In Profile

The End of Jessica Walsh?

There's something you should know about Jessica Walsh. And it's, well, everything. by Zachary Petit

"I'm here to see Jessica Walsh."

The hotel receptionist consults a list—which I quickly realize is *the* list. ... "I'm sorry, you're not on her list."

Chip Kidd has likened being a famous designer to being a famous plumber. Noreen Morioka has likened it to being a famous dentist. Stefan Sagmeister, a famous electrician.

It's an apt poetic metaphor. But it's hard to imagine aforementioned plumber, dentist or electrician staying at the Soho House Hotel in Chicago's trendy Fulton Market District. Think exposed brick, reclaimed wood furnishings, an edgy yet refined chic elegance that might be absurdly yet best described as "Midcentury Equestrian."

No, it's not the type of place I'd expect a foremost periodontist to stay. But it is where I'd expect a famous designer to stay.

"Can I call her and give you the phone?" I ask the receptionist.

She consents, and I dial.

Soon enough I'm in the elevator, ascending a few floors to the hotel's bar and café. I spot her on an olive couch across the room, the classic bangs an immediate giveaway.

It's easy to build up your own perception of a notable person from their work, their interviews and the press photos that tend to accompany them—in Walsh's case, images exuding style, power and often sexuality, reflecting her bold, formidable, striking, seemingly flawless designs. She has always seemed, in a word, unshakeable. Invincible.

But there's something that's often missing in those dead-serious press photos: a smile.

And in person, she has one.

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With terms such as "Design's It-Girl" floating around, let's ignore those for a moment and call Walsh what she has always been: Driven.

The first thing she designed?

"Magic moss rocks," Walsh, 28, says with a laugh.

When she was in fifth grade, she found some stones on the side of the street. She packaged them, documented their special powers accordingly in some labels, and sold them to her classmates.

"I always loved making things," she says. "I was obsessed with all the arts and crafts in school. ... I remember when I was 8, my aspiration was to make really elaborate beadwork on the side of the street, and my parents were like, 'Maybe you should aim a little bit higher.' It wasn't until I was 11 and I started doing a little bit of logo work for my parents' company and doing web design that I realized I wanted to do it [for a career]."

Yes: At 11, Walsh did logo work for her parents' software company. Around the same time, she made a website that taught fellow kids HTML and CSS—and as a result, ad revenue began pouring in.

"That's when I realized, *Oh shit, I can make money doing my hobby*."

She moved from designing websites for school clubs to local businesses, and when she was a senior in high school, got offered a $200,000 a year gig at a web design company. "I showed this contract to my dad, and he was like, 'What the fuck?'"

PHOTO BY HENRY HARGREAVES

The fantastical work of Sagmeister & Walsh.

She wrote them back and said she wasn't old enough, and went to RISD instead—even though it was more of a hands-on fine arts school, and she came from a digital background. Maybe—just maybe—that was the key to it all.

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Sometimes, when someone is *really* good at something from a young age, a natural, they know. They can just instinctively tell. Whether it's arrogance or a realistic self-awareness is irrelevant. They are just good. Did Walsh know?

"I definitely did not," she says. "In fact I always had this sense that I had somehow faked my way into everything. I think a lot of successful people feel that way, and I think it's somehow the drive—because you feel like you're inadequate. Through college I always had a really big sense that I was faking it or I shouldn't have been there and everyone else was a real artist and I just stumbled my way into this through the web stuff."

After school she nabbed an internship with Paula Scher at Pentagram in New York City. Ultimately, though, Scher didn't have any open jobs at the end of the term—but she knew someone who did. Her friend Kristina DiMatteo, then art director of *Print*, hired Walsh as associate art director. While Walsh says she loved the gig (with no prodding from me), she always wanted to be in a studio and branding environment. So in the middle of the night in February 2010, she sent Stefan Sagmeister a "super-long, emotional email, unsure of where to go in life."

She had never met him before.

"Out of all the design studios in New York, his was always the only one that I really, really looked up to and admired because of the emotional quality of the work that he was doing. It wasn't just design—it was story and authorship and content creation, so I really just wanted his advice in starting a studio. At the time he only had one person working for him. I didn't go there thinking it was a job interview—I didn't even think it was possible to work with him. But he looked through my book and was like, 'Before you do that, let's try working on a few projects together and see if it works out.'"

Sagmeister recalls that Walsh's interests were very similar to his own—and he hoped she would bring her own take on them to the table.

