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**RICERCHE**

## **WRITING AS A DESIGN DISCIPLINE: THE INFORMATION DEPARTMENT OF THE ULM SCHOOL OF DESIGN AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SCHOOL AND BEYOND**

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At the Ulm School of Design (1953-1968), there was a promising approach to teaching visual as well as verbal communication. Although it took place in separate departments, this pioneering approach attempted to integrate form and content, theory and practice. From the school's inception, the Information Department was established alongside the Departments of Visual Communication, Product Design and Building: writing was considered a discipline on a par with two- and three-dimensional design. While the Department of Visual Communication flourished, however, the Information Department languished, not least as a result of the school's policy and staff conflicts. A closer look at the HfG's history nevertheless reveals the Information Department's overall importance to the school's self-conception and attitude. Beyond its relevance for design history, this might also contribute to the discussion of a greater emphasis on verbal and writing competence in present day design education.

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### **1. Introduction**

Looking back in 1975, graphic designer and cofounder of the Ulm School of Design (Hochschule für Gestaltung, HfG) Otl Aicher wrote that, in comparison with the Bauhaus, the HfG's idea of "writing as a design discipline equivalent to graphic design, product design or construction" was an innovation (Aicher, 1975). From the school's inception, the Information Department was established alongside the Departments of Visual Communication, Product Design and Building: writing was considered a discipline on a par with two- and three-dimensional visual design. How this integrative approach came about can be explained by the school's

genesis and the societal-historical context in which it was conceived. Thus we must first grasp the original concept of an antifascist-democratic institution for holistic education. The establishment of the Information Department is rooted in the original political commitment of the school. And although the Information Department might appear almost insignificant, if measured by size, it clearly embodies that which made Ulm special: the idea that design should be understood and practiced as a socially relevant and ultimately intellectual occupation. This approach, held by the school's founders, was embedded in the institute's very structure, which included an unusually large number of associated context-creating sciences and the establishment of the Information Department.



This paper will suggest that the Information Department and the accompanying general education courses called Kulturelle Integration (“cultural integration”) are a key to understanding the HfG Ulm. Their influence on the school’s distinct intellectual climate appears to have been much greater than mainstream publications on the HfG and contemporary scholarship suggest. In Ulm, not only did students who were actually enrolled in the Information Department benefit from the teaching of verbal communication. Students from other departments too benefited from the department’s presence and from “cultural integration” courses, in which they had the opportunity to explore linguistic and text-based techniques. In particular, the Information Department faculty motivated and enabled HfG students to reflect, analyze, and describe designed artifacts and the design process. This had lasting effects on design theory, design reception and documentation in Germany and abroad – even long after the school’s closure.

## **2. The founding of the Ulm School of Design and the role of the Information Department**

The establishment of an Information Department can be explained by the original holistic political concept of the HfG. This unique concept remained a decisive influence on the school’s discourse and attitude right up until its

closure, even though it underwent several changes, especially after Max Bill was designated as principal of the school in 1950.

Some school programs such as the one from 1958/59 describe the

department as a school for journalists.<sup>[1]</sup> This falls short both of the initial concept and of how the department developed in the second half of the 1950s. For this reason, it is important to take a closer look at the historical background of the HfG and that of the Information Department.

The Ulm School of Design was founded in 1953 by Inge Scholl, Otl Aicher and Max Bill. Inge Scholl's siblings, Hans and Sophie, were active resisters against German fascism. Their engagement in the White Rose movement ultimately cost Hans and Sophie their lives (Aicher-Scholl, 1947; Zankel, 2008). After the war, Inge and Otl Aicher, who had been a friend of the Scholl siblings, developed ideas on how to foster democracy in Germany. Concerned about the "lack of direction in public life", they asserted: "the autonomous individual was the bearer of resistance. on his shoulders as well rests the future, which in turn depends on whether enough self-reliant, free and

independent individuals grow to maturity".<sup>[2]</sup>

This group, which called itself "Studio Null", sought contact with intellectuals who had retired from public life during the Nazi era or who had emigrated and now returned to Germany. Initially, a series of lectures was organized to counteract the rapidly developing tendency toward denial and trivialization. The lecture series was intended to educate and to foster political and cultural renewal. The lectures thus were in the spirit of the anti-fascist, humanistic, Christian tradition of the White Rose. The group debated such issues as city planning, new forms of living, the reconstruction of Ulm, and how to furnish refugee housing with simple means.

