The Basel School

Deconstructing Labels of Swiss Graphic Design Education

Sarah Klein, Sandra Bischler

The term "school" has been applied ambiguously in the context of Swiss graphic design history. In addition to being used literally to designate an educational institution, it has also denoted a style affiliation or a common formative mindset in order to simplify the attribution of certain creative phenomena. In combination with local attributes, such as, for example, "Basel," "Zurich," or even "Swiss," the term has served to describe complex phenomena of graphic design and typography.[1] However, the equation of the term "school" with "style" can inevitably only represent a contraction of institutional reality that conceals a multitude of influences and viewpoints. This becomes evident when taking a closer look at which actors used the term "school" in connection with graphic design and typography during the first half of the 20th century, at the ways in which they used it, and not least at the various motives behind it.

A school model for graphic design

A catalyst for the use of the term "school" in the Swiss graphic design and typography discourse was the implementation of Fachklassen für Graphik, full-time graphic design classes at public arts and crafts schools in the early 20th century. The *Fachklassen* were introduced in addition to the prevailing educational model of the apprenticeship in the printing workshop of a graphic artist or lithographer.[2] Alfred Altherr senior, director of the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich, ventured as early as 1916 to make the optimistic, but false, prediction that school education might even replace apprenticeships in the near future.[3] However, over the following decades, this new model had to assert itself primarily against skeptical tradespeople. For example, in 1929, and thus more than one decade after the implementation of Fachklassen, a proponent of the school model still noted a lack of recognition, both among certain professionals and among the general population.[4]

The strategy of the educational institutions—above all the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich and the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule (AGS) Basel—was to equate the term "school" with notions of excellence, quality, and progress, and to anchor it as a catchword for a specific educational philosophy.

During the 1940s, when Swiss graphic design education was undergoing the decisive steps of its legalization process, the

arts and crafts schools intensified their demarcation efforts. For example, Hermann Kienzle, director of AGS Basel, wrote in 1941:

> A student leaving school [...] should have at least experienced what can be the highest achievements in his or her profession. This awakening and refinement of a conscience for the quality of his or her work is the best thing that a school can give to its students for their own practice. (Der Schüler, der die Schule verlässt, soll wenigstens [...] erlebt haben, was in seinem Beruf höchste Leistung sein kann. Diese Weckung und Verfeinerung des Gewissens für die Qualität seiner Arbeit ist das Beste, was die Schule dem Schüler in die Praxis mitgeben kann.)[5]

However, it was precisely the transferability of this quality into practice that was doubted by the trade itself. In an article in the magazine *Das Werk*, Berchtold von Grünigen, a teacher at the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich, discussed the accusations that the school model was unworldly and lacked practical relevance:

> For them [the graphic design practitioners], the school, with its consistent training to achieve quality, is floating in the clouds of an ideal that in their view is proved wrong in practice. (Für sie [die Grafiker, Anm. d. V.] hängt die Schule mit ihrer konsequenten Ausbildung zur Qualität in den Wolken einer Idealvorstellung, die nach ihrer Ansicht in der Praxis Lügen gestraft wird.)[6]

He responded to these accusations with the argument that the schools would produce "open-minded designers of new solutions by which they enrich and fertilize practice" (aufgeschlossene Gestalter neuer Lösungen, mit denen sie die Praxis bereichern und befruchten).[7]

The two schools in Zurich and Basel considered themselves as innovators and persistent promoters of "neue schweizerische Graphik" (new Swiss graphic design)[8]—which emphasized their importance not only for the profession itself, but also for the cultural prestige of the nation. According to this narrative, it was primarily the school model that established Swiss graphic design's great international reputation.[9]

Swiss quality

In the discourse on graphic design and typography, other educational institutions also claimed a leading role in the development of a national "quality" in the profession. The question as to just what this specific quality was, and where it originated from, was a matter of controversial debate. In the case of "Swiss" typography, this is

reflected in trade journals, such as the fortnightly *Helvetische Typographia* or the monthly *Typographische Monatsblätter* (*TM*), both published by the Schweizerischer Typographenbund (Swiss Typographers' Association). Apart from the schools in Basel and Zurich, institutions in Aarau, Bern, Biel/Bienne, Lucerne, and St. Gallen also presented themselves or criticized each other. The authors regularly linked regional or national attributions with stereotypes of styles, which took on a political dimension—especially in the context of World War II and Switzerland's *Geistige Landesverteidigung* (Spiritual national defense).[10]

