Modern typography

11 Swiss typography

National peculiarities

In the years of economic expansion – past the aftermath of 1945 – the leading model of modern typography derived from Switzerland: the phenomenon that has become known simply as 'Swiss typography'. Certainly for the emerging first generation of graphic designers in the western countries, it was the style of the moment: though style was something that Swiss typographers disclaimed. For some explanation of the character and strengths of this typography, one may look to its beginnings in the years between the wars and to a salient factor in its development: Switzerland's neutrality in the Second World War. This allowed for a continuity of development that no other country enjoyed. (Sweden might provide another comparative instance, but, with its less developed typographic culture and exclusive language, a much weaker one.)

In the 1930s, in the larger field of graphic art, and in poster design above all, modernist approaches had become well established in Switzerland: simplified images; integration of text and image; the use of photographs, especially as photomontage. In such work, where image was reduced to type-like simplicity, and where type was given a graphic, image-like presence, the categories of 'typography' and 'graphic art' were broken down and fused to produce what then became 'graphic design'.*

Certain special characteristics of life and culture lay behind this development: the country's long tradition of direct democracy, in which voting on details of political policy has been a habitual, almost weekly, practice – for male citizens, at least. But, as the other side of this bargain, regulations and limitations have also been deeply ingrained, through custom and law. The acceptance of constraints on individual and corporate liberties has led, for example, to a view of advertising as essentially a medium of information: an idea that has been proposed in other capitalist countries, though with less conviction and less truth. In Switzerland, however, with its widely shared ideals of stability, continuity, equality, it was possible to develop a graphic design that could plausibly aspire to being 'functional', in the sense of being an unobtrusive medium for the communication of useful information, with the demands of competition being correspondingly muted.

* See example 22, p.166.

The strong craft tradition, carried over into industrial production, provided another special condition of Swiss typography. The characteristic pattern of industry has been of high degrees of craft skill combined with advanced technology in small, self-reliant units: in printing, as elsewhere, this has helped to minimize the split between production and design. Design has also been integrated into the education of printers, just as the education of designers has been grounded in the values of proper techniques in hand and machine production. Evidence of the good relation between printers and designers may be seen in the journal *Typographische Monatsblätter* (founded in 1933), which has catered for both groups equally and facilitated communication between them. Swiss typography has thus had a stronger base than any mere designer's style: printers could be relied on to produce competent (if not inspired) work, without a designer's instructions. This has applied to both modernist and to traditionalist typography. While it is an assumption of traditionalist typography that its manner is available to any practitioner, that this should have been true of modernist typography – the Swiss typography of these years – is an index of how well established modernism had become in places of influence, and especially within printing education.

Formations and distribution

The founding statement of Swiss typography can be seen to have been Max Bill's 'Über Typografie' of 1946, and in that text and in Jan Tschichold's criticisms of it, most of the issues of this typography had been raised (see chapter 9). In the immediate post-war years a 'school' of typographers, following the principles outlined by Bill, then started to form, as a younger generation entered practice. By the mid-1950s Swiss typography had begun to penetrate into international consciousness. This awareness was spread particularly though the magazine *Neue Grafik / New Graphic Design* (1958–65) and the book *Die neue Graphik / The new graphic art* (1959) by Karl Gerstner and Markus Kutter. The magazine *Graphis*, published from Zurich since 1944, and with an international readership, had neglected the phenomenon, being interested in graphic art of a more traditional kind. But in 1959, *Graphis* published a two-page account by Emil Ruder 'of the underlying principles of this new movement', entitled 'The typography of order'.[1] This text was supported by reproductions of work 'for the most part by old students of the author'. Ruder had been teaching typography at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel since 1942, later becoming head of department there; at his death,

1. Emil Ruder, 'The typography of order', *Graphis*, vol.15, no.85, 1959, p.404.

in 1970, he was still at the school, as its director. From this long-held position at Basel, and as one of the clearest and sternest practitioners of Swiss typography, Ruder exerted a powerful influence on its development. He was to summarize his approach in the book *Typographie* (1967).

If Ruder at Basel was one of the main disseminators of the Swiss approach, through his students and through their students, the other was his contemporary Josef Müller-Brockmann. Following a period of teaching at the Kunstgewerbeschule Zurich, Müller-Brockmann published his *Gestaltungsprobleme des Grafikers / The graphic artist and his design problems* in 1961. This became a prime document in the international transmission of Swiss typography and its methods; like much of the literature of the movement, the author's German text was supplemented by English and French parallel translations.

