

Associations

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To become part of a design association can represent a career goal for members of the graphic design community. Membership is a badge to show off proudly, both as a sign of belonging to an exclusive circle and as a means of attracting clients who rely on professional associations for reliable recommendations. Indeed, it is a distinctive feature that differentiates, qualifies, and invests members with connotative and qualitative values that mirror the agenda, ethos, and standards of the association.

Professional associations have attracted the attention of historians of professions¹ and design historians.² Scholars have indicated the forming of associations as a key moment in the professionalization process, for they promote a sense of community between members, facilitate networking, offer visibility, and improve public understanding of the practice. Their agenda includes the articulation and promotion of professional standards, and, through the establishment of codes of conduct, they try to control and constrain members' behavior.³ By representing members' interests in official contexts, associations are also expected to campaign collectively for greater

recognition of the profession's social and economic value, and to act as lobbying groups in charge of negotiating contracts and regulating wages. Finally, they provide members with occasions for exchange and the opportunity to be part of a network of supposedly like-minded people. Scratching beneath the surface, associations are not as homogeneous and unified as they present themselves, and their capacity to speak in unison for the entire practice should be challenged.⁴

Over the years, graphic designers have founded and/or become members of a number of national and international associations. In Switzerland, the most prominent were the Schweizerischer Werkbund (for German-speaking Switzerland) and L'Œuvre (for French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland), which included all design practices, together with crafts and architecture.⁵ More specialized associations included the Verband Schweizerischer Grafiker (VSG), which specifically addressed graphic designers. Outside Switzerland, Swiss graphic designers can also be part of international design organizations. The Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI) is one such organization around which the international graphic design community has clustered since its foundation in 1951. This association gathers together the supposed elite of graphic design. Membership is by invitation only: once they have attained an international reputation, prospective members must be invited and vetted

by current members. The AGI has often been perceived by critics as a somewhat elitist and self-centered “old boys’ club.”⁶ Yet in the last two decades, the association has begun adopting a more open approach, especially towards young designers, women, and designers from outside Europe and North America.

The voices selected here present the reader with different aspects of and approaches to design associations. Some perpetuate a well-known, self-celebrating, good-taste rhetoric that has been constructed over the years to justify the alleged elite status of members. They confirm a sense of being part of a like-minded community, and of working towards the same goals according to shared quality standards and design

principles. At the same time, they also show a less idealistic and rhetorical perspective on design associations by revealing the more down-to-earth, everyday aspects of memberships, such as parties and friendships. However, some voices express a certain degree of intolerance for associations and their prescribed standards of “good” design. They claim a more independent approach to the practice and set themselves outside the canon. This is particularly the case with a generation of designers entering the market in the 1990s, for whom professional associations had lost their appeal and become synonymous with the “good taste” of an older generation that they rejected, rather than with prestige and career goals.

1 Millerstone 1964; Scott 2001.

2 Thompson 2011; Hasdoğan 2009; Yagou 2005; Delamadeleine 2016; Calvera 2003; Messell 2019; Souza Dias 2019.

3 Armstrong 2016.

4 Freidson 1986: 195; Freidson 2001: 142.

5 Gnägi, Nicolai & Wohlwend Piai 2013; Baudin 1997.

6 Bos & Bos 2007.

Ursula Hiestand

Conversation with Chiara Barbieri and Robert Lzicar, Zurich, Dec. 4, 2017.

CB Avez-vous utilisé votre affiliation aux associations professionnelles pour faire la promotion de votre studio ou de vous-même?

UH Für uns war es eine Auszeichnung, in den Verbänden zu sein. Das tragen der Verbandstitel

hinter dem Namen war eine Ehre, vergleichbar mit einem Dokortitel. Um 1960 sind vermehrt Werbeagenturen in der Schweiz aufgekommen, Grafiker mussten sich organisieren um gegenüber der neuen Konkurrenz bestehen zu können. Wir, Ernst und ich, jung verheiratet, gründeten E+U Atelier für visuelle Gestaltung. Aufgrund unserer Arbeiten, wurden wir 1958 in den VSG, [den] Verband Schweizer Grafiker, [...] aufgenommen. Dieser Fachverband hat schon zu jener Zeit über die Arbeiten [seiner] Mitglieder Publikationen herausgegeben und Veranstaltungen durchgeführt. 1960 folgte die Aufnahme in den SWB, Schweizerischer Werkbund. Die Mitgliedschaft in den Verbänden verhalf uns zu Kontakten. 1968 wurden wir beide, Ernst und ich, in die AGI Alliance Graphique Internationale aufgenommen. Die AGI war das Tüpfelchen auf dem i, da es sich um einen internationalen Verband handelte. Die Veröffentlichungen der AGI, vor allem im Bereich von Corporate Identity, hatten weltweite Ausstrahlung. Der Wettbewerb für die Signaletik für das Centre Georges Pompidou Paris, den wir zusammen mit Jean Widmer Paris gewonnen haben, war durch die AGI ausgeschrieben.

CB Have you ever capitalized on your membership status in professional organizations in order to promote your studio or yourself?

