

Speaking Italian with a Swiss-German Accent: Walter Ballmer and Swiss Graphic Design in Milan

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Figure 1

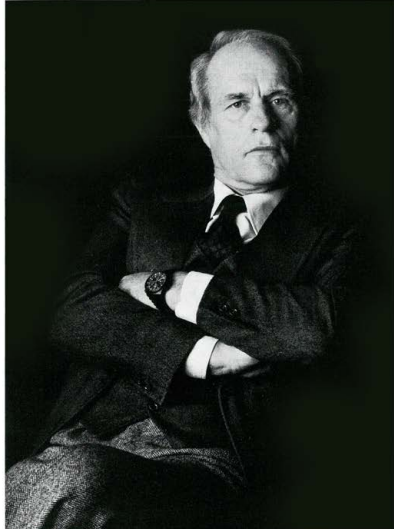
NAVA brochure advertising the collection of organizers (ca. 1980), 21×29.7 cm.

Logo designed by Walter Ballmer in 1975.

Source: Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan.

Courtesy Walter Ballmer Archive.

**fiducia a Nava, parola di Walter Ballmer
se realizzare bene un'agenda
fosse facile, non mi sarei rivolto a lui**



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Arms folded resolutely over his chest, Walter Ballmer (b. Liestal 1923, d. Milan 2011) stares sternly at the camera (see Figure 1). He has one blunt slogan to communicate: “Trust in Nava, take Walter Ballmer’s word: If producing a well-made organizer was an easy task, I would not have turned to him.” But why did Milanese printer NAVA pick the Swiss graphic designer as the face of its 1980 collection of diaries by leading designers, including Max Huber, Heinz Waibl, Bob Noorda, Massimo Vignelli, and Ballmer himself? Why should NAVA’s customers take Ballmer’s word? Would they even know who he was or what he stood for?

To chart the life and career of Ballmer in a birth-to-grave narrative is not the goal here. His work serves as a case study to problematize Swiss Graphic Design as an “actor’s category”—namely, the historically shaped vision of national design.¹ As Stuart Hall puts it, identities relate to the invention of tradition, for they are “constituted within, not outside representation.”² Thus, our interest in Ballmer lies in the discursive nature of identities in that we use him to question Swiss Graphic Design as a discourse within which his identity as a graphic designer was formed and understood by others. By altering the scale of observation, we acknowledge in this article the discrete nature of the individual and give credit to a plurality of experiences that are often overlooked in totalizing discourses.³ In doing so, we use “biographical research on a person” as a means of “determin[ing] the extent to which the accepted story about a culture is correct.”⁴ As such, we deploy Ballmer’s biography “as an active unit” to answer far-reaching questions and discover a broader design landscape.⁵

In an autobiographical account written at the time of a solo-show in 1989, Ballmer pointed out that, despite having lived in Milan for about forty years, and having by then adopted all the local customs, some people still found that his Italian had “an unmistakable Schwizerdütsch accent.”⁶ The quip is used to think about national design discourses outside national borders. Indulging in a linguistic metaphor, we problematize Swiss Graphic Design as “langue”—that is, the abstract systematic principles of a language that exist prior to individual users and that ensure meaningful utterance—by looking at individual acts of speech—“parole”—in Ballmer’s everyday practice.⁷ In other words, we ask whether Ballmer’s work—designed in Milan for Italian clients and for an Italian audience—had an unmistakable Swiss-German accent. If so, what did it sound like? To whose ears? And what kind of connotative values did this accent convey?

The article tackles these questions and contributes to the aims of this special issue by showing the constructed nature of national design discourses and their influence on the lives of individuals. First, we report on stereotypical accounts that have been repeated uncritically in the literature on Swiss Graphic Design in Milan. Second, we question Ballmer’s positionality and historically contextualize the label, Swiss Graphic Design. Third, we problematize the tacit connotative values attached to the so-called Swiss Style and explore how its stakeholders understood and capitalized on them.

The Fly and the Spider’s Web

In another passage from the autobiographical account previously mentioned, Ballmer recalled that, while studying at the Kunstgewerbeschule [School of Arts and Crafts] in Basel between

- 1 Kjetil Fallan, *Scandinavian Design. Alternative Histories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 2; and Javier Gimeno Martínez, *Design and National Identity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 81–83.
- 2 Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 4.
- 3 Gabriele Guercio, *Art as Existence: The Artist’s Monograph and Its Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 262–93.
- 4 Hans Renders and Binne de Haan, “Introduction: The Challenges of Biography Studies,” in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*, ed. Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 10.
- 5 Catherine Moriarty, “Monographs, Archives, and Networks: Representing Designer Relationships,” *Design Issues* 32, no. 4 (Autumn 2016): 62. On the renewed interest in the monograph as a narrative device in the writing on design history, see also: Katherine Feo Kelly and Helen Baer, “A Visionary’s Archive: The Norman Bel Geddes Papers at the Harry Ransom Center,” *Journal of Design History* 25, no. 3 (2012): 319–28; Nicholas Maffei, “Norman Bel Geddes: The Rise and Fall of Subjective Vision,” *Design and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2015): 29–50; and Lisa Mason, “Illustrating the Design Process: The Bernat Klein Collection and Archive, National Museums Scotland,” *Journal of Design History* 31, no. 3 (2018): 274–85.
- 6 Walter Ballmer, untitled brochure with autobiographical text, 1989, Walter Ballmer Archives.
- 7 Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (1964; New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 13–17, 23–34.