An example of this is the heated debate about the St. Gallen Fachschule für Buchdrucker (School of Printing) in the 1940s that was started by an article in *Helvetische Typographia* about supplements in *TM*, and that led to a discussion in these magazines about the style or "way" of the St. Gallen school and the origins of "Swiss" typography. In *Helvetische Typographia* in 1943, an anonymous author wrote that, in particular, no "fascist supplements and St. Gallen 'ways'"[11] were desired in *TM*, and thus he wanted to exclude the St. Gallen School of Printing from the typographic discourse. An attempt to defend the St. Gallen typography was made by the graphic designer Hausammann in an article in *TM* in 1944. He described it as one of two major directions in Swiss typography. The St. Gallen School of Printing could take credit, he

wrote, for the application of the traditional "healthy, original and down-to-earth forms" (gesunden, ursprünglichen und bodenständigen Formen"). The second direction, however, he described as sober, functional, lifeless typography that "is misused to create the most impossible aesthetic manipulations by means of constructivist speculations with blocks, groups, planes and spaces [...]" (die durch konstruktivistische Spekulationen mit Blöcken, Gruppen, Flächen und Räumen [...] zu den unmöglichsten ästhetischen Manipulationen missbraucht [wird])[12] and had no potential to last. Hausammann declared the St. Gallen typography as the more sustainable direction, and claimed that it had spread over the country to become "Swiss" typography. The same argument was made by the author using the pen name "boe" in the *Helvetische Typographia*, namely that for a long time these approaches hadn't been "St. Gallen ways" anymore, for this typography had long since become "Swiss."[13]

Both Hausammann and "boe" linked a regional school to specific stylistic qualities and declared these to have gone national. But this very "Swissness" in typography was controversial. Emil Ruder, a typography teacher at AGS Basel and a sharp critic of St. Gallen typography, asked bluntly "What particularly Swiss traits does this typography have?" (Was für besonders schweizerische Züge weist diese Typographie auf?)[14] and immediately delivered a statement about what he considered to be genuinely

Swiss, namely: "a pronounced sense for honesty of work and material" (ausgesprochene[r] Sinn für Ehrlichkeit der Arbeit und des Materials).[15] The editors of *TM* also disagreed with Hausammann's arguments:

> The claim that the Fachschule für Buchdrucker embodies the expression of Swiss typography seems very daring to us. What is certain is that something like a *home style* is cultivated in it, which, like all home styles, has a strong local color and, in addition, seems to constitute a minimization of higher values. (Der Anspruch, dass die St. Galler Fachschule für Buchdrucker den Ausdruck *der* schweizerischen Typographie verkörpere, erscheint uns sehr gewagt. Sicher ist, dass in ihr so etwas wie "Heimatstil" gepflegt wird, der, wie aller Heimatstil, starkes Lokalkolorit aufweist und hier ausserdem noch wie eine Verniedlichung höherer Werte wirkt.)[16]

A Swiss synthesis

The editors of *TM* did not link "Swiss" typography to a certain institution, but described it as a "happy synthesis of the German-speaking and the French-speaking" (glückliche Synthese von Deutsch und Welsch).[17] Their emphasis on shared values across language boundaries can be read as a statement in favor of national cohesion during World War II. It was an idealistic point of view for sure, since in the practitioner's minds the regional characteristics were very prominent, and there was a major disagreement not only about where typographic "Swissness" originated from, but also about what it embodied in the first place, and if it could or could not be attributed to specific educational institutions. After the end of the war, the Swiss-German typographer Kurt Huber wrote in *TM* that the idea of such a synthesis was not yet fulfilled, and he insisted on the existence of regional or, rather, language-specific differences.

> As rich in diversity as is the work of the Swiss-German typographers in the French-speaking part of the country, their quests and strivings are still met with fierce resistance. [...] This requires that we know the French-speaking Swiss and his typography better. (So reich an Vielfalt auch das Schaffen der Deutschschweizer Typographen im Welschland ist, ihr Suchen und Streben stösst immer noch auf harten Widerstand. [...] Das verlangt, dass wir den Welschen und seine Typographie näher kennen.)[18]

Comparable national stereotypes of style and taste in graphic design and typography dominated the discussion even when it came to assessing schools and training opportunities in neighboring countries.

