



Stefan Bucher:

Thank you very much, everybody. Well, it's nice to be here. Thank you guys for having me. I really appreciate it. Those of you who have seen me speak before know that it tends to be sort of an epic Ben-Hur type of experience, and since we don't have the time for that today, I've taken the liberty of cutting together a little sequence of what I do so we'll start with that.

[Music]

[Applause]

I thought you know that encapsulates it nicely in a sort of quiet restrained manner. So they've asked me to identify where I stand on the "Make/Think" rainbow, and I've illustrated that here. It's a German rainbow. And usually I certainly I aspire to be very much on the "Make" part of it because making stuff is what makes me happy and what gets me excited. But with the way that my brain is wired I tend to actually in reality be much more on the "Think" side, which is unfortunate for me. I'm not saying that I'm against thinking, but for me, my relationship to thought is sort of the same relationship that an alcoholic has to a bottle of Jim Beam, where it starts out as a really good idea, and allow me to illustrate.

When I first set out on a problem or start thinking it's, you know, it tends to be really kind of fun and supportive, you know, but then it very quickly becomes more complicated and the thoughts start growing and they start churning a little bit and it gets a little less supportive and less fun. And then from there, it's about existential angst at about three moves. And it becomes a sort of big snarling beast. So the way I deal with that is that I just know at this point after years of trying to actually change how I think, now I just work around it and I know to treat my brain like kind of a cranky hyperactive pit bull. And that -- and then I do the sort of the Dog Whisperer Cesar Millan action where I just I take it to the park and I let it run around until it tires itself out. And I let it think about, you know, what are people wearing at the Oscars and, you know, I let it chase squirrels sort of like look the healthcare debate -- "Go boy!" So that by the time I get home and I need to actually, you know, kind of write an e-mail or something like that, my brain is nice and tired out and actually does what I tell it to do. Which is also the reason why I work alone and I set myself up as 344 design because my subconscious -- while my actual conscious brain is, you know, as I said, sort of a pit-bullian kind of prick. My subconscious is a real team player and actually really tends to do right by me.

And the problem with that is that the effort of the subconscious is not -- it is hard to document while it's going on. And so that makes me a very difficult employee to have because there are just a lot of times where I just have to sit there and think about it. And so by working alone and by establishing the company, the company is sort of a respectability force field that obscures and hides from view my -- the process that works for me, the process that is efficient for me but to the untrained eye looks a lot like many, many hours of sitting and staring holes in the air. And the other benefit of having the company is that I am in control of my own overhead and I get to practice grief control which basically just means that I get to

control -- that I am in charge of my overhead and of what I spend, and I can keep my overhead very low, and so that means that I don't have to take a lot of work if I don't want to.

I lived with a really small footprint and I still do for the last 15 years and that makes it so that now I am debt-free and that frees me up to say no to clients, frees me up to say no to work that comes in, and say yes to things that otherwise I might not be able to afford because they don't pay or they don't pay enough. And so that has been a really wonderful thing that has freed me up creatively a great deal. And again that is not something that I can do if I am in an organization where I'm responsible for somebody else's salary or where somebody else is responsible for my performance. Because it is a little counterintuitive and it is also a little bit scary because a lot of times, again, I will just sit there, and I know at this point to trust my subconscious to deliver the goods when it comes time.

But even for me sometimes, it's like, oh man, fingers crossed. And if somebody has to pay me a big salary just to do that then I don't want to be that person. And so that is why it has been really great to just be independent. The trade-off for that is, of course, that I am probably never going to design the airline identity which I very much would like to do. Or something like that -- something that size because I can't offer redundancy. If I get the flu, then the logo isn't going to get done. But you know, of course I am, you know, I'm disciplined so I never get sick.

At any rate let me show you some of the work that I've done as of late. The first one I got a call from *The New York Times*, which, you know, was very exciting. And they asked a couple of designers, asked a handful of designers to design an alternate logo for Super Bowl 43. And obviously when you think professional football -- and so I decided that I would, I would serve my own people and I would do a logo for an audience that is woefully underserved by professional football and by professional sports in general, which is the nerd audience. And so I decided I would just do the nerdiest possible logo for the Super Bowl that I could do. Which was this one.

