

Awards

Jonas Berthod

For Megi Zumstein from studio Hi, winning the Swiss Design Awards (SDA) in 2002—just after she had graduated—was a door-opener when it came to applying for a job. By contrast, NORM approached the same awards with a clear strategy. They designed projects with the SDA in mind, and they were planning on using their winnings to pay for their production. Conversely, Ursula Hiestand did not see the accolades she won as a primary cause for her success. She ascribed it instead to her intense work with Ernst Hiestand. These three examples demonstrate how the relevance of awards and the role they play in the recognition enjoyed by designers vary significantly from one designer to the next. They provide more detail on this essential feature of designers' professional lives—albeit one that is not discussed often, except when it comes to commenting on the jury's selection of winners.

Design competitions range from industry-led honors to student accolades, from purely honorific mentions to significant cash winnings, and from widely followed ceremonies to obscure contests. Nevertheless, the SDA are widely recognized as the most prestigious awards in Switzerland.

They are followed by designers and the general public alike, who turn up in numbers to the SDA exhibition that is held during Art Basel.¹ Winning the SDA represents a significant financial windfall. In its 2019 edition, the awards gave out seventeen prizes of CHF 25,000 each—an unparalleled amount on the international design scene for a competition that is free to enter.² Another award by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture, the Grand Prix Design, represents ultimate recognition and a substantial prize. It was started in 2007 and nominates three designers for their excellent contributions to the field, awarding them CHF 40,000 each. These sums represent invaluable help in setting up and sustaining a practice, especially for designers who work in less profitable sectors.

Still, money is not the only appeal of awards. For example, the Most Beautiful Swiss Books (MBSB) competition attracted no less than 388 submissions for its 2018 edition, though it only awards certificates of no monetary value.³ This is because awards provide recognition and grant status, whether or not they are accompanied by monetary compensation.⁴ Just as belonging to a professional association can symbolize access to an exclusive circle,⁵ winning an award provides a “seal of approval.”⁶ For the MBSB, the seal is also literal: winners are provided with stickers to apply to their books. [Fig. 1]

It may well have been an appetite for recognition that led professional associations to lobby the government to support design. However, the support of the government also came at the cost of power struggles in design awards. These divisions reflected a conflict over time between the commercial and cultural territories of design, which is noticeable in the projects that designers discuss in this section. Ursula Hiestand's winning posters from the 1960s were advertising commissions, while Gilles Gavillet and NORM discuss work firmly anchored in the cultural sector. The reason for these differences can be found in the evolution of the awards themselves. The first edition of what we today call the SDA took place in 1918 after a campaign by two professional associations, the Schweizerischer Werkbund and L'Œuvre. The argument was that supporting design would be good for the economy. Both associations organized the competition until the 1960s, when the Federal Department of Home Affairs increasingly took over.⁷ By then, design had progressively become a cultural asset as much as an economic asset. The MBSB competition was initiated in 1943 by the Schweizerischer Buchhändlerverein (SBV) before being sponsored by the Federal Department of Home Affairs in 1971.⁸ The government took over the competition in 1997 and immediately emphasized the artistic aspect, rather than the technical qualities of a

book that the professional organizations had favored thus far.⁹ Another important design competition, The Best Swiss Posters of the Year, began in 1942 on the initiative of representatives of the profession and the industry—the Verband Schweizerischer Grafiker (VSG) and the Allgemeine Plakatgesellschaft (APG), amongst others. The government began sponsoring it in 1943.¹⁰ By the 2000s, their alliance had become uneasy. The APG argued that an unfairly large number of cultural posters were awarded in comparison with commercial campaigns.¹¹ In 2001, it rescinded its collaboration with the Federal Department of Home Affairs. It relaunched the competition independently in 2003 as the Swiss Poster Award, and has since focused on advertising, while the SDA and the MBSB concentrate on the cultural sector.

