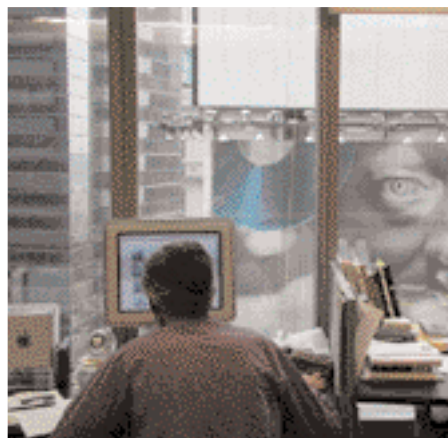
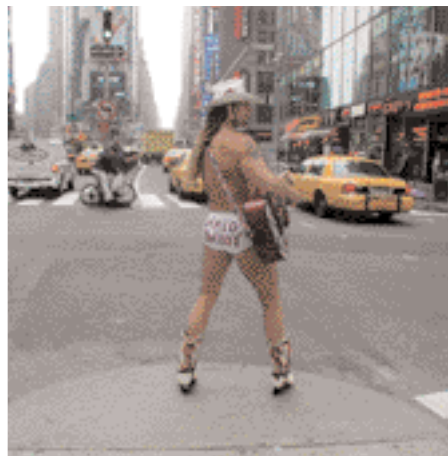


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ISTVAN BANYAI

INTERVIEWED BY DEVON SPENCER SMITH

I was thrilled as a giddy child when I was asked to interview Istvan Banyai for this issue of 3x3! Upon moving to New York to pursue illustration at Parsons School of Design, I became instantly familiar with the name behind the charismatic flat color-filled line drawings. Istvan has done work for THE NEW YORKER, TIME, ROLLING STONE, PLAYBOY, and a tremendous list of other magazines, newspapers and advertisers. His work has also been seen on the cover of AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION 18, as well as on many of his own books like ZOOM, RE-ZOOM, REM and MINUS EQUALS PLUS. And let us not forget the esteemed "idea" campaign he did for ad agency Saatchi and Saatchi, or the "AbsolutIstvan" piece for Absolut Vodka that appeared in NEW YORK MAGAZINE.

I try to remain collected as I eagerly await the master illustrator in the hip, studious atmosphere of Greenwich Village's Doma coffee shop. We have never met, but when I see a man approaching through the cold early morning I know him right away. He is just as I'd envisioned—the image of a true New York artist, wearing black sunglasses and feverishly smoking a Dunhill cigarette. I hurry outside to meet him and he shakes my hand firmly, introducing himself in a thick Hungarian accent.

After Istvan finishes another cigarette, we settle inside. I ask him to start at the very beginning and tell me about his childhood in Budapest. We whiz in and out of the story of his life as he attempts to recount the journey that has brought him to his current point as an artist. As he talks, I am reminded of the playful adventure that his readers experience in ZOOM and RE-ZOOM. He tells me that, as a child, drawing came naturally to him—both his parents drew well—and was something he enjoyed.

While attending art school, he discovered illustrators to admire between the pages of GRAPHIS magazine. He looked at Belgian artist Jean Michel Folon and French artist Roland Topor. "I love Topor's absurdity," he remarks. "I was fortunate to meet him in Paris later. He loved life, and he was a fun guy." Istvan describes designer Tadanori Yokoo as the "Milton Glaser of Japan" and considers him to be one of the first Japanese artists to fuse Western culture with traditional Japanese style. "In my early Californian years, Tadanori Yokoo was an idol of mine, along with splash and melting ice cream, Venice Beach with its strange murals, and Little Tokyo bookstores." He continues to reflect on his origins. "Growing up behind the iron curtain, the black market was the only place to find secondhand records from the West. These served as an eye-opener for me. I was living in the middle of a Bolshevik propaganda dump—Social Realism, the statue of the iron worker in the park, the Soviet military barracks at the end of the street, THE BALLAD OF A SOLDIER from Moscow at the cinema, the painted red slogans on the gates of the factories declaring 'War for Peace'... that stuff never quite went away. No wonder the art on Crumb's cover for Janis Joplin or

Heinz Edelman's YELLOW SUBMARINE was such an escape and influence. I knew that was something I wanted to do."

