Introduction: New Perspectives on Swiss Graphic Design

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Why Swiss Graphic Design Again, Now?

In reviewing the two publications—"Josef Müller-Brockmann" by Kerry William Purcell and "Swiss Graphic Design: The Origins and Growth of an International Style, 1920–1965" by Richard Hollis—Michael J. Golec noted that "when it comes to the graphic design of Josef Müller-Brockmann, we had to contend with what John Walker has referred to as 'typological' approaches-or studies and categorizations of designed objects according to type." This approach applies not only to the work of Müller-Brockmann but also to the entire previous investigation of graphic design from Switzerland. Or, to put it more sharply, the construct of Swiss graphic design represents an outdated historiography based on a "sorting out of objects according to 'authorship, chronology, national and individual styles, and authenticity'" more than any other label in design history.[1] Golec goes on to ask the question, "what then constitutes an informed history of the graphic design of Müller-Brockman?" This special edition is an attempt to answer this question when related to Swiss graphic design.

In graphic design history, the terms "Swiss graphic design," "Swiss typography," or "Swiss style" regularly denote an international style that can be applied to a variety of media, such as posters, books, corporate identities, and signage systems. This style emerged in Switzerland during the 1950s, was used by graphic designers in Switzerland and many other Western countries, and gained an excellent reputation worldwide. However, the term was used not only to define a certain, specific style, but also in many variations to describe graphic design from Switzerland in general, or design produced by Swiss graphic designers. This definitional blurring has in fact contributed to the success of the term. The nomination of "Swiss graphic design" as one of eight Swiss Candidatures proposed to UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2014 confirms the relevance of "traditional craftsmanship."[2] From this perspective, it becomes clear that "Swiss graphic design and typography" has not yet come to an

1 Michael J. Golec, "A Review Essay," *Design Issues* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 85.

2 See "Graphic design and typography," in *Die lebendigen Traditionen der Schweiz* [Living Traditions in Switzerland], http://www.lebendigetraditionen.ch/traditionen/00247/index.html?lang=en (accessed April 10, 2020).

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end: "It is still negotiated in classrooms, studios, exhibition spaces, and publications."[3] Furthermore, it is still in production and has been claimed as "one of the country's leading products."[4] The label, "Swiss graphic design and typography," thus oscillates between a closed mythology and a history still-in-the-making. However, what is missing is, on the one hand, an analysis of the discourses that have produced the labels of "Swiss graphic design" and "Swiss typography" and, on the other, an effort to look beyond the boundaries of these concepts so that stories can be told about them that are different from those that have long been accepted. This special issue intends to re-examine the existing networks, practices, and media that determine this discourse and to identify ones that might have been hitherto overlooked. As a result, we propose new approaches to graphic design history that go far beyond previous studies of the discipline.

Historiographical Challenges

The continuing and broad public interest in Swiss graphic design was reflected in the approximately 30,000 visitors to the exhibition, *100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design,* at the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich in 2012.[5] One daily newspaper reported on the exhibition as "a search for and discovery of a unique Swiss design identity," and it proved to be an event of national and international relevance.[6] Part of this exhibition was a "continuous frieze of posters documenting the 100-year period of the show (which goes along with) the thirteen crucial moments of Swiss graphic design."[7] Yet, unlike these moments derived from traditional graphic design historiography, the frieze "does not select posters because of their aesthetic quality or the ideological similarities between them, but instead applies criteria such as politics, zeitgeist, gender, geography, nostalgia, and national identity to [their] selection and sequence." This curatorial move was "buil[t] on the existing canon of Swiss graphic design" but also "open[ed] up the discussion to historical issues beyond graphic design."[8] That this curatorial approach was considered innovative is not surprising. After all, the conventional historiography of Swiss graphic design had been on a different course, entailing 50 years of objectification, personification, and glorification. Revising this outdated perspective was important in itself and also seemed necessary for another reason:

> If design historians are to present themselves as valuable contributors to such collective historical research, they have to make a persuasive case for the relevance of their knowledge to fora outside of their field. This is the challenge I put to the design history community. … Design historians have to broaden the understanding of design they communicate to their students, and they

3 Robert Lzicar and Davide Fornari, "Writing Graphic Design History in Switzerland," in *Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland,* eds. Robert Lzicar and Davide Fornari (Zürich: Triest Verlag, 2016), 8.