- 8 Ballmer, untitled brochure.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Bettina Richter, "Italian Influence in Post-war Swiss Graphic Design," in *Italian Design Is Coming Home to Switzerland*, ed. William Georgi and Tomaso Minetti (Amsterdam: Polyedra, 2011), 11.
- 11 Bruno Monguzzi, *La Mosca e la Ragnatela, The Fly and the Spider Web* (Bellinzona: Edizioni Casagrande, 2016). For a counter-narrative, see Davide Fornari, "Swiss Style Made in Italy: Graphic Design Across the Border," in *Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland*, ed. Robert Lzicar and Davide Fornari (Zürich: Triest Verlag, 2016), 152–80.
- 12 Bettina Richter, "Foreword," in *Zürich-Milan*, ed. Bettina Richter (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2007), 5.
- 13 See Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei, "Real Imagined Communities: National Narratives and the Globalization of Design History," *Design Issues* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 5–18; Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei, "Introduction: National Design Histories in an Age of Globalization," in *Designing Worlds: National Design Histories in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 1–20; and Joana Meroz and Javier Gimeno Martínez, "Introduction. Beyond Dutch Design: Material Culture in the Netherlands in an Age of Globalization, Migration and Multiculturalism," in *Journal of Design History* 29, no. 3 (2016): 213–27.
- 14 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 15 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
- 16 For further transnational perspectives on Swiss Graphic Design, see also Robert Wiesenberger and Elizabeth Resnick, "Basel to Boston: An Itinerary for Modernist Typography in America," *Design Issues* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 28–41.

1940 and 1944, he discovered "that the rules of sight exist and are rigid, and that creativity is free only in compliance with those rules."⁸ After graduation, he gained some work experience and eventually moved to Milan in 1947. There, he worked at Studio Boggeri until 1955. He then became art director at Olivetti until 1971, when he left the company to establish his own graphic design studio, Unidesign. In Milan, he benefited from "the advantages of a very particular intellectual and productive climate [in which] initiative and problem solving go hand in hand with creativity and *joie de vivre*. These are ideal conditions for the work of a graphic designer."⁹ As vague as Ballmer's recollection might sound, it complies with the historiographical canon about Swiss Graphic Design in Milan that we challenge in this article by looking at one of the "ambassadors of Swiss design" in Italy.¹⁰

When investigating Swiss graphic designers in Milan, one is likely to stumble across a recurring metaphor that features a fly and a spider's web. The web stands for a carefully built structure in which form follows function. Yet this perfect device is useless unless activated by a prey that turns the web into a purposeful tangle.¹¹ The metaphor is based on a stereotype: Swiss graphic designers embody formal severity based on solid education, while the Italian counterparts stand for "imagination, poetry and experimental curiosity."¹² Like a spider's web activated by a fly, the rigid rules of Swiss Graphic Design were broken once they came into contact with the Milanese design scene. According to the cliché that opposites attract, the connection set the bases for a happily-ever-after marriage.

This stereotypical narrative misses the point that makes Swiss graphic designers in Milan such a relevant case study: It reveals the multiple nationalities of design and exposes the artificiality of national design discourses. Drawing on transnational perspectives on design history, this article understands national design as a multilayered and ever-evolving discourse that cannot be fully explored from within.¹³ It argues that, despite a problematic tendency to stereotype and generalize, the historically shaped vision of national design cannot be ignored. Instead of accepting as a self-evident and fixed entity, we approach national design discourses as "invented traditions" with real consequences in the everyday.¹⁴ As such, they are meaningful at a certain time for an "imagined community" whose individual views are taken into consideration in an attempt to unpack contemporary perceptions on national design practices.¹⁵

Swiss, Italian, International

The focus on Swiss graphic designers in Milan affords an opportunity to explore one of many instances in which Swiss Graphic Design operated transnationally.¹⁶ In particular, it brings into

question what is at stake when labeling someone or something according to national categories. Difficulties in categorization are implicit in the words of Richard Hollis, who observed that “in Italy it was difficult to separate what was Italian from what was imported from neighboring Switzerland.”¹⁷ In this section, we focus on Ballmer’s positionality by looking at processes of self-categorization and identification with a social category.¹⁸ We adopt a discursive approach to identity, seen not as “‘who we are’ or ‘where we come from’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.”¹⁹ In so doing, we try to answer the question of whether Ballmer used his position as a representative of Swiss Graphic Design as a sales tool to attract clients and public interest. Not surprisingly, the probability that Ballmer invoked a given national identity, or that others attached it to him, varied depending on circumstances.

In no way did Ballmer’s Swissness pass unnoticed—not least because his name and accent flagged him as a foreigner in an Italian-speaking context. More often than not, his nationality was made explicit in contemporary media, where Ballmer was presented as a Swiss man working in Milan. More specifically, articles clarified that he had trained in Switzerland. This emphasis on his education hints at a cultural conceptualization of national identity and practices, the consequences of which we explore later.

Because we have found that Ballmer did not conceal his Swiss origins, we can identify some circumstances in which these roots were situationally relevant. Until the mid-1950s, Ballmer included the acronym VSG after his name, but he stopped soon after. In Switzerland, the three letters identified him as a member of the Swiss Graphic Design Association, but for the Italian audience, the acronym probably was meaningless. Also, during the first period, Ballmer designed some invitation cards for the Swiss Society in Milan, which suggests that he used his “Swissness” to get commissions from local Swiss clients. A similar reasoning applies to later projects for the Protestant church and the German school in Milan, around which the Swiss-German community gathered. His presence in Switzerland was infrequent but significant: He was awarded the Best Swiss Poster award for the years 1961 and 1971, and he contributed to the Swiss National Exhibition in Lausanne (Expo64) in 1964.²⁰ Outside Switzerland, Ballmer was part of a larger German-speaking network, as demonstrated, for instance, by a draft for a poster for the Kiel Regatta he designed in 1981. Tim Edensor defines national identity not just as “overt displays and self-conscious cultural assertions,” but also as “grounded in the everyday, in the mundane details of social interaction, habits, routines and practical knowledge.”²¹ Drawing on Edensor’s perspective and following Michael Billig’s notion of

17 Richard Hollis, *Swiss Graphic Design: The Origins and Growth of an International Style, 1920–1965* (London: Laurence King, 2006), 255. See also Richard Hollis, “The International Style and Italian Graphic Design,” in *TDM5: Grafica Italiana*, ed. Giorgio Camuffo et al. (Corraini: Mantova, 2012), 34–41; and Davide Fornari, “Triennale Design Museum 5. Grafica Italiana vs. 100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design,” *Progetto Grafico* [Graphic Design] 21 (2012): 58–65.

