Collaboration

Jonas Berthod

When the sociologist Howard S. Becker analyzed how art worlds function, he set out from the premise that artistic work relies on the joint activity of several people whose cooperation allows the work to come to life and to continue to exist. They include suppliers, distributors, other artists, critics, theorists, and audiences. Design is similarly produced through cooperation: graphic designers rely on extensive networks which include clients, producers, fellow designers, distributors, critics, awards, and audiences. Many of these themes and terms crop up in other sections of this book. They act as a reminder of how deeply embedded in a system of exchange of economic, cultural, and social capital design is. This idea immediately counters the idea of the solitary, “genius” designer. The production of design continuously relies on collaborative systems of exchange that are redefined as the situation requires. The selected voices that follow offer insights into some of their many forms.

Collaboration can mean “working for” or “working with,” and in the case of Fritz Gottschalk and Walter Ballmer, it was the former. Gottschalk recalls his working relationship with Ballmer as one of supply and demand. The designers’ mutually beneficial exchange was mainly pragmatic. This also highlights the importance of a shared language, which is further underlined in Ballmer’s collaboration with the photographer Serge Libiszewski. Their common visual ground allowed for an efficient working method based on trust and a shared approach to practice.

A different model based on friendship is exemplified in studio Hi’s work with TONK. Initially, the designers had little to gain from this exchange: they helped the photographers because they were friends. However, it led to an unexpected project which launched their career in book design. Similarly, the collective Silex, which was made up of a group of students from Biel/Bienne, relied on social connections. When Silex launched its eponymous magazine at art school in Biel/Bienne, it mostly featured students’ work. However, the magazine soon expanded to include recognized illustrators on a national and international level. It also enabled its creators to meet established designers and further their own professional networks.

Gilles Gavillet’s interview offers an insight into collaboration based on shared interests. His studio’s long-standing relationship with the art historian and curator Lionel Bovier, which spans twenty-five years, is grounded in their shared interest in the arts. Bovier and Gavillet began collaborating on books, notably for the publisher JRP.
Their work supported the transition of the type foundry Optimo from a student project into a business. Bovier’s international network soon extended Gavillet’s own, and broadened his client base. It was also thanks to this curator that Gavillet began a close collaboration with the printer Che Huber, who became instrumental in developing experimental projects.

Finally, Jonathan Hares and Jürg Lehni both highlight the role played by Lineto as an offline platform that allowed designers to meet, exchange, and collaborate. Lineto acted as an informal network that connected like-minded practitioners and let them share ideas, tools, and attitudes. It also worked as a publishing platform, a distribution network, and a catalyst for ideas. The potential offered by online platforms from the early 2000s is highlighted in Lehni’s projects too. The voices selected here discuss all manner of collaboration, ranging from pragmatic arrangements to circles of friends and alternative models of publishing. They highlight the critical role played by collaboration as a system of exchange that allows for a flow of social, economic, and cultural capital.

Fritz Gottschalk

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

FG [Walter Ballmer and I,] we knew each other through AGI. I got in touch with him when we needed someone in Milan. [Figs. 17–18] […] Our job [at Gottschalk+Ash] was to design, as one used to say during those days, the corporate identity for EniChem. It was a new brand, a new name, and we had to make the world aware of that new name. […] Ballmer was a wonderful collaborator, from this point of view. So whenever we had work that had to be looked at locally, or done quickly, or it was too much for us, then I said: “Look, that’s a job for Walter [Ballmer], he’ll look after it.” […] We never had to check anything. Nothing ever went backwards.
or forwards, he just did it and he understood exactly what we were after. And you can hardly see—actually you cannot see—a difference as to whether it was done in Zürich or in Milan. He was very, very efficient. At the beginning, we did everything from Zürich, also the billing. But then the EniChem people came and said: “All this money that goes to Switzerland does not look too good in our books, why don’t you open up an office in Milan?” and that’s when Walter took
over that part as well. So the bills went out from Walter’s office, Walter was paid, and then he sent the money up here.

