

LOR SED TE DOLORER ESECTE DIT LORE MINCILIQUAT LORTISL ULLUPTAT NUMMY NIAM, SUSCING EA FACIDUNT NIM NONUM EUI BLA FEUGIAT. UT WISI BLAM, QUISCIDUNT WIS ATIN UTPAT, SI ET LORE TIE DOLORER IDUISIM DOLOREET AUGAIT ILIQUAM, SI TET, VER SUSTRUD ET, VULLUPTATIO ODIT LORE DOLORPEROS EXER AUTE ET NIS NONSECTE MOD EUGUERA SEQUAT LUPTAT. UT NOSTO ESSIT LAOR AMCOMMLORE TIS NIAM ZZRIT, QUIS NIAM EU FACI ELESEQUAT NISIM VELIT ALIQUI TE MAGNA FACIDUISL DIPSUSCIPSUM DOLORTISI. DUISMOLUM QUAT. UT ADIAM ALIT ULLAM NUM ZZRIT LORE MAGNIBH EA FACILIQUIS AUGAIT LUM NONULLANDRE DUISI ER AT. UT AUT EX EUM AUGIAT PRAESSI. LOREROSTRUD TAT. UT LUTETUM ZZRIURE MOD MOLORPER AM, SIT PRAT. DUISI BLAORPERIT VEL ERCI BLAM AD EU FEU FEUGUERO CONUM VULPUTAT AM VERAT. UT AUGAIT NON ULLAORTIN UTEM VEL DOLOR ILLUPTATUER IRILISIS AUGIAM DOLOR IP EA COMMY NONULPUTAT VERIURE DOLENDIGNIM IUSCING EX ERO ODOLOR IPISI BLAM INISCIP EXERIUREM IPIS DO COMMODIP EUGAIT VELIS ET, SEQUIS ENIM VELESTRUD DO EROS NUMSAND ERAT. DUIS AD TING EUM DEL EUGIAM QUISMOL BORER IUUSTO DOLUTPA ISSECTE DOLUPTATISL ULLAN HENDIAM ONSSED TATE

JUDGMENT CALL

STEP obliges its Design 100 judges to make one “top pick.” Most select a thing they find especially well designed and well produced. Sahre selected something that bothered him, something that reminded him of what he considers the unpleasant choices designers face between commerce and art. He called attention to a logo for a state Lotto, juxtaposing it with a silkscreened poster for the arts he liked that was created by the same design team.

Sahre intended his comparison to make a larger point, that even the best designers face difficult choices: Work they love for clients they love or work they need to make ends meet that sometimes originates from clients with whom they may feel conflicted.

Sahre said then, “On the [one] hand, I know some things like this [are sometimes] necessary to keep things afloat and to allow you to do work you love. But where and when do you draw the line? I’ve faced my own difficult choices in my career. The thing about thresholds is sometimes they move depending upon your economic circumstances.”

In calling attention to the ethical decisions of others, Sahre begs that the same questions be asked of him. If you’re willing to

speak out on such topics, you’d better be free of sin or freely admit your own sins. The only worse thing than a scold is a hypocritical scold. What kind of guy was this Sahre? One year later, I had the opportunity to find out.

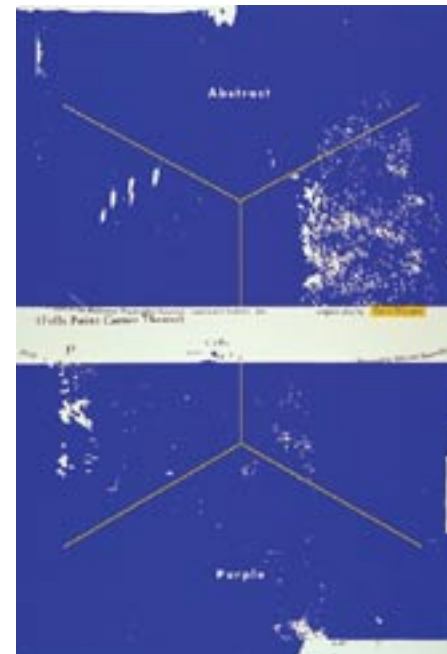
NOT NEW YORK

One of four children, Sahre was born in 1964 and grew up in Johnson City, a small town in upstate New York, somewhere between Syracuse and the Pennsylvania line. The town’s sensibility was more Midwestern than New York City, where life was quiet, simple and anonymous, Sahre says. “New York City seemed very far away.”