18 Our understanding of “social category” draws on studies of social psychology and social organization. See Michael A. Hogg and Deborah J. Terry, “Social Identity and Organizational Processes,” in *Social Identity Processes in Organizational Contexts*, ed. Michael A. Hogg and Deborah J. Terry (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2001), 1–12.

19 Hall, “Introduction,” 4.

20 Erich Pfeiffer-Belli, “Swiss Posters of 1961,” *Gebrauchsgraphik* [Commercial Art] 33, no. 5 (May 1962): 4–11; Hasso Bruse, “The Best Swiss Posters of 1971,” *Gebrauchsgraphik* 43, no. 8 (August 1972): 2–9; and Willy Rotzler, “Expo,” *Graphis* 20, no. 115 (1964): 374–403.

21 Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg 2002), 17.

“banal nationalism,” we see that Ballmer’s habit of buying his stationary nowhere other than in a shop in Zurich, and his decision to place his children, Peter and Barbara, at the German school Milan, can also be read as everyday enactments of his Swissness in his professional and personal life.²²

At times, though, his adopted Italian identity prevailed. As Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei put it, “where a design or a designer is particularly associated with one nation state, it is usually because one of the... factors [of design, manufacture, mediation, or consumption] has taken precedence over the others.”²³ Two episodes during Ballmer’s career align with this pragmatic perspective on national design, showing how his occasional preference for the Italian identity over the Swiss can be traced back to practical reasons. In a letter to the chair of the Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI) Italian Group in October 1971, Ballmer wrote “Dear [Franco] Grignani, whether I am a member of the Swiss or Italian Group is a point that still needs clarification. Yet, since I have been living and working for twenty-five years in this splendid country, this matter is rather obvious.”²⁴ In Ballmer’s opinion, birthplace was not a factor in this context—a position that must have been shared by fellow members because the group also included the Dutch Bob Noorda. Similarly, Ballmer, Noorda, and a cohort of Swiss graphic designers working in Milan—Aldo Calabresi, Max Huber, and Lora Lamm—were included in the “Italy” chapter of the first edition of *Who’s Who in Graphic Art*.²⁵ This classification by country of residence and activity complied with the editor’s attempt to publish a reference book to act as intermediary between designers, prospective clients, and collaborators. Ballmer’s insistence on being a member of the AGI Italian group followed a similar pragmatic reasoning. Because most of his clients were Italian, being included in local events and publications was in his own interest. Ballmer’s membership in the Italian Association for Industrial Design (ADI) provides further evidence of his assimilation into the Italian professional scene.

Ballmer’s context-specific national identity shows how ambiguous the nationality of design can be. To complicate things, the geographical boundaries of Swiss Graphic Design become even blurrier when considering the historically- and discourse-specific understanding of the word “Swiss.” An agreement on the defining attributes of Swiss Graphic Design has emerged from interviews with Ballmer’s colleagues, whose accounts provide a snapshot of contemporary perceptions and biases.²⁶ The stereotypical interpretation of Swiss Graphic Design includes the canonical list of formal elements associated with it—for example, the use of sans serif typefaces (Helvetica above all), asymmetric layouts, grid structures, white spaces, and photography as graphic elements—

22 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995). On Billig and Edensor’s theories of national identity and how they relate to design, see Martínez, *Design and National Identity*, 147–200.

23 Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei, “Introduction: The History of Italian Design,” in *Made in Italy: Rethinking a Century of Italian Design*, ed. Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 5.

24 Walter Ballmer letter to Franco Grignani, Milan, October 12, 1971, Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan.

25 Walter Amstutz, ed., *Who’s Who in Graphic Art* (Zürich: Graphis Press, 1962), 291–329. The Italian chapter in the second edition also lists Swiss-born designers working in Milan, including Walter Ballmer, Max Huber, and Bruno Monguzzi. See Walter Amstutz, ed., *Who’s Who in Graphic Art Vol. 2* (Dubendorf: De Clivo Press, 1982), 499–536.

26 Chiara Barbieri and Davide Fornari, “Uncovering and Questioning Unidesign: Archival Research and Oral History at Work,” in *Back to the Future – The Future in the Past: ICHDS 10th+1 Conference Proceedings*, ed. Oriol Moret (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 2018), 808–13.

but also a set of vague attributes such as “seriousness,” “credibility,” “clearness,” and “trustworthiness.” Repetition attests to their factual relevance within a specific network of practitioners who recognized themselves as part of the same clique. Most importantly, interviewees often downplay an essentialist conception of national design by interpreting Swiss Graphic Design as an approach to design that was shared by a self-perceived international community.²⁷ The word choice of the interviewees is revealing. Alternatively referring to the approach as “Swiss” or “International” style, the Swiss graphic designer Fritz Gottschalk also included among its representatives foreign graphic designers, such as Italians Giulio Cittato and Massimo Vignelli because they “worked along the same lines,... believed in the same approach, [and had] more or less the same DNA.”²⁸ Within the contemporary design discourse, Swissness was not something you were born into, but that you could acquire regardless of your origins.²⁹

To consider Swiss Graphic Design as a mentality detached from geographical boundaries makes the inclusion of people who were neither born nor trained in Switzerland less controversial, and hence acceptable. To put it simply—and in the words of Swiss graphic designer Ursula Hiestand—“although Vignelli was not Swiss, his style was indeed Swiss.”³⁰ This view on Vignelli as a designer who “exemplified the Swiss style as the foundation of an international style” still enjoys wide currency in the literature.³¹ Those who accept the artificiality of the label, Swiss Graphic Design, and agree to extend the terms of the national canon across national borders also implicitly accept the possibility that Swiss Graphic Design might not be entirely Swiss, thus allowing foreign designers to belong and contribute to its narrative.

