ON THE INTERPLAY OF PHOTOGRAPHY, TYPE, AND GRAPHICS

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What is typophoto? Typography is communication composed in type.
Photography is the visual presentation of what can be optically apprehended.
Typophoto is the visually most exact rendering of communication.
László Moholy-Nagy 1925[1]

Among the earliest photo-graphic posters are works by El Lissitzky, Sergei Senkin, and Gustav Klucis. Klucis's poster *Let us fulfill the plan of the great project* of 1930 shows dozens of heads and outstretched hands mounted into a mother's hand—the symbol of the working masses who were to fulfill the Soviet five-year plan *3*. The language of early Soviet posters is photomontage, tested by Dadaists, Surrealists, and Constructivists. It permits the construction and depiction of unreal, even unrealistic situations. Typography maintains an autonomous role in it that is, thanks to size, color, and design, on the same level as the photograph in Klucis's work; or it expands into the depth of the poster and unites with the visual space of the photograph, as in El Lissitzky's poster for the Russian exhibition at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Zurich *8*.

In Germany, in addition to the Dessau Bauhaus, where László Moholy-Nagy and Herbert Bayer in particular were combining the possibilities of photography with the New Typography, it was above all Jan Tschichold who stood out. Another representative of the New Typography, he was responsible for the poster series for the Berlin cinema Phoebus Palast *2*. His "photo sculptures," as Moholy-Nagy called them, are based on type, photography, and graphic-linear systems: he embedded the film still in a radial pattern of lines that symbolizes the projection in a cinema *2*. Typographical elements anchor the loose photographs in the visual space, as in Moholy-Nagy's advertising poster *Pneumatik*, whose drive was picked up again by Max Huber for his posters for the automobile race in Monza *21*.

The functional photograph as Hans Finsler taught it in Zurich from 1932 to 1958 concentrated on the reproduction of the object, in a way that did justice to both the material and the object, and was thus extremely well suited to advertising, such as Emil Schulthess, *Ita*, 1937 *15*, or Max Bill, *Wohnbedarf*, 1931 *10*. In an article on Herbert Matter, the German technical journal *Gebrauchsgraphik* employed the word *Photographik* (photo graphics) for the first time, writing: "These posters are not put together from photographs and texts; they are something entirely new: namely, photo graphics in its purest form."[2] Matter's poster *Für schöne Autofahrten die Schweiz* (For beautiful road trips: Switzerland), 1935 *6*, is a photomontage of a paved street that dominates the frame, spectacular hairpin turns, and snow-covered

mountains glistening under the sun; the slogan is located at the bottom. Such posters, characterized by reduction to a few photographically reproduced objects, the choice of simple typefaces, and–particularly striking in Matter's case–an unusual perspective, were radically new and were perceived as liberating in their contrast to the detailed advertisements of the nineteenth century.

Swiss tourist posters of the 1930s and 1940s (Werner Bischof, Emil Schulthess, Walter Herdeg *11*, Carlo Vivarelli) were usually photomontages of set pieces of sun, skiing and snow, or water, with the name of a vacation destination and perhaps a slogan printed over them. They are not depictions of reality but a construction of an atmosphere that arouses desire. Conversely, the medium of photography, particularly thanks to its fidelity to reality (although increasingly an illusory one), is well-suited to attracting attention; photographed suffering is especially moving for viewers, for example. In 1932, John Heartfield used a photograph of a starving child whose misery is tangible: *Das letzte Stück Brot* (The last piece of bread). Decades later, photography moved even closer up, but the documentary aspect is fictive: from a stark perspective from below, Josef Müller-Brockmann focuses on the visibly suffering facial expression of a woman; the red text–*weniger Lärm* (less noise)–is a sharp bloody cut diagonally through the black-and-white poster *27*.

In the Zurich of the Concrete and the Good Form movements, Max Bill, Richard Paul Lohse, Warja Lavater, Gottfried Honegger, as well as Carlo Vivarelli and others, developed rules for a constructivist graphic art that would soon become famous. Geometry and grids–intended to be clear and functional–marked Swiss advertising from then on. In the early 1950s, Müller-Brockmann in no small measure together with Vivarelli, turned away from the illustrative (subjective) style and toward a concrete, functional (objective) graphic art: "I avoided decorative elements and strove to achieve as much objectivity as possible. That applied to photography as well: the subject had to be seen with its own values and characteristics, without any alienation at all."[3] At the same time, Müller-Brockmann, one of whose early assistants was the photographer and great experimenter Serge Libiszewski, began to experiment with light painting, photograms, and photomontages, as for example in the series of posters on traffic.

