

BASEL, THE COMPUTER, AND ITS CONSEQUENCES, AN INTERVIEW WITH WOLFGANG WEINGART
BY ELIZABETH RESNICK

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Design Schools have been subject to continuous changes in structure since the end of the Second World War. The rapid mechanization in the field of applied arts and which embraced all its branches of study is evident through new teaching materials, new teaching methods and changes in the work environment. These changes are not, however, the most important ones. Noteworthy are the altered mentalities of students and teachers brought about by the constant use of technology.

We are just beginning to realize that technological advances are often achieved at the risk of stunting human imagination and sense. Moved by the opinion that the slow forfeit of handwork cannot be made up for by technology and mechanization, the teaching staff at the Basel School of Design in Switzerland has had to search for new educational models. New methods of instruction have had to be developed, fighting against the negative effects of mechanization, without adopting an anti-technology viewpoint, especially in disciplines where automation has taken extreme forms, such as typography, photography and graphic design.

Due to the efforts of Wolfgang Weingart the unity between thinking and producing has been reestablished, identifying the process as one of sensory interaction. Within our changing technological environment, Weingart has developed an educational approach that allows the individual to prove his command over technology. Thus, he has helped the Basel School of Design, which since the eighteenth century has oriented itself toward humanistic education, to attain new perspectives. Armin Hofmann

For 32 years, Wolfgang Weingart has challenged the boundaries of traditional Swiss typography with his expressive body of experimental typographic work. His personal visual research has served as the foundation of his exploratory approach to the teaching of typography at the Basel School of Design since 1968.

ER: In 1968 Armin Hofmann hired you to teach typography in the Advanced Class for Graphic Design at the Basel School of Design in Switzerland. You have stated at various times that you consider yourself a self-taught designer and educator. How did you develop your approach to teaching typography?

WW: I would like to explain the first statement, because I don't consider myself as hired to teach. At the beginning of my three-year typesetting apprenticeship in Stuttgart, Germany, I became fascinated with Swiss typography and graphic design, and arranged a visit to Basel in March 1963 specifically to meet Armin Hofmann. During the interview, with the hope of being accepted into the School, I showed him my work. At twenty-two, I was astonished when he asked me if I wouldn't consider teaching in his Graphic Design program. On the same day Hofmann introduced me to Emil Ruder.

A year later I moved to Basel, enrolled in the School as an independent student, and supported myself by working for printing and typesetting houses. I was not a student of Ruder, but during his typography classes I was granted full permission to use the facilities and presses in the typeshop for my typographic experiments. By 1968 Ruder had been the

Director of the School for three years, and was not in good health. Initiated by Hofmann, invited by both, I was asked to assist Emil Ruder during his four-hour class. Our teaching relationship was to begin in April for the coming semester, but it never happened as planned. Emil Ruder was in and out of the hospital so often that I had to take over his class from the beginning. Consequently, I became his successor.

As a typesetter I had already established an intense relationship to typography, and this is how I developed my approach to teaching. In order to teach typography in Basel it was obligatory to have completed training in metal typesetting. My intention was to be different from the way Ruder taught, to depart from his strict typography, to push typography in the direction of graphic design.

ER: How did Emil Ruder feel about the relationship between design and typography?

WW: He felt positive. Ruder and Hofmann were very wise personalities. They've been accused of a certain dogmatism, but they were in many ways not dogmatic, actually very open. They could sense potential and would staunchly support it. I had a clear vision of what I wanted the students to experience, but I needed a plan. It was a risk to begin teaching, but I was not afraid to teach. The students went crazy for this different way to make typography, different from the so-called International Style and from how they had learned in their schools. This new viewpoint of typography gained momentum. In those years, my students and I were all around the same age.

ER: Did you feel you were learning during your classes?

WW: I was not a trained instructor. With the help of certain students, I learned to develop a method of teaching. We discussed what was already working, and how the content could be better structured.

ER: Has your approach to typographic education changed since you began teaching in 1968?

WW: From the system and in comparison to other schools, it seems to change somewhat every five years. I don't teach academically, I teach from intuition.

ER: So you've remained fairly consistent in your approach?

WW: The issue of Design Quarterly of 1985 is a good example of what we've done and what we do in my classes. All the steps are clearly shown: we went away from spacing letters, we made film collages, experiments with text, and then, the very early research on the computer.