"Her portfolio was good, but what impressed me more was her enthusiasm," he says. "It was very clear that she loved design and wanted to put everything she has into it."

Two weeks after Walsh's email, she and Sagmeister began working together. Two years went by. And Walsh says it was an incredible experience and she learned a lot—but she was then ready to open her own studio. Instead, Sagmeister and Walsh negotiated for about six months before announcing an official partnership and creating a studio that would become known for some of the most beautiful and cutting-edge work around.

... Which brings us to *the photo*.

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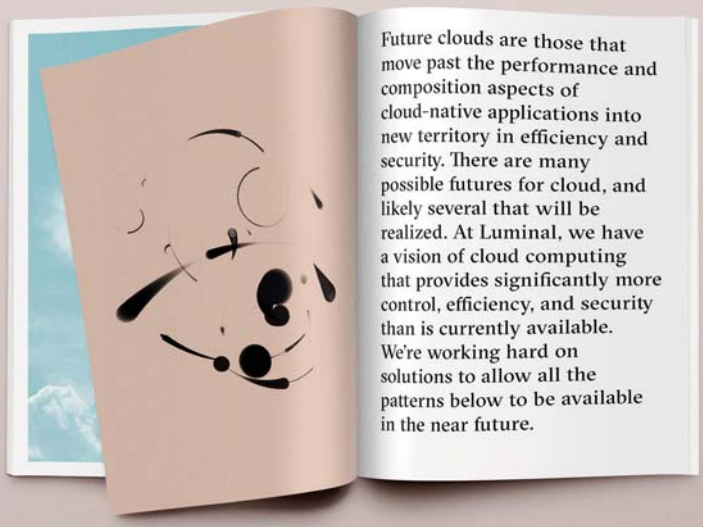
Jessica Walsh can be a divisive figure in design. And often, it goes back to the photo. We all know the story well, but

Fugue Identity. CD: Stefan Sagmeister. AD/Design: Jessica Walsh. Design: Pedro Sanches, Shy Inbar.



Future clouds are those that move past the performance and composition aspects of cloud-native applications into new territory in efficiency and security. There are many possible futures for cloud, and likely several that will be realized. At Luminal, we have a vision of cloud computing that provides significantly more control, efficiency, and security than is currently available. We're working hard on solutions to allow all the patterns below to be available in the near future.

Jessica Walsh photographed in New York City by Zak Mulligan for *Print*.

PAELLA TAPAS
BARRACA
STARBUCKS COFFEE

let's recap it for posterity: In 1994, Sagmeister formed his own studio, and he announced it to the world via a postcard of himself nude, save for a pair of black socks. To celebrate the founding of Sagmeister & Walsh in 2012, the partners recreated the photo in the buff (save again for Sagmeister's black socks). Walsh was 25 at the time, and the design web broke with admiration, jealousy, misogyny, speculation about a relationship between the partners, and everything in between.

But no matter how anyone feels about it: It was effective, just as Sagmeister's original postcard was. And Walsh agrees.

"When it first launched and a lot of people didn't know who I was—and of course Stefan is such an established person in the community—I can understand and empathize with why people were like, 'Wait, why is this 25 year old girl naked?' You know what I mean? I can certainly see why people thought the things that they thought or stuff like that. They didn't know me or who I was or my work."

Does she ever regret it?

"No. I mean, it did exactly what we set out for it to do. Even more so than we could have ever expected. So no, I don't regret it. And in fact, it's been so freeing."

This is where a different Jessica Walsh emerges. To me, the stoic expression and boldness in all those press photos has always seemed, not necessarily a preconceived persona, but perhaps an armor, a reaction. A mind-bogglingly talented young person who achieved the fame she deserved far earlier than most, and was left to navigate it. These are the things they do not teach you in design school.

Walsh was a very shy and anxious person at the time, and was naturally overwhelmed—because suddenly, she says, people expected things from her. And naturally, such fast recognition leads to things like speaking engagements. (After our interview, in fact, she is set to deliver a keynote to a few thousand people at HOW Design Live.)

She admits she had to develop a public face for it all.

"I still think I'm an introvert at heart, but it's definitely evolved *a lot*. Even two years ago, having this interview I would have been anxious for days before."

Over the years, as she has created amazing design after amazing design, her life has seemingly become open-source: The famous 24/7 Sagmeister & Walsh studio camera projects her every working movement, her Pinterest boards cover everything from typefaces and paper to lingerie, she maintains a Twitter following of 76,000, gives about 12 talks a year, and you can even find her wedding registry online.

