



Interview with Ralph Schraivogel



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Patrizia Crivelli, design promotion, Federal Office of Culture
and Vera Sacchetti, design critic
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Vera Sacchetti [VS]

You studied graphic design in Zurich. How did your education impact you, and how did you start designing posters?

Ralph Schraivogel [RS]

I studied graphic design not because I sought to pursue it as a profession, but because since kindergarten age I was always painting and drawing and was not happy at all during my school years. The applied arts school was a liberation: I felt free, like a newborn. I'm not unhappy there wasn't an art class in those days; but if there were, I would have ended up there. In retrospect, I was lucky that things turned out this way and I became a graphic designer.

During my studies, the 1980 youth riots in Zurich also took place, and the mood was wild and interesting: I thought things would get wilder and wilder, and I liked that idea very much. In my class, half of the class wasn't focused on graphic design and we didn't want to become like our teachers, so we actually did not have big plans of becoming graphic designers. Also, what we learned at school was still very strict Swiss graphic design. Following my diploma, I took a number of freelance jobs and after a few years I wasn't satisfied with my professional life... I recalled my diploma work and what I did before school, and I remembered how I was very happy while doing it. I was making pictures, images. Designing posters is the closest to that and so I assumed posters could be a very good medium for me. And don't ask me how, but I got the assignments to start making posters.

VS

From the start, your poster work is very experimental.

RS

I just saw possibilities, what has been done, not done and why not, and I also had this thing that I was "anti" Swiss design. I was told by an older designer I was spoiling Swiss style — spoiling the grid — but I was very proud of this, I thought it was the right thing to do.

VS

Do you think the poster is an ideal form of expression in graphic design?

RS

Yes, but it's merely one of many. It's the medium I clearly prefer in graphic design, and it's what I like to do the most. Maybe it's not important at all, but for me, it is important.

VS

Soon after you started designing posters, you start participating in international events and winning prizes. How does this come about?

RS

There were not so many events at the time. Warsaw, Brno — these were the big festivals. The first really nice prize I got was Warsaw, with the poster for *Cinemafrica* 1991. I remember when I did this poster I felt like I had broken a boundary for myself. It was a very nice feeling. Then, I

won the prize and it was a confirmation. That gave me the chance to go to Warsaw two years later, I had an exhibition there, and there were a lot of international guests coming. There was a symposium, and you were all together, you ate together, and you shared time with all these renowned designers — that was fantastic. Warsaw was also important for the connection with Japan, since many Japanese designers were participating. Since I was interested in Japanese design, this was a very nice coincidence. Two years later, I went back, integrated the jury, and again got the exposure to these people. I really appreciated this exchange, since graphic design, poster-making, can be very lonesome work. I enjoyed spending time with these people, talking to them about graphic design and other things, and see how they thought.

VS

The festival circuit ultimately leads to you joining the AGI in 1995. How does it go from Warsaw to this? I can imagine it's related to the continued exchanges you talk about.

RS

Many of the people I met in festivals were members of the AGI, and everyone knew about it. I thought it was something secret [laughs]. When I became a member I was of course very honoured, I knew it was something special; but nothing changed because most of the members I knew before and I was in contact with before.

Patrizia Crivelli [PC]

And while you were anti-institutional, was it acceptable for you to be a member of the AGI?

RS

I kept doing what I do; what I appreciated was the exchange between peers. The AGI is about the international network, and also, since I am teaching, it is important for education and exchanges for the students. This is what is still one of the fundamental reasons for the existence of the AGI.

VS

When do you find yourself drawn to Japanese design? And how does it influence you?

RS

While I was happy in my early career to be "anti" Swiss style, as I got a bit older I realized I did not want to be a permanent adolescent who is just against everything. Still, I was bored by the look of Swiss design at the time, and I was looking for something else. In 1986 I came across a Japanese Design Yearbook of the same year, and it just resonated: here was serious, well-done design that didn't look at all like the Swiss style, and there was something, a quality to strive for, which was different from all that was around me. To me, this was important. I didn't want to do the same as they do, but it was important to know about this parallel universe, which was something completely different and creative.

VS

You showed great resistance in adopting the computer as a tool, which only happened at the turn of the millennium. I would argue that your postponement of using the computer allowed you to become much more innovative than your colleagues because of the different tools you used, and you pushed yourself to be more and more innovative in this way. Do you feel that is true?

RS

Yes, the postponement of the use of a computer was completely intentional. At the time, everybody told me I needed to have a computer. I didn't believe it, and maybe in the beginning I was naïve and thought this was a trend that would pass. But simultaneously, I wanted to use my time to make these images, and not to buy an expensive computer and be forced to take other jobs to pay the investment. In retrospect, I believe I had a big advantage: I had so much time to enjoy, to work, to listen to music... I really enjoyed it, and resisted until it wasn't possible any longer to not work in a digital way.

