

# Wolfgang Weingart: Typography in Context.

Research into Tradition, Media Revolutions and Innovation in the Work  
of Wolfgang Weingart 1961–2004.

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# Research Report

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Within the framework of a research project on Wolfgang Weingart, from the beginning of 2012 to the end of 2013 investigations and research work were undertaken on three topic areas, the results of which are concisely summarized below.

## Rules and dissent: the “typographic rebel”

One of the reasons why the descriptions of Wolfgang Weingart and his own presentation of himself as a “typographic rebel” and a re-nower of modern Swiss typography interested us was because they are indicative of an approach that aims at ascribing typography a new status.

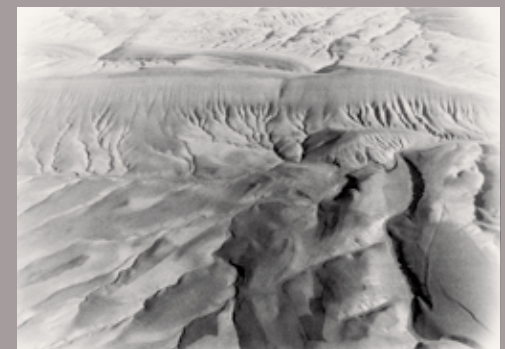
We are dealing here with an attempt to detach typography, at least in part, from the context of applied art and to situate it more decisively within the field of fine arts. The impulse to undertake this attempt can be related to the inferior value traditionally ascribed in both the criticism and history of art to applied art as compared with “high” (free) art, which repeatedly led other modern artists to explicitly distance themselves from the decorative arts. Within this classification system, applied art is associated more with rules and automatism – free art, in contrast, with breaking rules and crossing boundaries.

Weingart’s work and method of working, and his verbal and written statements, can be linked to concepts of art and artists that have existed ever since the emergence of modernism.<sup>1</sup>

A group of “line and round compositions” [fig. 1] in which Weingart, between 1965 and 1967, explored ways of using lead lines and letters that were very foreign to the typesetting profession make clear his interest in the visible traces of the work process while also illustrating a crossing of boundaries in the direction of “free” art. Weingart’s comparison of his own works to (abstract) natural and cultural forms seen from above [fig. 2] (photographs taken from a hot-air balloon or an airplane) can be found already among the pioneers of Abstraction, New Objectivity and New Photography (Kazimir Malevich, Paul Klee and others).



1 Wolfgang Weingart, Bent lead composition, experimental work, 1965–1967, letterpress, manual typesetting, 35 × 50 cm



2 Wolfgang Weingart, Dry river valleys in the Syrian desert, aerial photograph from a plane, ca. 1965, 30.5 × 40 cm

In many interviews with colleagues and students, Weingart’s behavior or “character” has been described in terms of the well-known archetype of the artist as an “enfant terrible” and revolutionary, one of modernism’s stereotypical descriptions of the artist. This picture becomes more concrete through the term “typographic rebel” (Kornatzki 1983: 80–87), which Peter von Kornatzki used officially to describe his friend.

That Weingart made use of traditional images and myths about the artist is also evident from a number of anecdotes, such as the one concerning a mishap that occurred during his apprenticeship in 1962. A type case fell out of his hands to the ground. While gathering up the letters to put them back in place, Weingart says, the idea occurred to him of placing the type artistically, that is without making legible or meaningful words or sentences (Weingart 2000: 169–171). This anecdote has all the literary characteristics of a “founding myth” in which chance and the idea are given special significance. Ever since the Renaissance, the idea or inspiration has been the principle characteristic used to distinguish high, creative art from applied, reproductive art (Ruppert 1998: 235).

Weingart himself described the clear parallels between his works and those by artists from the circles of Dada, the Bauhaus, or Concrete Poetry as being accidental. He claimed for himself the classic idea of a *creatio ex nihilo*, i.e. creating something out of nothing, an ability which, ever since Vasari, art history has attributed to the artistic genius (Krieger 2011: 157–158).