The AGI represented the Swiss/International approach to visual communication at its best. At least, this opinion reflects the views of designers such as Hiestand and Gottschalk, who conveniently are both members of this association.³² Gottschalk, in particular, described the AGI as a “fraternity” whose members “sought each other out, admired each other, helped each other, and recommended each other.”³³ The collaboration between Ballmer and the international graphic design studio Gottschalk+Ash (G+A) was one of the outcomes of such fraternity. Gottschalk and Ballmer met at the AGI meetings in the mid-1970s. The friendship developed into collaboration in 1982, when G+A secured the Italian company EniChem as a client. While running Unidesign, Ballmer also acted as G+A representative in Milan: He took care of local matters and invoiced EniChem on behalf of G+A because justifying regular money transfers to Switzerland would have been awkward for the Italian national oil company. Gottschalk’s decision to collaborate with Unidesign relied in part on Ballmer’s Swissness—that is, their

27 On essentialist theoretical approaches to national identity and their influence on ideas of national design, see Martínez, *Design and National Identity*, 31–91.

28 Fritz Gottschalk, conversation with Chiara Barbieri, Zurich, March 22, 2018.

29 For a similar cultural conceptualization of national design, but in a different geography, see Joana Meroz, “Exhibiting Confrontations: Negotiating Dutch Design Between National and Global Imaginations,” *Journal of Design History* 29, no. 3 (2016): 273–86.

30 Ursula Hiestand, conversation with Chiara Barbieri and Robert Lzicar, Zurich, December 4, 2017.

31 Hollis, *Swiss Graphic Design*, 13.

32 Hiestand, conversation with Barbieri and Lzicar, December 4, 2017; Gottschalk, conversation with Barbieri, March 22, 2018.

33 Gottschalk, conversation with Barbieri, March 22, 2018.

“common way of attacking a problem, looking for a solution and executing it.”³⁴ Yet, because the collaboration was essentially limited to the one client, the joint venture seems to have been one of convenience more than an inspired and unselfish collaboration of likeminded “frat members.”

“The Swiss Man at Olivetti”

Following from the previous section, we now examine how preconceptions about Swiss Graphic Design informed the way in which Ballmer was perceived. If we can take assistants and colleagues at their word, being Swiss in Italy was a “great asset”³⁵—to the point that Lora Lamm defined her Swiss origin and training as her “business card.”³⁶ Although weighing with precision the role that the Swiss-German accent played in Ballmer’s career is difficult, some clues leave space for speculation. For instance, Ballmer is often referred to as “the Swiss man at Olivetti.” The nickname clearly refers to his nationality, but its implications go beyond mere citizenship. Moreover, the nickname introduces another key player in Ballmer’s career—namely, Olivetti. Both aspects are investigated in the following paragraphs.

As “the Swiss man at Olivetti,” Ballmer stood out from the other art directors. What differentiated Ballmer from Franco Bassi, Italo Bellosta, and Egidio Bonfante were not only his passport and accent, but also his allegedly different approach to art directing, which was identified as “Swiss” by assistants and colleagues. When asked about their experience under Ballmer, assistants have a tendency to describe him as “rigid,” “patronizing,” and “obsessively meticulous.”³⁷ The negative adjectives somehow perpetuate a national stereotype that Italians often associate with Swiss-Germans. At the same time, they also reveal the unbalanced power dynamics between assistants and art directors that caused resentment and bitterness. Some assistants talked about a “design conflict” caused by the collision between an intuitive way of doing and Ballmer’s rather stiff and calculated approach to design.³⁸ The fly and the spider’s web narrative is implicit—when it is not made explicit—in this idea of Ballmer’s and his Italian assistants’ speaking different design languages. However, Italian assistants meanwhile also acknowledge the benefits of working with Ballmer, and their accounts comply with the historiographical canon, according to which better-trained Swiss designers arrived in Milan and taught the profession to their Italian counterparts. Italian graphic designer Giancarlo Iliprandi noted that, in the post-war period in Italy, graphic design was still in its infancy, while in Switzerland, it was “already seen as a profession”; and for people like Iliprandi who wanted to be designers, “a method, a set of

34 Ibid.

35 Armando Milani, telephone conversation with Chiara Barbieri, February 13, 2018.

36 Lora Lamm, conversation with Chiara Barbieri and Davide Fornari, Zurich, March 7, 2018.

37 Fulvio Ronchi, conversation with Davide Fornari, Milan, January 6, 2015; Ronchi, conversation with Chiara Barbieri, Milan, March 19, 2017; Urs Glaser, conversation with Chiara Barbieri, Paris, February 12, 2018; and Anna Monika Jost, conversation with Davide Fornari, Paris, December 7, 2015.

38 Ronchi, conversation with Fornari, January 6, 2015; and Ronchi, conversation with Barbieri, March 19, 2017.

rules, was essential.”³⁹ After Ballmer left Olivetti, his on-the-job mentoring evolved into actual teaching when he got directly involved in design education at the Scuola Politecnica in Milan.

The attitudes of Swiss assistants could not be more different. Interviewees declared that their interest in collaborating with him was more dependent on his connection to Olivetti, rather than on his appeal as a mentor.⁴⁰ Having acquired a method and a set of rules at the Basel and Zürich Kunstgewerbeschulen, they were already familiar with the “langue” of Swiss Graphic Design and hence did not need Ballmer to act as an interpreter. Likewise, when Swiss photographer Serge Libiszewski, responding to the question of which language he and Ballmer spoke when working together at Olivetti, said “Schwizerdütsch,” he was not simply referring to the accent.⁴¹ Yes, they both spoke Swiss-German, but “Schwizerdütsch” here is used as a tacit, metonymic particularization that stands for the same know-how, shared background knowledge, similar understanding, and competence, which arguably favor dialogue and exchange.⁴² Their “parole” came under the rules of the same “langue.” Ballmer and Libiszewski bore a similar approach to the practice because they shared the same “cultural capital” and “habitus,” which Pierre Bourdieu defines as “a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices.”⁴³ In particular, according to Libiszewski, Ballmer stood out from his Italian colleagues for an understanding of photography and his ability to combine typography and photographs that Libiszewski identified as “Swiss.”

