

Introduction

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Reading between the Lines of
Swiss Graphic Design History

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This publication on the reassessment of Swiss graphic design history has the format of a reference book. It assembles a variety of key-words that are without any systematic order, or normative or comprehensive conception. We consider this approach to be an appropriate response to the expectations raised by the title of the research project “Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited.” How might a critical rereading of a national label be achieved—a label that is equally understood as a style, as an economic argument in graphic design history, and as an ongoing practice?¹

The term “Swiss Graphic Design” has been used for different, changing phenomena, and its signification oscillates between styles and professional practices. In the same context, other terms such as Swiss Style, Swiss Typography, (Swiss) International (Typographic) Style, Swiss Modernism, or Konstruktive Gebrauchsgrafik have all been used as specifications, either alongside each other, or as synonymous with “Swiss Graphic Design” and with each other.² Within this ambiguous construct of a national

design label, a canon of designers, works, and publications emerged that forms the basis of practice, theory, and history to this day. This canon was to a large extent created and distributed by the practitioners themselves through publications, lectures, and exhibitions. An early example of how Swiss graphic designer Josef Müller-Brockmann spread selected names abroad is to be found at the Sixth International Design Conference in Aspen in 1956. At the end of his lecture about contemporary “visual art” in Switzerland, he presented a list of all the designers “who contribute an essential share to the formation of style in Switzerland.”³ Those he named in his partial list were: Adolf Flückiger, Karl Gerstner, Armin Hofmann, Siegfried Odermatt, Richard Paul Lohse, Hans Neuburg, Nelly Rudin, Emil Ruder, Gottlieb Soland, Carlo Vivarelli, Alfred Willmann, Max Schmid, Enzo Rösli, Igildo Biesele, and Josef Müller-Brockmann.⁴ His who’s who of Swiss graphic design thus concludes with his own name.

This leads us to a fundamental specificity in graphic design historiography: in self-authored publications, graphic designers interwove their own design theories with examples of what they perceived as outstanding works, thus creating the aforementioned canon of Swiss graphic design.⁵ Clearly it is no coincidence, for example, that Karl Gerstner and Markus Kutter commented explicitly on their goals in their publication *Die neue Graphik/ The New Graphic Art/ Le nouveau art graphique* from 1959.⁶

Our object was [...] to take what is more or less familiar and arrange it in such a way that the stylistic relations between the parts become apparent and the formidable abundance of works of graphic art can be examined in a perspective which allows their chief lines of development to be discerned and a better understanding of the whole to be obtained.⁷

Their text was specifically written with the goal of defining a new field of competence. Claims to a tradition were used to project into the future. However, this reference to a corpus of design should not lead to any misunderstanding that historiography was simply orchestrated by Swiss graphic designers. Both texts and visual showcases have to be understood as being part of the process of international exchange and international reception.⁸ Nevertheless, as these publications were the only references to Swiss graphic design for a long time, they were not usually understood within their original context of teaching or of design theory, but read rather uncritically as history books. In an essay included in a 2007 revised edition of Karl Gerstner's *Programme entwerfen*, Richard Hollis, a major voice in the historiography of graphic design, reflected in an almost poetic way on the changing status of these "sources" as they shift between the ephemeral and the canonical.

Some important books have only a brief life. They may light up an unexplored

area or catch a rising tide of interest before they disappear onto dusty shelves. A few others last, are referred to and recommended by one generation to another.⁹

To this day, the contemporary graphic design scene continues to profit from the label, the canon, and prestige; it reactivates, updates, and redefines the master narrative in line with certain aesthetics, terms, and concepts. In classrooms, studios, exhibitions, and publications, Swiss Style or Swiss Graphic Design remains a recurring topic, and practitioners and established institutions alike make use of the notion of this national label, thus further strengthening it.¹⁰ For example, in the publication that accompanied the exhibition *100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design* at the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich in 2012, Swiss graphic design was claimed to be "one of the country's leading products."¹¹ Awards continue the tradition of singling out contemporary, best-practice examples. Thus instead of critically questioning the label, they further disseminate the idea of specific national design competences.¹² As with the practitioner-organized exhibition *Swiss Style Now*, even when commentators emphasize contemporary design production and innovation, they still make reference to a national tradition:

Swiss Style Now shows how the Swiss graphic heritage still serves as a source of inspiration, but how design is much more versatile, emotional and fun today.¹³

Rereading and reevaluating these rich sources thus becomes necessary. The practitioner-authored publications remain a major source for understanding the history and the development of the Swiss Style. However, at the same time they have to be understood as being representative of certain motivations, functions, and contexts of use.¹⁴ In an interview, Manuel Krebs of studio NORM explained their need to author their own books in opposition to academic practice.