The Ulm adult education center (Volkshochschule) evolved out of these activities in 1946. Under the direction of Inge Scholl, the center provided a unique mix of educational lectures, panel discussions, and courses in diverse life skills.

Otl Aicher designed the corporate identity of the adult education center, including modular advertising pillars for posters, the posters themselves, as well as the center's monthly publication. This periodical provided a forum for debates about politics, design and other topics relevant to daily life.<sup>[3]</sup>

Aicher's understanding of visual and verbal communication as an integral whole was already evident at this point. In his work for corporate clients as well as for his own publications, he combined visual design and editorial activity and continuously sought intellectual exchange with authors and

humanities scholars, drawing on journalists' know-how.<sup>[4]</sup> This approach played a big part in establishing the HfG's Information Department.

As early as the late 1940s, Inge Scholl, Otl Aicher and the writer Hans Werner Richter began conceiving a college in Ulm based on the concept of

the Volkshochschule.<sup>[5]</sup> Here, young people would be educated to participate in a democratic state: journalists, teachers, designers. Several departments were scheduled, in the first place Political Method, followed by Press/Broadcast, Advertising/Information, Photo/Film, Product Design, Architecture and Urban Development. For general education, courses in Sociology, Economics, Politics and History were planned.<sup>[6]</sup> Whereas the list of departments was still subject to change, the approach of having mandatory general education (Allgemeinbildung) for students of all departments was to be continued until the closure of the school in 1968. Once Scholl and Aicher gained Max Bill's support for their endeavor, the chances of financing and implementing their school grew. At the time, former Bauhaus student Max Bill was already an internationally acclaimed designer, architect and artist - in contrast to Otl Aicher. Bill's reputation bestowed the professional credibility so indispensable to potential investors. The price to pay for having Bill was a marked shift in the school's founding concept, away from politics and progressive journalism, toward the creative disciplines propagated by the Bauhaus: building, product, graphic design. Walter Gropius also had a major influence. In a lively correspondence with Max Bill dating from May 1950, his keen interest in the HfG's development is evident. In that year he writes:

I have doubts whether it's possible to house a school of political methodology and a school of artistic design under a single roof. [...] A battle will ensue with respect to who is the director, the teacher of politics or the teacher of art. [...] Artistic design must be absolutely free in its development. Politics, press, publicity must be subordinate to it, not vice versa (as cited in Senckendorff, 1989).

This corresponded to Bill's ideas. While he believed general political education to be desirable, he wished to include it only in the context of what was planned as a basic curriculum in the first year. The idea of the Information Department was of interest to him only insofar as it offered the prospect of reporting on the work of the designers. However, in his mind, the main job of advertising was to convey "information about the products".<sup>[7]</sup> Under Bill's direction, the "Geschwister-Scholl-Schule" for holistic political education thus evolved into a school of design, which nonetheless included at least some political education. Once Bill had firmly established his approach, Hans Werner Richter withdrew from the project in 1950. He left behind a major gap with respect to the politics and journalism courses. As a result, in its founding year in 1953, the HfG prospectus announced an Information Department with a rather vague syllabus in comparison with the other departments. A driving force had not yet been found to replace Richter.

The announcement in the brochure for prospective students sounds very practical, journalistic, advertising-oriented: “The department will be operated in the manner of an editorial staff or advertising department of a business. Publishing fundamentals and working methods will be acquired in accordance with practical experience. Plans to expand the curriculum to include radio and television are underway”.<sup>[8]</sup>

At the time, the combination of themes and subjects was innovative. However, journalism courses were still in their infancy then. The few

university-affiliated journalism institutes<sup>[9]</sup> showed signs of disintegration immediately after the war. As B. Murner wrote in 1960 in the *Handelsblatt*, “[c]ountless professors had openly supported the Third Reich, and therefore could not return to their positions. [...] During the previous twelve years, journalism as an educational and research subject [...] had become highly dubious” (Murner, 1960). Most aspiring journalists learned the tools of the trade either directly in a newspaper office, or they were humanities

graduates who were acquiring journalistic know-how on the job.<sup>[10]</sup>

The original ideas of the school’s founders had moved to the background – especially in the school’s official statements and programs. However, since the involvement of Max Bense in fall 1954, the original approach was at least partly reanimated, for Bense not only established the Information Department, but also the accompanying general education, now called *Kulturelle Integration* (“cultural integration”).