A supposed understanding of allegedly country-specific biases was employed in advertising particular training opportunities abroad, or to warn against them. For example, in 1935, in a summary on training possibilities in Paris, potential Swiss designers were advised to avoid the "official French taste."[19] As one of the few exceptions, the newly opened school by A.M. Cassandre was recommended, because it was "perhaps closest to us in its tastes" (uns in ihren geschmacklichen Ansichten vielleicht am nächsten).[20]

These attempts to summarize stylistic phenomena using language-specific or site-specific categories are so evident because it was common to play them off against each other. Educational institutions in France, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland used such categories in connection with the term "school" in order to situate themselves more clearly, although this represented an all-too-uniform picture that collapses into its constituent parts on closer inspection.

Filed under: "Basel School, the"

When we return to the regional Swiss discourse, we find a remarkable example of this ambivalent, sometimes misleading use of the term "school" and the transformation process to which it was subject: the "Basel School" or "Basler Schule." This designates several approaches in graphic

design that are related on the one hand, but show many differences on the other. Besides being a shortcut for naming the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, the term "Basel School" as a means of stylistic attribution was used early on to describe a formal phenomenon in poster design that came to a head in the early 1940s, mainly in Basel, which was led by graphic designers such as Niklaus Stoecklin, Fritz Bühler, Peter Birkhäuser, and Herbert Leupin, who created hyperrealistic representations of products. The "Basler Schule" in poster design was already characterized by contemporaries as an "überspitzter Naturalismus" (exaggerated naturalism).[21]

The Basel graphic designers have developed their own style of the highest concision and impact, which is rightly highly regarded, both in terms of technical skill and in terms of its unmistakable effect. […] The Basel poster is a proven brand. (Die Basler Graphiker haben einen eigenen Stil von höchster Prägnanz und Schlagkraft entwickelt, der zu Recht hoch eingeschätzt wird, sowohl was das technische Können, als auch was die unübersehbare Wirkung betrifft. […] Das Basler Plakat ist eine bewährte Marke.)[22]

However, the tremendous popularity of this style was also already being criticized, as it implied "the danger of stereotypical sterility, of the routine recipe, the solidified

formula" (die Gefahr einer stereotypen Sterilität, des routinierten Rezepts, der erstarrten Formel).[23]

Several of the designers working in this manner were trained at AGS Basel in the Fachklasse für Graphik, therefore the link between the "Basler Schule" and the AGS Basel seems evident. Indeed, in the 1940s and before that, naturalistic drawing and product representations and the technical skills for hand-drawn lithography were all part of the Basel curriculum. However, they coexisted with other, more abstract, geometric, photographic, typographic, and calligraphic or even theoretical courses, given by different teachers without any clearly defined formal doctrine.[24] That is to say, even though some of the protagonists of hyperrealistic poster design had been trained at AGS, the emergence of the "Basler Schule" as a style phenomenon in the 1930s and 1940s can just as well be connected to the work of Basel-based graphic design studios, to influences from the art world[25]—and to the great popularity of these posters with clients and the public. There are overlaps between the school as an institution and the school as a style, but they are not congruent.

A term with a new meaning

In a totally different sense, the terms "Basel School (of design)," "Basler Schule," or the "Basel approach" have also been used to further differentiate the overall construct of "Swiss Style" graphic design and typography. According to this narrative, "Zurich" stands for constructive graphic design, closely bound to the concrete art movement and the magazine *Neue Grafik*.[26] "Basel" stands for a more "undogmatic"[27] attitude and is usually employed in close connection to the educational approach at AGS Basel, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, under teachers such as graphic designer Armin Hofmann and typographer Emil Ruder.[28]

"Basel school" here has been transformed from its initial meaning, a heterogenous educational institution—AGS Basel—into yet another, distinctive graphic design approach. This neglects the diversity of the AGS graphic design curriculum, as well as its course structure: the Fachklasse für Graphik, as well as the typography and typesetting courses, the courses for graphic design apprentices, and later the so-called Weiterbildung (Advanced Class for Graphic Design) from 1968 onwards can hardly be generalized as a homogeneous "school" or "approach."

As a tradition, the AGS Basel itself did not originally propagate a "style," but combined different design philosophies. Their origins can be traced back as far as the 1930s, during the directorship of Hermann Kienzle (director from 1916 to 1944), who introduced several new approaches to graphic design and typography education, creating the basis for a graphic design class that was not shaped by just one teacher,

but by a variety of progressive as well as traditional actors and their courses.[29]

In the late 1940s, these educational contrasts were even conceptually anchored in the program of the graphic design class.[30] Berchtold von Grünigen was appointed in 1932 to be the new director, after having been active in Zurich.[31] He apparently adapted his school's graphic design program according to the graphic design landscape he found in Basel upon his arrival. He believed that the school, besides its role in actively promoting progressive approaches, should not lose contact with professional practice. In Basel at this time, this meant contact with the world of mainly one-man studios with a commercial orientation, and strong local connections and support.

