

Egon Zippel finds inspiration in the everyday minutia of commonplace items: A PostIt sticky, saved over the years, a corporate logo found in advertising, a To-Do list. In our visit with the artist in his LES studio in New York, he explains how these found objects become paintings.

Egon Zippel



Kunsthalle Schlieren, Zürich

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Where are you from originally? I was born and raised, until I was four, in Rumania. We were part of the German minority that used to live in Rumania, where Germans arrived around 250 years ago, when it was part of the Austrian-Hungarian empire.

We never mixed and mingled with the Rumanian population, something like how the Amish people in America don't mix with modern Americans. So I can still speak a German that is 250 years old, as the language there has never evolved significantly.

People do tend to preserve their language when they live abroad. It's said that the American English spoken in New England, the famous Boston accent, is closer to the original Shakespearean English, while today's British accent that so many Americans adore actually evolved much later. So I never

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learned to speak Rumanian since my family left when I was four. My mother was a professional cello player, and my father a metal worker. They both lost their jobs when the authorities learned that we had "applied" for passports. We had already lost our land when it was "collectivized" by the communists who took power after the war; meaning we worked on it, but it didn't belong to us anymore. My parents saw no future for us there, so in 1964 we somehow got across the "Iron Curtain" to get out.

Where did you end up? We moved to a small village outside of Mannheim/Heidelberg, West Germany, and that's where I basically grew up, going to what we call "Gymnasium" — a classical academic school — taking nine years of Latin, three years of ancient Greek. It was nice, I liked it. Then I went into the Army for two years, 1979-1981, it was obligatory then in West Germany.

And after the army? From 1981 until 1984 I studied graphic design, and then I got a Fulbright scholarship, to study at the University of Texas in Austin. The Fulbright scholarship includes a one-year work permit, so I came to New York and worked full time as a graphic designer.

Then in the summer of 1986 everything changed. At the end of my stay here in New York City I had my personal epiphany, or enlightenment, which made me give up everything here and turn around 180 degrees.

Although my employer offered to get me a green card, I returned to Germany. After being told my whole life what to do — school, army, studies, job — then I just wanted time for myself.

How did you make a living then? Funny that you ask, I was asking myself the same question; that's why right now I am actually compiling a list of "ways I made money". Besides selling art, this list has around fifty different points so far...

Can you name a few ways you made money? Well, in the time before Internet, I was delivering newspapers to airports all over Europe. I went with my car from Heidelberg, where I lived, to Frankfurt to pick up the newspapers, and then I had to go as fast as possible to Vienna, or Budapest, or Milan, or Paris airports to deliver them. The company I worked for had apartments in all these cities for the drivers to rest, so if I wanted I could stay there and visit the city. Then I had gigs in graphic

design; I started selling my art, first in Italy, mostly Milan. Somehow there my art really hit a nerve.

Was it the same kind of art you are doing now, the "Devandalizing" series? No, it was related to working with corporate logos, playing with fragments of logos and creating new "Superlogos" with these fragments.

Who did you sell your artwork to? Did you work with galleries? No, just private clients.

Do you remember when you sold your first piece? Yes, it was in 1989. It was a painting with a lot of golden corporate logos, on a golden background.

How did you set the price, and how did you meet your first buyers? When I moved to New York in 1986, the first place I stayed was the *International House*, on Riverside drive, next to *Columbia University*. Here is what the *International House* says about itself: "*IHouse* is home to the next generation of globally-minded leaders in business, the arts, politics and more."

Well, there I met some people from Frankfurt, and they became my first clients in Heidelberg. To set pricing, since

I was kind of outside of the system, not having a gallery or being affiliated with any art institution, I thought it was best to come relatively low in. In Germany we say "Kunst kommt von Können", but I made my own version of this saying: "Kunst kommt nicht von Können, sondern von Kennen, und zwar die richtigen Leute".

What brought you back to New York a second time? In 1996 a friend who lived in New York called me, saying that he and his wife bought a building in Soho, and that the building was empty — they lived then in Los Angeles — and since I always said that I wanted to come back to New York, I could move in there.

It was a former Con Edison substation, converted by the former owner to an apartment and a huge studio. It also housed at one point the *Max Protetch Gallery*. So in February 1996 I was back in New York, and I lived and worked in this building on Lafayette street for two years. There were no other tenants in the building, just me, and their two dogs I took care of until the dogs also moved to Los Angeles. I organized a few art shows there, until 1998, when they started to renovate the building.

How did you make a living in New York at that time, did you continue to sell art? Yes, I continued to sell art to private clients, but that wasn't enough to survive here. So, in order to create income, I was the "fixer" for Italian TV and film productions, I did qualitative trend and marketing research for German and Italian trend research companies. And after the renovation of my friend's building on Lafayette street was finished in 2007, I rented it out on a commission basis as a location for film shoots and events.

What are you working on these days? I work mostly on my "Devandalizing" series, it's kind of a continuation of the work with the corporate logos, meaning that I use stickers and tags that I collect from the streets of various cities to create new entities; either with the stickers themselves or I use them as starting points for paintings. In a world with an abundance of technical possibilities, it is immensely rewarding to limit myself to a very restricted format.

Anytime we hit limitations, that's where creativity begins. On the other hand, when you finally have freedom to do anything, people often end up doing nothing. I also chronicle my To-Do lists: You can see over twenty years of them online, where I started a list, and when and where I finished it.

That's pretty wild. So in effect, you've made your life an ongoing art project. Yes, for example my Post-it series; if you go to my website, you'll see many more streets that I follow. **M**

Ed. Note: The artist's online project can be seen at egonzippel.com

Photos: (left page): Egon Zippel. *INFINITY*, 2012. Stickers and signaling tape, acrylic paint on canvas 48 x 48 inches. / Egon Zippel in his studio in New York 2018