Bense had been among the first guest lecturers after the HfG opened in 1953 and became the first director of the Information Department in 1954. Bense had studied physics, mathematics, and philosophy, among others (Walther, 2003). He shared his Ulm colleagues’ rational-scientific orientation, their interest in concrete art, and their rejection of Hitler. In addition to academic studies,<sup>[11]</sup> he authored several volumes of concrete poetry. The transitional curriculum for the academic year 1953/54 lists him as a guest lecturer for a lecture series entitled “Aesthetics” and a seminar on “The theory of beauty and the nature of works of art” (*Die Lehre vom Schönen und von der Seinsart der Kunstwerke*).<sup>[12]</sup>

In contrast to Richter, Bense was very interested in the now more design-oriented school. However, due to his full professorship at the Stuttgart University of Technology, he could only assume part-time directorship of the Information Department. Nevertheless, he assumed responsibility for the department’s curricular development and supported the administration in its search for someone who could manage the department full time.

In the 1955 revised version of the HfG prospectus, Bense’s influence is unmistakable: “The Information Division, yet in an evolutionary state, is concerned with the problems of information and communication. Its sphere of

action ranges from simple press reports via advertising and broadcasting to the results of cybernetics”.<sup>[13]</sup> The focus is now described in the terms “information” and “communications”. This sounds markedly theoretical and much less like writing craft. Press and advertising is mentioned only after these terms, supplemented by cybernetics - a newly emerging scientific discipline at the time that dealt with control systems and that would become a precursor of computer sciences (Oswald, 2012).

After Hans Werner Richter’s withdrawal from Ulm, several unsuccessful attempts were made to employ other progressive authors to head the department.<sup>[14]</sup> In 1955 the writer Arno Schmidt, one of Germany’s most important post-war authors, was interviewed for the position.<sup>[15]</sup> The negotiations with Schmidt apparently failed mainly because Max Bill, who carried out the key interview, made no secret about his expectation that the Information Department would be a service provider for HfG publicity and supplier of advertising copy for the Department of Visual Communications. “[...] beside the fact that, at this time, only problems of visual design were of concern - and neither linguistic scope nor intention defined - my main reason for declining was Mr. Bills’ personality”, Schmidt writes in retrospect to Tomás Maldonado.<sup>[16]</sup>





Bense published his plans for the department in 1956 in Alfred Andersch's literary magazine *Texte und Zeichen* (Bense, 1956b). In the article, titled "Texts and signs as information: an experimental curriculum for the Ulm School of Design", the introduction pretentiously announces a revolution in literary theory. In future, texts would be "judged solely on informational content". Further, a close cooperation with the Visual Communications Department is announced; after all, Bense argues, both forms of communication are based on the fundamental sciences of "general semantics" and information theory. Bense splits the syllabus into two areas: information theory and experiments on one side and (journalistic) information practice on the other. The course description for information theory and experiments takes up two pages, with a detailed list of 31 subjects. By contrast, information practice is dealt with in only two paragraphs, a clear emphasis on theory and experiments at the cost of the originally conceived focus on advertising and journalism.

Examples from Bense's syllabus of theoretical information (Bense, 1956b):

- Logic, philosophical grammar, semantics, probability calculation, statistics, mathematical analysis of languages.
- Information theory, transmission theory, translation theory, text theory.
- General topics of telecommunications technology.
- Verbal and non-verbal information. Nature, means, mediation, and transformation of information.
- Communication schemes, information schemes.

- Theory of perception, theory of representation for sign and signals, ideas and objects.

Examples from Bense's syllabus of experimental information:

- Conversion of natural languages and artificial languages into precise languages.
- Experiments on grid systems, shortening techniques and montage techniques.
- Concentration and dispensation of form and topics.
- Syntactic and semantic shortening, compression, distortion, lengthening, alienation.
- Accidental and attributive descriptions, phenomenological reduction and deflation of meaning.

These plans were in fact based on a radical approach to dealing with texts. Applying scientific, empirical and mathematical methods to all texts, whether they be press releases or poems, was as unusual then as it is now. The usual empathic interpretation of artistic literature was firmly rejected. Humanistic text exegesis was to be replaced by the precise analytical tools of statistics, logic and syntactics. Language was no longer examined as a means of artistic expression, but rather taken apart analytically, and reconstructed experimentally. The Information Department thus differed from the other HfG departments only with respect to the "material" being processed. The artistic or art historical perception of painting had become as unusable for modern visual communications as sculpture had become for product design. Parallels between the syntactical-grammatical exercises in Bense's syllabus and some of Maldonado's fundamentals assignments, such as raster surfaces, Peano curves or "exact-inexact", become obvious. Bense used similar vocabulary to describe his Experimental Information seminar: transformation, abstraction, raster technology, assembly, form concentration and dispersion, etc. Bense also touched on modularization, which later influenced product design and the Industrialized Building Department, when he speaks of language in terms of "syntactics, structures and elements" (Oswald, 2012).