Other factors and actors also contributed to Ballmer’s career in Milan. Focusing on the second term in the nickname, “the Swiss man at Olivetti,” we can consider the typewriter manufacturer itself. Working for Studio Boggeri had launched Ballmer’s career in Italy by introducing him to major clients, such as Pirelli and Olivetti. The pattern mirrors the careers of Xanti Schawinsky and Max Huber, who had worked for Olivetti on behalf of Studio Boggeri in previous years. Having worked with Swiss graphic designers since the 1930s, Olivetti was already familiar with and fond of the Swiss-German accent. As eloquently put by Gottschalk, Ballmer “cruised at the highest altitudes,” working for major clients, obtaining “the best job worldwide as a graphic designer”: art director at Olivetti.⁴⁴ The role the company played in Ballmer’s career has yet to be assessed.

During his career, Ballmer enjoyed Olivetti’s reflected glory.⁴⁵ When looking at the network of clients at Unidesign, Olivetti emerges as a center of focus. The commissions to design the visual identity of the Wertheim department store in 1973 and the Istituto Studi Direzionali (ISTUD) business and management

39 Giancarlo Iliprandi, “An Interview with Giancarlo Iliprandi,” in *Italian Design Is Coming Home to Switzerland*, ed. William Georgi and Tomaso Minetti (Amsterdam: Polyedra, 2011), 19.

40 Glaser, conversation with Barbieri, February 12, 2018; and Jost, conversation with Fornari, December 7, 2015.

41 Serge Libiszewski, conversation with Chiara Barbieri, Milan, October 4, 2017. On Serge Libiszewski, see Alberto Biana and Nicoletta Ossanna Cavadini, eds. *Serge Libiszewski: Sergio Libis Fotografo a Milano 1956-1995* [Serge Libiszewski: Sergio Libis Photographer in Milan 1956-1995] (Mendrisio: Capelli, 2010).

42 Arlene Oak, “Particularizing the Past: Persuasion and Value in Oral History Interviews and Design Critiques,” *Journal of Design History* 19, no. 4 (2006): 345–56.

43 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 170.

44 Gottschalk, conversation with Barbieri, March 22, 2018.

45 Carlo Vinti, *Gli Anni dello Stile Industriale, 1948–1965: Immagine e Politica Culturale nella Grande Impresa Italiana* [The Years of the Industrial Style 1948–1965: Cultural Image and Politics in Big Italian Companies] (Venice: Marsilio, 2007); and Nathan H. Shapira, *Design Process Olivetti 1908–1978* (Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1979).

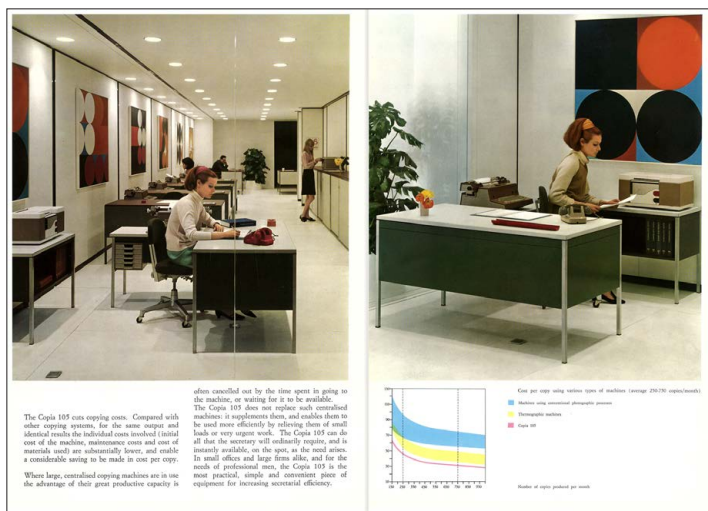


Figure 2
Walter Ballmer, brochure for photocopier
Olivetti Copia 105, 20.7×29.7 cm. Images on
the cover and in the double-page spread
feature Ballmer's abstract canvases. Source:
Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan. Courtesy
Walter Ballmer Archive.

school in 1976 demonstrate this function of network enabler. Indeed, Wertheim was Olivetti's distributor in Spain, while Olivetti was one of the shareholders of ISTUD. Former assistants recalled that Ballmer was also "a magnet for printers and typographers" who would "throw themselves" at him in an attempt to become part of the Olivetti network.⁴⁶

Ballmer was well aware of the benefits of being associated with Olivetti and, by mutual consent, used the company's network and media presence to build up his career as Concrete artist. Evidence of this use can be found in a number of advertisements featuring his Concrete Art paintings and sculptures (see Figure 2). We can safely assume that his self-promotion was not carried out behind Olivetti's back. The geometric forms and bright, plain colors of his abstract compositions and modular structures were suitable decorative elements—closer to geometry and technical drawing than to frivolous ornament—for a range of media and occasions (see Figures 3 and 4). In 1976 the company directly endorsed Ballmer's artistic career by sponsoring an exhibition in Ivrea curated by the head of the advertising office, Renzo Zorzi.

