

# Where are the Visual Communication Departments Going?

Wolfgang Weingart

Wolfgang Weingart \*1941, completed his typesetting apprenticeship in hand composition in 1963. He has taught typography at the Basel School of Design/University of Art and Design since 1968. Invited by Armin Hofmann, he was an instructor during the Yale Summer Program in Graphic Design in Brissago from 1974 through 1996.

For the last thirty-six years Weingart has lectured and taught extensively in Europe, North and South America, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. He is represented in the permanent collections of museums and private galleries, and has received design awards from the Swiss Federal Department of Home Affairs in Bern. Internationally exhibited, Weingart's publications and posters have been reproduced in numerous design references and journals. He was a member of Alliance Graphique Internationale/AGI from 1978 to 1999, on the editorial board of *Typographische Monatsblätter* from 1970 to 1988.

A self-taught designer who fosters imagination and insight, Weingart teaches his students to teach themselves. His experimental work in typography has influenced the course of design history in the last decades of the twentieth century.

## General Thoughts:

Weingart was a teacher at the Basel School of Design from 1968 to 2000 and at the University of Art and Design Basel from 2001 to 2004. Since the end of the 1960s, he has been upholding the tradition of the Typography Department, which, under the management of Emil Ruder and his colleagues, had been gaining international success since the beginning of the 1940s.

In April 1968 Ruder and Armin Hofmann started the unique Advanced Class for Graphic Design and Weingart began with his typography courses alongside a small group of internationally highly respected instructors. He had the great opportunity to work with older, experienced students who, for over thirty years, came to the Basel School from around 35 nations to help him build up an <Other Way> of teaching typography inside and outside of Switzerland.

During these amazing teaching periods, Weingart developed a particular relationship to his students. As a consequence, he had the extraordinary opportunity of visiting students from Basel scattered all over the world. Besides teaching in Basel, he has held a total of approximately 200 lectures, instructions or seminars since 1972, beginning with a rebellious series of lectures at several Universities of the United States such as Yale, Princeton, the University of Cincinnati and others.

Weingart's personal critical statements about design education in general or typography in particular in lectures, articles and discussions are known for their frankness, honesty and constructive criticism. At the same time the statements include the commitment to critically look into the near and far future, allowing for broad, open-minded perspectives regarding new expectations of various directions. These attitudes go hand in hand with his high standards of teaching, the design qualities of his students and a strong interest in new technological possibilities, which he often moderately and premeditatedly integrated into his typography classes.

Weingart is a fanatical critic of the so-called <Radical New Restrictions in Design Education> introduced by the Swiss Government a few years ago. For him, the <Selected Swiss Design Schools: Status of a University Level> reflect the end of well-established and proved classical opinions about how to teach a discipline. They put an end to an individual way of transmitting the chance to find the personal path of a signature, which, for Weingart, is the focus of a creative profession. The bureaucratic state authorities, who mostly have their ideas and plan their strategic prescriptions at a desk, often without knowing about the real professional needs in the field of graphic design, give directions and orders for the future which could have disastrous consequences for human beings devoted to their profession. The delegate experts give indirect orders on what to do and what not to do. It is basically a 1:1 copy of the Anglo-American school system (Anglomania). And it fits exactly into the slow combustion burner called globalization. Weingart made his attitude very clear in an interview with AIGA (New York, 1998):

"The school's new administrative empowerment may bring benefits, but it also means that the Swiss State can now impose other restrictions like setting up review committees to observe the classroom. This is complete nonsense. Such control groups propose recipes for education which suppresses individuality, the eccentric, the unconventional, the unorthodox. The outlandish are inhibited in favor of uniformity, which is the first step towards mediocrity. Do these state controllers have the right or competence to assess our visual language? The next generation will have to fight to find their own way.

Either the Basel School will go on, or it will be drowned in bureaucracy. As a teacher, I see another dark and depressing aspect of this state-controlled bureaucracy which mainly deals with the allocation of funds. Departmental budgets are justifiable only according to the level of technological sophistication. Superficial lip-service is given to the cultural implications.

Indirectly, the state forces the individuals to become compliant with every technological trend. Without computer proficiency, a design school or a design student has no chance of surviving. The loss of individuality, the loss of choice is at stake. This development is dangerous because people who dislike working with computers do not stand a chance. Those young people who do not fit into the system may never find their place in the professional life. Of no quantifiable societal value or

reward, their basic creative impulse, originating in childhood, will gradually be destroyed. This I find tragic, and it affects me deeply."