Because of his commitments in Stuttgart, Bense was unable to implement his plans without support. He recommended colleagues to fill staff shortages, including his then-assistant Elisabeth Walther and the writer Alfred Fabri. The Information Department faculty taught more than just the small number of students enrolled in the department. In the context of the mandatory theoretical-scientific "cultural integration" coursework, students of all departments came into contact with the Information Department faculty and their respective contents. This input certainly affected the intellectual climate of the HfG, and had at least an indirect influence on the science-oriented reforms of 1957/58. Although Bense in no way rejected art - he greatly

esteemed Bill and the latter's concrete art<sup>[17]</sup> – his influence was undoubtedly one of the main forces driving the school's scientific reorientation, which finally led to Max Bill's resignation.

Bense's seminars and lectures on philosophy, scientific theory, logic, linguistics, mathematical operations, statistics and communications theory left their marks on the HfG's design practice.

When Max Bense left the school in 1958, the first generation of information students were already working on their final theses. In all the other departments, new students had continuously enrolled each year; by contrast, not until after 1958 did a second generation of students enroll in the Information Department program. Only five graduates had thus been exposed to the maximum Bense dose. While five individuals scarcely justify generalizations, the fact that most of them worked in non-journalistic fields is conspicuous (Müller-Krauspe, Wenzel & Kellner, 1998).



#### **4. Writers for the mass media**

With the beginning of the academic year 1958/59, five new students entered the HfG who later intended to enroll in the Information Department. They encountered an entirely different department than their predecessors, with different emphases and objectives. These students were first required to complete a year of basic coursework. Only a small portion of their time was spent on department-specific exercises. One of the journalism instructors was

the writer Gert Kalow, who had taught in the department the previous year. In 1960 Kalow was hired as a professor and appointed as head of the Information Department. Under his leadership, the department increasingly moved toward a more practical journalistic approach (Wachsmann, 2015).



The focus of his instruction was “learning to write” not just for print media, but also for

the new mass medium radio. Courses in writing for film and television were in the planning stages. As early as 1952 the HfG prospectus announced plans to include radio and television as part of the Information Department

curriculum.<sup>[18]</sup> Several information students had the opportunity to intern at various radio stations during their semester breaks. During the practical part of their lectures, e.g., under the tutelage of radio broadcasting editor Bernd Rübénach and Gert Kalow, the students wrote radio plays.

Gert Kalow now redoubled his efforts to establish a recording studio for the school. Thanks to his initiative, several West German broadcasters donated equipment. However, by the time the studio was finally up and running in late 1962, the Information Department was practically defunct.

## **5. Stagnation and decline in the 1960s**

In 1962, the HfG experienced a severe internal crisis due to financial difficulties and factional disputes. The concurrent decline of the Information Department was closely linked to this crisis and was primarily a result of staff conflicts and university politics.

From the beginning, applicants to the school of design were only marginally interested in a text- and language-oriented department. An increase in applicants to the department from 1958 to 1960 proved short-lived: by 1961, the decline was irreversible. This trend was further reinforced by the lack of advertising for the department; few applicants were even aware of its

existence.<sup>[19]</sup> In addition, the only salaried faculty member of the department, Gert Kalow, was part time. As early as July 1960, he had been elected to chair the rectorate. He enthusiastically threw himself into the new responsibilities, which he perceived above all as keeping the peace between the conflicting factions within the HfG (Wachsmann, 2015).

In October 1961, Kalow unexpectedly took a leave of absence: he had received a scholarship from the Rockefeller Foundation, only sporadically returning to Ulm. Harry Pross, who had been hired to teach sociology at the HfG, took over Kalow's classes and HfG lecturer Horst Rittel took over as

head of the Information Department.<sup>[20]</sup>

Meanwhile, the HfG had entered into a serious crisis in which Rittel played a decisive role. In the conflict over the educational significance of scientific-theoretical subjects, two irreconcilable factions grouped around Aicher and Rittel, respectively, faced off. Significantly, the Information Department faculty sided with the theoreticians. Working with language as material – despite the concentration on journalism at this time – was perceived not as an applied, but rather as a scientific discipline. To Aicher's way of thinking in 1962, the latter threatened to play too large a role, at the expense of design. At the same time, the question arose as to whether the HfG was a "real"

university, that is, whether it upheld precisely those scientific standards – or was “merely” a vocational school for design.

