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Netzwerke/Réseaux/ Networks

A Relaunch to Reposition Federal Design Promotion

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On the evening of October 18, 2002, the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich opened its doors and welcomed visitors to the Swiss Design Awards (SDA) exhibition. As people assembled for this annual event, they were greeted by what was an unusual sight in the context of these ceremonies. Over the previous decade, these exhibitions had offered a “white cube” display of awarded projects without curation, discourse, or context. In 2002, however, visitors were welcomed at the door by a large title announcing a theme for the show: *Netzwerk/Réseaux/Networks*. [Fig. 35] This exhibition was not just a presentation of the prize-winning projects, but also contextualized them by showing how they fitted into a broader design network in Switzerland. To do so, the curation used three devices: an elaborate scenography, an extensive events program, and a complex catalog.

After entering the museum and climbing a series of steps, visitors discovered a bird’s eye view of the exhibition. [Fig. 36] Once they were there, it would have become clear that the platform on which they stood was a row of seats similar to those found in a sports hall or a stadium. The visual metaphors provided by Gabrielle Schmid and Cornelia Staffelbach’s scenography made connections between different arenas of competition—sports, games, and design awards—while also making clear how the different players were connected. The floor, covered with wooden panels of the same blue that is commonly found in sports halls, had a series of lines that displayed the nominees’ networks by linking the different exhibits. They showed “who knew whom” through themes such as education, awards, or institutions. When standing on top of the installation, the visitors were invited to take up a physical and metaphorical position in order to assist in the contest taking place in front of them.

The exhibition furniture was made of colored structures such as high and low tables, coffers, and gym espaliers that had been designed to accommodate a wide range of design artifacts, and which suggested movement thanks to their wheels and handles. The networks displayed seemed far from frozen: the exhibition also let visitors enter and expand them. This intention was communicated extensively in the promotional material for the exhibition. For instance, the poster announced the

intention of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (SFOC) to turn the exhibition into “a place where networking is practiced.” [Fig. 37]

An exhibition map gave a further point of entry to these networks by providing an extensive list of all the nodes mentioned in the exhibition, along with their contact details. These included schools, design awards, museums, foundations, and professional associations. At the center of the space, a room separated from the rest of the exhibition with floor-to-ceiling curtains offered comfortable seating [Fig. 38] and was used to host a series of events and debates called the Design Salon. Talks were organized around a wide range of topics including gender, marketing, and design as development aid. The extensive program was organized by the curators in collaboration with the HGKZ¹ and aimed to bring together a wide range of international actors from the scene and beyond. They included designers, representatives of the SFOC, academics, teachers, and museum and gallery directors, but also collectors, curators, journalists, and even a psychoanalyst. The cultural mediation program not only contributed to the discourse, but also provided a meeting point to extend the networks.

This exhibition led to a double reveal. The first was obvious: the curators made visible and accessible the networks of Swiss design by using their scenography, events program, and the catalog. But the second

reveal was more implicit. By demystifying the networks, providing a context, and inviting visitors to take part in these connections, the SFOC took the position of mediator in the network. This involvement was unprecedented for the SFOC, and introduced a new approach to Federal design promotion, which was met in the mainstream press with unusually overwhelming approval.²

A new era of design promotion

The exhibition was opened by Patrizia Crivelli, who as the secretary of the SFOC's Design Service was responsible for the SDA. She spoke of it as the beginning of a new era of design promotion.³ This relaunch was an attempt by the Federal Design Commission⁴ to respond to ongoing criticism concerning the awards' relevance. In 1989, worried that not enough designers were applying, the SDA had already begun exhibiting the works of winners outside Bern, and had begun publishing a catalog.⁵ This greater visibility led to increased scrutiny of the awards in the specialist press, which was highly critical of the SDA in the 1990s. Articles argued that the judging process was opaque, and that the winning projects were either safe choices or the work of previous winners and established designers.⁶ The press also suggested that the SDA did not reflect the whole scene, but instead produced a random selection depending on

who had happened to present a project that year; this implied that the best designers were not being represented.⁷ Moreover, the exhibitions were deemed too simple, for they failed to provide any context to the pieces exhibited.⁸ In 1996, the specialist press's opinion of the SDA was at its most critical. It argued that the awards had become so irrelevant that they should be dissolved, or at least wholly redefined.⁹ It is thus not surprising that in 1997, on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Federal design promotion, the Federal Design Commission began just such a process of redefinition.¹⁰

From early on in this period of transition—whose official purpose was to find new ways of supporting designers, but which was arguably also an attempt at saving the SDA—the SFOC realized it needed to turn itself from a distant, money-giving institution into one closer to the practice of designers and at the center of the design scene. One of the ways they identified for repositioning the institution was to give up-and-coming designers an increasing number of commissions to help them launch their careers. After taking over the Most Beautiful Swiss Books competition in 1997, the SFOC shifted its focus to recognizing design, rather than technical aspects,¹¹ and from 1998 onwards the design of its catalog was outsourced to up-and-coming practitioners such as Gilles Gavillet, Cornel Windlin, or NORM, who were all enjoying a moment of critical recognition. The

official criteria for choosing these designers were not fully transparent: Crivelli simply mentioned that the SFOC had “noticed their work.”¹² What we do know is that they had all previously won competitions organized by the SFOC.