4 Karin Gimmi, "Introduction," in *100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design,* ed. Museum für Gestaltung Zürich: et al. (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2014), 9.

5 The exhibition, *100 Jahre Schweizer Grafik,* took place at the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich from February 10, 2012, to June 3, 2012 and was curated by Barbara Junod and Karin Gimmi.

6 Katrin Schregenberger, "Die Schweizer Grafik von Weltformat," in *Schaffhauser Nachrichten,* February 8, 2012: 29. In the original German, "Die Ausstellung *100 Jahre Schweizer Grafik* fühlt sich an wie eine Identitätssuche und -findung einer ureigenen Schweizer Gestaltungsweise."

7 Davide Fornari, "Triennale Design Museum 5. Grafica Italiana vs 100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design" [Triennale Design Museum 5. Italian Graphic Design vs 100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design], *Progetto Grafico* [Graphic Design], 21 (Summer 2012): 63.

8 Robert Lzicar and Amanda Unger, "Designed Histories: Visual Historiography and Canonization in Swiss Graphic Design History," in *Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland,* eds. Robert Lzicar and Davide Fornari (Zürich: Triest Verlag, 2016), 267.

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also need to pay closer attention to the ways that design researchers other than historians are thinking about the subject. Is the design history community up to the task? I hope so.[9]

Swiss Graphic Design as a Glocal Issue

Summarizing the literature on graphic design and typography in Switzerland, one can say that it was initially dominated by a group of male designers who wrote about selected objects in professional journals published by professional associations, such as the *Typografische Monatsblätter* [Swiss Typographic Magazine] of the *Schweizerischer Typographenbund* [Swiss Association of Typographers], and for non-institutional networks like *Neue Grafik* [New Graphic Design], which was run by a Zurich-based editorial collective that also shared professional values. These publications formed the foundation of "konstruktive Gebrauchsgrafik" [constructive applied graphics] and, in retrospect, of the historical construction of the Swiss Style.

This thematic focus was followed by publications focusing on the key actors of the era—the life and work of individual designers, companies, or specific media, and their designs or subjects, such as posters, books, or typefaces.[10] This genealogy of publications has continued into our own time. Because their authors operated mostly in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, historiography has tended to overlook the Swiss periphery, such as the French- and Italian-speaking regions, as well as the fact that professional graphic design at that time was an interregional and international practice.

Many of these texts were authored by experts or journalists, and often also by graphic designers themselves who were targeting a large audience of other professionals or design enthusiasts. The important role of practitioners in the historiography of graphic design and the problems resulting from this disciplinary perspective are well known.[11] Designed by and for graphic designers, their publications "seem to 'design' the past, primarily by creating visual relationships," which "contributed to both the strong identity of the label Swiss graphic design and its degree of recognition in Switzerland and abroad."[12] However, this visual historiography has resulted in a strong canon and a "neat history" that reduces a rich past with a vast number of different designers and approaches down "to a certain period and certain actors within that period."[13]

More recent narratives have been devoted to aesthetics, styles, and eras or, less frequently, to selected places. Contemporary practices and attitudes are described by referencing historical topics. However, many of these histories lack a research question and thus rarely enter into the academic discourse, representing instead an outdated approach to graphic design history that neither

9 Victor Margolin, "Design in History," *Design Issues* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 104–5.

10 For a comprehensive repertoire of Swiss graphic design, see *Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland*, eds. Robert Lzicar and Davide Fornari (Zürich: Triest Verlag, 2017), 283–312.

11 Teal Triggs, "Graphic Design History: Past, Present, and Future," *Design Issues* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 4.

12 Robert Lzicar and Amanda Unger, "Designed Histories: Visual Historiography and Canonization in Swiss Graphic Design History," in *Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland*, eds. Robert Lzicar and Davide Fornari (Zürich: Triest Verlag, 2016), 267–68.

13 Sarah Owens, "'The Whole Picture: Locating Women in Swiss Graphic Design History' or Rather: 'The Graphic Design Canon: When History Gets Too Neat'," conference presentation, AGI Open Conference, Biel/Bienne, September 22, 2015.