He was also a fan of cartoons and comics like America's MAD MAGAZINE, and is greatly enthusiastic about comic artists Windsor McCay and Moebius. M. C. Escher is another favorite. Istvan is especially drawn to the idea of infinity expressed in their work. He draws a horizontal figure eight, the infinite symbol, and explains that this idea of infinity and the juxtaposition of opposite pairs has fascinated him his whole life. "A book that I have been very interested in lately is THE USER ILLUSION by Tor Norretranders, a leading Danish science writer. It is all about cutting consciousness down in size, and the author explains how, during any given second, we consciously process only sixteen of the eleven million bits of information that our senses are continuously passing on to our brain. In other words, the conscious part of us receives much less information than the unconscious part.

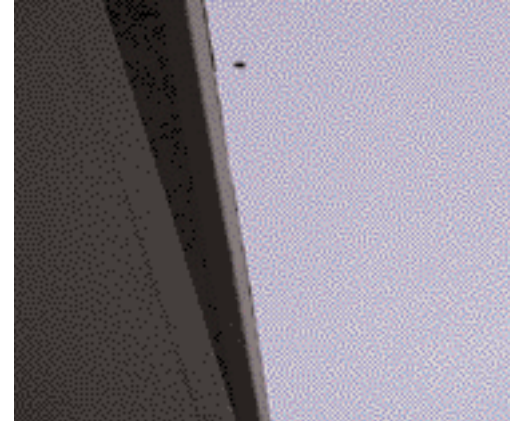
"Who rides the bike, the 'I' or the 'me'? We should trust our hunches and pursue our intuitions. They are closer to reality than the perceived reality of consciousness. Poseidon must emerge from the sea to show us something!

"I try to read whenever I can, on and off. GRODEL, ESCHER, BACH by Douglas Hofstadter, is mostly about patterns and the subject of infinity, about a universe without center and boundaries. Be it a staircase or a fugue, it repeats itself higher and higher, structure nesting on structure as far as the human eye can see or the human ear can hear—as high as his majesty's grace, as Bach said to Frederick the Great. Listen to Bach's "Das musikalische Opfer/The Musical Offering," written in 1747 (not 747!). These are fascinating ideas. They make me wonder, and help me to escape from the boredom of the daily repetitive routine."

Before I lose him to infinity, I interrupt to get a little more background on his beginnings and ask him about his schooling. He attended Applied Art School in Budapest, Hungary, which he describes as equivalent to New York's Cooper Union. "I was lucky to get into school—by passing the exam I avoided having to join the army. Military service was mandatory under communism unless you were a student." He received a Bauhaus-type of education in which function and form were indivisible. "They would have us go into the city and come back with fifty sketches depicting what we saw. It helped me enrich my visual vocabulary." While in school he often went to museums and especially liked the works of French artists Lautrec and Degas, the Viennese artist Egon Schiele and Hungarian Mihaly Zichy. He surprises me by revealing that he started out as an architecture major before transferring to graphic design and illustration. "You see, my father was a conservative engineer who did not want to hear about making art for a living." But architecture proved too dry for Istvan and he gave it up after two years, deciding instead



LEFT: **SIZE:** 8" x 12" **MEDIUM:** PENCIL ON PAPER COLORED IN PHOTOSHOP **ART DIRECTOR:** JANA MEIER **CLIENT:** OUTSIDE MAGAZINE **RIGHT:** **SIZE:** 9" x 9" **MEDIUM:** INK ON PAPER **ART DIRECTOR:** AVIVA MICHAELOV **CLIENT:** THE NEW YORK TIMES



On influences: "I love Roland Topor's absurdity. I was fortunate to meet him in Paris. He loved life, and he was fun." Istvan describes designer Tadanori Yokoo as the "Milton Glaser of Japan" and considers him to be one of the first Japanese artists to fuse Western culture with traditional Japanese style. "In my early Californian years, Tadanori Yokoo was an idol of mine, along with splash and melting ice cream, Venice Beach with its strange murals, and Little Tokyo bookstores."





upon illustration. "My line work originates there."