The fierce, often personal disputes in these years culminated in the decline of the Information Department. By the 1960s, the aura it had once emanated under the leadership of Max Bense, along with the intellectual challenges presented by the faculty, had faded.

Although Gert Kalow took up his teaching responsibilities again in January 1963, by July of that same year he resigned his permanent position to join the Hessian Broadcasting Corporation in Frankfurt as director of literature (Wachsmann, 2015). Horst Rittel also resigned from the school; Pross was not rehired. The three remaining information undergraduates now attended courses offered by the newly established Film Department and the Visual Communications Department. The 1964/65 HfG prospectus states: “currently, the information department is undergoing organizational and content changes. this year information department undergraduates will participate in the film section curriculum, in particular linguistic exercises” (HfG, 1964).

Despite these difficulties, Otl Aicher, who remained committed to the Information Department and its educational possibilities, tried once more to establish a linguistic-literary curriculum for the department at this time. He resorted to his personal contacts in the German literary avant-garde, who

were affiliated with the Group 47.<sup>[21]</sup> He wrote to Ilse Grubrich, who had graduated from the Information Department in 1959 and who was then working as a scientific editor at S. Fischer Verlag: “should we decide to reestablish this department, we first must develop a hiring concept which will ensure that the department will regain the reputation it once had during bense’s time”.<sup>[22]</sup>

In 1968 the Ulm School of Design was closed for good. Numerous faculty and alumni now became teachers at art academies and schools of applied arts, where departments of product design and visual communications modeled on the HfG were then being promoted.

The integration of writing as a discipline into the curriculum of a design school, was only adopted by the Offenbach University of Art and Design, which renamed itself Hochschule für Gestaltung in 1970. It directly drew on the ideas propounded in Ulm and engaged Gert Kalow to teach “language and aesthetics” from 1974 on. However, the subject was not established as an independent department or degree program, but rather integrated as an associated science into the visual communications program. The subject area still exists to this very day, albeit it was renamed “philosophy and aesthetics” in 2012.

## **6. HfG publications**

The presentation of its objectives and work results had always been an existential challenge for the HfG. In comparison with state universities, the private institution needed to work harder to win students and gain general recognition. Initially, this was manifested in the publication and distribution of programmatic documents with relatively large print runs. While one would expect students and graduates of the Information Department to assume responsibility for this job, this was rarely the case.

At the school's inauguration in October 1955, the Ulm newspaper Schwäbische Donauzeitung published a special supplement with texts written by the Information Department's first enrollee, Margit Staber (1955). This article, a report on the Ulm School of Design's construction and aims, corresponded fairly accurately with Bill's expectation of the Information Department's work. The same holds true for an informational flyer about the HfG printed in 1955, which was also written by Margit Staber (HfG, 1955); the HfG's first printed course program, published in an English and a German version in 1956; as well as the first issue of the school's magazine *ulm*, in

1959.<sup>[23]</sup> This latter organ introduced the HfG, its departments and the faculty. Its design was austere, with a trilingual layout, numerous photos and brief descriptions. The editor responsible for the first five issues of *ulm* sociologist Hanno Kesting, who taught interdisciplinary courses, including some in the Information Department. The subsequent four issues were each dedicated to a different topic, usually in the form of a single essay (new developments in industry and the training of product designers, photography, visual methodology, communications and methodology). The last issue of this series was published in July 1959. A few months later, Kesting left the school. Publication of the magazine *ulm* temporarily ceased.

In March 1961 the HfG students published the first issue of the university magazine output. The magazine's founding occurred during *ulm*'s three-year pause; the students may have seen output as a substitute (Curdes, 1961). Design and concept of the individual issues varied. The first issues consisted of stapled photocopies. Later the format was changed and the publication was offset printed. The output editorial staff was relatively constant, it only changed once due to a new generation of undergraduates in late 1962. With a single exception, staff and writers were recruited from outside the Information Department.

