/Citizen" in his presentation to the 2005 AIGA conference. He argues for the need to tackle the current state of the world - from the political climate in the West to the atrocities in Africa and the multitude of recent natural disasters - with whatever tools we have to hand. Low-tech badges and posters have just as much use and impact as high-tech solutions. We would like to see the OCN embrace the full range of the spectrum. As David Linderman from [Fork Unstable Media](#) summed up in a previous article Andy wrote about ethical design, "who you work for is less important than what you actually do and how you do it."

Sagmeister has reduced this down to two essential principles it seems. One principle is to always ask, "Is this something the world needs?" The other is whether the piece of work can move people

emotionally. "If something touched me and moved me emotionally, I'd say it has been useful. It was something I needed," he says. "This trigger will be a very different for people across the globe, thankfully I don't have to decide it for all of them, I can just make a gut judgment for myself and my audiences. I don't have to turn into a firefighter or cancer specialist or sweater knitter in order to improve my relationship to my fellow human beings. We all have a role to play. Why not try to play it well."

In terms of concluding this initial essay regarding "what the world needs now" - we both felt that from our own point of view, it was time for us both to offer our own response by offering and using our time, experiences, contacts, situations and our combined abilities as well as generally being fortunate enough to be able to do so. We have also both lived in the same location, in Sydney, for the last six years, and now that we are living half a world away (Germany and Australia) it is ironic that we have decided at this point to begin working together in an ongoing capacity. We also felt, in the spirit of building the community, that we should lay our cards on the table:

Andy's comments:

Neither of us (Rick and I) have outstanding records as "do-gooders" (and, as Stefan has pointed out in another essay, it is a shame that this term has such negative connotations), but we do both have our own particular 'axes to grind' and views about how we may be able to actually make a difference with the work we put our time into. As teachers in a university, we have been fortunate to be able to influence the behaviour of future generations of artists and designers - hopefully for the better. The downside of teaching is often wrestling with the large institutions and governments for whom we work and this can lead to a certain amount of navel gazing and politics and I believe this is an ethical issue that needs tackling in its own right.

We have also both been fortunate to travel and present at conferences and events around the world, but less fortunate in actually hearing from designers, artists, educators and students from outside the comfy confines of the developed Western world. We know we're missing out by not hearing these voices and it is important to us that the *OCN* isn't just us all doing things that make us feel okay about our own place in the world, but rather that we hear from others about just what might be useful in, say, Pakistan after the earthquake. We felt that by focusing on issues that are global concerns, we could cast the net of the *OCN* as widely as possible regardless of the ethnic, geographic or socio-economic backgrounds of members. Obviously, not everyone in the world has Internet access, but it is more likely that they have than them being able to fly halfway around the world to pay for conference registration fees and stay in a four star hotel.

In many respects identifying the problems is the easy part - we know there are issues to tackle in the world and also that the design (and, perhaps to a lesser extent, arts) professions are intimately bound up in all the complexities of global market forces, production and consumption that shape our lives. The real task is working out what to do about it - we have no immediate solutions to proffer, but hope that through this *Network* some might arise. The *OCN* is, at least, our initial response to many similar conversations we have had with colleagues all over the world and I feel it is essential to try and gather a community that can concentrate on these issues and questions. Some of the projects we hope to run through the *OCN* might have relatively minor outcomes such as badges, banners and posters. My preference is for solutions that start with simple actions that are easily communicated and hard to ignore in everyday life. [We Are What We Do](#) and their associated book is a brilliant example of this. If the *OCN* develops even some of these aims, it will have been worthwhile.

Rick's comments:

In 2003, I was lastingly inspired by two talks I heard by Stefan (Sagmeister) and Neville Brody in which both questioned what we were really up to as artists and designers these days. Both presentations raised some important and simple ethical questions and have provoked many thoughts in my mind ever since. I suppose I wanted to form the *OCN* to at least make some sort of contribution as a response to such questions, in the only way I knew how - by contributing my enthusiasm and the basic abilities I possess.

I founded *Omnium* back in 1998 with the intention of it one day becoming; a creative and self sufficient collective; being able to chose more the work we were to undertake; and having more choice in regard to with whom we worked - we are now getting closer to being there. I do generally consider myself a lucky 'bloke' as I really enjoy the work I do and, believe it or not, look forward to every (working) day - even with the difficulties that of course crop up. I also really admire and enjoy the people I work with (even Andy!) and endlessly admire their numerous talents. I think about and appreciate these kind of thoughts often and compare my own kind of fortune (not financial) to that of friends and acquaintances I once knew growing up in south London: employed in shops or factories and really hating their working lives (and they were the lucky ones who had jobs). Also, even after 16 years living in Australia, I still smile everyday at the simple feeling of sun on my face as I walk along and I consider myself equally fortunate in this regard. All in all - in basic ways - life is good. However, I am ever conscious of the fact that many millions of people do not feel that fortunate each day.

However, I am no angel either - I do the kind of things that appall the supposed do-gooders. I sometimes eat meat, I smoke cigarettes, I drink too often and I like laying on my couch and watching sport on my larger than is necessary TV. But, those things don't make me a bad person and I resent people who think they do. I am indeed considerate of my fellow humans and that keeps me in my own 'lighter shade of the grayscale'. So, in regard to contributing my enthusiasm and ability to the *OCN*?

If I had to write my own epitaph, it would read something like "Rick saw everything positively and he certainly got stuff done!"

In summary, and answer to Stefan's comments, this is the role I feel I can play ... and I will try my hardest to play it very well!!

Related Links

[Stefan Sagmeister's studio](#)

[Sagmeister interviewed by Steven Heller in the AIGA, Voice journal](#)

[Paul Nini's article "In Search of Ethical Design"](#)

[Mitlon Glaser's essay/speech "The Designer/Citizen" also titled "Since Then"](#)

[Fork Unstable Media](#)

[We Are What We Do - or Change the World for a Fiver](#)