Promoting “good design” by commissioning “good designers” might seem tautological, but this idea was not always so self-evident. Many of the Most Beautiful Swiss Books catalogs before 1998 were small brochures that looked more like administrative documents than pieces of design. Similarly, the SDA catalogs before 2002 were no graphic feats either. They were rather plain, commemorative records listing the procedure, budgets, and winners. By choosing promising designers for these projects, and giving them free rein to develop daring concepts (which were not always welcomed by the press,¹³ but certainly were by the designers¹⁴), the Design Service gave itself a facelift. It now became more attractive to the scene to which it was trying to appeal: it was young, cool, and on the rise. This demonstrated that the SFOC had understood the necessity of using the language of design to reposition the institution. By setting an example and becoming an “ideal” client, they enjoyed the bonus of being praised by the critics for their attempt to remain close to the practice of designers.¹⁵

Another strategy for repositioning the SDA at the center of things was to provide a critical discourse on the design scene.

Indeed, no other institution offered anything similar in Switzerland.¹⁶ To do so, the theme of “networks” was chosen by the three original curators of the 2002 exhibition: Crivelli; the director of the Museum für Gestaltung, Erika Keil; and designer/journalist/educator Ralf Michel, a member of the Swiss Design Association who was at the time preparing the launch of the Swiss Design Network.¹⁷ Soon thereafter, Keil left the museum, and Crivelli asked publisher Lars Müller to step in for the organization of the 2002 SDA.¹⁸ The curators hypothesized that there were informal “creative centers” in Switzerland organized as “shared offices, studio buildings, scenes,” and that these nodes—which were presumably interconnected—produced some of the most important Swiss design.¹⁹ Assuming that at least some of the winners to be awarded that year would be connected to these creative centers, the SFOC aimed to make their connections visible.

Reorganization

Apart from this new curatorial approach, another change included a collaboration with two Swiss design museums, the Musée de design et d’arts appliqués contemporains (mudac) in Lausanne and the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, which were to take turns hosting the yearly exhibition.²⁰ Previously, the ad hoc traveling displays had been hosted by different institutions

every year: museums, but also applied art schools and galleries. The former approach had covered a wide range of cities across all the linguistic regions of Switzerland, but had the disadvantage of producing exhibitions that were neither professional nor consistent. By contrast, the new strategy enlisted the patronage of two recognized institutions and would be supervised by curators who would work thematically. By institutionalizing the exhibition, the SFOC secured a place for the SDA on the cultural agenda, and cemented the gravitas of the event, which now became an actor participating in the creation of a discourse on the Swiss design scene.

One more change also contributed to the creation of a more complex discourse in the selection process. The categories in use so far by applicants—for example, fashion, jewelry, industrial design, and so on—were replaced by two broad groups. Group A comprised objects produced in a single edition or small series, while group B encompassed industrially or serially produced objects. Although this might seem like a simple administrative reorganization, it had significant consequences for the judging criteria. Instead of assessing objects within a single discipline, the jury was asked to compare objects transversally. This led to tense discussions, but allowed them to take into account new interdisciplinary practices that were increasingly becoming the norm.²¹ From then on, the judging process would consider “dossiers” as a whole,

rather than focusing only on the artifact submitted for the award.²² This required a positioning on the part of designers that encouraged them to make submissions that were more professional instead of their hitherto rather more vague approach.²³ The holistic selection also helped to sketch out a more detailed picture of the design scene. Previously, assessing projects within the same discipline meant that the emphasis was on “know-how”: technical skills, craft, and constraints within the framework of the discipline. With the new categories, however, this criterion no longer made sense. Different disciplines were mixed, and thus an accent was put on the relevance, quality, and originality of concepts and research.²⁴ This can be read as a nod to the ongoing redefinition of the profession as something that belonged to the cultural sector rather than to the service industry—a tendency that had gained momentum in the 1990s.²⁵