In retrospect, these strategies of self-description can be explained in light of Weingart's interest in upgrading his profession in artistic terms and in establishing his position within academic teaching throughout the world.

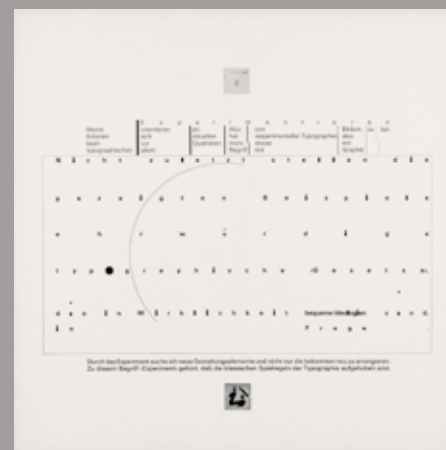
Weingart summarized the theoretical and practical results of his teaching in his advanced class from 1968 to 1976 in a manuscript that was revised and given a theoretical structure by Peter von Kornatzki (Weingart 1972). It was directed primarily at students from Germany and the USA who had already completed their university education in the fields of art and design, which was not possible to do in Switzerland at that time. An important aspect of Weingart's manuscript is the way he positions his work as a "new tendency," as a logical succession and an imperative progression. This description of the inevitability of stylistic progress is characteristic of a traditional approach of art history based on the history of styles. In that sense, descriptive terminology from art history is used here to upgrade typography by making it into an art form. In his concept for a new typography, Weingart called for the incorporation of linguistic approaches such as those that were already being used at the time in communication science. The strategies that favored the increasing academization of the profession, toward which Weingart had an ambivalent attitude, were also reflected in efforts that were being made at the same time to establish "author graphics" – the typographer as author and artist.

<sup>1</sup> The concepts of art and artists are thoroughly discussed in Bättschmann 1997, Bismarck 2010, Fastert 2011, Kris 1979, Ruppert 1998, Wagner 1991, and Wittkower 1963.

### Weingart's design practice in light of technological revolutions

The use of new production technologies by Weingart and his former students was examined and compared with the acceptance or rejection of these technologies by the profession in general. The period covered by the investigation (1960s to the early 1990s) was one of rapid technological change in the typesetting and printing industry, which was not always mirrored by changes in the media (e.g. caused by the computer). Three typesetting techniques were dominant in this time period: manual or mechanical typesetting, phototypesetting and the early phase of digital typesetting. These techniques did not completely replace each other, but were used simultaneously; and a new typesetting technology always gained widespread acceptance only after its viability in terms of production technology, economy and aesthetics had been scrutinized (Marshall 1993). The emergence of new technologies also repeatedly gave rise to warnings about an inevitable loss of quality<sup>2</sup>, which were intensified by the spread of desktop publishing in the mid-1980s, yet the qualities of the new production techniques also sparked euphoria among some designers (Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko, for example).

An examination of Weingart's practice shows that he rejected the use of photo- or digital typesetting for his own work, devoting himself instead to manual lead typesetting [fig.3], linocutting and, from 1974 onward, lithographic film collage [fig.4]. The overlaying of halftones and reproduction material, as well as the way in which the material facilitated the processes of modifying and scaling, presented Weingart with an exceptionally vast range of possibilities of artistic expression. This exemplifies how the use of a production process in design practice may prioritize the contemplation and testing of aesthetic effects.



3 Wolfgang Weingart, Meine Kriterien beim typographischen Experimentieren (My criteria for typographic experiments), typographic text interpretation from a series of eleven prints, 1969, letterpress, manual type setting, 50 × 50 cm



4 Wolfgang Weingart, The 20th Century Poster, exhibition poster for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, 1984, offset (photo collage), 128 × 90 cm

