Symposium & Workshop

Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland

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ABSTRACTS
Whist graphic design history still struggles with defining its position, the role of the graphic design archive within the academy is increasingly gaining visibility and defining what a history of the profession and its pedagogical framework might be. The intent of this paper is to explore the potential of such an archive as an intersection for re(mapping) a future for graphic design history, research and education.

The argument draws upon the work of historian Keith Jenkins who suggests in his classic book, Rethinking History (1991, 2003 edition) that history is a “field of force”. In other words, it is possible to consider “the discourse of history” as “a series of ways of organising the past by and for interested parties”, but always with considered intent (Jenkins, 85). This has interesting parallels with the inherent process involved with graphic design and, specifically, the curatorial and editorial process through which the past is organized and displayed e.g. exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues. The history of graphic design is more than a history of graphic objects; it’s also a history of narratives formulated around process, production, social interaction, and discourse.

In re(mapping) a future for graphic design history, we might ask: how can the design archive help us reconsider the ways in which we understand this history and for whom is it intended?

Equally, how might a mapping of the past inform contemporary and future practice? This paper takes two case studies and focuses on the ways in which an archive becomes a prompt for undertaking historical research about graphic design: Oslo National Academy of the Art’s Typography Archive, Norway and the Graphic Design Archives, Royal College of Art, UK. Graphic Design History, research and education can thus be re-envisioned in terms of a field of force with its own logic and motivation.

WOLFGANG WEINGART – TYPOGRAPHY IN CONTEXT:
TRADITION, MEDIA REVOLUTIONS AND INNOVATION IN THE WORK OF
WOLFGANG WEINGART 1961–2004

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Wolfgang Weingart (born 1941) is considered the “enfant terrible” of modern Swiss typography. He ranks among the most significant of the visual designers who in the late 1960s decidedly departed from the established Swiss Style and pursued new and experimental forms of typography. Between 1968 and 2004 he taught typography at the Basel School of Design (since 2000 on a University level), and influenced several generations of visual designers, many of whom came from overseas (USA, Australia, New Zealand, Asia) and carried these influences back to their home countries. Among his most famous students are April Greiman and Dan Friedman who, after their return from Basel, co-founded the postmodern New Wave in the U.S.

The research project represents the first major academic investigation of Wolfgang Weingart’s typographic work. It aims to situate his artistic attitude in relation to (inter-)national typographic and artistic movements, and to analyze and evaluate his practical and theoretical innovations in media, as well as his research approach and its implications. Weingart’s artistic approach is particularly relevant in view of current debates concerning design research, because he combined procedural and experimental work with an application-oriented research approach, and from 1968 onward incorporated this also into his teaching of typography at the Advanced Class for Graphic Design at the Basel School of Design.

The paper will give an overview of this recent academic research and of the preliminary basic archive and inventory work that enabled the academic research and the exhibition that is being prepared. Questions about the role and the relevance of basic and academic research and curatorial practice in writing and reconstructing graphic design history will be addressed.
The research project aims:
· to track back the professional history of type design education and practices in Switzerland;
· to detect roots and components of an emerging specific graphic design culture;
· to make data archives accessible for further research;
· and to enrich the contemporary type design culture.

Framework, research questions:
· what international and national traditions in teaching type design merged and merge in Switzerland?;
· who were the leading authorities in type design (schools, design-agencies/designers, type-foundries etc.)?;
· what could be the goal of type design education in an industrial context, a post-industrial, digital context.
Switzerland is said to have had a remarkable impact on the development of the historiography of graphic design (Drucker, 2009). Indeed, throughout the 20th century, and particularly in its second half, Swiss designers were extraordinarily prolific in creating some widely recognized retrospective publications and exhibitions. For the most part, their historical narratives were addressed at fellow designers and otherwise visually oriented audiences. Against this backdrop, we claim that these publications and exhibitions represent historical contexts not only through of their use of language or selection of works, but also — and perhaps even more fundamentally — by virtue of their editorial and exhibition designs.

The present paper traces a poster designed by Josef Müller-Brockmann through selected publications and exhibitions, edited and/or curated in Switzerland between 1955 and 2012. It showcases a paradigmatic visual canonization process by analyzing the ways in which editorial and exhibition design complement and expand the possibilities of text with regard to the creation of historical narratives. It appears that these publications and exhibitions “design” the past foremost by means of creating visual relationships. These insights affirm our hypothesis according to which editorial and exhibition design should be perceived as central “epistemological technologies” within graphic design historiography (Preziosi, 1993).

Finally, the paper suggests two representation of history that are methodically unique to graphic design: The first relies on an entirely visual editorial design, the second on interactive information visualization.


The exhibitions held at Triennale Design Museum in Milan (“TDM5”) and at the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich (“100 Jahre Schweizer Grafik”) represent two milestones for twentieth century’s history of graphic design in Italy and Switzerland. In some cases the exhibitions were echoing each other: same authors and, in several cases, identical projects. The Milan exhibition welcomed visitors with quotations by two Swiss authors: Jan Tschichold and Lora Lamm. The Zurich exhibition featured some iconic works made for Italian design as Swiss graphic design, such as the illustrations by Lora Lamm for Pirelli. What is Swiss graphic design and what is Italian graphic design, then?