But sharing the spotlight with such an iconic client was not without drawbacks, and Olivetti's fame at times overshadowed Ballmer's own. During his lifetime, his media presence was dependent on Olivetti. Other clients were seldom featured. Two exceptions say a lot about Ballmer's private network. The January 1958 issue of *Gebrauchsgraphik* [Commercial Art] included a monographic article written by the magazine's correspondent in Milan, Raimund Hrabak, who was a friend of Ballmer.⁴⁷ Glauco Felici, the author of a monographic article published in *Graphis* in 1979, was also anything but an impersonal critic: He was Ballmer's closest partner at Unidesign.⁴⁸ That Ballmer won the Best Swiss Poster award twice, but exclusively for Olivetti posters—and that he was

46 Glaser, conversation with Barbieri, February 12, 2018.

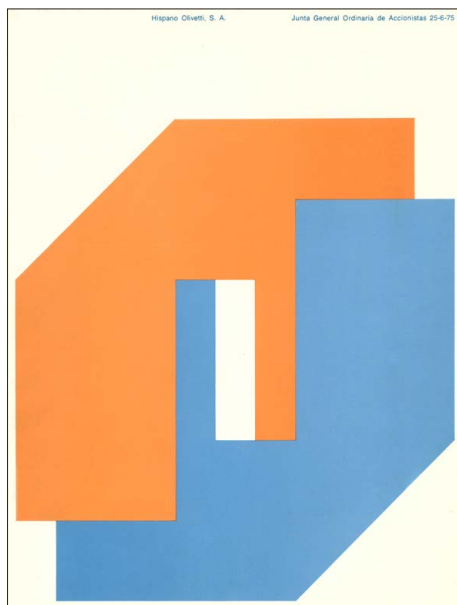
47 Raimund Hrabak, "Walter Ballmer Mailand," *Gebrauchsgraphik* 29, no. 2 (January 1958): 12–19.

48 Glauco Felici, "Walter Ballmer," *Graphis* 35, no. 204 (1979–80): 326–39. Also, the choice of the magazine was not coincidental. The editor, Swiss graphic designer Walter Herdeg, was in fact a friend of Ballmer, and he often featured Unidesign in *Graphis*, *Graphis Annuals*, and *Graphis Packaging*.



Figure 3 (top)
Walter Ballmer and Paolo Segota, one of Ballmer's assistants in the Olivetti advertising department, in front of decorative panels for the Olivetti stand at Interorgtechnika, Moscow, 1966. Source: Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan. Courtesy Walter Ballmer Archive.

Figure 4 (right)
Walter Ballmer (Unidesign), cover of the booklet for the annual stakeholders' meeting at Hispano Olivetti, 21.3×27.5 cm, 1975. Source: Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan. Courtesy Walter Ballmer Archive.



granted AGI membership in 1970 after the redesign of the Olivetti logotype put him on the international stage—further demonstrate how his public image depended on Olivetti. Even now, the Ballmer–Olivetti tie is as tight as ever. His infrequent appearance in museum collections worldwide generally is limited to the works he designed for Olivetti. For example, the online collection of the Museum für Gestaltung [Museum of Design] in Zurich includes 46 works by Ballmer; only two of them—namely, a poster for the Sforza Castle and issue no. 204 of *Graphis* are not Olivetti-related.⁴⁹

Swiss (Looking) Style

Researchers might experience déjà-vu in the Unidesign archive as similar forms and graphic solutions consistently emerge from the archival folders. When isolated in an often-interlocking shape,

⁴⁹ <https://www.emuseum.ch/en/search/walter%20ballmer> (accessed November 12, 2019).



Figure 5 (top left)

Walter Ballmer (Unidesign), logo for Mantero silk factory, 1983. Source: Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan. Courtesy Walter Ballmer Archive.

Figure 6 (top right)

Walter Ballmer (Unidesign), postcards, visual identity for the ski resort at Sestriere, 10.5×14.8 cm, 1983–1984. Source: Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan. Courtesy Walter Ballmer Archive.

geometrical elements can become logos (see Figure 5). Otherwise, they are combined together into modular patterns or abstract compositions (see Figure 6). The outcome of this serial graphic idiom is reminiscent of the minimalist and precise aesthetic of Concrete Art as practiced by Ballmer and other leading Swiss graphic designers, such as Max Bill, Richard Paul Lohse, and Max Huber.⁵⁰ In his graphic works as well as his abstract paintings and sculptures, Ballmer used a flexible serial system based on the repetition and combination of modular elements. Starting from a limited number of geometrical forms, he proceeded in a mix-and-match process with a keen eye on color combinations, as demonstrated by a set of colorful cutouts featured in the covers of the Humanities Series by Olivetti's publishing venture, Edizioni di Comunità (see Figure 7).

The Unidesign idiom appealed to a certain type of clientele that was interested in its connotative values and took advantage of the internationally recognizable Swiss Style brand. Fiorella Nahum, head of communication at the ISTUD business school, confirmed in a conversation that Swiss Graphic Design was meaningful within a certain elite circle and had become the go-to visual language adopted by corporates and companies with international aspirations.⁵¹ The Unidesign style, she claimed, was a vehicle of values, such as “reliability,” “trustworthiness,” “professionalism,” and “internationalism.” All these values mirrored the aspirations of ISTUD, and hence the style was ideal to visually represent it.⁵²

50 Hollis, *Swiss Graphic Design*, 169–71; and Hans Rudolf Bosshard, “Concrete Art and Typography,” in *Max Bill: Typography, Advertising, Book Design*, ed. Christoph Bignens et al., (Zürich: Niggli, 1999), 56–106.