Which is all to say, heavy stuff for an introvert. So what led to the shift?

In the speaking department, there's always the power of repetition. And then, of course, there's another colossal risk Walsh took that exceeds even the announcement photo.

Sagmeister & Walsh are sometimes criticized by graphic designers for essentially making commercial art into fine art. The reasons behind that criticism are another article entirely their own, but after a few years of doing only commercial work constantly, Walsh was feeling stifled. It wasn't all fun anymore. So she promised herself she would spend between 25 and 50 percent of her time on more personal work to balance things out.

"I think as soon as you attach all these expectations, and it's not doing the work for yourself, then you lose the honesty in what you're doing in a way. So for a while I was just in this weird spot, but eventually, I said I realized I just can't live for other people, I just have to do my own thing—and people will hate it sometimes, and that's fine."

The result was the illustrated 40 Days of Dating website in 2013, which Walsh created with designer Timothy Goodman. The premise: Two friends with separate dating issues date each other for 40 days.

As a reader at the time, perhaps the biggest revelation was this: The seemingly self-assured Walsh, known for bold work and conquering the design world at a young age, was in fact somewhat broken at that moment.

Going nude for the postcard was one thing, but this was another entirely: Here, she was revealing to readers who she really was.

She was terrified. She was vulnerable—and she put it all on the table for readers, from her anxiety and sleeping problems to her relationship issues to having sex with a Sagmeister & Walsh branded condom.

"It was a huge risk for us, both personally and professionally. And I was definitely scared shitless," she says. "The day before it was out I was having a total meltdown."

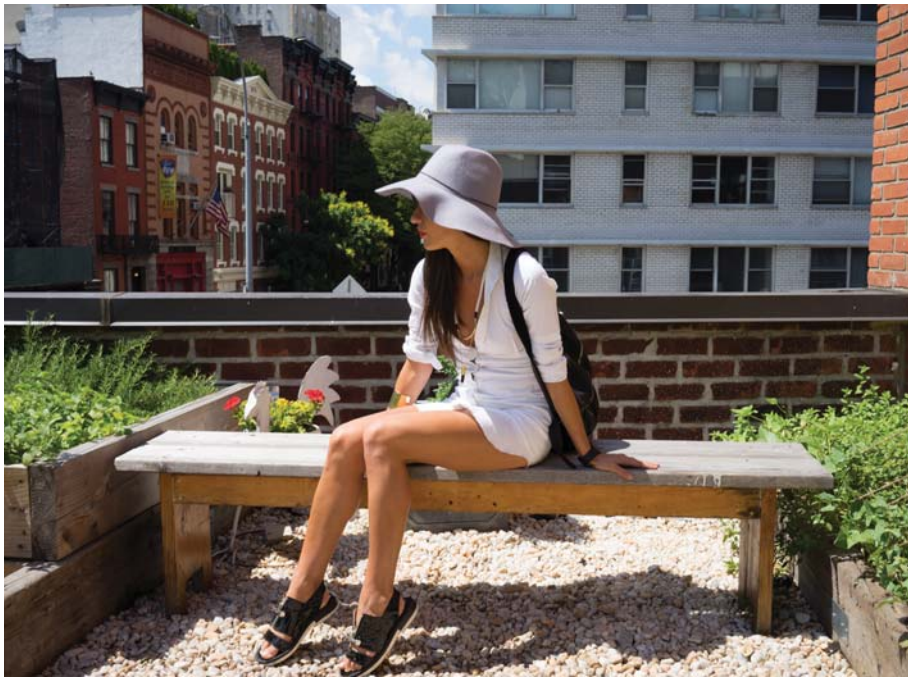
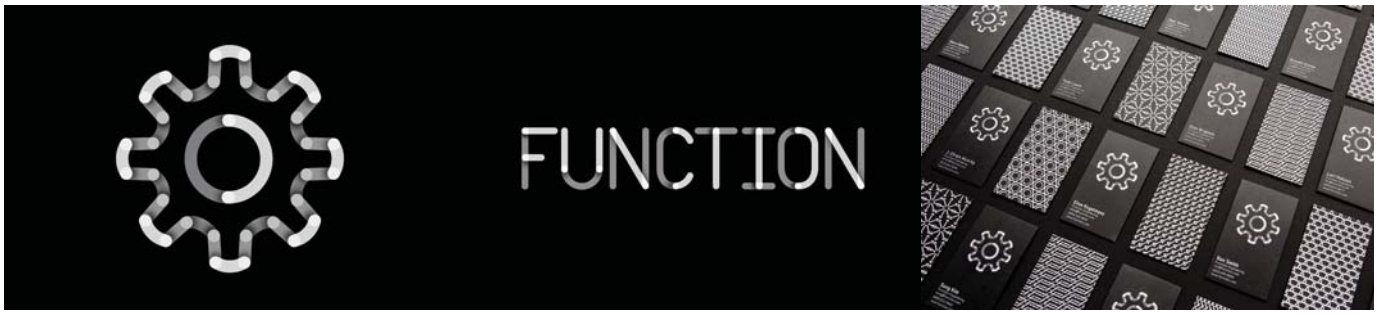


