

## Figures of Speech

*Chiara Barbieri, Jonas Berthod,  
Constance Delamadeleine,  
Davide Fornari, Sarah Owens*

This volume gathers together the accounts of people who—willingly or not—have taken part in, contributed to, and been influenced by histories of Swiss graphic design. “Multiple Voices” are the voices of designers and their collaborators, peers, and clients that have been collected through interviews and other forms of oral communication such as speeches, minutes, or conversations. Some of them have seldom been heard in the literature, or have even been silenced. The voices and perspectives of different generations tell us how and by whom Swiss graphic design was given meaning within specific contexts, and show how that meaning has changed over the years, depending on circumstances. The expression “figure of speech” usually refers to a phrase having a meaning different from its literal sense, such as a metaphor or a simile. The multiple voices collected in this volume likewise offer more than their literal accounts. They give an insight into how stories are also told as illustrative, metaphorical accounts of the topics they deal with.

National design canons are constructed narratives that are historically and geographically specific.<sup>1</sup> Swiss graphic design is a resilient narrative that resonates loudly within design historiography. By giving a voice to people who partook in the construction of this narrative, negotiated and mediated its meaning, or were opposed to it, this volume provides evidence that national design canons are not abstract concepts, but meaningful

sets of values that impact on everyday design practice. Instead of defining what Swiss graphic design is or is not, these accounts tell us how and by whom it has been defined, understood, performed, and criticized from the postwar period onwards. As such, this volume provides the reader with some glimpses of how Swiss graphic design was constructed both formally and informally, negotiated, and transmitted as a design discourse over the years and across different countries. It indicates entanglements, missing links, and central nodes that have played a role within social and professional networks and have given meaning to Swiss graphic design, without making any claim to provide an exhaustive mapping of it.

The voices collected here tell us only a partial story. In line with our book’s overarching aim, this volume does not offer any final interpretation of the voices we quote here, but instead contextualizes them and presents them to the reader as material for further research. It diverts our focus away from the so-called pioneers of Swiss graphic design and their iconic works, and towards the broader discourses that surround them and altogether constitute a meaningful canon of national design. The voices we have selected enliven stereotypical discourses, contradict rules that have been taken for granted, provide insights and different perspectives that break up linear narratives, and are grouped around eleven terms: associations, awards, careers, clients, collaboration, gender, location, studio, Swiss Made, training, and typography.

The most common way of engaging with graphic design history is by looking. Academics, designers, and students rely primarily on analyzing or referencing artifacts such as books, posters, typefaces, websites, and archival materials. Books and exhibitions

reinforce the prevalence of the visible, and even their design plays a leading role in communicating history and meaning. In fact, “their visual aspect is often more important than their text.”<sup>2</sup> This prioritization obscures the fact that our acquisition of knowledge about design also draws on verbal and written accounts: conversations and debates on design emphasize that it is, in essence, a social practice produced by networks of people.<sup>3</sup> A whole dimension of history would be dismissed if we as historians engaged exclusively with visual outputs, which is why this volume chooses to focus on voices rather than images. By engaging in a dialogue with actors of design history, we are able to provide a sociological perspective that complements visual analysis: oral history allows us to lend an ear to the people behind the artifacts in order to gain access to new vantage points.

This methodology has a long history. It has become well-recognized through numerous scholarly contributions,<sup>4</sup> and its use in design history is not new.<sup>5</sup> By speaking to those who have played a direct or indirect role in design, we can shift the focus of our history and open up new areas of inquiry.<sup>6</sup> Oral history focuses on people so that it might deal with

memory, veracity, the meaning of narratives, “recovering” unheard voices and stories, challenging meta-narratives, the relationship between verbal and visual modes of representation and attending to oral histories both as resource and topic.<sup>7</sup>

This methodology is therefore especially valuable for going beyond the repetition of a stereotypical narrative about the success story of Swiss Graphic Design.