So let me take you through it real quick. We're starting out with the number 43 expressed as a sum, and I have to thank my friend Jim Whitney, who is an actual -- honest to god -- a rocket scientist who helped me do that because I don't know how to do it. There is a code 128 barcode that's 43. There are -- well, you have got your football first of all, of course. The -- *My Neighbor Totoro* Miyazaki football, which is equipped with USB and FireWire ports. I'm not like Jobs' people -- I take care of the people with the FireWire. You've got your motto, "Yeah, for we are the pigskin of doom and they shall clash most mightily." You got yourself -- you got your three majors Sci-Fi's, franchises: *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and BSG. Frakin' -A-Right! Yeah. You've got your Dungeons and Dragons dice. Oh. Nerd problem, my laser pointer is not -- here it is, hang on -- and all the sides of the dice of actually come out to 43 either as 40 plus, as 4-3 or as sums. You've got your Latin motto "siphus eximius," which just literally just means superior vessel. You've got 43 expressed in binary and you've got the patron saint of nerds, Professor John Frink, wielding, yes, you're right to whistle. And he is wielding the power of the testosterone molecule. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. And then you have -- you have the Masonic symbol because it is always good to have a little Masonic action in there. I was told

afterwards that it's kind of a little bit ribald in this area. Okay. And then, of course, because you know we want to be clear communicators and we want to take care of our clients, you have the team logos prominently displayed. So, and the strategic thought behind this was that I thought that if I just crammed the thing full of details they have to run it twice as big as everybody else's logo. And indeed they did.

So. Another project I've been working on for the last three years is the Echo Park Time Travel Mart. And this is, if you are familiar with the organization 826 which is started by Dave Eggers, it is a tutoring center for kids, for at-need kids. They can go there for homework help, they can go there for writing seminars. And in the front of these tutoring centers, they always have a fake store for zoning purposes but also to get the kids excited and to help with fundraising. And so in New York they have the Superhero Supply Company, and in Los Angeles we have the Echo Park Time Travel Mart, which is a convenience store that serves the needs of, you know, the modern time traveler on the go.

Let me show you a few things. You've got your mammoth chunks for that bold mammoth flavor. 100% woolly mammoth meat; it may contain up to 30% mastodon. I know it is a cutesy promo. And by the way, the preparation directions for this are stovetop directions. Take can, bang on stovetop, howl at moon. And the microwave directions are bang on microwave, howl at moon. Anti-robot fluid, pure artesian protection. Warning, warning: does not work on plastic robots. And then our pride and joy, the slushy machine. Time freezy hyper-slush. The flavor that's partially obscured there is bubonic blast. And literally, literally five minutes before the opening of the store, a hose on the side exploded and so the brilliant writers of the store came up with a sign, and we liked that so much that we've left that up ever since. We think of the sign as much funnier than just having, you know, slushies for sale.

By the way, if any -- and at this point I've sort of stepped back as the primary designer. I designed all the products for launch and the store itself. And now I am working with a lot of designers that come in that do new products, and certainly all the contestants for "Command X" will be more than welcome because I think the Captain Crunch stuff was just genius and would fit right in with the Time Travel Store. So maybe we can actually use this as a recruiting event. Cool.

Another project that I did recently, I got a call from W. W. Norton to design a book cover for a travelogue book called *Swimming with Piranhas at Feeding Time: My Stupid Adventures with Animals* by Richard Conniff. And that just seemed like a no-brainer to me. First of all, I want to point out that that font is Home Run Sans by AIGA medalist Doyald Young. Yeah. Please. And I just love it and it's got this great sort of '70s SAS Pan Am vibe, and I thought it was perfect for that. The feedback I got on this was: Can you please make the bone a little less penis-y? This is the revised version. As it turns out our bones are a little bit x-rated. Who knew? And then it went to the author, and the author's comment was: A) Ew. That is disgusting; and B) I knew this before -- and the article in the book that deals with piranhas actually goes to great lengths to debunk the fact that piranhas don't actually desiccate you. But I try not to be tethered by facts.

Another project I do is the website neologist.org. Here you can order from me a tailor-made German compound noun to impress friends, clients, potential mates. In this particular case World-Weary in West Hollywood wrote to me and said, you know, I have a problem because I meet people and I am excited to meet people, and when I meet them, they sometimes disappoint me, and I need a word for that. And so the word was Erwartungsentzauberung which — expectation demagification. And that is related to Rückwirkende Vorfreudensauslöschung — retroactive joy of anticipation expungement. So if you are in need of a German compound noun for any circumstance, feel free to e-mail me at [neologist@344 design.com](mailto:neologist@344design.com). And the website itself, neologist.org, because it is a public service.