We jump to the start of Istvan's professional career. "I worked in Budapest for seven years doing movie posters and record covers for classical music and rock bands (Rock behind the curtain! Imagine that!). My work started to become popular among the young people of my age group. I also started doing animation for Pannonia Film Budapest, working on experimental projects with Gyorgy Kovasznai. I made a six-minute short called GOBBLE-GOBBLE, composed of 4,000 drawings that I made on my own. Because I had this good

sample piece, I was selected by a French director, Rene Laloux (Savage Planet) to go to France and work on his next film. It was entitled TIME MASTERS, and was designed by Moebius, the king of 'commix' in France. Once I finished the project, I never went back to Hungary. I dropped my passport—on the Versailles Police." I inquire about the differences between working in Europe and in America, and ask what I, as an aspiring illustrator, should expect from the industry. This question launches him on a charged and opinionated tangent. "In Hungary, there was only one movie dis-

(TOP) SIZE: 6" x 6" MEDIUM: PENCIL ON PAPER COLORED IN PHOTOSHOP ART DIRECTOR: MARY PARSONS CLIENT: ATLANTIC MONTHLY (BOTTOM) SIZE: 6" x 6" MEDIUM: PENCIL ON PAPER COLORED IN PHOTOSHOP ART DIRECTOR: GARY COOK CLIENT: MEN'S HEALTH/UK



SIZE: 10" x 10" MEDIUM: PENCIL ON PAPER COLORED IN PHOTOSHOP ART DIRECTOR: TOM STAEBLER CLIENT: PLAYBOY MAGAZINE

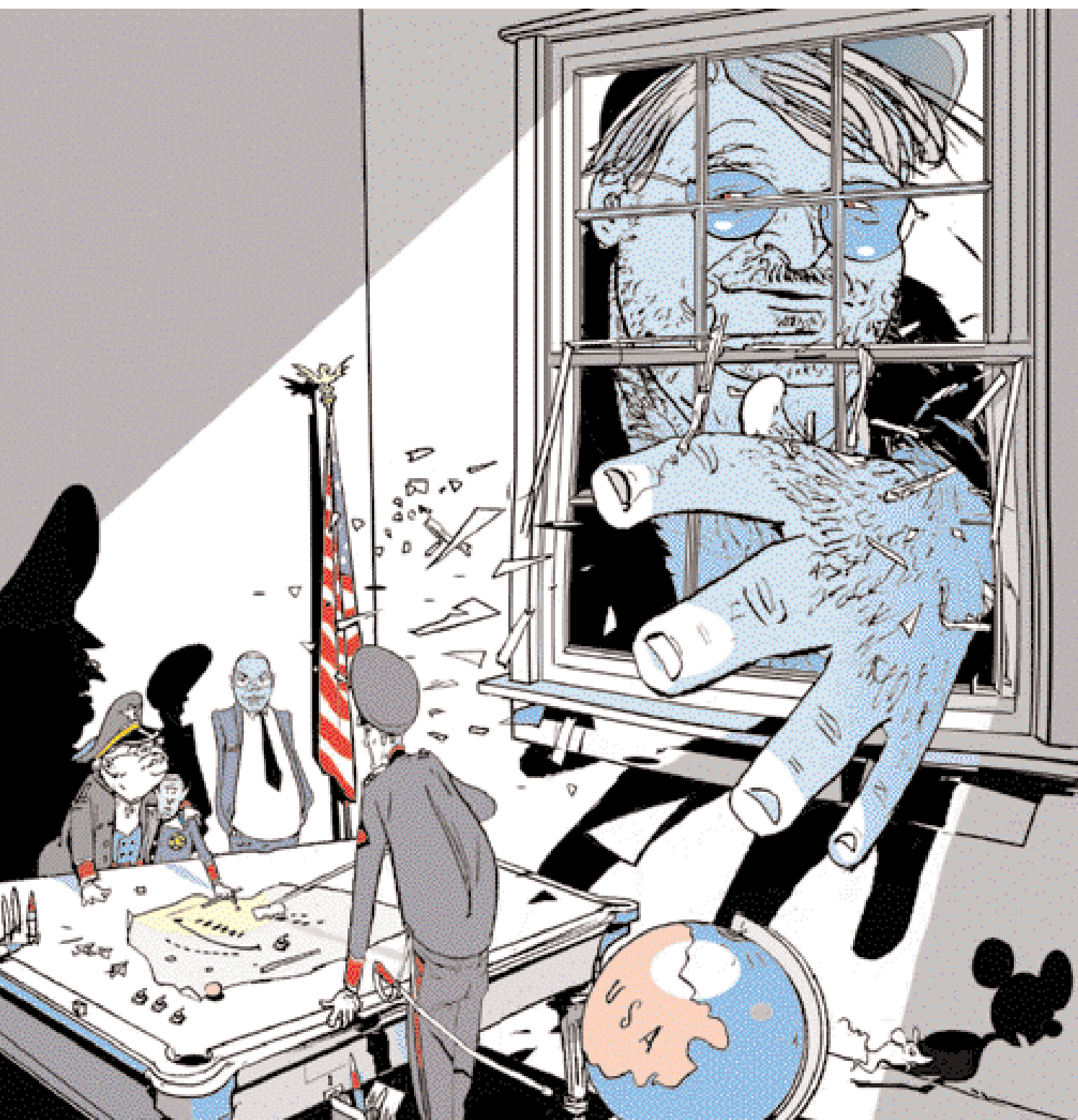
tributor and one record company to deal with. If you failed once, you failed forever! In the West, before corporate merging became so much fashionable, there was a limitless variety of clients. But now, in my eyes, it has all turned into some kind of pseudo-communist centralized system called 'One Corporation under God.' A megalith like Pravda resembles Time Warner or Turner AOL or whatnot, yet they can no longer afford to buy you lunch. Back when it was only TIME magazine in the mid-80s, on Friday night, the day before we went to print, the staff could enjoy a Swedish table full of delight in