It was in the late 1950s that the methodically structured courses by Armin Hofmann, in cooperation with Emil Ruder's typography courses, became increasingly recognized on an international stage thanks in part to articles in trade magazines, books, exhibitions, and teaching activities abroad.[32] It was also the heyday of the "Swiss Style"—and the intense publication activity of its protagonists in the late 1950s and 1960s indicates that the motto "publish or perish" also applied back then to graphic design and education. "Teacher-authors" such as Armin Hofmann, Emil Ruder, and later Wolfgang Weingart, who formulated their methodology and thereby made it accessible to a large audience, naturally came to play a more dominant role in the promotion of the Basel graphic design education, whereas other teachers play a minor role in the school's narrative.[33]

As this essay has argued, the term "school," supplemented by regional or national attributions, has a long history of transformation and reinterpretation and was strategically used by different actors—institutions, designers, critics, and design historians—according to their specific interests. If we are to achieve a new historiography of Swiss graphic design and its education, clarifying and revisiting critical terms such as "Basel school" can provide a starting point for us to question outdated narratives related to "styles" and "schools" as a major classification system.

1   "School" here has to be understood as a stylistic term, influenced by art historiography and its "history of style"—which was intertwined with notions of nationalism. See Locher 1996a: 291.

2   On the foundation of Fachklassen see "Timetables," in the volume *Visual Arguments*, and "Sonderstellung," in the present volume. Apprentices also attended the trade schools for supplementary courses one day a week.

3   See Altherr 1916c: 135.

4   The art historian Walter Hugelshofer even remarked that this regrettable lack of recognition and impact would drive the most talented and progressive graduates to emigrate to more "insightful" countries. See Hugelshofer 1929: 58.

5   Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel 1941c: 13.

6   von Grünigen 1938: 64.

7   von Grünigen 1943: 263.

8   Berchtold von Grünigen, Letter to Dr. P. Tschudi, Sep. 5, 1945, Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt, DI-REG 5a 2-7-3 (2) 8.

9   See Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel 1941c: 17.

10 See, for example, Reinhardt 2013.

11 *Helvetische Typographia* 1943a: 3.

12 Ibid.

13 *Helvetische Typographia* 1943b.

14 Ruder 1944.

15 Ibid.

16 *TM* 1944: Editorial. *Heimatstil* was a term often used to describe a modestly modern, folkloristic architecture which was used for some pavilions at the Swiss National Exhibition 1939. About the development and specific use of the term, see Crettaz-Stürzel 2015, n.p.

17 *TM* 1944: Editorial.

18 Huber 1947.

19 *TM* 1935: 238.

20 *TM* 1935: 239.

21 Oeri 1946a: n.p.

22 Ibid.

23 Oeri 1946b: 237.

24 In 1941, for example, there were courses in: Zeichen und Marken (Hermann Eidenbenz), Schrift und ihre Anwendung (T[h]eo Ballmer), Graphisches Entwerfen (Paul Kammüller), Modezeichnen (Julia Eble), Typographie (Jan Tschichold and Karl Becker), Lithographie (Werner Koch), Werbelehre (Fritz Bühler). See Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel 1941a: 18.

25 As for interactions with art, see, for example, poster designer Niklaus Stoecklin's work as a painter of "Neue Sachlichkeit," the "New Objectivity."

26 See Hollis 2006: 206.

27 Richter 2014a: 38.

28 See Hollis 2006: 215.

29 See "Teaching Material," in the volume *Visual Arguments*.

30 See "Student Work," in the volume *Visual Arguments*.

31 See Wanner 1965: n.p.

32 E.g. Hofmann 1958; 1965; Ruder 1944; Contemporary Arts Center 1957.

33 Lesser known AGS teachers (1930s–1960s) are, for example: Peter von Arx, Theo Ballmer, Karl Becker, Walter Bodmer, Robert Büchler, Fritz Bühler, Julia Eble, Theo Eble, Hermann Eidenbenz, André Gürtler, Andreas His, Paul Kammüller, Ernst Keiser, Lenz Klotz, Manfred Maier, Christian Mengelt, Rolf Rappaz, Numa Rick, Alfred Soder, Gustav Stettler, Max Sulzbachner, Mary Vieira.