In another interview with Professor John Maeda, MIT Cambridge, Massachusetts, he stated: "Advanced digital design work is usually a fancily decorated package that hides an empty core. Skill in the digital age is confused with mastery of digital tools, masking the importance of understanding materials and mastering the elements of form."

Switzerland did not learn from the mistakes of its neighbors near and far. The State cannot implement visions of the future and bureaucratic illusions in a field which, as regards education and its function, is diametrically opposed to an education for doctors or lawyers. It seems that the people responsible are not willing to understand these facts. The only thing that matters to them (and often to the school administrators, too) is the number of attractive courses on the program, how thick and attractive the annual report of a University of Art and Design is and the number of professors and international lecturers from famous universities who came to visit during a certain period of time. And, of course, how many international awards the institution received. Only facts like these count for administrators because they are objectively measurable. How absurd!

An attempt at a conclusion:

Weingart is convinced that the so-called classical education in graphic design has to be delicately transported into an absolutely new way of thinking, made for an increasingly changing world: into our future. His criticism and personal thoughts are a result of his international experience gained during many visits to design schools in Europe and on other continents. Globalization in design is obvious, individuality and quality of the individual no longer seem to be a priority.

Weingart: "In Switzerland, we need a center where we can openly, constructively and objectively discuss the real, burning problems in design education. We no longer need cities which still have their own theaters and symphony orchestras. We have to rationalize the dualities in our field, but we have to do so carefully, through a dialogue which takes into account the highest demands in education in general as well as ethics and critical views of the future in particular. To do so, we need bright and experienced people of all ages, people who are personalities in their field.

We have to reduce the number of schools worldwide by 80%. This also applies to Switzerland. Furthermore, we need to raise independent funding from the private sector and the industry, as is done by schools in the United States of America and other countries."

Last year, Weingart was invited to give a talk during a symposium at the University of Illinois at Chicago about the past, the present and the future of design education. Among other issues he prepared an introduction of 10 statements:

## Statement 1

**Understand my World of Thoughts as Crazy, perhaps a Utopian Dream reflecting the Time from whence they arose in my sixty-one years...**

## AIGA Chicago

Regional Education Conference  
University of Illinois at Chicago  
School of Art and Design  
October 11 to 12, 2002.

## Conference Theme: Future History

1. What Was
2. What Is
3. What will be its Future?

## Statement 2

**My Presence today and tomorrow is not directly in Context with my Home-Base School in Switzerland.**

**Certain Ideas or Thoughts for the next forty minutes are related around my thirty-four year old Model: The other Way to make and think about the Subject of Design Education and Life.**

## Statement 3.1

**School:**

1. A Place for Experimentation.
2. A Potential Feedback device within Society.
3. Gradual growth, branching in Many Directions on Open Ground, evolving like the organic and interlocked Architecture of a Desert Village. Nestled in an Oasis, surrounded by Sand Dunes, Palm Trees, fertile Fields, and Flowers.

**Untouched by any Outside Bureaucratic Control.**

1972/1998

## Statement 3.2

1. An Open System with a strong two-way International Dialogue from within the School to the Outside.
2. As regards the Newest Electronic Possibilities of Communication, there should be Direct Dialogue Worldwide:

**The Online-School...**

## Statement 4

**For me this last Rough Statement is the Presupposition of a Design Education of the Future. In the Near Future Classes will no longer take Place in a Definable, Physical Location as in the Past.**

## Statement 5

**To get back excellent Educators for Now and the Future, I propose to Reduce 80% of the Existing Design Schools:**

1. There are not enough Ambitious Teachers.
2. This Fact keeps the Classroom a Monotonous, empty Place.
3. Internationally, Schools will begin to have Financial Problems.
4. Only good Institutions are capable of Educating conscientious and responsible Designers who will solve our International societal ills. These Education Centers have to radically change our System of Teaching and Learning to affect our Human Habits.

## Statement 6

**Together we have to develop a Center for Design to establish new and responsible Teaching Guidelines for another, New Worldwide Educational System.**

## Statement 7

**To keep our Indispensable Cultural Assets relevant for Students and Educators we have to establish Institutions which monitor and correct Faulty Information, specifically Electronic Data.**

## Statement 8

**Divide the Technicians and the Designers into different Categories and bring back the Quality Craftsmanship Standards from the Past.**

## Statement 9

**The Designers should Only have to know the Technical Possibilities made available by the Industry-Standard Electronic Software, not the Programs themselves.**

## Statement 10

**Today's Electronic Software is used Globally. This fact is one of the Reasons why the Results are looking ordinary and commonplace. To change this Trend, a Designer should use his Own Personally Tailored Software made in cooperation with a Programmer.**