UH For us it was an honor to be in the associations. To bear the association title following the name was an honor, comparable to a doctoral title. Around 1960 an increasing number of advertising agencies appeared in Switzerland; graphic

designers had to organize themselves to be able to engage with the new competition. We, Ernst and I, freshly married, founded E+U Atelier für visuelle Gestaltung. Because of our work, in 1958 we were admitted to the VSG, the Swiss Graphic Design Association [...]. At that time, this professional association was already issuing publications about the work of its members and organizing events. In 1960 we were accepted into the SWB, the Schweizerischer Werkbund. Membership in the associations helped us to establish contacts. In 1968, both Ernst and I were accepted to join the AGI, Alliance Graphique Internationale. The AGI was the icing on the cake, as it was an international association. AGI publications, especially in the field of corporate identity, had a worldwide impact. The competition for the signage system for the Centre Georges Pompidou Paris, which we won together with Jean Widmer Paris, was advertised by AGI.

Fritz Gottschalk

Conversation with Chiara Barbieri, Zurich, Mar. 22, 2018.

CB Where and when did you meet Walter Ballmer?

FG I knew about him all the time because I followed his work, I admired him all my life. And I met him for the first time through AGI. We got along well, and we got along well because I knew Walter Herdeg very well. He was sort of my mentor, you know, the publisher of *Graphis* magazine. And Walter Herdeg was very appreciative of Walter Ballmer's work. The three of us got along

very well together. We had great fun together at the AGI meetings [...] Walter Herdeg, Walter Ballmer, and myself, we got along very well, because we somehow knew that the three of us, each one was doing good work. And that's why we really liked each other. There was no competition whatsoever, it was much more admiration: Walter Herdeg was a publisher, Walter Ballmer in Milan, I was over in Canada.

Hans Finsler

Public speech held at a general meeting of the Swiss Werkbund, St. Gallen, Nov. 5, 1955 (Finsler 1956).
Introductory note by Sandra Bischler.

From 1946 to 1955, Hans Finsler was chairman of the board of the Schweizerischer Werkbund. His speech contains a critique of functionalist ideas and is clearly directed against the concept of “good form” and its protagonist Max Bill. Finsler turned against the idea that the Werkbund could provide timeless aesthetic judgments and “educate” the masses towards good taste. About ten years later, emphasizing the symbolic content of designed objects became a fundamental aspect of the postmodern mindset.

HF Wenn eine Einheit Mensch–Ding besteht, muss es dann nicht auch schlechte Dinge geben? Es gibt doch vielleicht neben den guten Werkbundmenschen, die sich nur mit guten Formen umgeben, auch schlechte Menschen, die ein Verlangen nach schlechten Dingen haben [...] Lieben wir nicht im geheimen den Kitsch oder sogar die Gegenbeispiele zu unseren funktionellen Formen aus den schrecklichen, den werkbundlosen Zeiten des letzten Jahrhunderts? [...]

Der Mensch, der sich immer wieder die Dinge und die Formen schafft, die seinem Sein entsprechen, schafft mit

ihnen auch immer wieder Symbole seiner Existenz, die sich jeder Wertung nach gut oder schlecht entziehen. [...] Wir können den Massstab der Logik an die Dinge legen, soweit wir erklärbare Funktionen beurteilen. Ihr symbolischer Gehalt, ihre Schönheit sind unserer gedanklichen Logik entzogen. [...] Man erwartet von den Richtern des Werkbundes, dass sie eindeutige und gleichbleibende Urteile fällen, als ob sie Götter wären oder Pedanten.

HF If there's a unity of the man and the thing, would not bad things exist as well? Apart from the good Werkbund people who only surround themselves with good forms, perhaps there are also bad people who have a desire for bad things [...] Don't we secretly love kitsch or even the counter-examples to our functional forms, from those terrible times in the last century that did not have a Werkbund? [...]

The human being constantly creates things and forms which correspond to his being, and through them also constantly creates symbols of his existence that elude every evaluation of either good or bad. [...] We can apply the standard of logic to things, inasmuch as we are judging explainable functions. [But] their symbolic content, their beauty, are out of reach of our mental logic. One expects the judges of the Werkbund to make unambiguous, unchanging judgments, as if they were gods or pedants.

Cornel Windlin

Conversation with Jonas Berthod, Zurich, Mar. 8, 2018.

CW When I was at art school, they introduced us to various professional organizations. There were two types: trade organizations for the more bread-and-butter type design studios, like the SGD now [Swiss Graphic Designers Association], and more exclusive, invitation-only salons like AGI, for the more

flamboyant figures and auteur types. I was not interested in the first, but I was repelled by the latter. When they invited me to join, I told them I could only join if they expelled Roger Pfund, because his work was so vile. I said: “It would depress me to realize that in the end, I’m just a member of the same tribe. I just can’t.” The great Jean Robert, who had asked me to join, just laughed and said: “Oh, you know nothing. He’s not the worst by far!” I’ve recently seen that it is having a comeback; many young designers [whom I respect] are now part of AGI and seem to enjoy what it offers. So I wouldn’t need to reject it as I did then, but it still isn’t my thing. Call me a snowflake, but ten graphic designers in one room is nine too many for me.