With regard to the introduction of the computer, Weingart, like a number of his colleagues, had a somewhat ambivalent attitude (Weingart 1985). In 1984 he was provided with the first Macintosh personal computer from Apple for use in his teaching. He complained about the “computability of design processes,” but still praised the computer as an outstanding “machine for learning.” With regard to his “own” technique, the lithographic collage, Weingart took a protective attitude but introduced a number of selected students to this process. A few students (among them Mara Jerman, Adrienne Pearson, Lisa Pomeroy and Kristie Williams) also explored the design potential of the computer, though it remained one tool among many (fig. 5). Weingart’s attitude was not hostile to technology; essentially he simply urged for new technologies to be used in a more conscious way (Weingart 1986). Nevertheless, his approach and the limited use he made of the computer suggest a degree of conservatism. This seems to accord with his strategy of harmonizing artistic and design practice, under which the innovative moment originates from a systematic and intuitive-exploratory approach that is independent of technological and stylistic change.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Wallis 1993 or Garland 1996.



5 Lisa Pomeroy, *Research in Modern Typography*, in “*Typographic Process NR. 4*”, TM, n. 5, 1988, exe. 5 and 7, book cover studies employing conventional graphic methods and computer-generated images, 30 × 22.5 cm

## Weingart’s visual research approach in his design and teaching practice

Interviews with Weingart, contemporary experts and former students reveal that besides Weingart himself, other teachers at the Basel School of Design and their students also engaged in “research”.<sup>3</sup> In his writings, Weingart used this term for the first time in 1966: “research into optical laws” (Weingart 1966: 14). In 1986 he described the systematic examinations of the design possibilities offered by the Macintosh in his teaching as “basic visual research” (Weingart 1986: 1).<sup>4</sup> He also used terms such as experimentation, studies, gaining knowledge, solving complex design problems and developing design criteria, which indicate a certain proximity to the way in which the term “research” is used in the natural sciences. But Weingart distanced himself from this approach as early as the beginning of the 1970s. He described his own investigations and those undertaken in his classes as largely subjective, even though they were carried out systematically (Weingart 1972: 17). Weingart’s “understanding of knowledge and research” can be best described as exploratory “image research”.<sup>5</sup> A key work in this respect is his series of “Eleven Typographical Text Interpretations” [fig. 3], which he had conceived as a manifesto for a new understanding of typography for the exhibition at Kurt Weidemann’s in Stuttgart in 1969. In word and (graphical) deed, here he questioned the traditional “laws” of typography as “ideologies” (Weingart 2000: 282). He exhausted the possibilities of lead typesetting in experiments that aimed at giving the type a dynamic quality and making it more appealing to read. He also encouraged his students to experiment – to a far greater extent than many other teachers in Basel.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Among the most cited teachers figure Armin Hofmann, Emil Ruder, Kurt Hauer and Manfred Maier.

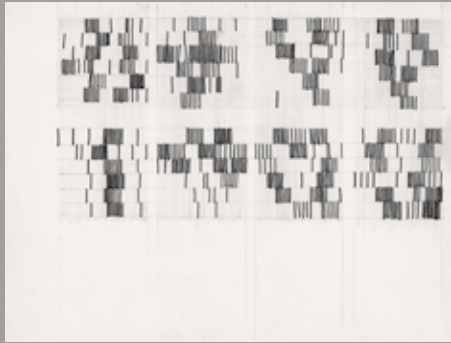
<sup>4</sup> The entire supplement series *Typographic Process* edited by Weingart in the “TM” (1982–1994) were dedicated to “research from the Typography Class” at the Basel School of Design.

<sup>5</sup> See the definition of “image research” and “knowledge” by Michael Renner (Renner 2011: 92–116 and 2013: 59–76). Compare with the definition of “scientific knowledge” as a result of a reflective design practice by Sabine Ammon (Ammon 2013: 336–361, specially 356–357).

<sup>6</sup> This was emphasized by many former students of the research team interviewed in 2012 and 2013.



