

## A Visual Approach to the History of Swiss Graphic Design and Typography

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The present volume, *Visual Arguments*, contributes to *Swiss Graphic Design Histories* by providing a window onto an imaginary archive consisting of the familiar, as well as the unknown, entities of Swiss Graphic Design and Typography. This window is divided into twenty-five “visual arguments”—image clusters—each of them raising a specific topic that has not hitherto been subjected to historical inquiry. These arguments reveal aspects of design and typography practice, education, and discourse in Switzerland from the early 20th to the turn of the 21st century that go beyond the “metanarrative”<sup>1</sup> of the so-called “Swiss Style.”<sup>2</sup>

Our curated selection of images consists of graphic and typographic works, photographs, spreads from books and journals, letters, legal documents, and student work. By bringing these documents to the fore in an image-centered context rather than in a text-centered volume, *Visual Arguments* intends to provide an annotated collection of sources related to the history of Swiss Graphic Design and Typography. The arguments here derive from the visual source material, and are formulated in short accompanying essays.

This selection of documents derives from the respective fields of expertise of the contributing researchers, such as the pedagogy of graphic design and typography, their underlying networks of practice, and their publication and dissemination strategies. These diverse contributions focus on specific phenomena, events, personalities, clients, and philosophies, though without any claim to completeness. By presenting each source document in large format and untrimmed, we hope to foster a sense of immersion in its design, materiality, and detail that promotes

the reader’s visual engagement with it: this is a low-threshold form of access to primary source material that enables every reader to form his or her particular understanding of what is a multifaceted history. Altogether, these *Visual Arguments* constitute an argument in favor of a critical reevaluation of what has been taken for granted as the history of Swiss Graphic Design and Typography.

With this aim of reexamining the dominant historiography, the editors of this volume approached archives as being both essential to tracking down the sources on which the established historical narratives are based, and a means of detecting empty spaces in the history of visual communication—those aspects that have hitherto remained unknown, hidden, neglected, or intentionally suppressed. According to Michel Foucault, archives are neither the totality of texts written for a specific scientific field stored in a repository, nor the complex of institutions. Instead, he describes them as the invisible forces, rules, and value judgments that lead to the enunciation of a discourse, its appearance and transformation, before history is written.<sup>3</sup> In order to reveal the invisible forces that led to the current historical narrative of Swiss Graphic Design and Typography, we have regarded the empty spaces of established archives as being as important as the objects they hold.

Under this premise, the authors of this volume have been collecting primary sources: from private legacies to the records of educational and federal institutions, the dusty cellars of collectors, and the archives of trade associations. A selection of our findings is presented here as a kind of visual “counter archive” complementing the limited number of objects of visual communication that reoccur throughout the metanarrative of Swiss Design and Typography.

*Visual Arguments* is based on an understanding that historiography transcends the widespread preconception of defining history through the linearity of a *written* text, referring to *written* sources. This is indicated by common definitions of historiography, such as the “writing of history,” “the principles, theory,

and history of historical writing,” or the “product of historical writing: a body of historical literature.”<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, the sense of sight, one of our means of having sensory experiences, has been considered inferior to the experience of ideas, concepts, and language in the context of Western epistemology. This dichotomy of the sensory and the conceptual is often traced to Plato’s understanding of the “idea” as a superior means of arriving at a true understanding of the world.<sup>5</sup>

However, a critique of this distinction can also be traced throughout the history of Western thought, from Spinoza to Nietzsche and to recent philosophical positions of embodiment informed by cognitive science.<sup>6</sup> In the 20th-century aftermath of these reconsiderations of the sensory experience in the assessment of truth, the status of images was transformed, in order to overcome an epistemology based exclusively on propositional argumentation implemented through abstract symbol systems such as language and mathematics.