"Images don't have to make a statement; they have to be able to tell a story."
Werner Jeker, 2006

It is not difficult to recognize Werner Jeker as a late descendant of modern Swiss graphic arts, as his posters are distinguished by an "almost measurable clarity."[4] Again and again, however, Jeker breaks with the tradition by using painted texts, color, cropped or fragmented photographs, and even painting.

Jeker's poster for an exhibition on Man Ray (1990) is objective and classical in its structure, in its use of a photograph that fills the format, and in its typography; at the same time, however, it has a subjective note 1. The creases and tears of the photograph from Man Ray's archive were not retouched but, on the contrary, emphasized by means of sharp reproduction, heavy shadows, and by placing the type to follow the patterns of the folds. By making the past visible, the history of the print becomes part of the poster, since Man Ray himself had repeatedly folded the photograph in order to establish the ideal cropping and best proportions. Man Ray's fingerprint, so to speak, lends the poster not only a touch of authenticity but also a historical dimension that goes far beyond the two-dimensional photographic likeness, pointing to the working methods of its author, Man Ray. This poster is typical of Jeker's series for the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne, which was a crucial influence on the corporate design of this photography museum: a careful, precise approach to the given circumstances with a minimum of material as a way of provoking a pointed dialogue with the subject matter. Jeker is, however, capable of other approaches as well: his posters for companies or his series for the seasons at the Théâtre Vidy are more fragmented, playful, and colorful.

Although Jeker's typographical designs are quite different from those of Michal Batory, some of his seasonal program posters for the Théâtre Vidy are astonishingly close to the Polish artist's intellectual cosmos. Using pencil and paper, Batory formulates the concept and design for a poster, then realizes his idea using a camera. Batory, who says of himself that he is sometimes more likely to get an idea from a baker than from an artist, likes to employ a vocabulary of everyday objects: apples, rice, roses. In Batory's work, these things begin to dance and make music. Sometimes the right perspective is enough to turn lips into a heart *105*; sometimes it requires a computer. But Batory's objects are no longer pure computer creations; more and more, he photographs actual small constructions he has built. His mise-en-scènes, allusions, and alienations are as diverse as the objects themselves; he quotes and paraphrases from history–for example, Duchamp's shaved head in Man Ray's photograph of him in *Helmucik* or the portraits by the Renaissance painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo composed of fruit, vegetables, and flowers in *Concha bonita* 99–just as he works with universally intelligible symbols or creates new images.

Leonardo Sonnoli too shows individual objects in his series for the Commune of Pesaro, but their position within the medium is completely unlike that in Batory's work. Whereas Batory's designs recall the painted Polish posters of recent decades, and stand in the tradition of Magritte and Surrealism with their wit and irony, Sonnoli sees himself in the company of typomaniacs such as Apollinaire, Moholy-Nagy, and Müller-Brockmann. Correspondingly, letters are particularly important in Sonnoli's work, for the "word in its typographic form" is still the "most direct and clearest means of communication"; the photograph gives the printed word a sound, and a

sculptural appearance to the letters. In the series for Pesaro he elevated this to a system. The letters are the protagonists: tossed onto the garbage dump (*La discarica*–the descriptive word has become the object depicted 4), hung on a nail 33, transformed into an egg (*Omnia Mutantur:* the legendarily perfect form of the egg is out of plumb; everything, including the egg, is transformed 31).

Gerwin Schmidt says of himself that he works a lot with "design systems." When he designs a poster, he starts from its content. Then certain mechanisms come into play: "a definite, obvious aesthetic or a basic design theme … ; for film [posters], for example, blurriness works very well, or a sequence." Often they are quite direct transformations of the message to be communicated: for example, when Schmidt focuses a photograph of a plate with eight strawberries for *Acht kurze Filme über die Liebe* (Eight short films about love)–a fruit that is supposed to have an aphrodisiacal effect 53. The camera is his notebook; with it he collects images, moments, and emotions, and like Sonnoli he describes photographs as sound that he combines "at the given time … into precise messages." Schmidt's expectations of his posters are classical: they should inform, attract attention, trigger emotions. His material for the typographical design is in keeping with this: a grid, "three or four sans serif typefaces and three or four roman typefaces"; he rarely uses recent typefaces, but when the theme calls for it, Schmidt even uses black letter typefaces, since "the typeface has to be appropriate. To the subject matter, to the period, to the surroundings."