After sketching the historical transition from illustration and the 'subjectivist mode of expression' to a typographically oriented 'objective, constructive method' – exemplified by his own turn from illustration to graphic design – Müller-Brockmann then spelled out in some detail the principles of this 'new graphic art'.[2] The whole programme is here made explicit: the striving for impersonality and objectivity, through an elimination of decorative or expressive effects ('the paramount requirement is an unadorned typographical form serving purely the needs of communication') and through the application of an ordering grid; restriction of type sizes and typefaces (sanserif is 'the expression of our age' and suitable for 'almost any typographical job'); the use of unjustified text (though the text of the book itself was set justified); the use of photography in preference to illustration, with drawing allowed an important role in diagrams.[3] All this was exemplified by reproductions of work by Müller-Brockmann and his associates and students.

Müller-Brockmann was one of the co-editors of *Neue Grafik*, with three other graphic designers working in Zurich: Richard Lohse, Hans Neuberg, Carlo Vivarelli. In the first number of the magazine the editors explained that they aimed to 'make a collection of work showing significant trends and gradually to reproduce that work in a periodical for examination and discussion'.[4] In keeping with their hope for it to become an international platform, texts of articles were given in three languages, in the multi-column, square format that became habitual in Swiss typography. Throughout its seven years of publication (in 18 numbers), the design of the magazine never deviated: as if to exemplify the settled, thoroughly 'objective' nature of its approach. In support of its publication of

2. Müller-Brockmann, *Gestaltungsprobleme des Grafikers*, p.5.
3. Müller-Brockmann, *Gestaltungsprobleme des Grafikers*, pp. 16, 25.
4. *Neue Grafik*, no.1, 1958, p.2.

recent work by this burgeoning new school of graphic designers, *Neue Grafik* included substantial historical articles on modernist graphic and typographic design from between the wars. Leading the way in the rediscovery of this work, the magazine aimed to establish a tradition whose most recent development was Swiss typography. However, neither the name nor the work of Jan Tschichold was mentioned in its pages, while contributions by Max Bill and reproductions of his work appeared with some frequency: a sign of the intensity of party commitment that informed the enterprise.

In confirmation of the arrival of this 'new graphic design', a book of (almost) this title – *Die neue Graphik* – was published soon after the start of the magazine *Neue Grafik*. The book was announced in the second number of the magazine, in an advertisement that took pains to disclaim rivalry and to affirm a common spirit: 'There are some subjects which are very much in the air...'[5] The book's authors, Karl Gerstner and Markus Kutter, worked from Basel, where they set up an advertising partnership in 1959. Kutter was a copy-writer (and later published some experimental fiction), while Gerstner had learnt typography at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel under Ruder and subsequently worked as a designer for Geigy and as a freelance. Born in 1930, Gerstner represented the generation after that of Max Bill (born in 1908) and most of the *Neue Grafik* group (of whom Vivarelli – born in 1919 – was the youngest).

Gerstner and Kutter's book certainly shared much with *Neue Grafik*, both in form and content: the same almost-square, multi-column format (though with more refinements of configuration than were possible in the design of the magazine), and the same marshalling of historical examples to form a sequence leading to the present 'new graphic design'. In their historical coverage, Gerstner and Kutter cast their net wider than the magazine was to do. According to their account, graphic design had its first seeds in the 'timeless' work of 'primitive' graphic art, and its proper beginning was located in the nineteenth century: the work of anonymous printers and of the poster artists. The 'break-through' came with the modern movement in the twentieth century. After a substantial representation of modernist work up to 1945, the second half of the book was devoted to 'the present' ('the generation of graphic artists which has been at work since the Second World War') and to 'the future'. This last section featured a selection of recent work consisting of planned sets of items (corporate identity work, as it would become known), as if to suggest that this more rigorous approach, where design was considered 'on equal

5. *Neue Grafik*, no.2, 1959, p.63.
Here, as elsewhere, 'f'/'ph' spellings have been faithfully transcribed. See the note on page 199.

terms with the economic, administrative and editorial aspects of advertising technique', was the way ahead for the new graphic design.[6]

A persistent interest in advertising was a characteristic of *Die neue Graphik*. Gerstner and Kutter were about to enter advertising themselves, while elsewhere the new graphic design was turning away from this sphere of activity. However, as already suggested, advertising in Switzerland was the subject of a marked degree of mutually understood self-constraint on the part of advertisers and their agents, so that it was possible and also necessary to practise an informative and systematic approach, avoiding arbitrariness and fiction. Such an approach was evident in Gerstner and Kutter's work, which was however by no means staid or merely prosaic. As *Die neue Graphik* showed, they looked towards recent work from the USA, in advertising and graphic design, and thus sought to tap sources more vital than those that were available at home.