Oral history is not without its fair share of debates, which have been well-documented.<sup>8</sup> Some critics have argued that oral history is not objective, though the same can be said of any source.<sup>9</sup> Oral history does not claim neutrality, but instead proposes to focus on the subjectivity of memory.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, “interviews are locally managed occasions of interaction in which participants collaboratively construct meaning” and, as such, they both recount and shape the past.<sup>11</sup> This means that they “tell us less about *events* than about their *meaning*.”<sup>12</sup>

Most of the accounts published in this book are excerpts from semi-structured interviews. This format offers the possibility of addressing specific questions while leaving space for new meanings to emerge during the discussion.<sup>13</sup> This is valuable, as interviews sometimes prompt us to rethink what we thought we knew.<sup>14</sup> This volume also contains other forms of accounts: transcripts of speeches, excerpts from published interviews, and protocols. While these are not strictly oral history,<sup>15</sup> they are valuable contributions to the discourse and to writing history,<sup>16</sup> and share an origin in oral forms of communication. Furthermore, while the interviews “simultaneously engage with the period being discussed and the period during which the interview is occurring,”<sup>17</sup> the accounts republished from other sources offer an opportunity to access the past as it was experienced at the time.

An interview becomes oral history once it has been “recorded, processed in some way, made available [...] or reproduced in relatively verbatim form for publication.”<sup>18</sup> These transcripts are never wholly neutral.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, oral history does not stop at the mere publication of interviews, but includes their interpretation

as well.<sup>20</sup> In this volume, accounts are framed by essays that provide theoretical or historical frameworks for the themes discussed. They sketch out key debates, literature, and thoughts in an effort to make transparent the mindsets we have brought to our selection of excerpts, but without the aim of designating these debates and sources as the only possible perspectives on the excerpts. Instead, it is the excerpts themselves that contribute the detail of lived experience, thereby allowing us to reconsider how our perception of design practice and our accounts of it are shaped by the surrounding academic discourse.

The excerpts following each theme have been carefully chosen and placed in sequence so as to map the evolution of social, economic, and professional patterns. On the one hand, this volume's structure creates an argument, and on the other, it lays flat the meaning-making effect of selectivity.<sup>21</sup> The organization of the accounts thus offers another level of interpretation which acknowledges the importance of contextualization and curation when publishing oral history.<sup>22</sup>

This collection of voices has been sorted and grouped around eleven keywords and it includes mostly past and present designers active between the 1950s and now, as well as other categories of actors involved in the design field. The selection process was conceived so as to provide a counterbalance to prevalent master narratives on Swiss graphic design and to subvert them by also giving voice to people who have thus far been overshadowed or omitted in the main historiographies. These might include women designers, clients, or studio assistants. Accounts by actors living abroad or located in peripheral areas like Francophone Switzerland were another key focus of our selection criteria, in order to pose critical questions about the national attribution of the label "Swiss

graphic design and typography." Nevertheless, we were aware that going beyond the canon comes with its own difficulties, most fundamentally that one must start an inquiry with what one is most familiar with—in this case, the canon. Accordingly, some of the voices assembled in this volume are well known. They are included here to shed light on the research paths we have taken, to provide context for other voices, and to offer an impetus for their reappraisal.

Furthermore, all these voices—both those well known and those formerly overlooked—allow us to observe how those who are speaking desire (or refuse) to position themselves within a narrative that has been collectively established and is being continuously reconstituted. Self-portrayal may come into play; it became evident, for instance, when some interviewees chose to edit their accounts heavily, or even rewrite them. For others, interview statements became a means of renegotiating their place within history. Some interviewees reiterated and thus reconfirmed accepted portrayals of historic events, while others expressed unease with precisely these portrayals by asking for their statements on them not to be included in this volume. The ways in which interviewees modulated their spoken accounts, either concurrently or retrospectively, testifies to their keen awareness of the advantages and possible pitfalls of being historicized.