It is not only in the field of art and visual communication that images have become omnipresent, but also in daily life, in political processes, and in the economy. Image creation has become of interest in psychology, anthropology, and in the natural sciences, where images are employed increasingly as arguments in highly standardized creative processes.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the humanities, for example in philosophy, sociology, or the historical sciences, attention was directed towards an inquiry into what images are, and what role they can play in knowledge production.<sup>8</sup>

Graphic design history—as a sub-discipline of design history—came to the fore during the 1980s as an emerging academic field of study in its own right.<sup>9</sup> As a discipline primarily dealing not with works of art, but with objects of visual communication, graphic design history can be seen as part of the epistemological shift that acknowledged the contribution of the visual sense to knowledge production in cultural history. Its objects of investigation conform to an expanded understanding of the image. However, design history has widely adopted methods of selection and description from art history, the

result being an overemphasis on the narration of masters and masterpieces—something that has been criticized within its own field.<sup>10</sup>

Today, even contemporary history acknowledges that visual documents, such as maps, collected postcards, private photographs, movies, posters, and advertisements, provide levels of information that linguistic sources are not able to transmit.<sup>11</sup> Visual history is a relatively novel research field in contemporary history, and it offers new perspectives, encourages the development of new types of research questions, and is further developing its methods of image analysis.<sup>12</sup>

The abovementioned shift in favor of the visual can be considered to be the foundation of the present volume, *Visual Arguments*. In his quest for a visual epistemology, Rudolf Arnheim’s writings on visual thinking, which were informed by Gestalt psychology, can provide a theoretical framework for the ideas behind this volume. From his point of view, “cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception, but the essential ingredients of perception itself.”<sup>13</sup> He lists operations that we perform consciously or unconsciously in the process of perception: “active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison, problem solving, as well as combining, separating, putting in context.”<sup>14</sup> And he concludes that “Visual perception is visual thinking.”<sup>15</sup>

Another possible theoretical framework for this volume can be developed in accordance with hermeneutic methodology.<sup>16</sup> When an interpretation of objects of visual communication is recorded in the form of an essay that takes into consideration previous, or alternative interpretations, this allows the beholder of the image to evaluate his or her own visual experience in comparison to the one proposed in the text. So the function of images has to go beyond that of a mere, small-format reference to the original, and must allow the beholder-reader to view in the visual document as many of its original qualities as possible.

Viewing an image has been described as both a seductive experience and an act with

epistemic potential. For a means of differentiation between these two possibilities, we can refer to a description of seeing by Gottfried Boehm. He observes that we can be immersed in an image and take part in it. Or we can analytically evaluate an image, keeping our distance to it *while taking it apart*.<sup>17</sup>

The researchers contributing to this volume have had both experiences. Finding an object in an archive and selecting it among others can be described as an intuitive process of taking part. And the analytical process must happen during a conscious act of taking the found visual object apart, while also considering other sources and performing operations of viewing. Since the immersive and analytical approaches to seeing are not divided into two strictly separate phases, but rather alternate continuously, we can understand them as the core of a process of continual negotiation between the sensory and the conceptual. In these operations, images are active material constellations that reveal or point (*zeigen*) at something, and guide a dialogue with the beholder.

This deictic quality of images, their ability to point, to present, to reveal, or to provide insight, has been used to draw a distinction between images and the propositional structure of language. Dieter Mersch defines the epistemological potential of images as their ability to provide evidence:

[. . .] it [the potential of truthfulness of the image] is rather based on a specific 'format of truthfulness' of showing, of demonstrare, illustrare or performare, which does not originate from the logic of reason, but from the structure of evidence. ([. . .] vielmehr beruht sie [die Wahrheitsfähigkeit des Bildes] auf dem spezifischen 'Wahrheitsformat' des Zeigens, dem demonstrare, illustrare oder performare, welche allerdings nicht der Logik der Begründung entstammen, sondern der Struktur der Evidenz.)<sup>18</sup>

Leaving theoretical foundations behind us, and coming back to the concrete examples of visual argumentation presented in the current publication, an image providing "evidence" is a snapshot of graphic designer Cornel Windlin

burning the controversial publication *Benzin* in front of an audience of studio visitors. This photograph and the circumstances of its creation are reflected upon in the contribution "Blogpost."

A critical negotiation between the evidential and seductive character of images is the focus of the contribution "Reproductions." It juxtaposes installation views of an exhibition of student work with the original exhibits—or rather, their close-up reproductions.