A number of Swiss graphic designers have been active in Italy, either temporarily or permanently. Nevertheless institutions and critics have only recently started to highlight these authors “on the border”. If we look at these Swiss graphic designers as a whole – from Imre Reiner to Max Huber, from Aldo Calabresi to Felix Humm – they represent the most influential community of foreign designers in Italy, in some cases still active.

Their clients cover a variety of Italian brands known worldwide: la Rinascente, Olivetti, Biennale di Venezia, Valentino, Alfa Romeo, Stefanel among others. Can these projects, all affected by the typically Italian phenomenon that makes graphic design an ancillary discipline of product design, be classified as made in Italy, or are they examples of Swiss style? This is the space for further research on the influence of Swiss graphic design beyond national and identity rhetoric.
LES 50 DERNIÈRES ANNÉES DU GRAPHISME SUISSE ROMAND (1964–2014)

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Le corpus des connaissances et des réflexions théoriques relatives au design graphique suisse romand est réduit, si on le compare au design graphique suisse allemand. En effet, la littérature a massivement mis l’accent sur ces productions car c’est dans cette partie du pays que se sont développées les écoles, les institutions (notamment à Bâle et à Zurich) et les réalisations qui ont marqué l’histoire. À partir du contexte de deux expositions, un désir de recherche systématique, doublé d’un effort d’animation de la scène graphique romande a émergé. Les récentes expositions Panorama (Centre d’art contemporain, Genève, 2011) et Aperçu (Museum für Gestaltung, Zürich, 2012) organisées par le studio de graphisme Schönherwehrs basé à Genève, ont amorcé un mouvement qui ne demande qu’à être poursuivi.

Ce projet de recherche interdisciplinaire, réunissant des historiens et des praticiens de la discipline s’inscrit dans cette continuité. Il vise à produire de nouvelles connaissances sur l’histoire du graphisme suisse romand de ces cinquante dernières années (1964–2014) et à valoriser les productions visuelles de cette partie de la Suisse, en élaborant un base de données. Les premières étapes de ce “mapping” territorial seront présentées lors de cette conférence.
Swissness, as some cultural historians claim, is not a swiss but a british invention, made more then two hundred years ago, even before the birth of the helvetian confederation in 1848. However, the discovery of Switzerland as a tourist destination brought about a new industry dedicated to the design of swissness: the souvenir industry. It all began with veduta etchings in the late 18th century. Generally, these early souvenirs are counted among arts, not design, and have been widely studied in art history. But since their manufacturers, the so-called little masters, produced them serially and sold them in bulks they may likewise be looked at as graphic design artifacts. Veduta etchings’ iconography survives to date not only in touristic campaigns and postcards but also in a bewildering variety of souvenir products.

This presentation attempts to draw back how the veduta migrated from the second to the third dimension, as it were from graphic to product design. Furthermore, it will refer to current graphic strategies in souvenir design and indagate how they construe contemporary swissness.

The analysis is based on ongoing research into swiss souvenir design history. It basically understands tourism as an imagery machine and souvenir objects as signs trading identity. Methodologically, it combines grounded theory with iconology and semiotics and is rooted both in cultural and design history.
ANALYZING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE BASEL SCHOOL OF DESIGN AS A CASE STUDY

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The early history of the Basel School of Design’s international reputation developed out of the innovative cultural environments that manifested modernist tendencies in the late 1920s, both in Switzerland and abroad. Encircled by post-World War II Europe, Basel’s methodological approach toward design education, began to attract international students whose numbers would increase significantly in the 1960s and whose professional activities would proliferate these stylistic and didactic innovations globally.

In the late 1940s, the developing Basel curriculum synthesized systematic, discipline-based, kinaesthetic techniques into a didactic focused on training perception, craft-skills, compositional sensitivity, and analysis of image and meaning. With this – and the professional success of its instructors (e.g. Ruder, Hofmann, and later Weingart) – Basel became an internationally acknowledged centre of design and design education.

To date, little has been researched, analysed or published regarding these issues, on either an objective scientific or critical level; therefore we will begin our investigation by defining and implementing methodology that will validate the objectivity of the outcome. Our research plan includes the development of interview guidelines, video recorded interviews with members of the faculty involved in the development of the Basel curriculum (ca. 1940–1980), analysis of the transcribed interviews by an international group of experts.

Using these tools, the issues to be investigated will include: Historical drivers, curriculum, pedagogical goals and practices, protagonists profiles/self-assessments, and peer reviews. Two priorities are: Interviews of the relevant protagonists and a structured analysis of the individual course content.

The completed research will be distributed in a published form where, we hope, to open a broader interdisciplinary discourse with other Design Schools in Switzerland and abroad, as well as developing an exchange of knowledge and experience with other image generating sciences. And last but not least, to heighten an awareness of what the expression “Swiss Design” represents.