the late night hours—not to mention a ride home in a limo. All that is gone. We can no longer afford pleasure...at least not for the little people like you and I. "The new tendency in the United States—although its not new to me, since I grew up with it in the Bloc—is the art of being bureaucratic. We can no longer afford emotion. We prefer robotic efficiency. I am often told to get a sketch done in half an hour. Then they don't call you back. They deliver answers out of the blue after they have finished their lunch, or when the bigger cats come back from the sauna.





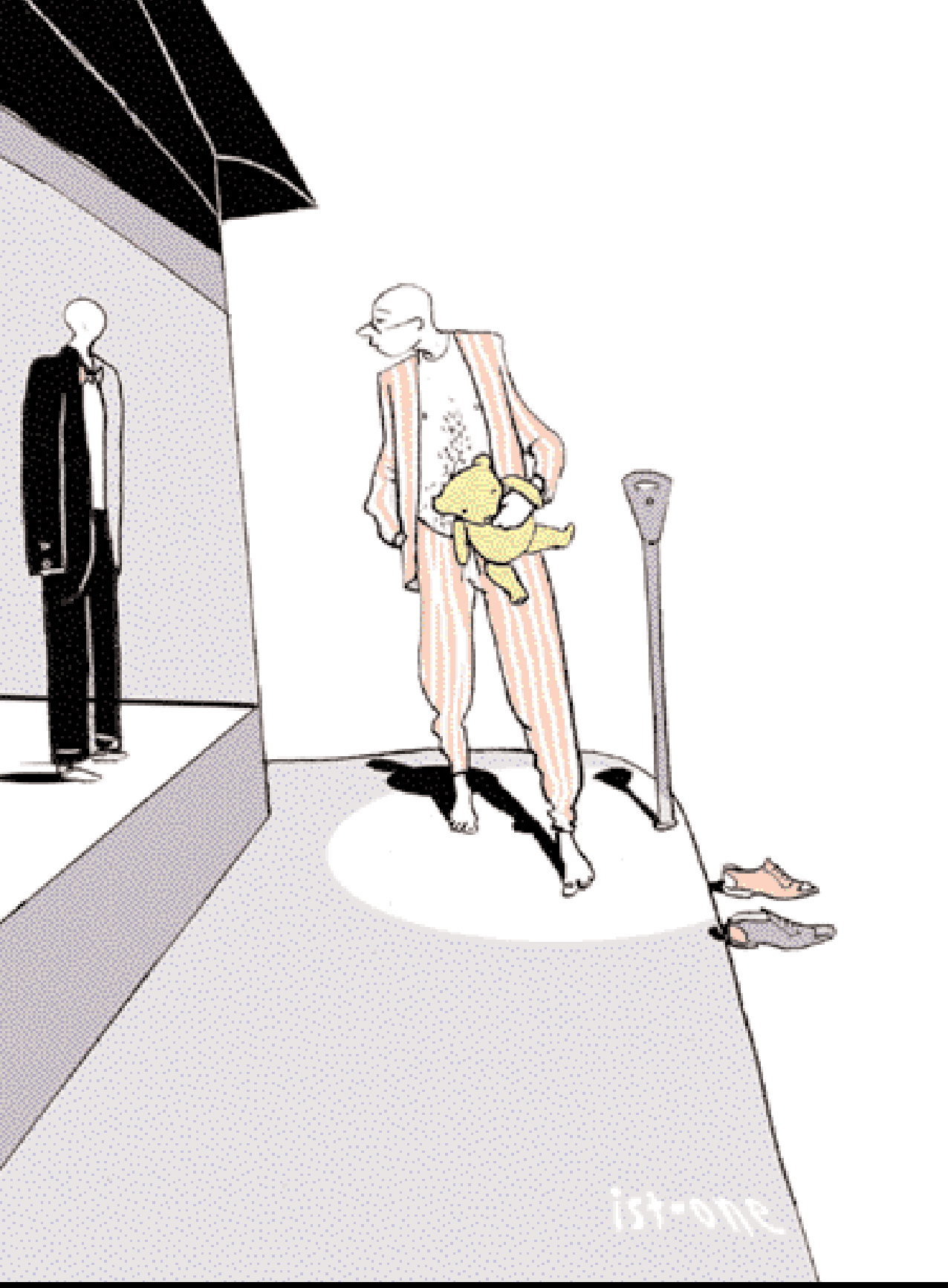
On the frustration: "I am often told to get a sketch done in half an hour. Then they don't call you back. They deliver answers out of the blue after they have finished their lunch, or when the bigger cats come back from the sauna. They never consult me in a meaningful way, and they talk down to me as though I'm on the lower deck of the Titanic."