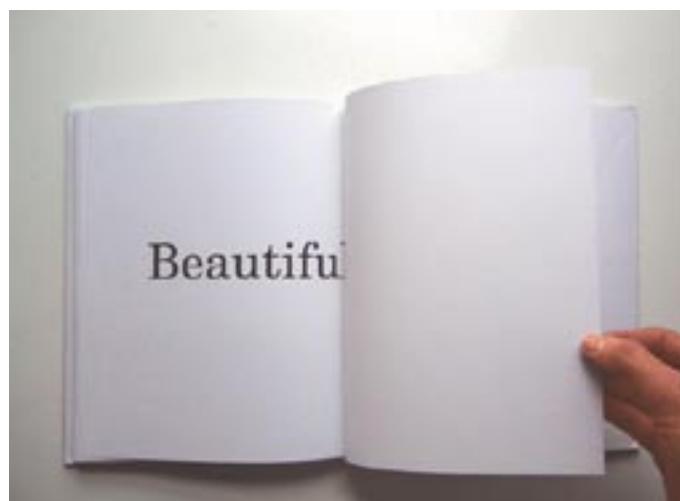
Sahre chose Kent State University near Akron, Ohio for college. He was attracted to the school’s place in American progressive thinking and leftist political history. He liked it enough to continue there for grad school. An exciting time in his life, he discovered design was not a “job” but more like “religion.”

After grad school, Sahre and his first wife moved to Baltimore. She worked as a fashion designer for Merry-Go-Round, an ’80s retailer, and he began a series of mind-numbing jobs that made the exhilaration of grad school a mere hallucination. Reality, as it turned out, was less exhilarating than grad school.

Still, Sahre bought in deeply to the American Dream. He settled down, got married, bought a house, assumed a mortgage, and took on a series of dull jobs to pay for it. To escape the displeasure he found with his paying work, he set up a low-tech silkscreen print shop in his basement and began doing jobs for little or for free. His main client, Fells Point Corner Theatre, gave him free reign. Sahre only charged them for expenses, usually less than \$150



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including paper and ink. The theater “sniped” the posters across Baltimore. They got noticed. They got stolen. They brought Sahre a small degree of notoriety and a great deal of pleasure.

And still, Sahre continued to work for others, paying the bills, plodding along, weighing his options. He took a job with GKV Advertising as director of an in-house design group. Working on a brochure for a company that serviced attack helicopters, Sahre realized he hated his job. It was making him hate his life.

One day, without forethought, he called a staff meeting. He recalls the moment: “I said to them, ‘Why are you here? Why are you wasting your best years here? What are you doing? Does any of this have any meaning to you? Because it means nothing to me.’” The pep talk worked: A few months later, the agency closed the design group, releasing all of them to seek their Zen. “It was a mercy killing,” Sahre says, looking back. “We were euthanized.”