ER: Have you noticed any significant changes in student attitudes?

WW: They are more lazy and less crazy. Lazy because they sit down in front of the computer and push the buttons. They don't think as much. Sometimes the creativity is much less. Often they arrive too quickly at results. This tendency is increasing.

ER: Why do you think that?

WW: Time. Because of the Internet no one will go to the libraries in the future. Students will sit in their homes and study. Perhaps we won't have cars any more. That would be wonderful. Another dream of mine would be to work with a group of teachers

and students internationally. I explain something in the typeshop with four cameras in the room, a simultaneous broadcast via Internet. Before you had to make the effort to go to the library to get information about Jan Tschichold. It might take half a day, or an entire day. Now students just lie on their beds and type. There is a danger, however. Wrong information appears on the Internet.

Take one example. Years ago, I gave a lecture in Amsterdam. Someone who was not an expert in design transcribed the spoken lecture from a tape. The printed result appeared in the Internet as a reference to A. Pelgram, which when pronounced sounds somewhat like April Greiman. Transcribed from the same lecture, Ruder became Rudel, and Aicher became Eigher. We are driving into a chaos which we cannot hold back.

Before the influence of advertising typography had spread to Europe, type composers and proofreaders were employed by the printer. The trained composer composed. In a separate enclosed room were the proofreaders, highly specialized experts for particular or various languages, bilingual or multilingual, often specialists in the terminology for different fields of knowledge. When the personal computer came on the market in 1984, the professions of type composer and proofreader became dispensable.

ER: How do you see yourself in your role of teacher?

WW: It was never a question since I was in my mother's belly. I came out doing what I do.

ER: What is the single most important piece of information that you can offer a student?

WW: To make the explanation of typography so transparent that their grandmothers could grasp it. I encourage the students to go to the libraries to discover what happened in the last 500 years of typography, or to discover the origin of our alphabet over 2,000 years ago. It's important that students see their work in the context of history. To teach is not difficult. It's just that you must not teach dumb things.

ER: Do you tell your students what to look for when they go to the library?

WW: Sure, but some students won't go. I give them names, book titles, subjects. My students are asked to purchase one book about typography published in 1998, *Typo: when, who, how* by Friedrich Friedl. It is organized like an illustrated encyclopedia of over five hundred pages with the text in three languages.

ER: Who or what were your early influences?

WW: The first, the two human beings who gave me the wonderful opportunity to participate in this unbalanced, cracked earth. The second, my childhood bike. And finally, the Swiss educators Armin Hofmann and Emil Ruder.

ER: How do you keep yourself fresh and interested?

WW: That is a delicate question. More and more students need to be told what to do. I hope in a few years it gets better. Even if I have a class which is not particularly good, teaching is not painful, but it can be dull. I experienced very strange groups in the 1970s, funny classes which I could't relate to. It goes up and down. In every class I have a few wonderful, talented students. They keep me fresh with the hope that things will improve.

ER: In the publication *My Typography Instruction at the Basel School of Design/Switzerland 1968 to 1985* published in *Design Quarterly* No. 130, you stated that a teaching program must remain independent from the concrete demands made by existing professional standards. Do you feel this is as viable in 1998 as it was in 1968?

WW: Even more so. That's the short answer to a long question. Within the last ten years technological advances have all but replaced the following professions in our field: the typist, the typesetter, the proofreader, the stripper, the separator, the retoucher, the printing colour specialist and others. Each area of expertise has had its own specialized professional standards. In Switzerland graphic designers must pass an examination before qualification to practice is granted by the state. Measurable professional standards have been established over time. Today, these many traditional professions, not to mention additional theory or business demands, are the domain of one single person, the digital designer who sits at the keyboard. Although Schools everywhere have been trying to keep up, it's an absurd undertaking. The obvious course for a Design School is to teach the fundamentals of design, which happen to be the very root of professionalism.

Another aspect of this statement which is emphatically relevant today implies that teaching must not be confused with imitating fashionable practices. In Basel we make clear, classical and practical work. We strive to be neutral, educating students for the future without knowing what that will be. We teach what is basic, challenging the students to solve tangible visual problems. Our program builds from traditional core courses, like drawing, letterform, and colour. I am working together with a teacher in our School, for example, developing an advanced course in interactive typography. In my first-year classes, however, solving elementary typographic problems by hand is a prerequisite for more complicated work. We believe this foundation gives students something solid, stimulates perception and develops individual creativity. If the question implies that competence in using computer programs is an existing professional standard, I don't believe this is the responsibility of an art or design school. It is a short-sighted misunderstanding of our educational objectives, and it would be a mistake for Basel to train technicians.