VS

After almost sixteen years working with the computer, do you notice differences in the way of working?

RS

When I started working with the computer, my way of working changed a lot... it was clear for me that it would get more conceptual with the computer. The machine already comes with all these tools, somehow spoiling the game. I need some resistance to work, there needs to be some sort of fight, otherwise it's not so much fun.

VS

There is a text by [Japanese designer] Koichi Sato, where he describes how impressed he was by the multiple techniques you used to make your posters — in this case the *Cinemafrica* 1991 poster. It really seems to have a three-dimensionality that makes it quite fascinating, giving depth to the paper.

PC

You also won, with these posters, a Swiss Design Award.

RS

Ah yes, I had nothing else to submit [laughs]. Yes, that was, of course, very nice.

PC

Yes, and you won three times before 2000, in your “analogue” period. And now the Swiss Grand Award for Design.

RS

You have to invent a new prize [laughs]. It was great, always at a good time. The money also helped, it's not very lucrative to make cultural posters.

VS

After the *Cinemafrica* 1991 poster, there is also the poster for your retrospective in Bern, where there is a visual continuity in terms of optical effects and depth. How is it like to work for yourself? Are you free to experiment more?

RS

Somehow, I always work for myself. The technique is really simple; mostly, in my posters, there isn't as much as it seems. My work is a reduction; not as employed by the “Swiss style” and its visual purity, but in the use of the technique.

VS

And then there is the signature, which is always present. Your name, and then the name of the printer.

RS

On my posters the printer is always mentioned. If they are not, then I really forgot. I always have the printer — mostly Serigraphie Uldry, in Bern — included.

VS

This brings me to the topic of collaborations, which are seemingly very important to bring forward the best possible results for your work. While you work by yourself, your practice is not isolated at all; these kinds of relationships make your work shine.

RS

I go a long way when I make a poster. It's not glamorous, I like to work long hours on it, and then if you go to a printer that prints in two hours and prefers you are not there, that's very uncomfortable if you worked two months on something... then in the end it will be more or less by accident that it is well printed. It's much more comfortable to work when you know the printing will be in good hands. Whenever I worked with Serigraphie Uldry, Albin Uldry was so interested, it was just... fantastic. That helped me more and more to do things; I was motivated by the moment I could go to Bern and print the poster together with Albin. He was very generous with his time, stopped all machines and jobs, and dedicated all his attention to our project.

PC

Printers like this are very rare. There were only two others in Switzerland that were like that.

VS

For me it's interesting that in your career collaborations don't fall only on this aspect of finalizing and producing your work, but also in collaborations with clients, where you've created and shaped their image for years and years. That was very good for you, but also very good for them...

RS

I take great pleasure in doing what I think is best for the client. But sometimes, I realize the client doesn't think the same way, or has another opinion about what they really need. Collaborations aren't always very easy; some clients stay for years, other not. The collaboration with the Neumarkt Theater lasted one year, with the Kunsthhaus Zürich two years... Collaborations are always two-sided; I don't want to be bossed around, it's also my life's content that is at stake. With the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, it's been going on for a long time; sometimes we have different opinions, but in the end we understand each other. With “Cinemafrica”, after the first or second poster, the clients just trusted me and I really could do what I wanted. I never want to say “I had to do this”, because in all truth I don't have to, and I hate the idea that “I have” to do something. So the collaboration is something I

always want to defend: the collaboration and the product that the client and I made together.

VS

You've just been awarded the Grand Award for Design. What does the distinction mean to you?

RS

Firstly, it's of course a great honour. Then, it is also a recognition. That's very nice for me, because when you design things, you are always unsure about what you're doing — if you were sure, that would be certainly boring. But then, that makes it very nice to receive this recognition, because it gives you some satisfaction. I always think that when you do something that you give something, you give a present to the public. And if you give presents and the public doesn't like them, it's terrible. Graphic design is one-way communication, and this feedback is maybe why I also really appreciate these exchanges I mentioned, not just within your community but also at a wider, global level. This because, for me, a graphic designer's work is, somehow, extremely local — I've had serious difficulties in making posters for Japan, because I cannot imagine with the same clarity as I do in my local context how they will perceive it. I realize that, when I'm working, I think about my audience, who I believe I have to address in the particular context of a project. This is the one-way communication aspect of our profession, which always gives you this feeling of insecurity.

VS

What has yet to be done in your career?

RS

Many things are not done yet. This prize is also a motivation for the future. I remember when I started a friend always said "Oh, you work so long on a poster", but I said "No, this is an investment for the future, then they know me, and they come to me, and I get clients because they know what they get"... then when it happened the first time, I thought, "Wait, no, I don't want to do a Schraivogel!"... I don't know what a Schraivogel is!