Renewed debate

In the year of publication of *Die neue Graphik* – 1959 – another declaration of principles of Swiss typography appeared: a special number of *Typographische Monatsblätter*, with the general rubric of 'Integrale Typographie'. This was also the title of Karl Gerstner's extended contribution to the issue. In this text he reaffirmed the thesis of Max Bill in 'Über Typografie', that the new and valid typography was 'functional or organic', without the strain or quasi-decorative effects of the earlier modernist 'elementary' typography. This approach Gerstner now called 'integral', summarizing it thus: 'Integral typography strives for the marriage of language and type resulting in a new unity, in a superior whole. Text and typography are not so much two consecutive processes on different levels as interpenetrating elements.'[7] Among his examples of this integral typography – suggesting a scope more liberal than that of Max Bill's ideals for a functional typography – Gerstner included a recent series of advertisements for the *New York Times*, set in a seriffed typeface and without any strict underpinning from a grid.

In his introduction to the special issue, Rudolf Hostettler, the long-serving editor of *Typographische Monatsblätter*, explained that the present situation 'in many respects corresponds to that which prompted Max Bill to write his essay "Über Typografie"', and he cited an article recently published by Jan Tschichold: 'Zur Typographie der Gegenwart' ('On present-day typography').[8] The special issue was a collective rejoinder to Tschichold's renewed aspersions against typographic modernism: both

6. Gerstner & Kutter, *Die neue Graphik*, p.215.
7. Gerstner's text was reprinted in *Programme Entwurfen*; quoted from the 1968 English edition, *Designing programmes*, p.66.
8. Rudolf Hostettler, 'Einführung', *Typographische Monatsblätter*, vol.78, no.6/7, 1959, p.339.

explicitly in one article and through reproductions of work and statements by leading representatives of Swiss typography.

Tschichold's article had been published first in Germany in 1957 and had subsequently (in 1960) appeared as a pamphlet published by the Monotype Corporation in Berne. His argument was accompanied by no pictorial illustration and avoided all specific reference to Swiss typography as a collective phenomenon, still less to any individuals, but his target was unmistakable. Employing his usual free-ranging mixture of technical, aesthetic, and moral argument, Tschichold rounded in turn on each of the central tenets of Swiss typography. He suggested that a preoccupation with the arrangement of blocks of text led to the reduction of words to mere colour and to a denial of their meaning. This pin-pointed one of the most pervasive features of the Swiss approach, inculcated through educational exercises in variations of configuration within a grid. In a series of objections to the cult of sanserif, he asserted that it was not the duty of letterforms to correspond to the spirit of the age, nor to its newest material products (skyscrapers or car bodies); rather 'typography must be itself. It must be adapted to our eyes, and to their well-being'.[9] Not so much a modern letterform, the sanserif was a nineteenth-century product, and its original name of 'grotesque' (still current in German) was the correct one: 'it really is a monster'.[10] The lasting letterform was the roman ('Antiqua'), proved over centuries and still maintaining the calligraphic tradition. Other essential features of Swiss typography came in for attack: the refusal to indent first lines of paragraphs (another piece of formalism at the expense of meaning); asymmetrically placed text in book design; DIN paper sizes (lacking in aesthetic quality as well as unpractical); the limitation to a single size of type (leading to a failure to articulate the text); the predilection for large expanses of pure colour or a harsh white paper. Above all, Tschichold suggested, this new typography lacked grace ('Anmut'). By this he meant not prettiness, let alone kitsch, but the quality that follows from work done with love and attention to the smallest details.

Of the group contributing to the special 'Integrale Typographie' issue of *Typographische Monatsblätter*, it was Emil Ruder – perhaps the clearest object of Tschichold's attack – who undertook the task of a direct reply to these severe charges.[11] Though Ruder's article took the form of a point-by-point rebuttal, he tended to shift the issues rather than deal with and refute the charges directly. Thus he discussed the question of relations between compositor and designer: an issue of importance and – as himself

9. Tschichold, *Zur Typographie der Gegenwart*, p.7. The text was first published in *Börsenblatt für den Deutschen Buchhandel*, vol.13, 1957, pp.1487–90.