PHOTO BY ZAK MULLIGAN



Brand identity system for Function Engineering. CD: Stefan Sagmeister. AD/Design: Jessica Walsh. Design: Wade Jeffree.

But ultimately, it became the project of which she is most proud in her career. The site went viral, and led to appearances on the "Today" show and "The View," the sale of the film rights to Warner Bros., and a print book released earlier this year.

"The funny thing is, I'm less proud of the content and more proud of the realization that design can touch a mass audience like that," she says.

While the story indeed resonated with a mainstream crowd, that was not always the case within the design world, which sometimes seems to bemoan its own celebrities while simultaneously embracing them.

"What I learned is that a lot of designers like to keep design in this box of what design is, and anyone who tries to do something outside of that box, it's really easy to critique them. So we got a lot of hate from designers I actually really admire in the industry who thought it was wrong that we were putting our personal stories into design," she says. "A lot of graphic designers want to remove themselves. Which is fine. Some people's style doesn't lend itself to putting your personal voice in it, and certainly not in every client project is that appropriate to do. But that doesn't mean as designers we can't do that. Design is just a tool like writing is a tool, to express yourself."

What is it like to be a celebrity of design?

"Oh god," she says with a nervous laugh. "I don't know. When people tell me, 'Oh, you're my idol,' that stuff really scares me, because I'm just still figuring this all out as I go, you know, and there's so much still for me to learn. I don't feel like I'm an idol in any way. My life is a mess in some ways. So yeah, it's just a very odd concept to me."

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So what's next for Walsh?

She's currently working on a fresh project with Goodman—though not a romantic one, as she married cinematographer Zak Mulligan last year—and she says it's going to be a game-changer in her career, and perhaps the best thing she has ever created.

"When I first started speaking five years ago, definitely at that time ... I was very much curating who I was and trying to put on this very confident facade and not talk at all about my problems or failures or stuff like that. And I think it was just a lot of insecurity. I felt like I had to show this perfect side of me. No one likes perfection anyway," she says. "... So eventually over time as I learned that and became more comfortable with myself and confident in that, I've become much more comfortable opening up."

In the craft of fiction writing, the No. 1 rule of character development is that a character must be flawed; readers have no interest in the flawless. In any pursuit, perfection is a great—and necessary—goal. But in most cases, it is also a great, and unnecessary, illusion. *Vulnerability*. Perhaps that is the magic of 40 Days, and part of the reason that Jessica Walsh is at the top of her game: She embraced it.

The future project, she says, is going to be a dramatic shift and a step further. (And by the time this issue comes out, she may already have taken that step; as of this writing, the project is set to launch at the end of the summer.)

As for the present, there's still her HOW Design Live talk to do. She describes it as a mix of who she was at the time of the partnership announcement, and her post-40 Days vibe; a sort of duality. A couple of hours later, there she is, black leggings, white v-neck, pony tail, giant wedges and trademark bangs, taking the stage as the venue's smoke machine billows.

She's funny. Bold. Confident. At times, vulgar. She told me her voice shakes in the first few minutes of a talk, but I detect no quavers.

Afterward, she stays for more than an hour signing copies of *40 Days of Dating*. She's sweet to her fans, draws in their books, and agrees to an inordinate amount of selfies.

Eventually, the conference organizer has to remove her because Walsh is about to miss her flight, leaving everyone to inspect their phones, ponder the moment, and send the shots off to wherever they may land.

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When Jessica Walsh's new project debuts, what will happen?

I hop onto the Sagmeister & Walsh webcam and scan the scene for details, but find none.

This may be the end of Jessica Walsh as we know it, and the beginning of another evolution, of something new, perhaps a fresh understanding of one of today's most talked-about and celebrated designers.

Who will she reveal?

But perhaps the bigger question: When you look at her brilliant work, does it matter? ■

Zachary Petit (@zacharypetit) edits *Print*.