The SFOC also wanted to help designers broaden their networks. Prize-winning designers were offered three options: the usual money prize (CHF 25,000), a stay in an atelier abroad, or an internship organized by the SFOC at a selection of international design studios.²⁶ The aim was to give designers more than financial support by championing professional networking.²⁷ The provision of internships was based on Crivelli’s research²⁸ and addressed a real need: demand exceeded the number of places available.²⁹ The SFOC arguably had a dual intention here. Not only did it want to

help build up designers’ networks, but it also needed to reclaim a position at the center of this network by becoming “an important moderator and initiator.”³⁰ The SFOC aimed to portray itself as a mediator playing an active role in connecting people and promoting designers. No longer a distant institution awarding large sums of money to designers, it now claimed a role “as a node in the so-called ‘design network’” by adopting a proactive position on the scene.³¹

Echoing the design lifestyle

The exhibition, the related series of events, and the catalog all served to create and mediate a complex, layered discourse surrounding the awardees and, by extension, the overall scene itself. They managed to reposition the SDA at the center of the Swiss design scene, and succeeded in creating a renewed sense of excitement that was largely echoed in the national press. This may have been helped by the provision of material in press releases, discourses, and exhibition ephemera, which contrasted with the absence of context in previous years. It also reflected the SFOC’s newfound ability to capture the audience’s imagination through the curation and design of the exhibition, which contributed to redefining the face of the institution and led to increased recognition by practitioners.³²

The network exhibited in 2002 was not restricted to purely professional nodes, but



Fig. 35



Fig. 36



Fig. 37

Fig. 35

The entrance of the 2002 exhibition with the back of the terraces (in green) and the staircase visible in the background.

Fig. 36

The view from the top of the steps.

Fig. 37

Poster for the 2002 Swiss Design Awards exhibition, Elektromog (graphic design), 2002.

Fig. 38

The space in the center of the exhibition. In the foreground, a laptop displayed the plan of the space.

Fig. 38



also included affinities, shared interests, collaborations, and informal meetings at picnics, parties, club nights, and openings.³³ This reflected the new organization of small, recently founded studios, in particular in graphic design. From the late 1990s onwards, these studios expressed a general lack of interest in formal structures such as professional associations,³⁴ preferring informal networks instead.³⁵ Designers' friends were "all designers and all they [did] was talk about design."³⁶ They actively wanted to create tightly knit design communities; they shared studios, played football together, and organized exhibitions and parties.³⁷ In books, they chose to be represented as anti-professionals: by mixing business and pleasure, blurring borders between professional and personal lives, they suggested that work and fun went hand in hand.³⁸ The SFOC's all-encompassing definition gave institutional recognition to a change in the profession: more than a profession, design had become a lifestyle.

These studios concentrated on projects in the cultural field, which were often poorly paid but allowed them to develop more experimental design languages. It is noteworthy in this regard that the only critical review of the 2002 exhibition came in the specialist press in the form of a brief news item that laconically noted an absence of self-awareness in the prevalence of cultural projects. It argued that the exhibition did not address why this "niche economy" was given so much weight in the SDA.³⁹

The recognition by the SFOC of the "design lifestyle" in the Most Beautiful Swiss Books and the SDA had led to an increased promotion of small studios with a practice rooted in the cultural field. They saw winning these competitions as an opportunity to become recognized and to fund their practice, for winning could help them to finance their studios, or sponsor self-initiated projects.⁴⁰ From 1998 onwards, the projects commissioned by the SFOC allowed particular designers to develop work under conditions that were the exception rather than the norm—with decent budgets and the leeway to develop strong graphic concepts. All the designers who were commissioned by the SFOC went on to forge critically recognized careers, which suggests that the SFOC was successful in its role of design promotion. However, it also led to a somewhat predictive role played by networks. Most of the designers then reappeared in the SFOC's internal networks; although these were significant for design, they were not discussed in the 2002 exhibition. For instance, those designers themselves sat on the Federal Design Commission or on the jury for the Most Beautiful Swiss Books. To be sure, juries can never be entirely impartial. However, an external observer might wonder just how much of an echo chamber these juries became. This predictivity points to the less visible and more passive role played by networks, one to which the reorganization of the SDA actually contributed. Whether wittingly or

not, the internal networks accessed by designers within the institution allowed them to continue to award practices close to their own that were located predominantly in the cultural sector, and run by designers who were in one way or another part of their existing networks. The side effect of this was a feedback loop of design promotion. It reduced the breadth of practices awarded, and turned the SDA into a partially self-fulfilling prophecy.