The next book is important. [...] The point is that graphic designers themselves reflect on the things they do. We want to use our means to talk about design, to formulate our ideas graphically. Unlike cultural theorists, who have no clue about fonts. (Wichtig ist das nächste Buch. [...] Es geht darum, dass Grafiker selber über die Dinge, die sie machen, nachdenken. Wir wollen mit unseren Mitteln über Grafik sprechen, unsere Überlegungen grafisch formulieren. Nicht wie Kulturtheoretiker, die von Fonts keine Ahnung haben.)¹⁵

With the establishment of an academic field of graphic design history since the 1980s, a more critical reading of these discourse documents has emerged. Increasingly, the practitioners' narratives and their ideological underpinnings have been questioned with regards to their political and economic settings, their social and discursive function,

and their underlying ideological conceptions and biases.¹⁶ In this context, it seems worth noting that these innovative approaches to Swiss Graphic Design not only questioned the heroic monograph, but also often provided a much-needed view from abroad.

Evidently, when addressing the topic of Swiss Graphic Design it is inevitable that we should engage with the meaning of a national approach to historiography. As argued by Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei in their paper "Real Imagined Communities: National Narratives and the Globalization of Design History," the national framework is by no means fundamentally outdated or even taboo. Instead, national phenomena and identities in design need to be situated simultaneously within the context of the local, regional, and global, if they are to reflect accurately the processes by which design is produced, mediated, and consumed.¹⁷ Calling for a Critical Regionalism, Kenneth Frampton already argued along these lines in the 1970s when he stated that the impact of universal civilization needed to be mediated with elements indirectly derived from the peculiarities of a particular place. He aimed to take the global into account as well as the local, and to include different social, cultural, political, and economic aspects. Most importantly, this approach included discussing the effects of specific local characteristics without celebrating nostalgia, national identities, or vernacular traditions.¹⁸

Against this background, we believe that a reassessment of Swiss Graphic

Design's historiography can neither proceed chronologically nor claim completeness. A single and homogeneous master narrative cannot be maintained. Approaching the renegotiation of this highly complex phenomenon with a contemporary understanding of historiography, we shall go beyond the linear narrative structures that have dominated the field so far. Instead, we have chosen fragmentation as a method of investigating relationships, exploring the fringes, and uncovering untouched territories. Taking our cue from Carlo Ginzburg's approach to microhistories, we suggest that it is through in-depth analyses and meticulous research of small and well-defined subjects in all their complexities that insights into larger phenomena can be gained, insights that are more aware of plurality and less prone to generalization.¹⁹

The present volume gathers together essays that single out terms indicating significant moments within the discourse of Swiss Graphic Design, and question fundamental issues in relation to the established understanding of it. In order to reassess these canons, we aim to reveal mechanisms behind their formation, fill in gaps with new knowledge and names, and trace stereotypes. Above all, however, these terms indicate symptomatic nodes in the discourse that have served diverse functions in cultural politics. Some of these essays also establish connections to other disciplines and relate specific manifestations, undertakings, or documents to historical, political, social, and economic events, including what has so far been

considered as being situated at the fringes of the history of Swiss Graphic Design.

We have focused on terms found in exhibition catalogs, books, journals, and criticism, but also in administrative documents. Our fragmentary reference book is based on exercises of close reading, with the agenda of revising the "critical terms" for the historiography of graphic design.²⁰ This close reading offers an approach to discourse analysis that is informed by metahistorical interests as introduced by Hayden White.²¹

Certainly, we do not want to revert to fixed categories. However, we wish to provide transparency about certain overall structures and questions that are the basis of our research. Our first group of terms refers to the historiographical structures and narrative patterns discussed, following the inherent logic of linearity and progress in relation to modernity ("Cave paintings," "Unfamiliar writing forms"). The second group of entries targets the issue of how descriptive terms become normative labels and value judgments ("Die besten Plakate/Les meilleures affiches," "The Basel School," "Neue Schweizer Schulschrift," "Visualiste"). In the third group, specific strategies of dissemination are highlighted such as can be found in exhibitions and journals ("In eigener Sache," "Lehni Frame," "Schweizer Graphik," "Weltformat"). And, lastly, there are certain terms that open up a rather loose set of further important paradigms, such as specific sites ("Hotspot Milan," "Kunsthalle Bern"), and networks of social scenes and

their protagonists (“Iconophile,” “Netzwerke/ Réseaux/ Networks,” “Popular Culture,” “Sonderstellung”).