Because awards define who is in and who is out, they often prompt debate, and their organization has often been questioned.¹² In the 1990s especially, the Swiss press deemed both the criteria and judging process opaque, and asked why some designers were accepted, but others not.¹³ Journalists often disagreed with the designers and projects chosen, finding them either “ugly” or, conversely, to represent “safe values” that did not take risks.¹⁴ In 1994, the scandal surrounding the provocative exhibition *Die 99 schlechtesten Plakate* (The 99 worst posters) highlighted the importance of public recognition. Its

“inverted awards” were not taken lightly by designers.¹⁵ The MBSB selection was similarly questioned by the designers who had not made the cut. In order to instill a sense of transparency, in 2009 the competition began showing all books submitted, along with those that received awards.¹⁶

In her interview, Ursula Hiestand points out that winning prizes was not her primary goal. Her remark highlights a paradox within the “economy of esteem” sustained by awards.¹⁷ Designers often desire the recognition of their peers, yet do not want to appear to do so.¹⁸ The need for recognition, a form of symbolic power, is especially pressing in the cultural field, in which almost all recent SDA and MBSB

winners are located.¹⁹ There, recognition by peers plays a more prominent role than commercial success, which is not valued as much (or at least not openly so).²⁰ But awards are not just simple marketplaces for symbolic capital. For instance, Gilles Gavillet explains how the 1999 selection of SDA winners signaled a change of generation. Awards are thus the site of “tournaments of values”²¹ at the crossroads of cultural production, where different practices compete for recognition. Rather than a yearly “best of,” they should be read as revealing tensions that come with a desire for recognition, a continuous definition process, and the politics behind selection.

1 In 2018, this six-day exhibition attracted more than 11,000 visitors (Swiss Federal Office of Culture 2018a).

2 Most state-backed competitions on an international level award trophies and invitations to professional events, rather than a large sum of money.

3 Udry 2019.

4 Frey 2006; Frey & Neckermann 2008; Gallus & Frey 2016.

5 See “Associations,” in the present volume.

6 English 2014.

7 Münch 1997.

8 Früh 2004.

9 Guggenheimer 2004: 83. Since 1997, the jury of MBSB has also bestowed the Jan Tschichold Prize to a personality, group, or institution whom they nominate for their outstanding contribution to book design. In 2018, this prize was CHF 25,000.

10 See the volume *Tempting Terms*.

11 Gerdil-Margueron 2002.

12 Michel 2000a.

13 Gantenbein 1992; 1993; Müller 1992.

14 *Tribune de Genève* 2001; Gantenbein 1994.

15 See *Tempting Terms*.

16 Imhasly 2009.

17 Brennan & Pettit 2000.

18 English 2014: 133.

19 Bourdieu 1977; 1993.

20 English 2002.

21 English 2014: 137.



Fig.1
Giliane Cachin, sticker celebrating books awarded in the Most Beautiful Swiss Books competition, 2019, Switzerland.

Ursula Hiestand

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

CB Est-ce que gagner le Best Swiss poster award [en 1961, 1963, 1964] a aidé votre carrière ou non? [Figs. 2–5]

UH Ich erinnere mich nicht, ob ich Aufträge durch diese Auszeichnung erhalten habe. Aber man steigerte seinen Bekanntheitsgrad durch die Auszeichnungen, weil die Arbeiten in einer Wanderausstellung in verschiedenen Städten gezeigt und in Fachzeitschriften publiziert wurden.



Fig. 2
E+U Hiestand, "Fiat – ein guter Name," 1961, offset, 128 × 90.5 cm, Museum für Gestaltung Zürich. This poster was declared Best Swiss Poster of the year 1961.



Fig. 3
"Schweizer Plakate 1961," in *Gebrauchsgrafik*, 33, no. 5 (May 1962), pp. 4–5.



Fig. 4
E+U Hiestand, "Ein Hut von Fürst,"
1964, offset, 128 x 90 cm, Museum
für Gestaltung Zürich. This poster
was declared Best Swiss Poster of
the year 1964.



Fig. 5
"Die besten Schweizer Plakate des
Jahres 1964," in *Gebrauchsgrafik*, 36,
no. 6 (June 1965), pp. 30–31.

CB Did winning the Best Swiss Poster award [in 1961, 1963, 1964] have any kind of impact on your career? [Figs. 2–5]

UH I don't remember if I received any commissions through this award. But one boosted one's reputation through the awards, because the works were shown in a touring exhibition in different cities and published in professional journals.

Gilles Gavillet

Conversations with Jonas Berthod, Geneva, Apr. 6, 2017
and Jan. 31, 2018.