SIZE: 11" x 11" MEDIUM: PENCIL ON PAPER COLORED IN PHOTOSHOP ART DIRECTOR: OWEN PHILIPS CLIENT: THE NEW YORKER

(TOP) SIZE: 6" x 6" MEDIUM: PENCIL ON PAPER ART DIRECTOR: MARY PARSONS CLIENT: ATLANTIC MONTHLY (BOTTOM) SIZE: 11" x 11" MEDIUM: PENCIL ON PAPER COLORED IN PHOTOSHOP ART DIRECTOR: CHRIS CURRY CLIENT: THE NEW YORKER





(LEFT) **SIZE:** 8" x 12" **MEDIUM:** PENCIL ON PAPER COLORED IN PHOTOSHOP **ART DIRECTOR:** LISA LEWIS **CLIENT:** LOS ANGELES MAGAZINE (RIGHT) **SIZE:** 8" x 11" **ART DIRECTOR:** CHRIS CURRY **CLIENT:** THE NEW YORKER



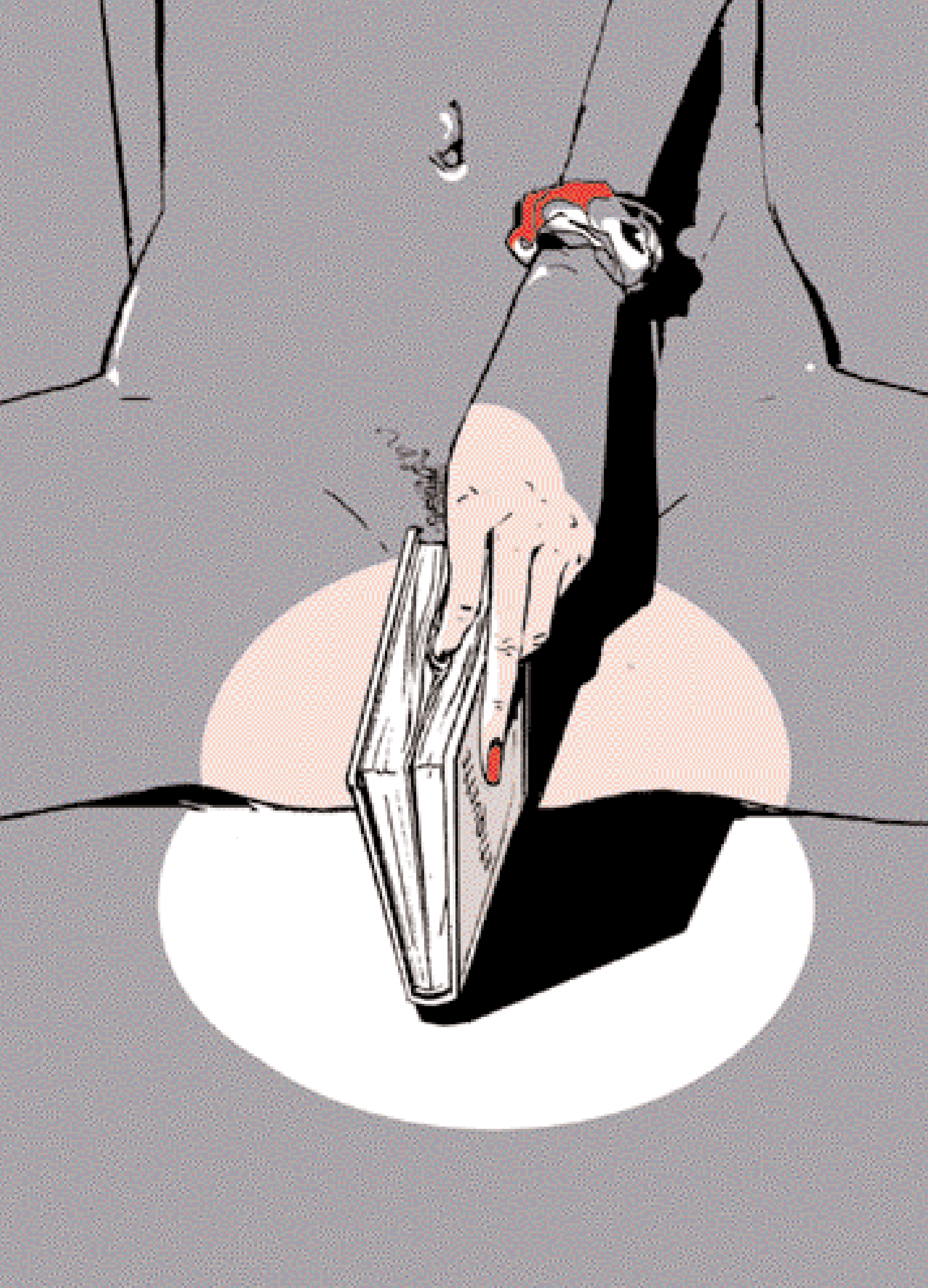


(LEFT) **SIZE:** 7" x 10" **MEDIUM:** PENCIL ON PAPER COLORED IN PHOTOSHOP **CLIENT:** PERSONAL PIECE (RIGHT) **SIZE:** 11" x 11" **MEDIUM:** PENCIL ON PAPER COLORED IN PHOTOSHOP **ART DIRECTOR:** OWEN PHILIPS **CLIENT:** THE NEW YORKER



On his approach: *"I like discrepancies. There is an idealism in everybody, to some degree, and maintaining that is a very stubborn process. It keeps you angry with a certain edge. And it comes out when you draw. I try to see absurdity in everything and reconstruct it in my own language. I try to make sense of it for myself."*





SIZE: 8" x 11" MEDIUM: PENCIL ON PAPER COLORED IN PHOTOSHOP ART DIRECTOR: TOM STAEBLER CLIENT: PLAYBOY MAGAZINE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ISTVAN BANYAI

They never consult me in a meaningful way, and they talk down to me as though I'm on the lower deck of the Titanic. Your work is critiqued, but you never know who has made the decisions—it could be ten or fifty people, but it is always a plural: WE think it should be like such and such. The art director, like Moses, comes down from the mountain with the message he's received from the gods on the phone, complete with their sixty-six commandments. And now that you have been enlightened, you are expected to proceed accordingly without any argument—and preferably with a smile! A dash of humor helps. As always, the exception enforces the rule. After a period of time in the trenches, you wind up with a few friends, but THEY (always plural) won't let you get away with any controversy because they get stock options. You get \$450 for your trouble, and you couldn't care less!

"Illustrators need to be paid decently and need to be given credit for what we deserve. Art directors should stop cropping and changing colors of a piece. Sometimes they don't print it at all—when they do it is often without a credit. I find that working in Europe, Canada and Japan, the money is less but an illustrator's work is not over-editorialized and you get it printed as you intended it. There you are the author!"

After this dose of harsh reality, I am not sure at how to reply, though I am grateful to hear an honest view of what I may be experiencing in the near future. He reassures me by saying that we must use art as an outlet to express our frustration.