10. Tschichold, *Zur Typographie der Gegenwart*, p.8.

11. Emil Ruder, 'Zur Typographie der Gegenwart', *Typographische Monatsblätter*, vol.78, no.6/7, 1959, pp.363–71.

a compositor turned designer – one close to his heart, but something raised only tangentially by Tschichold (in the criticism of the formalist view of text as no more than an area of colour or tone). On the question of symmetry, he defended unjustified or ragged setting (not mentioned by Tschichold) as obviously the correct way to compose text. While taking pains to distinguish between different kinds of sanserif (some were better than others), Ruder was prepared to defend the category as suitable for any kind of text and as having advantages over roman in its greater possibilities for development as 'families' of related variant forms. In conclusion, Ruder suggested that Tschichold's polemics were unhelpful: Swiss typography stood out for quality too; he did not want to reject modernism now, just because bad things were done in its name; the age of manifestos was over, and the task was now to refine and build on what had been achieved so far.

Univers and Helvetica

In his advocacy of sanserif, Ruder was now able to call upon what he seemed to see as a trump-card in the argument: Univers. Together with its contemporaries Folio (from the Bauer foundry in Germany) and Helvetica (from Haas in Switzerland), Univers represented an attempt to provide a sanserif that improved both on the nineteenth-century grotesques and on the more geometrically designed sanserifs from between the wars (Futura, Erbar). Of the former category, Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk, available for hand-setting and line-composition machines, was then still the standard in German-speaking countries (and for the English-speaking market it was given the name 'Standard'). Gill Sans was available only for Monotype composition and had thus found limited adoption on the Continent: it was not favoured by the most influential Swiss typographers (Bill and the *Neue Grafik* group). Rather, where this form of composition was available, Swiss modernists used Monotype Grot 215 in preference to Gill; like Akzidenz Grotesk it could be seen to bear the stamp of anonymous, vernacular authenticity. The calligraphic, Renaissance-humanist tradition evident in Gill Sans – despite the Monotype Corporation's concession of alternative characters for lower-case 'a' and 'g' – was no recommendation to hard-line Swiss typographers.

Though produced in Paris, initially for the Lumitype photocomposing machine, Univers can be said to have had origins in Switzerland. Its designer was Adrian Frutiger, Swiss by birth and the beneficiary of a thoroughly Swiss education: a compositor's apprenticeship and then the

Kunstgewerbeschule Zurich. The most distinctive feature of Univers was that it comprised a family of 21 variants. This was conceived at the outset, and the typeface was designed within a programme that was demonstrated by a matrix presentation, each variant bearing an index number. If all this gave off an air of scientificity, attractive to typographers interested in possibilities of logically determined design, the considerable sophistications of Univers depended on old-fashioned drawing skills and patient small adjustments: it was an exemplary product of the Swiss craft tradition. Though it anticipated the possibilities of computer-aided typeface design, this was done quite innocently.

Although Univers was designed initially for photocomposition, neither this technology in general, nor Lumitype in particular, had made much commercial impact in Europe at that time. An important boost was thus given to the typeface when the Monotype Corporation bought rights to adapt it for their machines. In Switzerland, Emil Ruder led the way in welcoming this development: first in *Neue Grafik*, and then in a special issue of *Typographische Monatsblätter*, in which the Monotype cutting made its first appearance.[12] Matrices became commercially available at the end of 1961. It was clear to Ruder that with this typeface, modernist typography at last had the sanserif that it had previously only been able to postulate. And though the claim was made neither by Ruder, still less by Frutiger (who took care in his writings to resist dogma), the name given to the typeface suggested the grandest ambitions. It did certainly have a more realistic claim to being a 'universal' typeface than the alphabets attempted by Bayer, Schwitters and other between-the-wars modernists: not least because it was manufactured by companies with world-wide markets. As to universal features of its design, the publicists explained that different languages set in the typeface produced blocks of text of the same colour, because of the relatively small size of its capital letters. Thus, for example, French and German (with its high incidence of capitals) produced the same visual effect when set in parallel columns. This was among the features of the typeface of special attraction, in multilingual Switzerland, to typographers interested in the 'Satzbild': the text-image. In due course, following the success of the typeface in the West, non-Latin equivalents of Univers were produced: Cyrillic and Japanese among them.

The other new sanserif of this time associated particularly with Swiss typography was Neue Haas-Grotesk, designed within the Haas foundry in Münchenstein. Taking advantage of the reputation of its country of

12. Emil Ruder, 'Univers', *Neue Grafik*, no.2, 1959, p.56; 'Die Univers in der Typographie', *Typographische Montasblätter*, vol.80, no.1, 1961, pp.18–20.

origin, the typeface was named 'Helvetica' for its issue by the Stempel foundry (based in Frankfurt). This was the name by which the typeface became generally known, especially in North America, where it was sold (in innumerable adaptations) more widely than Univers. As its first name suggested, the typeface was an attempt to improve on the model of the nineteenth-century grotesque. Although a more homogenous set of forms than the previous Haas-Grotesk, Helvetica retained an air of the reliable but ungainly work-horse, while Univers aspired rather to the race-course.