GG En 1999, nous sommes témoins d'un changement de génération et de transition en terme de culture graphique qui est notamment perceptible dans le cadre des prix fédéraux de design. À cette époque, trois projets par catégorie sont primés sur la dizaine de candidat(e)s sélectionnés. [La sélection incluait] notamment André M. Baldinger et Müller + Hess, des designers avec une pratique bien établie. Müller + Hess proposaient un design contemporain et sophistiqué cohérent en termes de ligne généalogique avec l'école bâloise, ou plus largement avec la tradition graphique suisse. Notre approche représentait alors une rupture nette avec [cette tradition].

J'y ai présenté le premier site web Optimo, et des projets réalisés à Zurich au studio de Cornel [Windlin] pour le Museum für Gestaltung, notamment *Game Over* et *Fehlermeldung*. [Figs. 6–8] L'ensemble était présenté comme une installation mettant en avant les caractères typographiques réalisés pour ces projets sur des panneaux lumineux. Parmi les autres nominés figurent aussi NORM [Dimitri Bruni et Manuel Krebs], Aude Lehmann, Dimitri Broquard, Bastien Aubry, tous fraîchement installés à Zurich, qui gagneront avec *Silex*. Étonnamment, les prix sont attribués à cette nouvelle

génération dont je fais alors partie [plutôt qu'aux studios bien établis]. C'est alors un signal assez fort en terme de politique culturelle de la part de l'OFC [Office Fédéral de la Culture] – soutenir l'émergence d'une nouvelle direction. Ce prix fédéral me place dans le réseau de l'OFC et je suis notamment invité au concours pour le design du catalogue des plus beaux livres suisses que je remporte et réalise avec Cornel Windlin de 1999 à 2001.

En 2002, je me présente à nouveau avec des projets de commande, notamment mes premières collaborations avec JRP Editions. L'impact financier de ce prix est important à un moment où ma pratique démarre sur des projets souvent auto-générés, et me permet de financer le loyer, ou d'acheter ma première imprimante HP 5100.

GG In 1999, we witnessed a generational change and transition in terms of graphic culture, which was particularly noticeable in the context of the Swiss Federal Design Awards. At that time, three projects per category were awarded prizes out of the approximately ten candidates selected. [The selection included] André M. Baldinger and Müller + Hess, designers with a well-established practice. Müller + Hess presented a contemporary, sophisticated design consistent in terms of genealogical lineage with the Basel School, or more broadly with the Swiss graphic tradition. Our approach represented a clear break with [this tradition].

I presented the first Optimo website there, as well as projects produced in Zurich at Cornel [Windlin]'s studio for the Museum für Gestaltung, including *Game Over* and *Fehlermeldung*. [Figs. 6–8] The whole was presented as an installation highlighting the typographical characters created for these projects on illuminated panels. Other nominees included NORM [Dimitri Bruni and Manuel Krebs], Aude Lehmann, Dimitri Broquard, Bastien Aubry, all newly settled in Zurich, who would win with *Silex*. Surprisingly, the prizes were awarded to this new generation, of which I was

then a part [rather than to well-established studios]. This was a considerably strong signal in terms of cultural policy from the SFOC [Swiss Federal Office of Culture]—to support the emergence of a new direction. This federal prize placed me in the SFOC network and I was invited to the competition for the design of the catalog of the Most Beautiful Swiss Books, which I won and produced with Cornel Windlin from 1999 to 2001.

In 2002, I entered again, presenting new, commissioned projects, notably my first collaborations with JRP Editions. The financial impact of this award was important at a time when my practice was starting with projects that were often self-generated, and it allowed me to pay the rent and to buy my first HP 5100 printer.



Fig. 6
Stéphane Delgado and Gilles Gavillet,
Optimo type specimen, 1998.



Fig. 7

Cornel Windlin and Gilles Gavillet, *Game Over - Now*, 1999, silkscreen printing, 128 x 90 cm, ZHdK, Museum für Gestaltung Zürich.

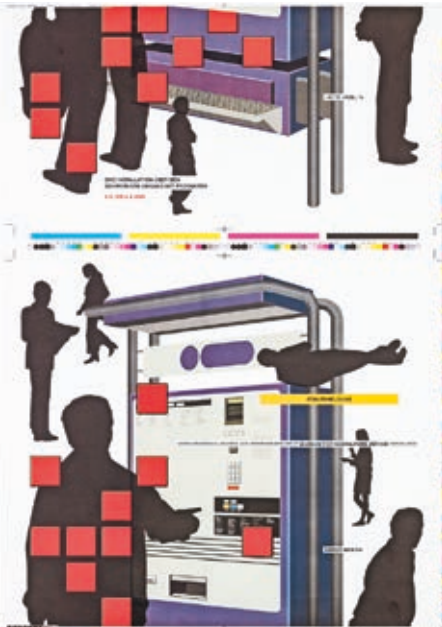


Fig. 8

Cornel Windlin and Gilles Gavillet, *Fehlermeldung/Error Design: Eine Installation über den schwierigen Umgang mit Produkten* (Error message/Error Design: An installation on the difficult usage of products), 1999, offset, 70 x 50 cm, ZHdK, Museum für Gestaltung Zürich.