"We illustrate written articles but language has been flipped and reformulated lately (read *JUNK ENGLISH* by Ken Smith). The keepers of meaning quietly recalibrate the language, using terms such as 'collateral damage'. Is it harsh to say 'dead' or 'think tank'? What the hell is a 'think tank' anyway? Please do not forget, English is my second language—it is twice as difficult for me to sort these things, since I take them first at face value. No wonder I am frustrated! But you must camouflage your message with images. You must express yourself with sugarcoated poison. You must administer the poison in a very delicate dose."

We "re-zoom" back to his career journey. Due to hard times and impossible housing, he left Hungary and immigrated to France with his wife and son. While working in France he met Eveleene Menasche, the Parisian representative of Push Pin Studio. "I was familiar with Push Pin and liked what they were doing. They recycled elements from the past and made them contemporary, creating work that was both interesting and marketable. The word 'postmodern' hadn't been mentioned yet." In 1980 he moved with his family from Paris to Los Angeles, where he worked with Rod Dyer—"a very cool designer, who picked me up off the street!"—and eventually became represented by Seymour Chwast and the Pushpin Group Inc. in New York.

Though he was getting some work from Pushpin, working for the animation studio Duck Soup paid the bills. "I was enjoying all the

plastics in L.A.—a nice climate with palm trees was a big contrast after France, and there was a heavy learning curve for me with a lot of mistakes and adjustments." But Istvan still wanted more action—eventually he felt ready to pack his bags and moved his family cross-country to New York. "I went to start up my career on my own. No reps this time. I began knocking on doors and one thing led to another. My first work experience was in the early 1990s with Robert Best and Kurt Anderson, who asked me to do a small drawing for the Gotham section, an angry weekly essay by Larry Doyle in *NEW YORK MAGAZINE*. I landed next to every *New Yorker's* toilet in an instant—overnight!" he laughs.

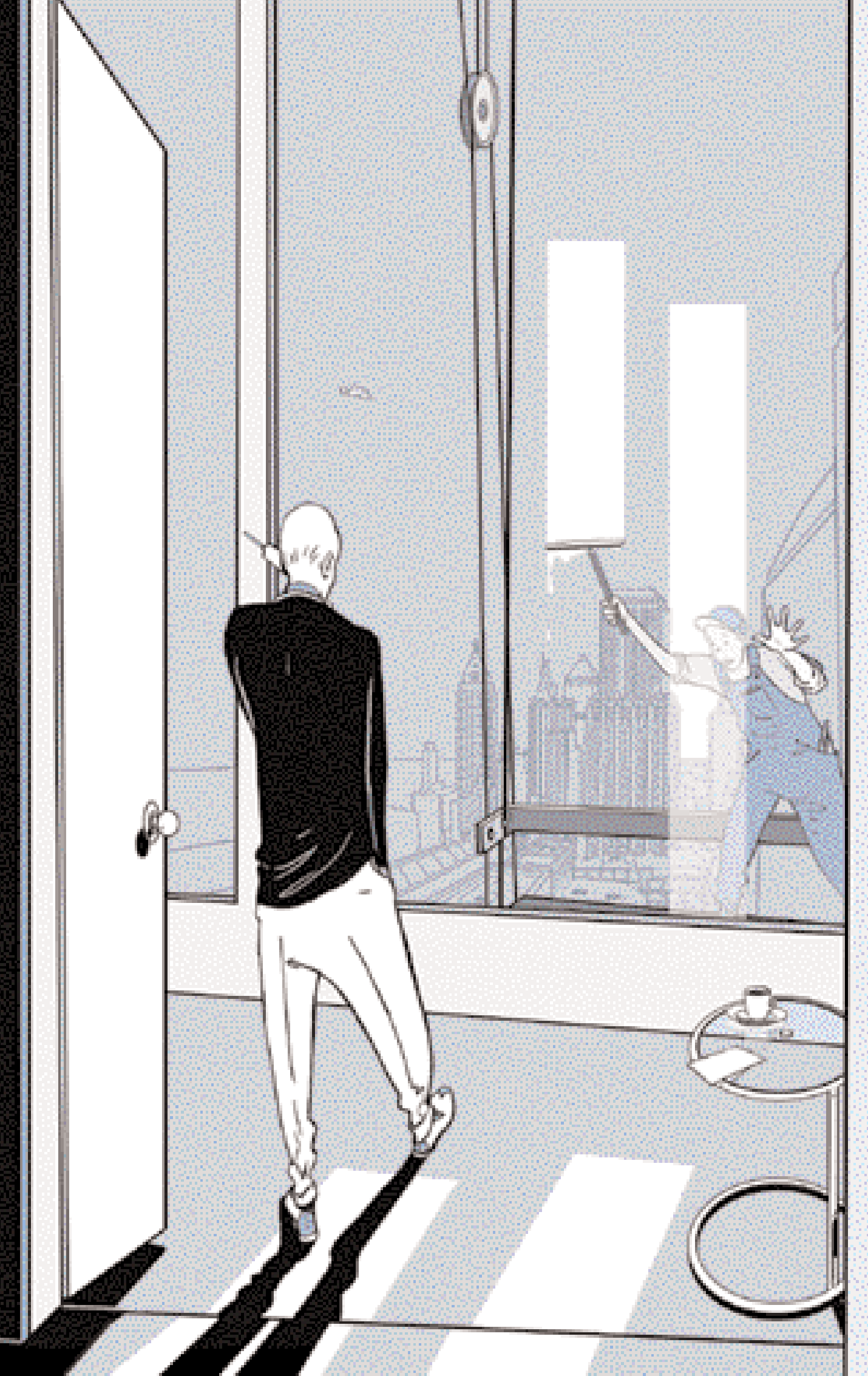
It was a jumping off point for Istvan, who has since done more than fifty covers for the *NEW YORKER*, seen his children's book *ZOOM* come out in thirty-five countries, put together animations for companies such as Nickelodeon and MTV Europe, and had his work spotlighted in *AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION*—especially on the cover of #18! "AbsolutIstvan" for the Absolut campaign, which previously had featured only photographers and no artists other than Warhol, escalated his presence in the industry to stardom.

