The Prize of Success:
the 2002 Swiss Design Awards,
careers and idealised practices

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Abstract

In 2002, the Swiss Design Awards – Switzerland's most prestigious design competition – were relaunched under a new guise. Officially, they were reformatted to adapt to the needs of a new generation of graphic designers. They introduced a new approach to design promotion, which they advertised with an elaborate exhibition and a complex catalogue. However, the relaunch was also a successful attempt by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture at consolidating the awards, whose basis had been questioned in design circles.

Introduced in 1917, the Swiss Design Awards were initiated as a way to support the economy. However, by the end of the 20th century, they had become a tool for cultural promotion. In the 1990s, the design field changed dramatically thanks to digital tools and the potential offered by the internet. These technical possibilities increased the desire for greater creative independence. Designers often preferred critical acclaim to financial success. By awarding these more experimental projects, the Swiss Design Awards also encouraged a type of practice that was financially precarious. Perhaps ironically considering the reason for their foundation, the career models the awards began to promote were economically questionable.

This thesis sets to analyse the relaunch of the Swiss Design Awards and their evolution in parallel to changes in designers' careers. It also aims to understand the influence that the awards had on these careers. It follows the trajectories of three winners of the 2002 awards, Gilles Gavillet, Megi Zumstein and NORM. The thesis offers an analysis that switches between close reading of visual material, historical overview and granular enquiry of key career moments to draw a broader picture of the evolution of the Swiss design scene and profession.

Biography

Jonas Berthod studied graphic design and visual communication at ECAL in Lausanne and the Royal College of Art in London from 2008 to 2015. His research interests lie at the intersection between practice and theory, designers' ongoing professional self-definition and recent Swiss graphic design history. He is a PhD candidate and research assistant based at the HKB in Bern within the Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited research project. He is a lecturer at ECAL and a visiting lecturer at Kingston University, HEAD Geneva and the Royal College of Art.