The breadth of articles in output, covering a range of topics and school-related issues, tended to be much broader and its tone more open than the more official publication *ulm*. The magazine served to some extent as a literary forum: satirical texts and images were also published. Some issues were devoted to a single topic, e.g., the individual departments (Nos. 3, 4+5 and 14), discussions on abolishing the mandatory basic coursework for freshmen (No. 6+7), or the Scholl Foundation's constitution (No. 9). Job descriptions and types of training were also covered (Nos. 11 and 13); entire

lectures, or summaries thereof, were reprinted; books were reviewed and individual student projects discussed. Of particular note is the thoroughness with which individual topics were covered, as well as the sincere desire to participate in change, evident in suggestions and constructive criticism. In the context of the HfG's original aims of fostering democracy and freedom of expression, the magazine is an important measure of the school's diversified, interdepartmental education, which bore fruit beyond department's boundaries - if not always to the enjoyment of the school's administration. Thus the magazine's critical attitude, manifested in articles and editorials on conceptual or personnel decisions, soon led to conflicts with the administration, e.g., on the debate about the role of the first-year basic course (No. 6+7)<sup>[24]</sup> or the dispute over the school's future direction in the 1960s.

In November 1964 the last issue of *output* was released (No. 26). However, as early as October 1962, the sixth issue of *ulm* was published, featuring a new concept and design. This time the editorial staff was headed by HfG faculty members Tomás Maldonado and Gui Bonsiepe. Gui Bonsiepe had been enrolled in the Information Department from 1955 to 1959, graduating with a diploma, and he later taught in the Product Design and Visual Communications Departments of the HfG.

The goals of the magazine are restated in a preamble:

In the new series [...] '*ulm*' will strive to fulfill two aims: on the one hand it will document the achievements of the HfG in the fields of education, research and development and indicate the theoretical basis with the help of which these same achievements have been attained; on the other hand it will discuss unanswered questions of design philosophy, method and teaching (*ulm* 6, p. 1).

New columns included "Opinions", "Teaching Outcomes", "Faculty Design Projects", "Comments", "Trends", "In *Ulm*", and "People and Events". The articles on teaching outcomes consisted primarily of concise descriptive texts illustrated with extremely austere photographs or drawings. The design and layout rigorously adhered to a grid, which contributed to the magazine's unmistakable look. At first glance, this uniformity conveys a tremendous unity, which is carried through on the editorial level only in a very limited way. The last issue of *ulm* appeared in 1968, when the HfG closed.

The writers of both *ulm* and *output* saw their magazines as discussion forums for topics relevant to design, albeit from different perspectives and with different purposes. The design of *output* often seemed extemporaneous (the editorial staff had a much smaller budget), and the content less compelling than its more official sister publication, *ulm*. However, both magazines evinced the ambition to shape the environment visually or three-dimensionally, as well as to deal with one's own actions and surroundings, on

a linguistic and intellectual level and within a societal context.

## 7. Graduates and their careers

If one considers the Information Department graduates' careers to evaluate the impact on the design discourse, theory, reception and documentation, the verdict is rather modest. This may mainly be due to the small number of graduates. Of fifteen Information Department students, only a very few pursued careers in design. Margit Staber, who wrote about the HfG as an undergraduate, later published numerous books on design and art, often but not exclusively about Max Bill.

The most prolific alumnus in terms of design is likely Gui Bonsiepe, who had been an editor for *ulm* until 1968 and who had taught product design and visual communications in Ulm. After the HfG closed, Bonsiepe's books on design theory had a decisive impact on the design discourse and education in Latin America. In the mid-1990s, he published his influential theory on design as interface design. Most recently, in Brazil, he published three volumes on design theory and practice.<sup>[25]</sup>

The other graduates of this first generation gained success in various scientific areas, in part after attaining a second degree in the humanities or the sciences.<sup>[26]</sup> In contrast, the majority of the second- and third-generation information students, who had attended the HfG from the late 1950s, became

writers and journalists.<sup>[27]</sup> Dolf Sass should be mentioned in particular, who successfully implemented Otl Aicher's original aim of close cooperation between designers and writers. Sass began to write for the *Ulm Volkshochschule* magazine while still an undergraduate. He wrote critical

articles for Lufthansa's customer magazine, *Lufthansa's Germany*,<sup>[28]</sup> working closely together with HfG alumni from the Visual Communication Department who were responsible for the layout. From the 1960s, Sass worked for a daily newspaper in Ulm. There he developed a new editorial concept and

coordinated the development of a new visual identity for the newspaper.<sup>[29]</sup>

Particularly noteworthy is Peter Michels, the department's last graduate. He worked as a critical and progressive journalist all his life, a career corresponding exactly to the HfG founders' aims in establishing a politically oriented school (Oswald 2012). In his books and his numerous radio features he covered topics like the resistance against Hitler, German after-war elites and managers, student and anti-war protests, and women's rights. Many reports addressed the situation of minorities like African-Americans, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans in the US, as well as the struggles of miners, farm workers, prisoners, etc.<sup>[30]</sup>

Although difficult to prove, what remains is the strong indirect academic

influence that the department had on the school as a whole. The internal impact on the traditional design departments came about due to the interdisciplinary “cultural integration” seminars taught by the Information Department faculty.