Here the story of his amazing career journey pauses as he asks for a quick cigarette break. Istvan smiles and asks if I am sick of him yet. Never! He hands me a bag of goodies to keep me busy while he steps outside—a copy of *MINUS EQUALS PLUS*, *ZOOM*, *RE-ZOOM* and *AMERICAN ILLUSTRATOR 18*. I eagerly look over each one, taking extra time with *MINUS EQUALS PLUS*, a treasure that showcases the hard work he has put in over the years and displays both his published and unpublished illustrations.

When Istvan returns, I ask him what it is that he wants to reveal in his work and if he has any advice to give to aspiring illustrators. As he pauses to consider these questions, his features return to the intense, mesmerized look that he'd had earlier when speaking about infinity. "I like discrepancies," he says finally. "There is an idealism in everybody, to some degree, and maintaining that is a very stubborn process. It keeps you angry with a certain edge. And it comes out when you draw. I try to see absurdity in everything and reconstruct it in my own language. I try to make sense of it for myself, even if it is futile. What else can you do? You add a little seventh sense and it's done. I draw legible things, nothing abstract. I am interested in the particulars. I want to see the big picture or what is behind something, or why it seems the way it seems."

These ideas are definitely apparent and applied in his work—they are also included in a book he is currently working on called *THE OTHER SIDE* (Chronicle 2005). He describes it as a book joke: "You turn one page and you see the other side of the previous page. The format comments on how everything has two angles."

And as far as advice for aspiring illustrators, here are words of wisdom from the true Banyai: "Be a commentator on the times. Draw your frustration. Work hard and do it for love and passion. It is a way of life, and quite a good one actually!"



(LEFT) **SIZE:** 8 3/4" x 11 1/4" **MEDIUM:** PENCIL ON PAPER COLORED IN PHOTOSHOP **ART DIRECTOR:** FRANÇOISE MOULY **CLIENT:** THE NEW YORKER (RIGHT) **SIZE:** 10" x 10" **ART DIRECTOR:** TOM STAEBLER **CLIENT:** PLAYBOY



On working today: "Your work is critiqued, but you never know who has made the decisions—it could be ten or fifty people, but it is always a plural: WE think it should be like such and such. The art director, like Moses, comes down from the mountain with the message he's received from the gods on the phone, complete with their sixty-six commandments. And now that you have been enlightened, you are expected to proceed accordingly without any argument—and preferably with a smile."