While not unlike Gerwin Schmidt in terms of typography, Cyan (Detlef Fiedler and Daniela Haufe) treat the visual material completely differently from Schmidt, Batory, or Jeker. Nor are the posters by this duo classical photomontages. Cyan dissects and then reassembles images, stacks them vertically, into the depth of the poster's space. Using superimpositions in their posters for the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, they dissolve the contours of semitransparent objects and fuse the levels. The clouds of color move easily, freed of Euclidian space. The when and whence of the individual photographs that form the basis of this play remain unclear, until they ultimately succeed in separating both the photographic models and the layers of the fabric from one another: the mise-en-scène of light on the Bauhaus stage turns out to be a man's head 92, the flying object to be a dancer's arm 93. Now it is not only possible to identify the historical and actual photograph that produces the connection to the history of the Dessau Bauhaus, but also to its present. Skolos/Wedell also refer to a historical avant-garde without losing the connection to the present. Their "Techno-Cubist" posters–in the words of Mike Hicks–result, according to Wedell, from "unfinished works that we combine." The historical reference is not only evident from the collage of materials but also in the fragmentation of space and the splintered perspective. Their posters reveal an enormous diversity that is confusing at first glance: different typefaces distributed across the page, and concrete and–usually–abstract visual set pieces and collages; the choice of colors adapts

the atmosphere to the architectural compositions, sometimes luminously, some-times in pastel shades. Photography as a medium is not immediately obvious, and yet it is omnipresent, usually in its literal sense: as a drawing with light. Light and shadow emphasize the spatial depth but also the complex structure of their posters. The close interplay of photographic and graphic elements—for example, the cast shadow of a photographed object that is paraphrased by the graphics—merges the boundaries between the various techniques.

If Skolos/Wedell may be said to be constructors of architectural fantasies that integrate all the visual components, Tschumi, Küng strictly separate the levels of type and visual elements. The type is pasted on the surface as if it were the work of a billposter. Curious about what they hide, we squint past the broad bands of type into the peep-show stage of the photograph—except, what is central remains hidden, so that we ask ourselves: "What is playing here?" 14. The photographs used by Tschumi, Küng do not solve the riddle, but they do seem to dispense with any connection to the plot of a play. The photographs they employ are taken by profes-sionals or amateurs: "If we can't find a suitable image, we take it ourselves." The photographs' connection to everyday life brings the play from the stage and from its historical period into today's society; the poster brings the mise-en-scène onto the street.

M/M (Paris) proceed in the opposite way: in their series for the Théâtre de Lorient, photography becomes the stage type, dissolving the spatial planes. Fantastic forms tumble in the depth of the pictorial space, with letters costumed to suit the play or the photograph. The letters are always black and white, in strong contrast to the not infrequently Pop-like colors of the photographs, which are the intellectual heirs to British Post-punk. Hence, despite the spatial dovetailing of typography and image, both levels remain clearly visible. The central position that photography occupies in M/M's posters is optically reinforced by the strict rules by which they have been making their own photographs since 1993 that sometimes serve as the basis for their series of posters for the Théâtre de Lorient: the identical camera, the identical lens, the identical color film, frontal photographs. Mathias Augustyniak has said of the role of photography in the Lorient series: "Photography was used as the raw material for each of the posters. It stands for reality and is in dialogue with the other symbols and signs that reverberate with it. The mixture is a visual sentence." 5 Although the result could not be more different from the classical Swiss tourist poster, M/M's statement would have been equally valid seventy years ago.

1 László Moholy Nagy, Painting, Photography, Film, Cambridge, MA 1969, p. 39.
2 Victor Borel, "Herbert Matter," Gebrauchsgraphik 1 (1936): 28.
3 Josef Müller-Brockmann, Mein Leben: Spielerischer Ernst und ernsthaftes Spiel, Baden 1994, p. 36.
4 Editorial, Neue Grafik 1 (1958).
5 The quotations from the designers are all from remarks made while this publication was being prepared.