And then there are, of course, the monsters. And if you're -- thank you, person -- and if you're -- if you're not familiar with it let me quickly show you the entire book.

[Music]

There is that. Thank you.

And if you're really not familiar with them or if you haven't seen any, I did, of course, bring a fresh monster for you. So what I do basically is, every day for 100 days and now sort of more sporadically, I would put a little bit of ink down on a piece of paper, I blow it out with an air gun, as you'll see in just a second, and then out of that inkblot I would make a monster. I did this one, I think, Wednesday night. Because, again, I can count on my subconscious to deliver when it's time.

Monster:

Uh. Excuse me. Who are all these people?

Stefan Bucher:

It's the AIGA Conference in Memphis.

Monster:

So we are in the middle of your talk?

Stefan Bucher:

Yeah. We kind of are.

Monster:

But you wanted them to see a live monster?

Stefan Bucher:

Well, yeah. Of course.

Monster:

Don't you have another 11 slides to go through?

Stefan Bucher:

You know, 12 actually.

Monster:

Well, go, get to it. Time's a-wasting.

Stefan Bucher:

All right.

Monster:

Monster out.

Stefan Bucher:

And this is another thing that came directly out of the monsters is that I got to do monsters for *The Electric Company* on PBS. And I did monsters with typography. So it's negative space monsters. I just filmed a bunch more of these for the second season so they're going to become a regular feature of the show, which is pretty cool.

[Music]

See you are actually learning something today. And the next thing that I'm doing with the monsters is -- I have so far kept it entirely within 8.5 by 11 and I'm, now I'm taking the giant frightening leap to 16 by 20. And that is going to be a portfolio of 12 giant monsters where I can actually indulge my love of crosshatching. And stippling, and you can see more details there. Scroll through these pretty quickly. As you can see again, stippling in pencil in great detail, and that's going to be out in about a month and it's going to be a limited edition kind of thing. I was hoping to show you the portfolio today because it is all iridescent, hardcover and everything, and it is beautiful with a magnetic closure. But it's trapped somewhere in Chinese customs, so there you go. Picture it, it's glorious. And they all have really good footwear as you know. You know, because that really pulls the outfit together.

And lastly I'll show you my new book that just came out two weeks ago, which is *The Graphic Eye*, which is a collection of 500 photos by about a 100 designers or over a 100 designers. And we all take really great photos, I think, and so I thought this would be a nice way of making a collection of that to show everybody's favorite images.

And this is the Chronicle cover. This is the British cover. And they started from the exact same round of comps, and it was sort of interesting to see how they evolved in completely different ways. And this was a project where, you know, this sort of brings me back around to by conscious mind and my subconscious. The subconscious is really good in setting it all up, getting the whole process going, and then at the very end I was able to engage my conscious mind and say, Now you get to play, too. You get to go through all these images and you get to make a sequence, and that was what was sort of the most fun of the whole process was just to sequence the book and to create not an obvious narrative but a little bit of a sequence that hopefully is provocative when you go through it when every page in some way or other is

related to the one before and after it in a really conscious way. And I, you know, I took absolute liberties with the photos in rearranging them to make little statements like: I love you too, big daddy. The snake tricked me. And then this one, which I set up as a grid that you can read in any direction, really like provoke thought wicked idea. A quick dump. Or wicked united nut high. And so it was really, it was like my subconscious and I -- it was like a family portrait. It was like a family picture -- my subconscious and I took my conscious mind to the park and we let it catch Frisbees in midair and that was pretty fun. And that is all I have for you tonight. Thank you very much for having me.

[Applause]

Kurt Andersen:

It was a pleasure.

Stefan Bucher:

Thank you very much.

Kurt Andersen:

Now did it take you ten years to get citizenship because they forced you to absolutely erase any trace of a German accent?

Stefan Bucher:

You're very sweet. Germans and transvestites, we try to pass.

Kurt Andersen:

Well.

Stefan Bucher:

No. That wasn't -- but I did have to take a written and spoken language test, actually.

Kurt Andersen:

And you probably spoke it better than the man testing you -- I would.

Stefan Bucher:

No.

