

## FOC Grand Prix Design 2013: encomium for Trix and Robert Haussmann

My dear Trix and Robert Haussmann,  
prizewinners and guests

There is barely another designer in Switzerland who can be said to have had such a broad and lasting influence as Trix and Robert Haussmann. In 1967, the year they married, they formed the bureau Allgemeine Entwurfsanstalt. Meaning “general drafting institution”, the name betrays their love of wordplay and finely honed sense of irony, but it also tells us something about the Haussmanns’ professional mindset. The emphasis is on neither form nor function. Instead, the forward-looking creative process takes precedence. “Institution”, meanwhile, describes a form of organisation that serves to perform a specific public duty (perhaps it makes you think of a correctional or financial institution). Drafting is thus understood to be a public duty. The “general” part makes it clear that that, far from concentrating on specific contracts or clients, they are open to everything.

You may well be familiar with works by Allgemeine Entwurfsanstalt. You may have used them without knowing. Examples in Zurich include the Lanvin and Weinberg boutiques as well as the ShopVille shopping arcade and Da Capo bar in the central station. There is also the Hotel Plaza in Basel, the Galleria shopping arcade in Hamburg and the extension to the Museum zu Allerheiligen in Schaffhausen. Perhaps you even own a piece of their furniture made by Röthlisberger, Wogg or Knoll, a curtain from Mira-X or a cup from Swid Powell.

If you have used just one of the above, you will know how well they work. To understand the origin of their design language, however, we need to take a little history lesson. In 1967, the year Allgemeine Entwurfsanstalt was founded, Swiss designers still felt beholden to “good form”, but the tradition of Modernist functionalism had lapsed into rigid formalism. The country was undergoing a construction boom, and designs were being produced very quickly. The Oil Crisis cast doubt on people’s faith in progress. In the US, Robert Venturi wrote his groundbreaking book “Complexity and Contradiction”, and Studio Alchymia was created in Milan by Ettore Sottsass and his associates.

Trix and Robert Haussmann were also affected by the Modernist crisis and joined in the search for a new visual language. Both were very well acquainted with the ideas of classical Modernism. Trix Haussmann-Högl had studied architecture at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich under Werner Max Moser and Jacques Schader, while Robert Haussmann had taken the interior design course led by Wilhelm Kienzle and Willy Guhl at the School of Arts and Crafts and had been working for such exponents of Modernism as Gerrit Rietveld. He once told me: "Modernism embraced me."

The newly formed Allgemeine Entwurfsanstalt aimed to break free from the embrace of Modernism, which had become expressionless and commercialised. To this end, Trix and Robert delved into the Mannerism of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their children thought it was perfectly normal to spend their holidays in Italy, where their parents would visit churches to sketch illusionistic frescoes.

This research work undertaken at the end of the 1970s led to a series of models dubbed "teaching items". They were the visual representation of Trix and Robert's criticism of the dogma of Modernism, since the couple believed that there were already enough written manifestos. Through these models, free from scale and purpose, they created their own design approach, which they called *manierismo critico*. This was then refined and applied to textiles, crockery, furniture, interior design and architectural projects. Driven not by invention but by the reinterpretation of the past, they made use of techniques such as imitation, illusion, metaphor, ambiguity and contradiction. Traditional craftsmanship was just as important to them as irony.

The "teaching items" are key pieces in the Haussmanns' joint oeuvre. Thanks to a generous gift from the designers themselves, they are part of the collection at the Museum of Design in Zurich. We are very proud of these valuable documents of Swiss design history and plan to show them to a wider audience once again next year.

Critical design is more popular than ever at the moment, and digital imaging has led to a strong resurgence in Mannerist strategies since the 1990s. This can be seen very clearly, for example, in the fashion and textiles section of this exhibition. The synergies between craftsmanship and design are also evident in some of the products and objects on display here. There can be no doubt that a whole new generation is developing an ever-growing interest in the work of Trix and Robert Haussmann.

Renate Menzi, Federal Design Commission, June 2013