ER: Do you still teach metal typesetting?

WW: No. I haven't taught students to typeset in lead for three years. For several years I made a midway experiment: the students composed in lead type learning correct word distances, and afterwards typeset on the computer. They made the same mistakes. This parallel combination from lead to screen was too theoretical; it didn't work. I finally gave up this approach when I realized they were not able to transfer the learning experience.

ER: A recent article published in *Communication Arts* [May/June 1998] states that the Basel School of Design is currently reassessing its curriculum and teaching methods with major changes to be announced. What does this mean?

WW: To explain how and why our School is changing, the following overview is important. The Basel School of Design is not the only school for Art and Design in Switzerland. Its international reputation, today accrued to the overall Basel School of Design, developed out of a degree program, the professional graphic design program, the *Grafikfachklasse*. In the late 50s, in response to the growing interest of many trained designers who were searching for a means to deepen or extend their knowledge or skills, a

unique post-graduate program for graphic design was conceived by Armin Hofmann and Emil Ruder, the Weiterbildungsklasse für Grafik, founded in 1968. The influence of this program became a phenomenon. Generations of Basel students have become teachers all over the world. Significantly, this international program was not bound by state and federal regulations. After thirty-two years of independence, however, the program now confronts a political challenge.

Unlike elsewhere, Swiss art and design schools have never been instituted within a university system. Currently, the initiative is to elevate certain design schools to the academic status of a university. Competition for governmental validation this last year has instigated fusions between schools in different cities, the specialization of Schools, the consolidation of programs and courses within Schools. Having recently endured this procedure, the Basel School of Design has been awarded the higher rank of accreditation. Two specific results of the new school structure in Basel are: the post-graduate program is part of an umbrella Design Department, and an official diploma can be offered also to foreign students. Our schools in Switzerland will be more and more controlled by the State, in other words, subject to federal regulation. To this end our new Director believes it will be necessary to implement more communication theory courses, more guest lecturers, and more exchange programs. The most important upheaval in our classes was over ten years ago in response to the impact of almost concurrent changes, namely, the retirement of pillar teachers and the introduction of computer technology.

ER: How does this affect you?

WW: Personally, not at all. Over thirty years ago the School gave me an incredible opportunity. From the beginning, I've been accepted and supported in everything I've done. Either the Basel School will go on, or it will be drowned in bureaucracy. Departmental budgets are justifiable only according to the level of technological sophistication; superficial lip service is given to the cultural implications. Indirectly, the State is forcing the individual towards compliance with every technological trend. Without computer proficiency, there is no chance to survive as a Design School, or as a design student. What is dangerous is that the people who don't like working with the computer have no chance. Their basic creative impulse, originating in childhood, will gradually be destroyed because it is of no quantifiable societal value or reward. This I find tragic, and it affects me deeply.

ER: Are you ready to go on to something else?

WW: In a way, yes. I would like to open a restaurant. In 1948 I started to cook, and still love it. I had something to offer the school, and now I have something to offer with my own unique menus. Once I believe in something it seldom doesn't work.

ER: How do you feel about artistic work with digital technology?

WW: The computer cannot be considered an aesthetic tool. The word aesthetic stems from the Greek. As an adjective, it means sensitive; its verbal form means to perceive. The speed and flexibility of the computer are its wonderful potential, but therein lies the deception for young designers. Achieving genuine aesthetic quality with the computer presumes a rigorous sense of discipline on the part of the designer. I try to get the students to question typographic details with the overall aim of provoking discernment, to see differences,

to become critical of the machine.

ER: Do you feel computers foster creativity among students?

WW: Most of my students are practicing designers who tell me that they are relieved to get away from working with the computer, that working in front of a screen all day makes them numb.

When students tell me that they cannot work because the computer broke down, or because systems were incompatible, or that they need a faster machine to realize an idea, I like to see what my students can do without the computer. More important is that the students see for themselves what they can do without it. A dependence on computers, especially in design education, impairs the development of the students' creative authority, crippling the imagination.