Kurt Andersen:

They can't take it away now.

Stefan Bucher:

Yeah, in that case, that guy was a total douche.

Kurt Andersen:

Well, yeah. There you go.

Stefan Bucher:

No. He was actually -- he was super nice. I was so -- that was like the scariest day of my life and the officer was actually super, super nice.

Kurt Andersen:

And speaking of Germans, stereotypically Germans and great senses of humor, those don't necessarily go together.

Stefan Bucher:

You don't think our work has been funny up till now?

Kurt Andersen:

Well, some of it funnier than others in a kind of a dark way, yes.

Stefan Bucher:

Yeah. We go for the macabre.

Kurt Andersen:

Yeah, indeed. Do you ever -- I mean -- none of the work you've shown here and none of the work that I know of yours is without humor. Do you do work without humor?

Stefan Bucher:

You know, Christoph Niemann last year or two years ago said something very good where he said, I just don't have the balls to do anything that's not funny because when it's a little bit funny, you have a metric of success. You know, somebody laughs you know you've done your job well. So I try.

Kurt Andersen:

So you really don't? You didn't hide that earnest, sincere stuff.

Stefan Bucher:

No there's -- yeah. There's not the sort of, you know, Carmina Burana work is not here anywhere.

Kurt Andersen:

As I said, I love the story monster and the fact that it is these daily animations as well as the drawing and it's all online -- it seemed like a wonderful stitching together of several media. Did you -- when you were starting out as a designer and saw the web coming, making, you know, editorial illustration difficult and challenging, did you feel threatened by the coming internet?

Stefan Bucher:

I kind of was, yeah. I was a Luddite for the longest time because, well, this is crap and I don't understand this. And because I -- and not even that I was against that -- I was just so for print and still am in some ways that I just -- I was very late to awaken to the possibilities of it

and did the monsters as sort of a lark because I was trying to sell a book about monsters called *Upstairs Neighbors* and the publishers were taking forever to get back to me. And so at that point, I started filming the monsters just to keep myself interested and then was completely floored by the reaction, which was also why I didn't talk about this much before in the talk itself, is the amazing thing was that people were writing in stories or sending in stories which happened because they asked me, Well, what's this monster called and what does he listen to? And in some mad moment I just said, Well, that's not my job; that's for you to tell me. And so then all the stories came in and it just blew me away. So then I was like, Oh, wow, this is like -- I'm not a control freak, I'm a control enthusiast. And so this made it so that I was able to surrender a little bit of control in a way that was really fun.

Kurt Andersen:

Well, and to your point that something you were doing while you were kind of killing time, it speaks to that sort of inner game that we're supposed to find where when you're not thinking about it too much -- your subconscious, which, as you say, you trust does it for you.

Stefan Bucher:

Exactly.

Kurt Andersen:

Los Angeles.

Stefan Bucher:

Yes.

Kurt Andersen:

Do you think it affects your work or does it just happen to be the place you live?

Stefan Bucher:

Absolutely. You saw it from the opening that was just when my life -- the whole horizon just opened up. I grew up in Germany, which, you know, as we were discussing earlier, doesn't necessarily lend itself to fun quite as much. Or it's a very particular kind of fun and in L.A., I mean, just the light. Lawrence Ressler wrote a great article on the light in L.A., and that's just -- you read that and it's like, yes, that's it exactly. Hard shadows. Wide vistas. And I was a really weird guy in Germany, and that caused me a lot of problems back there. I'm still a really weird guy now, but in L.A. it actually seems to go over and so.

Kurt Andersen:

And finally why 344?

Stefan Bucher:

344 initially was just because my office is at the intersection of the 210 and 134 freeways, and they add up to 344.

Kurt Andersen:

You OCD nut, you.

Stefan Bucher:

It's a little bit with the nerdiness again. But what's -- then what I found out two years later is I designed a catalog -- not a catalog but a calendar -- and I numbered all the days as I would, and the 344th day of the year is in a non-leap year December 10th, which is the day that I moved from Germany to California. So that was obviously was meant to be.

Kurt Andersen:

So some of that mystical numerological part of German-ness I guess you also carry.

Stefan Bucher:

That actually is a very nice intersection in the Venn diagram of Germany and L.A.

Kurt Andersen:

Indeed. Stefan, thank you very much.

Stefan Bucher:

Thank you very much.

[Applause]

[Music]