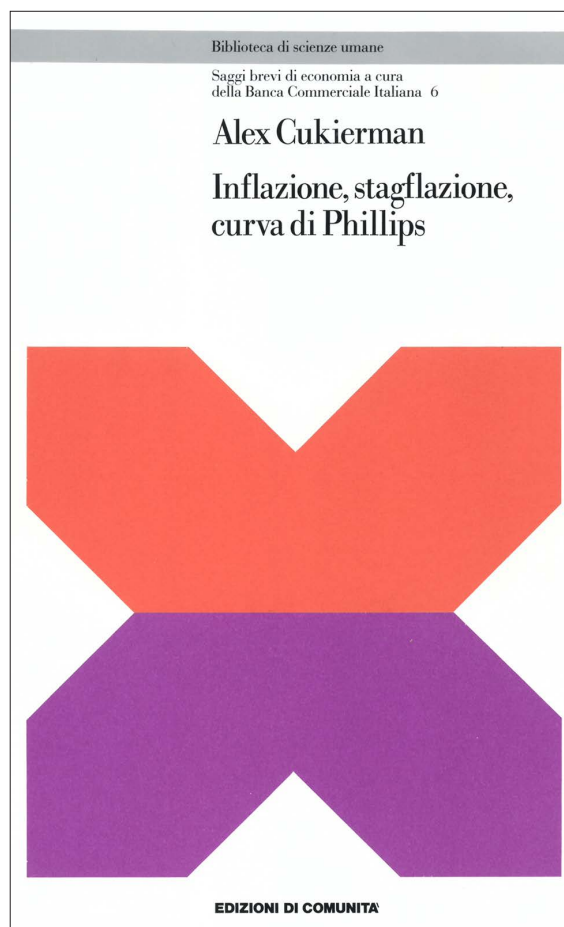
51 On international style as the lingua franca of corporate design, see Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish, *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide* (2008; Boston: Pearson, 2013), 247–67.

52 Fiorella Nahum, conversation with Chiara Barbieri, Milan, October 20, 2017.



Figure 7

Walter Ballmer (Unidesign), cover design for the Humanities Series by Edizioni di Comunità, 1980–1983, 14×22.5 cm (right); colored paper cutouts (top). Source: Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan. Courtesy Walter Ballmer Archive.



Likewise, the decision by Milanese printer NAVA to commission Huber in 1961 and then Ballmer in 1975 to define its visual identity was hardly a coincidence. Both Swiss, they brought added value, thanks to the celebrated reputation of Swiss Graphic Design and the cultural capital associated with its representatives that must have appealed to NAVA for marketing purposes. Although Italian, NAVA adopted a Swiss-German accent in its promotional material. Many elements of NAVA's promotional brochure shown in Figure 1 might have sounded Swiss to the ears of NAVA's clientele in the know. By wearing a dark suit, keeping his arms crossed and seeking direct eye contact, Ballmer performed with his attire and attitude the role of the serious expert whose professionalism should not be doubted⁵³—a message that was reinforced by viewers' background knowledge of him and his work and their biased understanding of Swiss Graphic Design more broadly. In addition to the image, the use of a grid layout and a lowercase Helvetica bold further conveyed NAVA's intention to be associated with Swiss Graphic Design. The Milanese printer was one that favored its spread in Italy, and indeed was responsible for importing the Helvetica typeface, following Vignelli's request.⁵⁴

53 Leah Armstrong and Felice McDowell, "Introduction: Fashioning Professionals: History, Theory and Methods," in *Fashioning Professionals: Identity and Representation at Work in the Creative Industries*, ed. Leah Armstrong and Felice McDowell (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 9–12.

54 Iliprandi, "An Interview with Giancarlo Iliprandi," 20.

Figure 8

Rejected design for the new Valentino visual identity, 1977, 27×21 cm, by Walter Ballmer (Unidesign). Source: Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan. Courtesy Walter Ballmer Archive.



At times, however, being Swiss was not enough, and Ballmer had to come to terms with the clients' expectations. In the late-1970s, the Italian fashion brand Valentino hired Unidesign to manage its visual identity. Early sketches of the logotype did not engender the client's favor; the geometric serif all-caps logotype was considered "too 'designer,'" whereas the client asked for something "richer, baroque and more 'dynamic'" (see Figure 8).⁵⁵ The approved branding was the opposite of what was originally suggested, and the serif lettering and center layout contributed to a design by Ballmer that did not seem Swiss at all (see Figure 9). By combining an elegant lowercase serif lettering for the trademark and logotype with Helvetica Light for the different departments, the final design was a compromise between typographic tradition and corporate design that must have appeared more appropriate for the upper-class clientele that the fashion brand targeted.

Another interpretation for Ballmer's reuse of similar design solutions comes to the fore when taking into consideration his design practice. According to his assistants, it was a strenuous work-in-progress design process: The design of a poster could take him months, and he would run countless multiple color combinations and printing proofs before coming to a decision. The almost unlimited budget and virtually negligible time pressure at Olivetti made this practice viable, but problems emerged once Ballmer started his own studio, as two events seem to suggest. First, the confectionery factory, Galbusera, rejected a logo design because of an unjustified delay.⁵⁶ Second, Ballmer asked former assistant Fulvio Ronchi to help in a contest for rebranding the BCI (Italian Commercial Bank) because, according to Ronchi, this temporary consultancy helped Ballmer to address his difficulty with tight deadlines.⁵⁷