Hi (Megi Zumstein and Claudio Barandun)

Conversations with Jonas Berthod, Zurich, Apr. 6, 2017
and Nov. 13, 2017.

MZ When I came back [from my internship at Graphic Thought Facility in London]—in 2003 or so—there was this Internet crisis, the *Internetblase* [dot-com bubble], and a lot of people were dismissed because everything broke at the same time. No company was hiring new people back then. But [having won the Swiss Design Awards] was quite a door-opener to different agencies ... it didn't get me a job [directly], but at least I could get “past the secretary.”

NORM

(Dimitri Bruni, Manuel Krebs, and Ludovic Varone)

Conversations with Jonas Berthod, Zurich, Jun. 15, 2017
and Jan. 30, 2018.

MK L'importance des bourses ... les bourses créaient une forme d'urgence. C'était aussi important pour voir les gens. Tu voulais y être, montrer ton travail, dire “on en fait partie”. C'était pour marquer notre présence.

DB Cette reconnaissance ... tu en fais partie.
On se dit, si on est là, c'est que c'est bien.

MK On est venus à Zurich, on ne connaissait personne, sauf quelques graphistes qui ne te donnent pas de boulot. On avait rien, aucun mandat, ce qui est normal je pense quand tu ouvres un bureau. Quand on a fait *Introduction* [publié en 1999 et récompensé en 2000], on devait l'argent à l'imprimeur et on partait du principe qu'on allait gagner ces 20 000 francs pour pouvoir payer le livre.

DB Même système avec *Silex*, on s'est endettés en spéculant.

MK On a gagné avec *Silex* [en 1999] et on s'est dit OK, c'est notre business model, on va juste faire un truc bien et après gagner les bourses [rires].

DB Les bourses étaient très importantes pour plusieurs choses. Un, évidemment, tu reçois 20 000 francs. On se dit qu'on va pouvoir payer un imprimeur, on a de l'argent de côté, on peut faire un autre projet. Deux, on a été connectés avec l'Office Fédéral de la Culture qui te décerne un prix, et te donne une forme de reconnaissance.

MK Ensuite, ça a aussi conduit à notre premier mandat, les catalogues pour les plus beaux livres suisses. C'était comme gagner une deuxième bourse.

DB C'était vraiment fou. Tu étais libre, c'est-à-dire que tu pouvais proposer des idées [assez expérimentales], et il disaient "ouais, c'est bien, c'est cool".

MK The importance of the Swiss Design Awards ... they created a form of urgency. It was also important for seeing people. You wanted to be there, to show your work, and say "we're part of it." It was to signal our presence.

DB This recognition ... that you are one of them. You think, if you're here, it's because [your work is] good.

MK When we came to Zurich, we didn't know anyone except a few graphic designers who wouldn't offer you work. We had nothing, no jobs, which is normal, I think, when you open

your own office. When we did *Introduction* [published in 1999 and awarded a prize in 2000], we owed money to the printer and assumed that we would win these 20,000 francs so we could pay for the book.

DB It was the same with *Silex*; we got into debt by speculating.

MK We won with *Silex* [in 1999] and we said OK, this is our business model, we're just going to make a great project and then win the awards [*laughs*].

DB The awards were very important for several things. First, of course, you receive CHF 20,000. We thought: we'll be able to pay for printing, we'll have some money on the side, we can do another project. Secondly, we were connected with the Federal Office of Culture, which gives you a prize and gives you a form of recognition.

MK Then it also led to our first job, the catalogs for the Most Beautiful Swiss Books, which was like winning yet another prize.*

DB It was really crazy. You were free, that is, you could come up with [pretty experimental] ideas, and they would say, "yeah, that's good, that's cool."

* NORM designed the Most Beautiful Swiss Books catalogs for the years 2001, 2002, and 2003.