
Wolfgang Weingart: Making the Young Generation Nuts

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This summer, Wolfgang Weingart will teach a summer program on typography in Basel, Switzerland. Even for this veteran teacher, the prospect of fresh pedagogy and new students is exciting. Here he discusses his educational roots, the current state of the art and the promise of his new program.

Heller: You are a pioneer of the “new” typography of the pre-digital age. What were your motives in developing an anti-Swiss style manner of typography at a time when the Helvetica ruled the corporate world?

Weingart: In 1959, I got nuts (in a good way) about Swiss Typography, what you call the “International Style.” In spring 1963, I visited Armin Hofmann and Emil Ruder in Basel, and Hofmann asked me to teach at his school. A year later, I started a new design life at the Basel School as a “guest listener.” I soon found, however, that this International Style had limits, so I started to get rebellious and began my own personal work. I also organized rebellious speakers to give lectures against the school, including G.G. Lange from the Berthold typefoundry, Anton Stankowski, Hap Grieshaber and others. Ruder almost threw me out of the school. But I am not a pioneer.

Heller: How do you feel your typographic experiments (and practice) relates to the earlier New Typography as codified by Tschichold and the avant gardists in the '20s?

Weingart: Forty-five years ago I was very uncivilized. I did not know about the Bauhaus or Tschichold. I lived in my own world, working seven days a week. History began to interest me in the '70s, when I gradually found out about many historical wonderful typographical works. These days, frankly, I prefer to instruct students who know nothing about typography.

Heller: You are dedicated to the painstaking craft of type and typography. You produced much of your most important work using hot metal types. What did you think when digital typography was introduced and so many typographers used the medium to create anarchic typography?

Weingart: That my work was mostly done with hot metal types comes from the fact that I have been around for a long time! We were the first Swiss design school that, in November 1984, had Macintoshes in my typeshop, it was a gift from Steve Jobs and Clement Mok. This reality could be a proof that I am open for almost everything. In fact, in the Basel typeshop we had hot metal, lithographic film, and the electronics all together.

My first principle to every student was: "Use every technique to solve the problem." Josef Albers said, in 1933, at Black Mountain College, "Open the students' eyes." That's an important part of my mission in our "First Summer Program Basel 2005."

Heller: What has been significantly gained or lost with digital-based typography?

Weingart: You can compose micro-typography much better than in hot metal types. But you still have to know the existing rules exactly, even the ones from hundred years ago.

Heller: Twenty years ago in Design Quarterly, your principals of typography were published. This was, for many, the first introduction to how abstract and practical principles were combined in a virtual manifesto of type. Have these principles changed for you in any way since that first publication?

Weingart: That Design Quarterly in 1985 was one of the statements I've made about my activities in typography. Since the late sixties, you will find I radically changed many things, yet the principles are the same. [Leonard] Bernstein or [Herbert von] Karajan conducted the Beethoven Symphonies in different ways, but the music by Beethoven is still the same: great and amazing, just like his compositions were over two hundred years ago.

Heller: Your classes at the Basel School of Design are legendary. Indeed, like a magnet, you attracted many young designers from all over the globe, especially from the United States. Many of these, such as April Greiman and Dan Friedman, brought a so-called new (neo-Modern) typography to the United States. Since last October you have been "retired" from the Basel School. In all your years, what would you say has been your proudest, as well as your most significant, accomplishment?

Weingart: I had, and I have still, a very serious mission: To give the highest quality education to everyone who passes through my classes. And I am sure this is true for all my Basel colleagues too. I have never had time look back at what opportunities I made possible for young students, but my biggest wish was for students is: "When you leave our school, you must find your own path and dream." And I did not attract students from all over the globe. The alliance of great teachers that made up the Basel School of Design attracted these students.

Heller: Though you are currently “retired,” you are certainly not removed from teaching. This summer you are starting your “First Summer Program Basel 2005.” What will you teach? And what do you hope to impart to students who have been bombarded with all manner of typography from the classical to the chaotic?

Weingart: I will be a typography instructor for one week at the “First Summer Program Basel 2005” during July 3 to July 23. The pillar for us is “basics.” We’ll rediscover the needs of basics as the first step in beginning of each design education. No other school of design offers a deeper or more serious basic program.

Heller: Was there a reason for leaving the Basel School of Design to found your own summer program? Were your teaching principles no longer compatible?

Weingart: I did not leave the Basel School of Design. I left the University of Art and Design Basel, which split away from the Basel School of Design in 2000. They split away to open a new type of university design level, controlled mostly by the Swiss government. (In Switzerland, there are nine institutions with the same scheme. 30 percent of that would be enough!) So, I went back to the original school from where I came to work on different projects. One of these projects is the “First Summer Program Basel 2005.”

Heller: How have your teaching methods and style changed during the over thirty-five years since you began teaching? Have there been any significant revelations in that time?

Weingart: The structure of the images changed, but the concept is consistent still today. From 1968 on, my work was the opposite of “Swiss Typography;” I was the rebel of the Basel School. In the mid-1970s, many designers copied the Basel approach to create the so-called “New Wave.” Yet I never wanted to create a fixed style, so I radically changed the way I worked from that point on.

My range of operating with typography is still wide, and it makes the young generation today nuts! Often I hear students say, “I paid over \$100,000 for my design education. What I saw and learned in these three days at your workshop was more than during my four years university!”

One of the secrets is that my instructions have nothing to do with fashion or the “Zeitgeist.” We are timeless.

Heller: Do you still teach typography the same way you did when designers had to cut and paste letters together? Or have you accepted new technologies?

Weingart: We use electronics only when we really need the new technologies. A lot of work is done quicker by hand.

Heller: As a teacher, you are a strict formalist. But given the capacity of the computer to enhance the expressive aspects of typography, do you allow students an opportunity to experiment with form?

Weingart: Everything is allowed in my classes when it makes sense!

Heller: Having been a leading figure in typography, do you foresee (or do you see now) shifts in practice that are unprecedented, or are we returning to a kind of stasis in terms of classical and traditional work?

Weingart: Not for me. Design is like fashion: the skirts are once mini, and then as long as possible. But I believe we always have to move our backside into the future with a great respect to the past. This political viewpoint makes enemies, and a lot of wonderful, good friends.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).