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broaches the problem of the category "Swiss" for a contemporary discussion of graphic design, nor deals with the complex underlying structures of graphic design practices, discourses, networking actions, and curricula.[14]

In This Special Issue

This special issue builds on the results of the research project, "Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited." The project involved 12 researchers from 7 Swiss universities and 13 associate researchers over 4 years. Thus, it was the largest academic research project in the field of design ever funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation—the science research support organization mandated by the Swiss Federal Government.[15] This research project focused on Swiss graphic design and typography and its ongoing legitimacy, reputation, and status in three sub-projects: "Principles of Education," "Networks of Practice," and "Strategies of Dissemination." It considered "Swiss graphic design and typography" not as a monolithic label or style, but as a multi-faceted construction within an international discourse. This perspective was taken into account by the collaboration of the team's Swiss and foreign researchers, who worked in mixed research groups. They produced various small-scale narratives that together offered a more complete and flexible interpretation of "Swiss graphic design and typography" than extant literature has constructed, and these narratives questioned the existing canon of Swiss graphic design in a variety of ways. By focusing on historiographical and methodological challenges, the articles selected for the present special issue highlight these new perspectives.[16]

Several design schools have retrospectively attained a mythical status. This rise in status has often occurred hand in hand with the rise in fame of their faculty because of their inclusion in the graphic design discourse through articles on teaching principles in trade magazines, internationally disseminated educational books, and celebratory yearbooks. In such a hagiographic context, one of the most important voices is absent. Sandra Bischler's essay, "*K* and *output*—Two Student Publications in Light of Mid-Twentieth Century Graphic Design Education," focuses on *K,* a magazine edited and published by a group of students at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel (Vocational Trade School, later the Basel School of Design) in the early 1960s, which has been completely neglected in the historiography on Swiss graphic design to date. By analyzing *K*'s contents and editorial design in comparison with other schools of the same period—primarily the Ulm School of Design and its students' publication *output*—Bischler reveals close connections with certain educational philosophies and also uncovers previously overlooked debates on graphic design education.

14 For one exception, see Tan Wälchli, "The Afterlife of Swiss Style: An Experiment in Political Economy," in *The Most Beautiful Swiss Books: The present issue,* ed. Bundesamt für Kultur et al., (Bern: Bundesamt für Kultur, 2008), 72–83. In this essay, Wälchli critically questions the attribution of Swiss national clichés to graphic design and relates it to Swiss "spiritual national defence" during the Second World War.

15 This project was supported within the framework of the Swiss National Science Foundation SNSF Sinergia scheme, which promotes collaboration between research groups "that propose breakthrough research." See http://www.snf.ch/en/funding/programmes/sinergia/Pages/default.aspx (accessed April 10, 2020). The research team included: Prof. Dr. Arne Scheuermann (main applicant), Prof. Michael Renner, Prof. Dr. Sarah Owens, Prof. Dr. Peter J. Schneemann (co-applicants), Prof. Dr. Davide Fornari, Prof. Robert Lzicar (co-coordinators and researchers), Tina Braun (assistant coordinator), Dr. Chiara Barbieri, Prof. Rudolf Barmettler, Roland Früh, Jonas Niedermann, Prof. François Rappo (researchers), and Jonas Berthod, Sandra Bischler, Constance Delamadeleine, Ueli Kaufmann, Sarah Klein, and Sara Zeller (doctoral students). This research project was supervised by a panel of experts including Prof. Dr. Jeremy Aynsley (University of Brighton), Prof. Dr. Barbara Bader (Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart), Prof. Dr. Claude Hauser (Université de Fribourg), †Prof. Em. Dr. Victor Margolin (University of Illinois at Chicago), Prof. Dr. Catherine de Smet (Université Paris-VIII), and Prof. Dr. Teal Triggs (Royal College of Art, London). For further information, see www.sgdtr.ch (accessed April 10, 2020).

16 A four-volume publication with contributions from all three sub-projects and nine case studies will be published in March 2021, see *Swiss Graphic Design Histories,* eds. Davide Fornari, Robert Lzicar, Sarah Owens, Michael Renner, Arne Scheuermann and Peter J. Schneemann, (Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2021).