Here, too, several exemplary careers must be noted. Klaus Krippendorff, who had studied product design in Ulm, went on to graduate from a US-American university with a degree in communications sciences. The world of science knows him as the originator of Krippendorff’s alpha coefficient, a reliability measure for content analysis data (Krippendorff, 2004). The design community is familiar with him through his contributions on product semantics (Krippendorff, 2006), a topic that had already appeared in the

theoretical part of his diploma thesis in 1961.<sup>[31]</sup>

Internationally less well known, but influential in the West German design discourse, was Karlheinz Krug’s work as editor (from 1962), later editor-in-chief and copublisher, of the magazine *form*.<sup>[32]</sup> Krug had studied product design at the HfG from 1956 to 1960. Under his direction and into the 1990s, *form* was the only West German periodical to publish scholarly essays and articles on product design. Other HfG alumni also wrote for *form*, writing about their own designs and projects, among others. Two Information Department graduates who wrote for the magazine were Gui Bonsiepe and Margit Staber. Bonsiepe regularly published so-called product critiques. Staber wrote about Max Bill or Henry van der Velde’s work, reported on the Milan Triennial, or dealt with the subject of design in general. Other HfG members such as Gerda Müller-Krauspe, Herbert Lindinger, or Martin Krampen, who, after having studied in other departments, found a forum for their publications in *form*, writing on the theory and history of design. Although it had not necessarily been the HfG founders’ – excepting Max Bill – explicit desire to educate design journalists, it is fair to assume a strong influence on these careers by Information Department’s lecturers – be it directly in the department, or indirectly by their influence on the school’s intellectual climate.

## **8. The Information Department’s significance for the HfG**

If one measures the department’s success by the number of graduates who had a significant influence on the design discourse, then the pickings are rather lean. The department never managed to attract a substantial number of undergraduates who were interested in a language-oriented curriculum at a design school. And of the few actual graduates of the program, only a modest number ultimately worked in the intended disciplines. Thus, measured against its own objectives and compared to other departments, the Information Department was a failure. Nonetheless, the department had an

enormous internal impact on the designers educated at the HfG. As a small residue of the initial vision of a political school, the department influenced the school's attitude towards design as a socially relevant, socially formative and also intellectual work - beyond handicraft, propaganda or decoration. As early as 1951, Otl Aicher conceived the Information Department as a nexus: "the 'information department' should be a connecting link between the specialty departments and the basic courses; its faculty must have a

stronger impact on general education than the other departments".<sup>[33]</sup>

From the beginning, the Ulm School of Design aspired to nothing less than an all-encompassing redesign of modern industrial life. In the area of communications and media, this included radio and print, as well as the then relatively new media film and television - albeit striving for the greatest possible "objectivity", given the context of the Third Reich's manipulative misuse (Wachsmann, 1991).

In this context, the development of the Information Department at the HfG, culminating in the establishment of the Film Department, may be seen as an attempt to reconcile mass-media-induced phenomena with that relatively new system of government called democracy in Germany.

Implementing these ideas under Bense and Kalow proved difficult in part because the concepts were still blurry - particularly with respect to the graduates' future career paths. In the process, the biggest uncertainty probably resulted from Bense's thematic shift and expansion. On the one hand, the standards of scholarly confrontation with art history, philosophy and scientific theory were thus raised; on the other, what had previously been a relatively clear occupational profile, applied journalism, was thereby eradicated.

Within the HfG, the Information Department was disparagingly referred to as a "school of poets" during the 1960s. This casts a poor light not so much on the department itself, but rather on the originators of this description, reflecting their fear of language and literature. Above all, it reflects the estrangement between the two factions in their ideological dispute over which direction the HfG should take in 1962. In the end, the "applied" designers prevailed over the "theoretical" academicians. In this conflict, the linguistic discipline was categorized either as science or as art. Its dimension as a means of communication in this particular applied discipline was ignored,<sup>[34]</sup> and eventually no longer perceived even by the Information

Department graduates.<sup>[35]</sup>

The disputes in the 1960s over the school's orientation thus prevented any further conceptual development of the department with respect to integrating verbal and visual communications. The desire for a holistic approach in communications nevertheless seems relevant even today. Integrating subjects like language and writing into the curriculum at design

schools makes sense for a number of reasons. Obviously, designers are required not only to draft their designs; they must also justify and explain their designs – undoubtedly a verbal-intellectual matter. An improved language and text competency would surely benefit designers even today. Finally, a visual-verbal program of studies would attenuate the fear of reading and writing observed in some graphic designers – better communication skills and fewer superficial formalisms would be a worthwhile goal.