ER: At the end of 1984 you included the Apple computer in your curriculum for its new worlds of graphic possibilities. Now you seem to have grown less enthusiastic for the computer in the educational environment.

WW: I made one of the biggest errors of judgement in my life. I completely miscalculated. When I started experimenting with metal and wood letters, I came to new ideas if I wanted to push the limits of the technical process. As part of my training I knew my equipment and tools inside out. I knew the materials, the techniques and the process exactly. A craftsman learns how to make decisions through mistakes and struggles. Today the problem is more abstract, and therefore more complex. Students cannot open up the computer with a screwdriver to see how it works. They cannot take it apart and put it back together again from scratch. My mother told me an interesting fact. In Germany in the thirties when she learned to drive a car, it was law that before being granted a license to drive, she had to be able to dismantle the car to prove that she understood how the vehicle functioned.

Most of the younger designers lack, in principle, this primary and intimate relationship with the vehicle they are using. Digital design is not my means of expression, but it is obvious that the professional graphic and typographic work of today is in general the tragic work of puppet designers who show clever tricks, who have become preoccupied with special effects, who have been caught in a desperate search to discover their originality. I do not wish to address what confusion that must mean for their clients. I also do not wish to comment upon what, or if, they are communicating. They have neither been trained in a traditional craft, nor have they had the opportunity to learn to think as the computer thinks. Lured into Schools promoting a comprehensive but often vague curriculum, usually at the expense of substance, this generation has been cheated on both counts.

ER: Have you seen any experimental interactive work created by designers that has excited you?

WW: Very few practicing designers are able to program the computer. I think this is one of the reasons that everything looks the same today. Fewer still are computer scientists who have also been traditionally educated in art and design. John Maeda, assistant Professor of Design and Computation at the MIT Media Lab in Cambridge, showed me his experimental interactive work in July 1997 on a notebook computer in Basel. At this first meeting without knowing his background, I thought finally, something fresh and authentic. Since then I have invited him to give a lecture and demonstration during the Portland

workshop for two years. Maeda has said: "Advanced digital design work is usually a fancily decorated package that hides an empty core. Skill in the digital age is confused with mastery of digital tools, masking the importance of understanding materials and mastering the elements of form."

We have even more to anticipate with the very young kids, those born around 1982. Since they have been on earth, they have grown up with mass media in potent combination with electronic and digital technology. Soon there will be no need to teach the mass-marketed computer programs; basic programming skills will be common knowledge. Bombarded on every level, extremely influenced by trends, the worldwide consumption of clothing, sport and even food styles, what will they need to learn about design? What will their expectations be? If my colleagues in the School are open and willing to face this pivotal challenge, I still have a few more years before I'm ready to retire.

This interview took place in July 1998 while Wolfgang Weingart was in residence at the Maine College of Art in Portland, Maine.

ABOUT WOLFGANG WEINGART

Wolfgang Weingart teaches his students to teach themselves. His experimental work in typography has influenced the course of design history in the last decades of the twentieth century. Although Wolfgang Weingart is well known for his departure from traditional Swiss typography by radicalizing and challenging the absolutes, he shares many of the classic values of Emil Ruder and Armin Hofmann. As a teacher, Weingart's influence has radiated beyond his own work. Early Basel students like April Greiman and Dan Friedman, invigorated by Weingart's influence, returned to the US to teach and practice. Their continued visual explorations eventually coalesced as the beginning of the new wave in America. These ideas, which originally had their birth in the school's type lab where Weingart experimented with handset letters and darkroom techniques, were widely appropriated in the 1980s and became one of the most profound influences on American modernism. In 1972 Weingart organized a lecture tour through Switzerland, Germany and the United States, to illustrate his threefold manifesto to expand typographic alternatives through syntactic, semantic and pragmatic relationships in typography. Wolfgang Weingart is one of the most prominent educators of the mythical Basel School of Design. His pedagogical perspective rests on the premise that technological mastery should not influence the creative and intellectual aspects of the practice of design. He thus ensures the progressive development of the School without overlooking its fundamental values.

ABOUT ELIZABETH RESNICK

Elizabeth Resnick is an assistant professor in the Communications Design Department at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. She also operates Elizabeth Resnick Design. She has published interviews in EYE magazine and in the AIGA Journal.

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