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Designers themselves have overexploited their monographs to enhance their reputations through the years. These monographs include self-referenced books, in which designers themselves showcase the best of their production in chronological order or within taxonomies, and in retrospective, post-mortem catalogs of works with an approach typical for art history. The essay in this issue by Chiara Barbieri and Davide Fornari, "Speaking Italian with a Swiss-German Accent: Walter Ballmer and Swiss Graphic Design in Milan," asks critical questions about the oft-repeated rhetoric that hailed graphic design in Milan as a mixture of Swiss precision and Italian poeticism. It takes Walter Ballmer as a case study to revisit the monographic format: a Swiss graphic designer trained in Basel who spent most of his life working in Milan. Largely based on unpublished archival material from the Ballmer Archive and on oral history through interviews with colleagues and clients, this article shows how designers have shaped their biographies by excluding critical aspects from their self-representation. Here, networks of people (designers, assistants, clients) are investigated outside the heroic approach that is otherwise typical of the celebrity-centered narrative.

Although Paris and Milan were long-favored destinations for designers trained in Switzerland, the former remains an underexplored scene in its exploitation of a "Swiss Style," connected to stereotypes such as precision and quality. The essay by Constance Delamadeleine, "Promoting Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Abroad: The Case of Paris in the 1960s," explores the network of different actors involved in the formation and dissemination of "Swiss graphic design and typography" in France, and it sheds light on the different agendas and strategies linked to this process. Delamadeleine here reveals how, during a period when Europe was being newly constructed as a political community and before a backdrop of the liberalization of world trade, both state actors and non-state actors aimed to strengthen Switzerland's international position by reinforcing abroad the value and significance of its cultural and economic presence. The "Swiss living abroad" became important in furthering this national objective. In Paris, a network of Swiss citizens was established in the 1960s comprising different stakeholders, including the graphic designers and typographers who contributed to disseminating and promoting Swiss graphic design and typography on the French stage and beyond.

Swiss graphic designers working outside Switzerland were not alone in contributing to the dissemination of Swiss graphic design. The non-Swiss who reflected on graphic design practice in Switzerland from a foreigner's perspective were just as important. Robert Lzicar's essay, "Swiss Graphic Design: A British Invention?," explores the role of British graphic designers in transforming

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"konstruktive Gebrauchsgrafik" into both the "Swiss Style" and a general approach to design problems—a transformation that was promoted beyond Swiss national borders. Interviews with graphic designers and other experts reveal a complex process of co-definition at both local and international levels. Lzicar's essay calls into question the concept of Swiss graphic design as a monolithic label.

In the literature, the history of Swiss graphic design regularly is told as a linear development from illustrative tendencies to Modernist abstraction. As shown in recent research, these narratives were largely constructed and disseminated by a group of Modernist graphic designers through journals and their own publications. The Modernists themselves usually segregate designers of that time into two camps—namely, the individual or illustrative versus the abstract or Modern. This dichotomy became established early on and continues to shape the narrative of Swiss graphic design to this day. However, the essay by Sara Zeller, "Centering the Periphery: Reassessing Swiss Graphic Design Through the Prism of Regional Characteristics," argues that design practice in Switzerland in the 1950s was more diverse than hitherto assumed. Outside an exclusive circle of practitioners, illustration and abstraction were understood more as design methods than as attitudes. Taking this observation as her starting point, Zeller looks beyond this dichotomy and draws on hitherto unpublished sources of the time to challenge the traditional understanding of Swiss graphic design.

To conclude, we would like to refer to the question of the state of design history as asked by Teal Triggs in 2011. At the end of her article, "Graphic Design History: Past, Present, and Future," she calls for "more trained design historians to provide a context to the understanding of graphic objects, movements, and people;" she also desires that they "celebrate the practitioner-historians who also have the capacity to locate, explain, and contribute to the development of graphic design practice."[17] We have sought to apply this dual approach in the present special issue. If we look at the background of our authors, then "either/or" distinctions and polarities develop into "both/and" realities, to "yes and yes." Most of these authors have completed a practical training in graphic design, have gained professional experience, and have only decided subsequently to engage with the history of their practice. The project, "Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited," created structures for them to develop their academic skills and to deal in a scholarly manner with historiography in graphic design. The concept of the practitioner-historian must therefore be redefined for the future.

17 Triggs, "Graphic Design History: Past, Present, and Future," 6.

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