Reading our terms and being confronted with expressions in German or French, there might be a moment of puzzlement. However, in reference to the idea of the untranslatable, we are convinced that the original language invites the reader to a close reading of seemingly random phenomena in the discourse.²² The terms in their original language answer a call by Sarah De Bondt and Catherine de Smet that design history in the Anglo-Saxon discourse has to deal with sources in other languages in order to add other cultural specificities to the international discourse.²³ Language is also a prominent topic in designer-authored publications, although it is usually not explicitly addressed. Having international ambitions for both the validity of their theories and their growing practices, Swiss designers often released their writings in several languages. While some authors decided to release tailored publications for each market, many iconic publications were trilingual.²⁴

These essays are written by researchers who share an enthusiasm for graphic design but come from a variety of backgrounds, from graphic design practice and teaching to art history. The specific structure of this volume intends to bring to the foreground various perspectives on the subject by individuals with their own specific self-understanding as practitioners, teachers, art historians, and designers. It is our intention that the authors’

competencies should complement and challenge each other in a productive way. Moreover, this book was produced parallel to the writing of extended case studies as PhD theses with highly individual foci.

- 1 In 2014 “Swiss Graphic Design and Typography” figured in the list proposed by the Federal Office of Culture (FOC) for the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. See www.bak.admin.ch/bak/de/home/kulturerbe/immaterielles-kulturerbe/umsetzung/vorschlagslistedes-immateriellen-kulturerbes-in-der-schweiz/schweizer-grafikdesign-und-typografie.html (accessed Mar. 23, 2020).
- 2 Beegan 2016: 294–297.
- 3 Müller-Brockmann 1956: 3.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Margolin 2012 (1994): 99. “All the authors were trained as graphic designers and share similar values about the canon of their profession. This canon has neither developed randomly nor been institutionalized in the manner of an academic literary canon. Rather, it resulted from a selection process that has celebrated noteworthy designs in professional magazines such as *Novum / Gebrauchsgraphik*, *Graphis* and *Print*, as well as in numerous picture books and occasional museum exhibitions.” Prominent examples of such historiographical works are Gerstner & Kutter 1959; Müller-Brockmann 1961;

- Gerstner 1963; Hofmann 1965; Müller-Brockmann 1971; Müller-Brockmann & Yoshikawa 1971; Frutiger 1980; Müller-Brockmann 1981; Lutz 1987; Hochuli & Kinross 1996; Weingart 1999; Bruggisser & Fries 2000; Klanten, Hellige & Mischler 2000. Canonical and arguably canonizing, but not historiographical, books, are, for example, Ruder 1967; Gerstner 1972; NORM 1999; NORM 2002.
- 6 Gerstner & Kutter 1959.
- 7 Gerstner & Kutter 1959: 4.
- 8 Scotford 2012 (1991): 40–43.
- 9 Hollis 2007: 7.
- 10 For example, the exhibition *Swiss Style Now* by the Lucerne-based graphic designers Erich Brechbühl and Noël Leu that has been touring internationally since 2016 or the exhibition *100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design* at the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich in 2012.
- 11 Brändle et al. 2014: 9.
- 12 For example, the SFOC still annually awards prizes to The Most Beautiful Swiss Books. Since 2001, practitioners from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland have together organized an annual poster award under the name <https://100-beste-plakate.de/> (accessed Mar. 23, 2020).
- 13 <https://weltformat-festival.ch/en/2018/exhibitions/swiss-style-now> (accessed Mar. 23, 2020).
- 14 Hollis's statement is reminiscent of Gumbrecht's accounts of a growing understanding of the varied, shifting reception of texts and a consequential shift towards a focus on differences in the sense-making of specific communities with and through texts, rather than through their content alone. Gumbrecht 1992: 4.
- 15 Widmer 2000: 13.
- 16 Dilnot 1984a; 1984b.
- 17 Fallan & Lees-Maffei 2016a: 18.
- 18 Frampton 1983: 147–162.
- 19 Ghobrial 2019. For a discussion of the relationship between approaches of micro-history and national history, see Berger & Lorenz 2010: 1–25.
- 20 Nelson & Shiff 2003 (1996).
- 21 White 1980.
- 22 Cassin 2004.
- 23 Cassin 2004; De Bondt & de Smet 2012a.
- 24 A particularly interesting case is Jan Tschichold. Even though he did not lack any international ambitions, he never released any multilingual books. Instead, he worked with various local publishers to produce translations, sometimes even including new visual material by local designers in order to reach his respective audience; see, for example, the Swedish and Dutch editions of his *Typographische Gestaltung* from 1935. See Tschichold 1935; 1937; 1938.