Serge and Nanette Libiszewski


SL  [Walter Ballmer] mi diceva “fai tu” e io facevo. Aveva totale fiducia in me. Nei miei lavori io davo già una chiara impostazione alla foto, che era basata soprattutto sull’oggetto e la luce, così come avevo imparato alla Kunstgewerbeschule di Zurigo. Gli facevo dei bei lavori e lui apprezzava. Capiva subito che la cosa valeva e io ero contento perché non era il grafico che poi prende la forbice e taglia tutto. Un tempo la fotografia era una cosa rigida, bisognava tirarla su con la grafica, con qualche punto d’attrazione e con i colori. In quel caso, invece, non ce n’era bisogno: la foto in sé reggeva un manifesto e [Ballmer] aveva il buon gusto di metterci una bella tipografia senza muovermi più niente. In questo c’erano tra noi una grande intesa, rispetto reciproco e fiducia. [Figs. 19–20]

SL  [Walter Ballmer] would say to me: “Just do it your way,” and so I did. He had complete trust in me. My works had a clear approach to photography that was based on the object and the light as I had learned at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Zurich. Indeed, my works were quite good and he liked them. He would immediately understand that the work was valid. And I was glad because he was not the kind of graphic designer who would cut everything up with scissors. There was a time when photographs were something stiff. You needed to enhance them with graphics, some attractive elements and colors. In this case, however, there was no need for that. The picture would make a poster on its own and [Ballmer] had the good taste to use
Fig. 19
Walter Ballmer (graphic design) and Serge Libiszewski (photography), *Olivetti Studio 45*, 1969, printed by NAVA, offset, 68.5 × 48.5 cm, Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti, Ivrea.

Fig. 20
Walter Ballmer (graphic design) and Serge Libiszewski (photography), *Olivetti Summa 19*, 1970, offset, 70 × 50 cm, Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti, Ivrea.
good typography and not modify a thing. As such, there was great understanding, mutual respect, and trust.

[Figs. 19–20]

Hi (Megi Zumstein and Claudio Barandun)

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

MZ We started [collaborating] with friends, with Nico [Krebs] and Taiyo [Onorato].* They did lots of photography for Bernhard Willhelm. We made some lookbooks together, but that was more or less for free.

CB For clothes. But then we had the opportunity to make this book for Bernhard Willhelm for the exhibition [Het Totaal Rappel (Total recall), 2007].

MZ Nico and Taiyo [designed] the exhibition [scenography]. [...] And then they needed a flyer. And a poster. But they had everything ready: photography, and they had made some handwritten typefaces. They needed some help to “put the logos on” [laughs]. It was only an assisting job actually [laughs]. But then we got involved with the whole exhibition: we made a little leaflet—an exhibition guide—and different things for the exhibition. When we went to the opening, the mayor of Antwerp said in his speech ...

CB He was so ...

MZ ... overwhelmed.

* They work as a photography duo under the name TONK.
“What an exhibition, you have to do a catalog.”

It was a super nice exhibition. A lot of people [came]. They really felt like it was the center of the fashion world. That was the starting point of our book design career.

In this excerpt, Manuel Krebs and Dimitri Bruni discuss how Silex was founded and evolved. Silex was both an informal group of friends who were studying at Biel/Bienne, and a series of publications dedicated to illustration.

On a commencé Silex pendant l’école, c’était en deuxième année de graphisme je crois [1994]. Il y avait un noyau de six personnes. Il y avait Anne Alibisetti, Aude [Lehmann], Manu [Krebs], Dimi [Broquard], Bastien [Aubry] et moi... On a initié ce projet, et après il y a eu des collaborations. On a fait vingt numéros, et entre deux on a aussi demandé à des amis qui étaient aussi à l’école – ou externes – de participer à des [numéros] [...]. [Fig. 21]

Si je peux préciser... On a initié ça presque avec des travaux qui étaient faits pour l’école. [...] On était en première ou deuxième année. On regardait un peu aussi chez les deuxième ou les troisièmes. Par exemple Bastien [Aubry] avait fait un travail qu’on a adoré. Puis on a dit on peut faire une revue avec ça [...]. Après ça s’est donné au fur et à mesure, et on a fait deux trois quatre...
numéros et Dimitri Broquard a dit: “j’aimerais aussi faire partie”. Lui il était deux années plus haut. [Il y avait cette distance entre les “grands”] et les “petits”... Puis on a aussi collaboré avec Greg [Gregory Gilbert-Lodge], qui était déjà en dehors de l’école. C’était un peu une [référence]... on adorait. [...]
and me ... We initiated this project, and then there were collaborations. We produced twenty issues, and in between two of them we asked friends who were also at school—or outside it—to work on [an issue] [...]. [Fig. 21]

MK If I may clarify that ... We more or less started this with projects that were made for college. [...] We were in our first or second year. We also checked out the second- and third-year students a little. For example, Bastien [Aubry] had made a project that we loved. We thought we could do a magazine with that [...]. After that, it developed gradually, and we did two, three, four issues and Dimitri Broquard said: “I would like to be part of it too.” He was two years ahead of us. Then we also collaborated with Greg [Gregory Gilbert-Lodge], who was already out of college. He was [someone we looked up to] ... we loved what he did. [...]