The cases of Walter Ballmer (1923–2011) and Albert Hollenstein (1930–1974), both of whom were educated in Switzerland and enjoyed cross-border careers, were instrumental in collecting our voices. Their extensive but unexplored archival material offered an opportunity to identify and map out a certain number of individuals involved in their respective professional networks. French, Italian, and Swiss contemporary

witnesses — such as colleagues, assistants, collaborators, and peers — were then interviewed according to a similar pool of questions related to the research topic, with a special focus on professional practice. They were invited to describe their career path and the professional context in which they evolved, and to share memories related to their daily working practices. In addition, interviewees were encouraged to reflect on their perception of Swiss graphic design and typography, and the meaning associated with it.

To grasp the variety of professional interpretations of graphic design in Switzerland, and its various ways of forming networks of dissemination and education from a contemporary perspective, this volume furthermore includes voices of Swiss designers active in Switzerland from the early 2000s until now. The catalog entitled *Swiss Design 2002: Netzwerke/Réseaux/Networks*,<sup>23</sup> featuring the professional network of graphic designers honored by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture in 2002, was our starting point for compiling a list of potential interviewees. Gilles Gavillet, NORM, studio Hi, and Cornel Windlin, based in the Francophone and German-speaking parts of Switzerland, were interviewed. Their oral accounts offer a complex description of professional practice in Switzerland in recent decades.

This volume also includes written excerpts from interviews that focused on particular events, such as the opening of the touring exhibition *The Swiss Posters* organized in London in the 1950s, or the institutional debate related to the curriculum of graphic design in a specific canton. This additional layer of voices allows a more comprehensive picture of the graphic design field in Switzerland to emerge. All in all, these excerpts illuminate historical

knowledge and current issues pertaining to Swiss graphic design, and inject new life into the narratives. This mix of historical and contemporary voices sheds light on the evolution of the practice over time, and brings to the fore the multitudinous facets and definitions of Swiss graphic design and typography that form part of the discourse.

As mentioned above, all these excerpts were brought together by means of eleven keywords (associations, awards, careers, clients, collaboration, gender, location, studio, Swiss Made, training, and typography), and these form the chapters of this volume. These keywords were furthermore used as a means to link statements across space and time, to reveal formerly hidden narratives, and to make new ones possible. Emerging from a close reading of the collected accounts, they acted as mechanisms for classification and affiliation. Some reflect specific, recurring topics within the historiography of Swiss graphic design, while others function as thematic filters adding perspectives from sociology and cultural theory. What all the keywords have in common is that they attend closely to professional practice, highlighting organizational structures, work and career patterns, and individual strategies, and thus allow for a rediscovery of the network of practice that shapes graphic design, as well as enabling a wider understanding of Swiss graphic design history.

- 1 Gimeno-Martínez 2016.
- 2 Lzicar & Unger 2016: 250.
- 3 Becker 1982.
- 4 For overviews, see Leavy 2011;  
Perks & Thomson 2016; Ritchie  
2010; 2015; Thompson & Bornat  
2017.
- 5 Donnelly 2006; Ishino 2006;  
Sandino 2006; 2013.
- 6 Thompson & Bornat 2017: 6.
- 7 Sandino 2006: 275.
- 8 Perks & Thomson 2016, 1–21;  
Thomson 2007.
- 9 Portelli 2016 (1979).
- 10 Frisch 1990: 188; Thompson  
2011.
- 11 Oak 2006: 346.
- 12 Portelli 2016 (1979): 52.
- 13 Galletta 2013: 1–2.
- 14 Ritchie 2010.
- 15 Ritchie 2015: 1.
- 16 Thompson & Bornat 2017: 140.
- 17 Oak 2006: 346.
- 18 Ritchie 2015: 8.
- 19 Oak 2006: 347.
- 20 Abrams 2010.
- 21 Schnapp et al. 2008.
- 22 Boyd & Larson 2014: 13.
- 23 Crivelli et al. 2002.