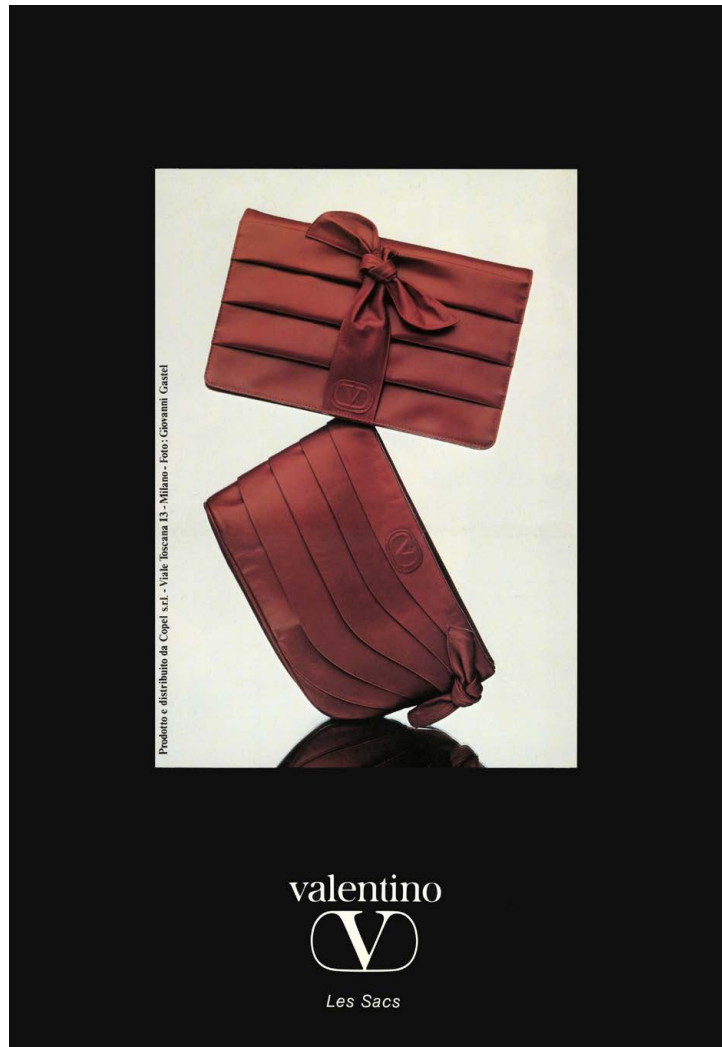
55 Proceedings of a meeting on the rebranding of Valentino, December 14, 1977, Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan.

56 Franco Giandonati (Konsum Spa) letter to Glauco Felici (Unidesign), August 29, 1984, Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan.

57 Ronchi, conversation with Fornari, January 6, 2015; and Ronchi, conversation with Barbieri, March 19, 2017.

Figure 9

Approved design for the new Valentino visual identity, 1977; Valentino advertisement, 1982, 27×39 cm, by Walter Ballmer (Unidesign). Source: Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan. Courtesy Walter Ballmer Archive.



Consequently, one could argue that the signature style helped Ballmer speed up the design process and overcome time management issues by using a design repertoire. Gottschalk recalled an event that might support this hypothesis. Gottschalk was at Unidesign one day when a new commission arrived. To his surprise, Ballmer opened “a drawer full of stuff, designs that he had done before, for somebody else or just for himself, he [went] through it, pick[ed] something, and [said] ‘that’s what I’m gonna do!’”⁵⁸ The unorthodox practice contradicts one of the core ideas associated with Swiss Graphic Design: It is an approach to visual communication that is purpose-led and stresses problem solving over subjectivity. Not bothered by the contradiction, Gottschalk found it “quite clever” how Ballmer had “two or three shapes which he varied again and again and again, [without] giving a damn whether the client was producing cars or glasses.”⁵⁹

58 Gottschalk, conversation with Barbieri, March 22, 2018.

59 Ibid.

Figure 10

Logo design for Colmar and AEM (Azienda Energetica Municipale), 1985, by Walter Ballmer (Unidesign). Source: Walter Ballmer Archive, Milan. Courtesy Walter Ballmer Archive.



The logo for the sport fashion brand Colmar, which is identical to a logo designed for the electric company AEM, is a case in point (see Figure 10).

The anecdote lifts a corner of the veil covering the misconceptions about Swiss Graphic Design. As Giovanni Levi argued, “biography is... the ideal place to control the interstitial... character of freedom that agents are able to exert, and also the manner by which normative systems, which are never free of contradictions, function in concrete ways.”⁶⁰ In this light, Gottschalk’s anecdote offers a glimpse into the manner in which Swiss Graphic Design, as an abstract normative system, was put into practice in the everyday—one of the many inconsistent ways in which a “langue” is uttered in an individual act of speech. Stretching the terms, one could also suggest, with or without malice, that Ballmer customized his own graphic idiom to sound Swiss to a foreign audience but without necessarily sticking to its proclaimed methodological rules. He accentuated his Swiss-German accent to capitalize on the connotative values attached to it.

Swiss Graphic Design Revitalized

In line with the aims of this special issue, we have revisited in this article an aspect of the historiographical canon of Swiss Graphic Design. A loaded term that has lost its meaning and connection with reality, the concept of Swiss Graphic Design was revitalized through Ballmer’s own experience. Instead of considering it as an abstract, totalizing, monolithic, and impersonal concept, we have looked at how and by whom Swiss Graphic

60 Giovanni Levi, “The Uses of Biography,” in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, 107.

Design gained meaning in specific circumstances. In doing so, the case study serves as a lens to assess the relative power of Swiss Graphic Design and its effects on individual lives and careers.

In Ballmer's case, he benefitted from the excellent reputation of Swiss Graphic Design and sometimes capitalized on the stereotype associated with it. When compared to other Swiss graphic designers living and working abroad (see, for example, Constance Delamadeleine's article on Studio Holleinstein in this issue), Ballmer does not seem to have been deliberately outspoken about his Swissness. Meanwhile, he developed a distinct graphic idiom, especially at Unidesign, that was recognizable, and recognized, as "Swiss." Yet, to reduce him to the stereotype is to disregard the realities of his design practice. To attribute his success only to his Swissness does not account for other factors or actors involved. In other words, national design discourse cannot be reduced to an individual, and neither can the individual be sacrificed to generalization.

Rather than asking whether Ballmer and his work can or cannot be labeled as Swiss, we have shown in this article the fictional character of national design discourses. We have mapped the social network that gave meaning to Swiss Graphic Design and questioned how it was perceived, understood, and performed in a specific time and place by Ballmer, his assistants, the broader graphic design community, and his clients.

Acknowledgment

The authors express appreciation for all images that were kindly provided by Walter Ballmer Archive (bc.ballmer@gmail.com).

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