DB This project was initiated and then there were collaborations. We did about twenty issues. We wanted to do our thing, an independent project, super underground, just for fifty subscribers. But it was pretty cool, because in the end we had a lot of resonance. For example, I met Cornel [Windlin] for the first time, I had just arrived in Zurich, and it was Marco Walser from Elektrosmog who had organized a small meeting with people I think, and I met Cornel for the first time. I had given a Silex presentation. He was a subscriber at the time, he always sent us letters ... he was very responsive, we were very happy.
GG  [J’ai rencontré Lionel Bovier] à l’ECAL lorsqu’il arrive avec [Pierre] Keller en 1995 pour repenser la structure de l’école. L’ECAL du milieu des années 1990 est très provinciale, sans cours de théorie du design et sans perspective internationale. Lionel va y remédier en amenant John Armleder, Liam Gillick, bref un réseau très stimulant et je me rappelle que j’étais extrêmement friand des conférences organisées à ce moment-là. [Lionel] a un rôle important, il nous ouvre à l’art contemporain, qui n’est pas diffusé de la même manière qu’il l’est aujourd’hui. À cette époque, nous sommes influencés par les idées véhiculées par les artistes de “l’esthétique relationnelle” [...] selon la terminologie de Nicolas Bourriaud. Une génération d’artistes français émerge, avec qui on collabore encore maintenant, [Xavier] Veilhan notamment. M/M (Paris) est très proche de cette scène-là, et cela a un impact sur notre manière d’envisager le graphisme. C’est dans ce contexte que nos premiers caractères et essais typographiques se nourrissent de la lecture de Documents sur l’art, la revue publiée à l’époque par les Presses du Réel ... d’un rapport très direct avec la réalité, et cela se traduit par exemple par une typographie inspirée d’un logo de vache de maïs. [Fig. 22] [...] On se nourrit des idées émises dans l’art et nous intéressons au “Design in the Expanded Field”, aux questions de transversalité, etc.

On propose à [Lionel] le rôle d’éditeur à Welcomex et l’invitons pour y intégrer l’art contemporain. Quand je suis chez Cornel [Windlin], on collabore sur une série de livres qui s’appelle Positions, dédiée aux écrits d’artistes. Et à ce moment-là il commence JRP Editions avec Christophe Cherix. [...] À Genève je travaille beaucoup avec Lionel Bovier aux débuts de JRP Editions ... Et on se retrouve vite confronté à d’autres requis typographiques, pour les livres, qui sont différents de ceux d’un magazine. Cela nous permet de vite mettre en place de
nouveaux modèles typographiques, de les tester dans un contexte réel de manière immédiate. On commence à faire des caractères un peu plus sophistiqués, et là aussi entre en scène François [Rappo], qui lui commence à s’intéresser à ce qui s’est passé un ou deux siècles plus tôt. Un échange avec François se met en place, que les supports éditoriaux ont aidé à développer, d’un côté. […]


On a développé aussi une relation avec Che Huber – rencontré par Christophe et Lionel alors qu’il travaille dans une autre imprimerie. Christophe et Lionel l’encouragent à créer sa propre imprimerie, et nous imprimons notre premier livre d’artiste chez lui pour JRP Editions, Ben Kinmont: Prospectus, qui sera primé aux plus beaux livres suisses de 2002. Che Huber est une figure importante pour la scène graphique romande. Passionné et talentueux, il est toujours prêt à expérimenter et partager son savoir. On a pu expérimenter des processus d’impression qui auraient été impossibles ailleurs, comme par exemple le livre sur les estampes de Matisse ou Learning from Martigny pour Valentin Carron. [Fig. 23]
[I met Lionel Bovier] at ECAL when he arrived with [Pierre] Keller in 1995 to rethink the structure of the school. ECAL in the mid-1990s was very provincial, without design theory classes and with no international perspective. Lionel remedied this by bringing in John Armleder, Liam Gillick, in short a very stimulating network, and I remember I was extremely fond of the lectures that were organized at that time. [Lionel] played an important role, he opened us up to clients local and international networks career schools

Fig. 22

Fig. 23
contemporary art, which was not disseminated in the way it is today. At that time, we were influenced by the ideas conveyed by artists of “relational aesthetics” [...] in the terminology of Nicolas Bourriaud.* A generation of French artists was emerging, with whom we still collaborate today, [Xavier] Veilhan among others. M/M (Paris) is very close to that scene, and that has an impact on our way of looking at graphic design. It is in this context that our first typefaces and typographic experiments were nourished by reading Documents sur l’Art, the journal published at the time by the Presses du Réel ... with a very direct relationship with reality, and this is reflected, for example, in a typography inspired by a corn-cow logo. [...] We were nourished by the ideas put forward in art and we were interested in Design in the Expanded Field, ** in issues of transversality, etc.