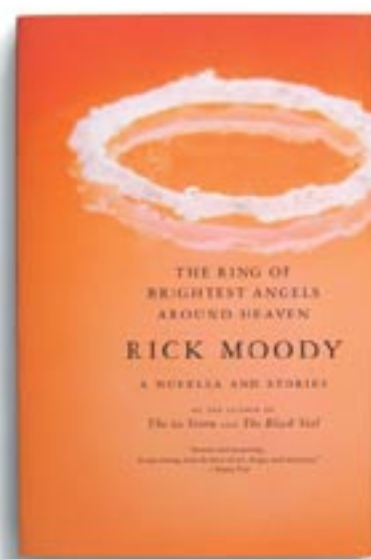
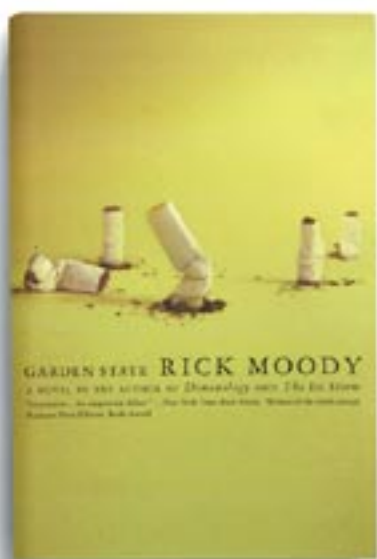
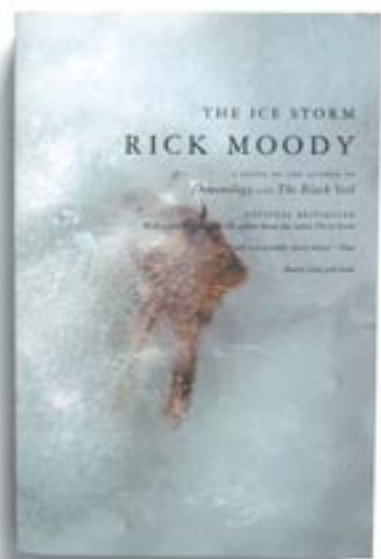
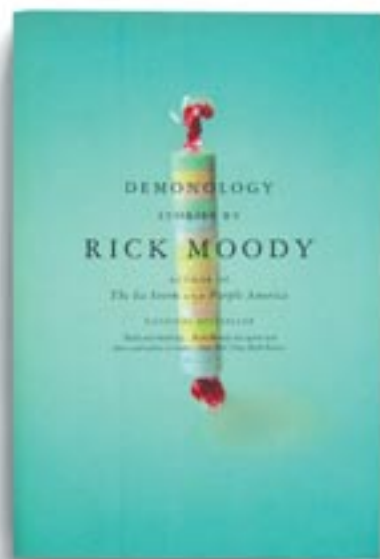
UP FROM BALTIMORE

Thanks to his work for Fells Point Corner Theatre, creative directors Michael Ian Kaye and John Gall began to call. “I didn’t so

much move here [New York] as I got *pulled* here,” says Sahre. He left Baltimore in 1998. His life changed. His marriage ended. He began, but soon ended, a business partnership with friend Stephen Doyle (who still mispronounces Sahre’s name to demonstrate his lasting pain). Meanwhile, Sahre’s work for book publishers grew, and he began his long relationship with the SoHo Rep Theatre, which continues today.

Most importantly, Sahre returned to the classroom—as an instructor at the School for Visual Arts (SVA). In this enriched atmosphere—surrounded by agile, young people with fresh ideas and a gift for experimentation—Sahre regained his creative impetus.

“I give credit to Richard Wilde [director of the design school at SVA]. He gives me the freedom to design the class in the way I want and to audit the students who take my class.” When Sahre says “audit,” he means his class functions like a classic *atelier*. Students act as apprentices: Those that “get” him will perform well under his direction. If the fit does not exist, students are not forced to stay nor punished if they leave. Those who remain *want* to be there. His senior portfolio class is always full.



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Sahre revels in it: “I think I get more out of being in class than the students. I am surrounded by young people who get me and want to work through my [unorthodox] approach,” he explains. “And because those in the portfolio class have proven that they really want to be a part of it, I end up giving still more one-on-one time outside of class. It is a tremendous commitment of time.”

Sahre has an established approach to the class. It begins with each student creating a single “conceptual theme” to be used throughout the year. *Everything* they do filters through it. For example, one student chose the concept “what is difficult to endure is empowering to recall” as his theme. The approach is both liberating and maddeningly restrictive. By requiring students to focus on a central theme, their thoughts could not wander to, say, hypothetical vodka packaging or CD covers for their favorite band. They are forced to return to the concept again and again, squeezing every bit of meaning through every possible application of the idea to a routine design assignment.

NAUSEATING EXERCISES

Some requirements are routine: a book, a symbol, a poster, etc. Others less so: a performance piece enacted in front of a live audience. The student with the “what is difficult to endure is empowering to recall” concept demonstrated his theme by ingesting capsules containing printed phrases that spelled out his theme. He then self-induced vomiting, coughing up each capsule, opening them and revealing the message on a wall. Whether the audience felt empowered after enduring the smell of vomit is unclear, but there you have it.

Yes, Sahre realizes that some may see this exercise as, um, gratuitous. But his point is larger than one student’s nauseating performance. “My point with the exercises and the repetitive use of one central concept is to train students to think like graphic designers, not office cubicle workers. Graphic design is more than just a job with an in- and out-box and a gray desk. It is about expression and communication.”