The continuous negotiation between the sensory and the conceptual when looking at images is represented by a large group of documents that combine propositional logic and visual evidence, being both text and image—a discipline-immanent feature of visual communication. The contribution "Timetables" makes institutional documents visually available: their content and appearance—such as their typographic composition—reflect both structures and shifts within an institution.

"Christmas Cards" compares the visual and textual aspects of the self-representations of a design studio, revealing hierarchies within the agency. The essential changes in the visual strategy of another institutional actor—the Swiss Design Awards—are analyzed and queried in "Award Catalogs."

Other contributions touch upon certain "empty spaces" in established archives by shifting the focus of interest from the individual designers towards other actors in design production, such as clients. "Corporate Printed Matter" engages with the Italian company Olivetti, while "Advertisements" analyzes the graphic design of the company Gygi. These contributions also identify designers excluded from the Swiss graphic design canon, and question the power structures and value judgments behind their exclusion.

The diversity of our authors, who come from both practical and theoretical backgrounds, is reflected in their respective approaches to the visual material in their contributions to *Visual Arguments*. Close analyses of images, taking the archival material as a dedicated starting point, are placed next to more contextualized approaches towards the documents, and to contributions that discuss the appearance of images in different

media. The nature of these documents decided the titles of these contributions, which are ordered in a way that hopes to provide a diverse mixture of themes, approaches, and authors. Instead of a linear narrative, our more fragmented arrangement results in thematic and ideological contrasts, leaps in time and place, and juxtapositions of known and unknown names. Overall, this approach bolsters our arguments for the creation of a “counter archive” for the history of Swiss Graphic Design and Typography.

Instead of another grand historical narrative or a linear chronology, we here develop a multitude of historical story lines—*histories*—that create meaning in a relationship to each other and to the currently established narrative. These histories do not intend to overwrite what has been written before, but aim to foster a discourse that allows us to engage with the phenomenon of Swiss Graphic Design and Typography from a more informed, up-to-date point of view.

- 1 Lyotard 1984 (1979): XXIV.
- 2 According to this metanarrative, “Swiss Style” or “International Style” typography and graphic design, or simply “Swiss Typography”, emerged out of a group of almost exclusively male, Swiss design “pioneers” from the early 1950s onwards, and has become an international success mainly because of the quality and innovation of the oeuvres produced. For overviews of the topic—with varying levels of critical engagement with this narrative—see Bignens 2000; Brändle et al. 2014; Hofmann 2016; Hollis 2006; and, less recent, but still common, Müller-Brockmann 1971.
- 3 See Foucault 2006 (1969): 26–37.
- 4 See the entry “Historiography” in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/historiography> (accessed Apr. 17, 2020).
- 5 See Plato, *Politeia*: VII 514–541. See also Heidegger 2010 (1961): 121; Rüegg 1999: 7.
- 6 See Damasio 2018: 209. See also Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 95. A prominent turning point was Nietzsche’s rejection of the hierarchical relationship between the sensory and what he calls the supersensory. He called for nonhierarchical understanding and desired a continuous negotiation between the two. See Nietzsche 1954 (1889): 963. See also Heidegger’s interpretation, Heidegger 2010 (1961): 118–148.
- 7 Mersch 2006: 95–116.
- 8 See publications on visual culture studies and *Bildwissenschaft* such as Mitchell 1994; Boehm 1994.
- 9 Regarding the emergence of design history and its sub-disciplines as academic fields in the late 1970s and 1980s, see, for example, Walker 1989: 1–2. For graphic design history, see De Bondt & de Smet 2012b.
- 10 Design history’s methodological orientation towards a “history of styles,” which is influenced by antiquated art history methods, remains a reason for critique. For a discussion of this problem, see Fallan 2014 (2010): 8–10.
- 11 See Danyel, Paul, & Vowinckel 2017: 11.
- 12 See the summary of the development of visual history in the German-speaking world since 1986 in Paul 2017: 16–18.
- 13 Arnheim 1997 (1969): 13.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*: 14.
- 16 Gadamer 1997 (1977): 32–57.
- 17 See Boehm 2019: 25.
- 18 Mersch 2005: 327.