We offered [Lionel] the role of editor at Welcomex and invited him to include contemporary art. When I was chez Cornel [Windlin], we collaborated on a series of books called Positions, dedicated to the writings of artists. And at that time he started JRP Editions with Christophe Cherix.*** [...] In Geneva I worked a lot with Lionel Bovier at the beginning of JRP Editions ... and we quickly found ourselves confronted with other typographic requirements for books, which are different from those of a magazine. This allowed us to quickly set up new typographic models, and test them in a real context in an immediate way. We began to make typefaces that were a little more sophisticated, and here, too, François [Rappo] came in, and began to take an interest in what had happened one or two centuries earlier. A dialogue with François was set up, which editorial design objects helped to develop. [...]

* For a brief overview of Bourriaud’s contribution, see Frogier 1999.
** Gavillet is referring to concepts developed in Bovier’s interview with M/M (Paris) (Bovier, Amzalag & Augustyniak 1998).
*** JRP Editions was founded by Christophe Cherix and Lionel Bovier after their work on a book published in 1994, Just Ready to be Published (Geneva: V. Chevalier). In 2004, they began a collaboration with publishing giant Ringier under the name JRP|Ringier, which lasted until the end of 2018. In 2019, the partnership relaunched under the name JRP|Editions.
I designed *Across/Art/Switzerland/1975–2000* [2001] at the same time as [Lionel] wrote it. This was our first significant editorial experience, and other projects followed, born from shared aspirations in art publishing. We begin to develop a working relationship, where new characters, new typologies, new texts developed in parallel, and also an ambition—or at least an awareness of wanting to create a new editorial statement. After this project, we made a few small artists’ books before collaborating again on a bigger project, which was the monograph for Olivier Mosset in 2003.

We also developed a relationship with Che Huber—whom Christophe and Lionel met while he was working in another printing house.* Christophe and Lionel encouraged him to set up his own print shop, and we printed our first artist’s book with him for JRP Editions, *Ben Kinmont: Prospectus* [2002], which was awarded a prize in the competition for the Most Beautiful Swiss Books of 2002. Che Huber is an important figure on the graphic arts scene in French-speaking Switzerland. Passionate and talented, he is always ready to experiment and to share his knowledge. We were able to experiment with printing processes with him that would have been impossible elsewhere, such as the book on Matisse’s prints, or *Learning from Martigny* for Valentin Carron. [Fig. 23]

Jonathan Hares

Conversations with Jonas Berthod, Lausanne, Mar. 5, 2018.

* Che Huber (born Josef Huber, 1954) trained in the USA before returning to Switzerland to take a job in a print shop in Geneva in 1986. He founded Noir sur Noir printers in Geneva in the early 2000s (Swiss Federal Office of Culture 2018b). He was awarded the Jan Tschichold Prize in 2018.
** LL Biff is a typeface, drawn by Jonas Williamsson in 1995, which was used regularly by REALA.
were two. [The] first one was at Cornel’s family chalet, I can’t remember where. Pronto [Stephan Müller], NORM, and Laurenz [Brunner], REALA were there [Laurent Benner, Samuel Nyholm, Jonas Williamsson], this first one was more of a general gathering.

The second one was in Lavin. The topic was Open Type: “it’s going to change everything.” But for half of us it didn’t mean anything—not in the sense that we didn’t know what it was, but that we were not going to need an Open Type version of Biff anytime soon. But Dimi [Bruni] was more focused, his ears pricked up a bit more. We had seminars where Pronto sort of explained, again more about [new] type technology. [...] I think that by the second one, the game was changing and it was clear that you couldn’t put out fonts in the same way that you did [in the past]. [...] These things needed to be mastered, hinted correctly ... there was a sense that this needed to be taken more seriously. One day we all sat around and presented what we were working on. And I remember Dimi was showing early versions of what was then going to be Purple [2006]. Or these first ideas about this limited grid [Replica, 2008]. [...] I strapped some stuff together to show [...] So I ended up showing [my font]. And then the Elektrosmog guys [who were at the conference] ended up using it for a poster campaign [Schnittpunkt, 2006]. [...] [I] think that kind of sums up how it was. It was still very much sharing, and collaboration, rather than the business the whole scene became.