In March 2005, Sahre curated a student show at a gallery in Chelsea. The show featured the work of every former Sahre student willing to participate, meticulously hung and annotated. Sahre commissioned Jason Fulford to produce life-size four-color photographs of him and a few students to help illustrate the profundity of the teacher-student relationship, tongue firmly pressed in cheek. The show stood for two weeks and involved a great deal of work. Typically, Sahre did not make a penny on it.

SMELL THE COFFEE

Sahre’s one-floor studio inside a drab pre-war building overlooking Sixth Avenue near 14th Street will not be featured in a design

magazine. Sandwiched between Dunkin Donuts and a Driving School, it’s dark in the winter, hot in the summer, and always smells of coffee. An old refrigerator rattles in the corner. A water cooler stands wanly nearby. Desks are elementary school surplus, a million names carved into the tops, a million wads of gum stuck beneath. One room is the office, the other is the silkscreen studio. It’s just Sahre, his Boston Terrier, Sid, and his intern, Joon Mo Kang, a former student. Indeed the space looks like a Sahre op-art piece about potential; just superimpose the words “In Progress” over it to complete the point.

And that is the point. Sahre is a work in progress. His education is a work in progress. His career is a work in progress. His journey has just begun. The Office Of Paul Sahre (O.O.P.S.) has been open just over five years, yet it somehow seems longer. To Sahre, it’s all coming together ... or coming apart, depending upon one’s perspective. “I’m exhilarated by the diversity of the things I am doing, but I’m leery about being all over the map, too. Clients want to know what you are—‘he’s a book designer,’ ‘he’s an illustrator,’ ‘he’s a teacher,’ ‘he’s an author,’ ‘he’s a poster designer.’ I am many things ...is that good or bad? I don’t know yet.”

But, by most sane measures, Sahre is successful, or at least very busy. Publication design remains his cash crop. He’s also a regular contributor of op art to the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Esquire*. SoHo Rep Theatre receives a lot of his time and energy, and he helps the AIDS Institute of the New York Department of Health with publications rife with charts and graphs—“a good information organization challenge,” he offers.

He’s currently jazzed about a project with Marvel Comics, designing a book called *Maximum FF* about the Fantastic Four. He’s also designing a poster for the University of Minnesota’s sum-

mer workshop series, Design Camp. Boredom is not an issue for Sahre. But it’s experimental work that stirs his passions most. Whether it’s on a silkscreen poster or witnessing it among his students, Sahre is captivated by experiences that bring him closer to the sense of exhilaration he felt at Kent State. Before he had a “real job,” that experience that made him realize that design was a calling, not a career choice. Just as his concept theme approach forces students to keep after an idea until they have tried to exhaust every possible articulation of it, Sahre’s idea of fun is to get the most out of a thing, to distill it to its purest, simplest, most concentrated form. Strong brew—not everyone’s taste.

“I have tried to give my students a taste of what I experienced at Kent State. There, I was responsible for figuring out what I was studying, why I was studying it, and where I was going with it. I stayed up many, many nights running on adrenalin. I took photographs, designed type-faces, made posters, and designed books. It was so fun and challenging. Since then, I’ve tried to return to that ideal, but it seems that everything afterward, especially the jobs I had, were not it.”

THE NINTH CIRCLE

He has found “it” again. The education of Paul Sahre has come full circle. As a student at Kent State, he discovered his calling. As a cubicle worker, he lost it. As a teacher and volunteer, he is rediscovering it daily. “At SVA, if I could create a class in which the kids got a taste of the exhilaration I once felt, I figured they’d know how good it could be at least once,” he says.

In Sahre’s mind, that memory would be a place where they could return. The recollection would offer a refuge after other experiences—money, clients, disappointments, compromises, ethical lapses, dumbasses, and mean-spirited bosses—had drained them of their passion. What Sahre discovered through all this was that he needed both Kent State and a shitty string of cubicle jobs, both the pain of Baltimore and the triumphs of New York. He needed them for comparison. Like Adam and Eve. Heaven and hell. Dante and Virgil.

Some need a map. Others need a companion. Others travel on pure instinct. Sahre’s lucky to have all three: a roadmap of past experiences, a brilliant new wife (Emily Oberman), and the courage to follow his heart. And he now knows one thing for certain: If you remain in the School of Life, you’ll get smarter, eventually.

“When you stop learning, you die,” Sahre says. “Right now, it all seems new again. I’m not exactly sure where I’m going, but I’m going to get there.” ■

PAUL SAHRE | O.O.P.S. | 212.741.7739 |