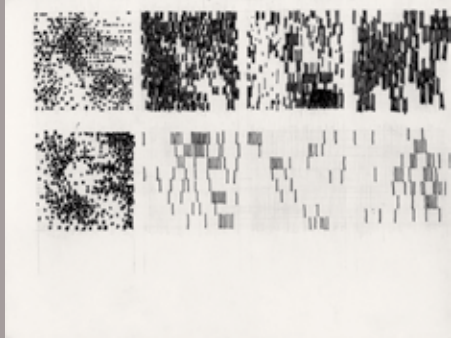
6 Armin Hofmann, exercises in line articulations, in “*Graphic design Manual*” (Hofmann 1965: 105). These exercises were already published in “*Graphis*”, n. 80, 1958 (Hofmann 1958: 504)



7a Wolfgang Weingart, two line studies in Hofmann's class, 1964, pencil, 18.5 x 24.5 cm



7b Wolfgang Weingart, line picture out of a series of 3 free compositions, 1964, letter press, 47 x 33 cm



However, the process-oriented, systematic method of working was not unique to Weingart and his students, but was characteristic of the entire Basel School. The exercises in Armin Hofmann's textbook "Graphic Design Manual. Principles and Practice" (Hofmann 1965) [fig. 6] or in Manfred Maier's introductory course textbook "Basic Principles of Design" (Maier 1977) could be regarded as finger exercises that encourage students to "practice".<sup>7</sup> Viewed historically, such exercises and processes are rooted in teaching methods based on perception psychology that were fostered in European workshop schools, among them the Bauhaus. Armin Hofmann's and Emil Ruder's textbooks (Ruder 1967) reveal analogies to Bauhaus teaching about form by Wassily Kandinsky ("Point and Line to Plane", 1926) and Paul Klee ("Pedagogical Sketchbook", 1925). Traces of this are also found in Weingart's own studies, in particular in his examination of point and line [fig. 7]. An exploratory examination of the themes with regard to elementary relationships such as point/plane, light/dark, figure/ground, concentration/dissolution or bold/light, sharp-edged/blurred is verifiable in Weingart's work. A relational way of thinking and other design principles that in general are characteristic of the modern avant-garde permeate Weingart's entire work. That these principles could be perfectly described using semiotic terms was recognized by his friend Peter von Kornatzki, who had studied at the

Ulm School of Design. He combined lectures that Weingart had given from 1972 onward at different universities, mostly in Germany and the USA, with semiotic concepts and in this way helped Weingart gain a high academic standing (Weingart 1972–1976).<sup>8</sup>

One interesting finding is that while relationships to the Ulm School of Design (Tomás Maldonado and others) can be proven, there were also considerable discrepancies between the schools. Whereas in Ulm design processes were rationalized using scientific methods, in Basel an attempt was made to enrich them with individual image ideas inspired by studies of materials.<sup>9</sup> A similar discrepancy between a university and a practice-oriented design school becomes evident when comparing the Royal College of Art in London, which has had the status of a university since 1967, with the Basel School, which did not attain university status until the year 2000. Whereas in London empirical legibility tests were conducted for commercial purposes, the legibility studies performed around the same time in Weingart's class were used to develop visual sensitivity [fig. 8].<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See also Hofmann 1958 and Kurt Hauert 1988.

<sup>8</sup> The friendship between Weingart and Kornatzki goes back to their training period as typesetters in Stuttgart. Afterwards Weingart continued his training at the Basel School of Design, while Kornatzki studied visual communication at the HfG Ulm, where Tomás Maldonado taught design semiotics.

<sup>9</sup> Compare the statements of Gui Bonsiepe (Bonsiepe 1967: 8–11) with the explanations and illustrations by Emil Ruder about spontaneity and fortuity in his textbook (Ruder 1967: 162–173).

<sup>10</sup> The Royal College of Art London and the Kunstgewerbeschule Basel were presented with their different education approaches in "Graphis", No. 146, 1969–70, pp. 486–567.



Comparison: exercises in Weingart's class from 1970 onward – versus – experiments at Royal College of Art, from 1968 onward

8b Hitoshi Koizumi, Typographic legibility research project, one sketch of a series with the same text block slowly destroying it, 1992–1993 (Weingart's class), 42 x 49.5 cm



8a Brian Coe, experimental studies (Royal College of Art), in Herbert Spencer, *Readability of Print*, in "Graphis", n. 146, vol. 25, 1970, p. 539

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