

Blogpost

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In the spring of 2001, a group of about sixty graphic design students from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam visited Zurich and its graphic design studios. The trip was organized by the graphic designer Julia Born, then still based in Amsterdam, and the design studio Elektrosmog, Marco Walser and Valentin Hindermann, from Zurich. There is no detailed documentation of this excursion, but the Dutch designer Harmen Liemburg added some photos and a short description of it on his website, where it is still accessible.¹ The snapshot shown here was taken during the studio visit with Cornel Windlin, and shows Windlin setting fire to the book *Benzin*.² [Fig. 106]

Benzin was published in 2000 by the graphic designers Thomas Bruggisser and Michel Fries.³ It was an attempt to portray the state of contemporary graphic design in Switzerland, with its young and upcoming designers, collectives, and studios. With its journalistic language and easy-access portraits, the book offered inspiration to the next generation—a digital generation of designers,⁴ as Martin Heller hinted at in the preface: “This book depicts a basecamp of conclusive but not exactly popular passion fighting for recognition.”⁵

The project *Benzin* had been introduced in short articles in the architecture and design magazine *Hochparterre* in 1999⁶ and 2000,⁷ and the design critic Ralf Michel reviewed the book in late 2000.⁸ The editors of *Hochparterre* took an active role in promoting *Benzin* as a long-awaited publication—and, by doing so, *Hochparterre* itself hoped to get better connected to the younger generation.

The first edition of *Benzin* in English and German sold out fast and the title was reprinted in 2001 as a soft-cover. However, the authors’ selective approach to celebrating the few instead of the many, and their manner of defining these designers as part of a specific scene did not resonate very well with some of those portrayed in it. Also, as *Hochparterre* and *Benzin* had been keen to point out, young designers enjoyed setting up collaborations and collectives at will. To be featured in a book that put a name to this scene signified the opposite of what they practiced. As such, the anecdote of Cornel Windlin setting fire to *Benzin*, in which he himself was featured with his company and collaborative lineto.com, is a fine illustration of how quickly the winds of change thwarted the attempt by Fries and Bruggisser to define a new “Swiss Graphic Design.” Designers were now prepared to reject any attempt to pigeonhole them.

- 1 Liemburg 2001.
- 2 “A great opportunity to visit Swiss people like Martin Woodtli (second left), and Cornel Windlin (far right), appropriately setting fire to *Benzin*, a publication showcasing a young Swiss design scene ...,” Liemburg 2001.
- 3 Bruggisser & Fries 2000.
- 4 See “Award Catalogs,” in the present volume.
- 5 Heller 2000: 7.
- 6 Gantenbein 1999a: 10–15.
- 7 *Hochparterre* 1999: 7; *Hochparterre* 2000: 5–6.
- 8 Michel 2000b: 32–33.



Fig. 106 Cornel Windlin sets fire to the publication *Benzin* during a visit to his studio in Zurich by students from the Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, 2001.