Jürg Lehni

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

JL  In 1999 I decided to leave the ETH to explore more creative forms of engagement with technology. During that time, I helped my brother Urs [Lehni], Raphael Koch, and the other guys [Peter Körner and Markus Wohlhüter] with the digital
documentation of their graduation project Transport [1999]. [Fig. 24] It was a graphic design off-space in Lucerne for which we created a very experimental, interactive CD-ROM and installation called Visomat. Transport and Visomat were the start to many things that followed. When Cornel Windlin asked us to release the Lego Font that came out of Transport on the Lineto type foundry, we decided to develop mini-design applications that were originally part of Visomat into an interactive type specimen. Cornel then challenged us to turn this into an actually useful tool by adding the capability to export vector graphics from it. This became the Lego Font Creator [2000]. After that, I created the Rubik Maker [2000] with Cornel, and in 2002 he asked me to help them create their new website, which we launched in 2004.
Fig. 25
Vectorama, Vectorama.org interface.

Fig. 26
Vectorama, 2000-10-12/One-day Vectorama, one day of activity on Vectorama.org, December 2000.
visual multiuser playground for up to ten users, and it caused quite a splash when we launched it, because this kind of use of the web was very novel back then. The vector export function of Lego Font Creator gave one impulse for Vectorama. [figs. 25, 26] But the idea also goes straight back to Transport, where they were building all these graphical libraries, a lot of hand-traced vector graphics. [...] They grew tired of making their own graphic design a bit, and thought, “what if we made these libraries available, and people make graphic design for us?” There was an urge to open up the medium and democratize the means. [...] The plan was to make this Adobe Illustrator for the masses available online. Everyone could use it, but you couldn’t be alone on it, you had to share your workspace. It was very democratic. You could delete the work of other people, and they couldn’t do anything about it. It was a mixture of a workspace and a chatroom. It was also quite punk and DIY in some way. You could send the state of the drawing surface as vector graphics to yourself, and people were actually using that to do graphic design with it. [...] The system would also record the current image every five minutes and it allowed you to navigate that stream on a timeline. It made it look like a movie. When 9/11 happened, you could see that on the timeline. People started drawing things relating to the event, somebody used predefined shapes to create the skyscrapers and somebody else added people falling out of them. So when browsing through the timeline, you could encounter all these reflections of what happened on the planet. You could say that Vectorama was a bit like Web 2.0 for 56k modems, fifteen years earlier.

When I studied at ECAL I continued this interest in vector graphics and the creation of bespoke design tools. I made Scriptographer [2001], a scripting plug-in for Adobe Illustrator. It allowed users to create their own design tools within this closed software. My diploma project was Hektor [2002]. It was done in collaboration with my friend Uli Franke, who I had met while studying at ETH. Hektor was
essentially an imprecise, slightly clumsy printer. It was a portable spray paint output device for computers, with its own character and handwriting.

All my works to this point—and after—were technological platforms enabling collaboration. And the connections formed early on through the Lineto network and its extensions were quite crucial in this process. Coming from Switzerland, I didn’t know of many of these people beforehand, and meeting them through my work opened doors internationally. The first Hektor piece ever exhibited was in Public Affairs at the Kunsthaus Zürich in 2002, thanks to Cornel who invited me to collaborate with him in that show. Through Vectorama I met Laurent [Benner] and Radovan [Scasascia], and then Laurent invited me to do a piece with Hektor at the London Design Museum.* Laurent shared his studio with Alex Rich at the time, who also happened to be part of my diploma jury when I presented Hektor at ECAL. I ended up collaborating with Alex Rich for years, starting in 2003 and expanding into a full shared practice that peaked around 2010. I started picturing myself operating more internationally than on the Swiss scale. [...] I also collaborated with Laurent and Alex on this Scrollable Landscape project [2004]. It was a website where you can upload an image and arrange it with other images so that it forms one endless landscape. We launched it as a project without disclosed authorship, it was completely anonymous. And it was basically like a billboard, anyone could upload their stuff.

Jonathan Hares

Conversation with Jonas Berthod, Lausanne, Mar. 5, 2018.

JH I did one or two book projects with [Cornel Windlin], and later [the Lineto website 3.0, 2019]. We got on well. But you know he’s always collaborated with many people. [...]
there’s always someone interesting around. There’s always someone who’s taking part in something. [...] I think most people you know or talk to have at some point [worked for him]. I think people just came through his studio, and at that time they have their effect on whatever is being worked on. Whereas a different designer might go, “OK, now I need a guy for this job, an illustrator for that job,” I think it’s not quite like that [with Cornel]. There’s always lots of people, if you look at Tate Etc, Vitra stuff [...], or the Schauspielhaus, there were a lot of people who worked on that [...]. Also, you could’ve filled a few careers off the stuff he didn’t do. He’s generous at passing work to other people [...]. I have benefitted from that.