Both Univers and Helvetica came in for some criticism from Karl Gerstner: as being too smooth and producing too even a colour. If this was a 'graphic' advantage, it was not a 'functional' one: 'what has ocular clarity may appear monotonous when read'.[13] Thus he suggested that the old grotesques were still valid models, and, taking Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk as a basis, proposed his own development of the category. The result – which achieved very limited application, on the Berthold Diatype machine – was perhaps more interesting as a case study in programmatic design than it was successful as a working typeface. And, as such, Gerstner included the essay in his book *Programme entwerfen* (*Designing programmes*) of 1963.

Out of the straightjacket

Although still working firmly within the Swiss tradition, one may cite Gerstner as the theorist-practitioner who was best able to point ways out of what, during the 1960s, became a situation of stagnation in Swiss typographic culture. This impasse was the unwelcome counterpart of the urge for methods, standards, objectivity, which was so strong a feature of the work of the leaders of the school (Ruder, Müller-Brockmann).

To take the example of a fundamental typographic detail: the consensus among Swiss typographers, at the high point of the phenomenon, ruled out indentation of first lines of paragraphs. But gradually – one can see this in the design of *Typographische Monatsblätter* – indentation was rediscovered, and with it a greater freedom of configuration and a greater sensitivity to the meaning of the text being designed. Karl Gerstner's major contribution to this loosening of design dogmas (including much play with indentation) came in 1972, with the publication of his *Kompendium für Alphabeten*, appearing in English as *Compendium for literates* (1974). This was very much a book for designers, important for its spirit of experimentation (small square format, Chinese-folded page leaves bound at their heads), rather than for any particular design feature or for

13. Gerstner, *Designing programmes*, p.32.

its content. It seems, in retrospect, to have signalled the end of Swiss typography, as an internationally understood method or style. By this time the older generation of typographers were no longer active. Gerstner had retired from his advertising and design work in 1970, and then turned increasingly to fine art.

In Gerstner's wake, and under the leadership of Wolfgang Weingart at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, the generation of designers emerging in the 1970s began to break with some of the essential principles of Swiss typography. This served to confirm that, like any generally accepted approach to design, Swiss typography had been a manifestation fitted to its time and place: the years of recovery and prosperity in the western world. Either as a style or as an attempt at an objective and impersonal method, it represented confidence in technical progress in a successfully modernizing world.

The fundamentally aesthetic approach of Swiss typography, lying behind its claim to functional effectiveness, becomes evident enough when viewed historically. Its functional aspirations might be further doubted by pointing to the fact that several of its leading figures were also professional abstract artists (notably Bill, Lohse, Gerstner) and also to the abstract-art basis of Swiss graphic design education: thus one might imply that Swiss typography was simply art in the guise of useful design. Certainly Swiss typographers' obsession with the grid and the 'Satzbild' meshed perfectly with their geometrical, abstract-art interests. The grid found its functional justification in the frequent need in Switzerland to publish text with illustrations in two or three languages; thus the development of the multi-column, square-format book. Beyond these motivations for Swiss typography, there was also a social impulse that can be seen in at least some of this work. Such an impulse could be there as long as it existed in its original Swiss context. But, in its translation into the everyday style of the West, aesthetic refinements were lost, leaving only the rationale that it was efficient and saved money. In Switzerland, the idea that life might really be improved by infusing it with purifying abstract art did perhaps have some reality, as it did not in other less constrained societies. The strong moral content of this vision of abstract art was clearest in Max Bill's book *Form* of 1952: here 'good form' (abstract form) becomes the principle that might save civilization from the onslaughts of North American streamlining and kitsch.[14] Western civilization – or, at least, western capitalism – allowed Bill's good form to develop in only a partial embodiment. This was the moment of the Swiss ascendancy, in

14. Max Bill, *Form*, Basel: Karl Werner, 1952; see especially p.46.

which (even as late as 1967), typography could be serenely described as 'an expression of technology, precision and good order'.[15] But, with the years of crisis and recession in the 1970s, the context changed. Technology was no longer an unambiguous blessing; order and precision were in doubt.

15. Ruder, *Typographie*, p.14.