- 1 Now called ZHdK. A series of actors were involved in the collaboration: the Department of Cultural Studies in Art, Media and Design, the Institute for Design and Art Theory, the Design and Art Theory cluster, and the Design Department.
- 2 Beck 2002; Bergflödt 2002; Cerf 2002a; Cerf 2002b; Eschbach 2002; WOZ 2002; Gasser 2002; Kult 2002; Meier 2002; Schneider 2002; *Schöner Wohnen* 2002; Zürcher 2002; NZZ 2002.
- 3 Crivelli, Patrizia, "'Swiss Design 2002: Netzwerke—Réseaux—Networks'. Vernissage vom 18. Oktober 2002, 19:30 Uhr," opening speech at *Swiss Design 2002: Netzwerke—Réseaux—Networks*, Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture archives, October 18, 2002; Crivelli, Patrizia, and Ralf Michel, [untitled], press conference at *Swiss Design 2002: Netzwerke—Réseaux—Networks*, Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture archives, 2002.
- 4 The Federal Design Commission (until 2001: Federal Commission of Applied Arts) is an extra-parliamentary body consisting of five members appointed directly by the Federal Council to advise on design promotion. They take decisions that the secretary of the Design Service executes, though in reality they work in close collaboration. The Commission also acts as jury for the SDA, along with three invited experts. In 2002, the Commission members were Lorette Coen (cultural journalist and chair of the Commission), Ruth Grüninger (fashion designer), Luca Patocchi (gallerist), François Rappo

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	(graphic and type designer), and Annette Schindler (art historian); the experts were Marc Deggeller (set designer, Berlin), Sabine Dreher (curator, Vienna), and Hermann Weizenegger (industrial designer, Berlin).		18. Oktober 2002, 19:30 Uhr," opening speech at <i>Swiss Design 2002: Netzwerke—Réseaux—Networks</i> , Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture archives, October 18, 2002; Crivelli, Patrizia, and Ralf Michel, [untitled], press conference at <i>Swiss Design 2002: Netzwerke—Réseaux—Networks</i> , Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture archives, 2002.	34 NORM 2017.	
5	Lippuner & Buxcel 1989.		21 Michel 2001; Crivelli et al. 2002: 209; <i>Kult</i> 2002.	35 Berthod 2019b; Bruggisser & Fries 2000; Müller, Lars, Ralf Michel, and Patrizia Crivelli, "Erste Gedanken zu Ausstellung und Buch," memo, Swiss Federal Office of Culture archives, n.d.	
6	Gantenbein 1992; 1994; 1995.		22 Coen & Crivelli 2003: 9.	36 Truniger 2018.	
7	Gantenbein 1993; 1994; Locher 1996b.		23 Locher 2002: 19.	37 Macháček 2004.	
8	Jaunin 2001.		24 Cerf 2002b.	38 Bruggisser & Fries 2000.	
9	Locher 1996b.		25 Berthod 2018a.	39 <i>Hochparterre</i> 2002.	
10	Crivelli 1999.		26 There is no obvious link between the studios at which the internships were offered in 2002 and members of the Federal Design Commission. One of the experts, Weizenegger, did offer an internship that year. Since the experts were chosen by the Commission because they were recognized in their field, we can only assume that studios were selected using similar criteria.	40 Gavillet 2017; NORM 2017.	
11	Guggenheimer 2004.		27 Münch & Staub 2005.		
12	Crivelli, Patrizia, and Ralf Michel, [untitled], press conference at <i>Swiss Design 2002: Netzwerke—Réseaux—Networks</i> , Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture archives, 2002: 3.		28 Crivelli 2017.		
13	<i>Tribune de Genève</i> 2001.		29 Gasser 2002. This interest lasted for about a decade before fading; the internships were subsequently dropped.		
14	NORM 2017.		30 Müller, Lars, Ralf Michel, and Patrizia Crivelli, "Erste Gedanken zu Ausstellung und Buch," memo, Swiss Federal Office of Culture archives, 2002; Steiner 2001.		
15	Locher 2002.		31 Crivelli 2002b.		
16	Crivelli, Patrizia, "Briefing Elektromog: Sinn und Zweck der Publikation," Swiss Federal Office of Culture archives, 2002.		32 Barandun & Zumstein 2017.		
17	Keil, Erika, "Kurze Übersicht," Zürcher Hochschule der Künste ZHdK archive, AY-GAY-00009.		33 Müller, Lars, Ralf Michel, and Patrizia Crivelli, "Erste Gedanken zu Ausstellung und Buch," memo, Swiss Federal Office of Culture archives, n.d.		
18	Crivelli, Patrizia, "Vorbereitungspapier für die Feedbackrunde vom 2. Dezember 2002 in Wettingen," memo, Swiss Federal Office of Culture archives, 2002; Steiner 2001.				
19	Müller, Lars, Ralf Michel, and Patrizia Crivelli, "Erste Gedanken zu Ausstellung und Buch," memo, Swiss Federal Office of Culture archives, n.d.				
20	Crivelli, Patrizia, "'Swiss Design 2002: Netzwerke—Réseaux—Networks.' Vernissage vom				