Otl Aicher was far from being free of formalisms in his practice – on the contrary. Nevertheless, he never questioned the relevance of content or linguistic quality. His attempt in 1963 to rejuvenate the department was conclusive, but doomed to fail in light of the Ulm School of Design’s existential crisis and subsequent closure in 1968.

### **9. Learnings for design education today**

The Ulm school of design was the first school in Germany to name a program “Visual Communication” – instead of “Graphic Design”. This was a deliberate move towards a more holistic, media-neutral and human-oriented approach. Simply put, whereas graphic design is about “ink on paper”, visual communication is about the process of communication, i.e. the media-based exchange of information between humans. Today, a program like the Information Department’s would most likely be named “Verbal Communication”. If such a program, focused on verbal communication and located at a design school, would meet more student interest today than it did in Ulm, could only be verified in practice. However, in recent years at least some promising hybrid programs were introduced into the German-speaking area that combine visual, verbal, conceptual, scientific and/or technological subjects: Media Concept Development,<sup>[36]</sup> Cast,<sup>[37]</sup> Technical Editing,<sup>[38]</sup> and of course programs in the growing area of Design Research.<sup>[39]</sup> Apart from these approaches, a greater integration of verbal competencies into communication design programs seems to be advisable. It may sound self-evident that effective communication design has to consider content and form. Still, the academic landscape builds on the presumed dichotomy between the two. If the term communication design is to be taken serious, this dichotomy has to be dissolved, in favor of a more holistic view on all aspects of communication in integrated study programs. Otherwise “Communication Design” risks to be reduced to superficial auxiliary services.

*Translated by Gabriele Glang*

This article is based in part on the authors’ previously published texts: “Wortverlust oder die Herrschaft der Bilder” [The Loss of Words, or the

Domination of the Image] (Wachsmann, 1991) - published in an exhibition catalogue on photography at the HfG - and "The Information Department at the Ulm School of Design" (Oswald, 2012) - a contributed talk/paper at an international conference on the history of design.

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## Notes

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**NOTE** (← returns to text)

1. HfG Ulm (1958/59), hochschule für gestaltung ulm, lehrprogramm [Ulm School of Design, Teaching Program], print, 1958/59, HfG-Archiv Ulm.←
2. Inge Aicher-Scholl, Inges Vorschlag [Inge's proposal [for a Leaflet]], manuscript, no date, HfG-Archiv Ulm.←
3. Aicher not only designed, but also wrote articles for the publication. Other HfG faculty, staff and alumni published texts and photographs here (Wachsmann et al., 1991).←
4. Reference is made here to the long-time friendships among the Aichers and Hans Werner Richter, Wolfgang Hildesheimer and Christa Wolf, as well as participation in Group 47 meetings, collaborations with journalist and HfG alumnus Dolf Sass and architecture critic Manfred Sack, et al.←
5. Richter was a regular guest speaker at the Ulm Volkshochschule. During this time, he initiated the Group 47, the most influential association of progressive authors in post-war Germany.←
6. Inge Scholl et al., Vorbereitung zum Prospekt 1949 [Preparation of the Brochure 1949], typoscript, 1949, HfG-Archiv AZ 618.←
7. Max Bill, Letter to Inge Scholl, May 16, 1950, HfG-Archiv Ulm, AZ 588.163.←
8. HfG Ulm, HfG-Informationsbroschüre 1952 [HfG information brochure 1952], 1952, HfG-Archiv Ulm.←
9. The universities of Münster, Berlin, Erlangen, Göttingen, Hamburg, and Munich all had affiliated journalism institutes. Their curricula were oriented more toward the theoretical and scientific, rather than toward practical journalism.←
10. One exception was the Deutsche Journalistenschule, established in 1949 in Munich. Modeled after the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University in New York City, students were educated in editorial training departments. It was not until 1979, with the founding of the Hamburger Journalistenschule, that another institute expressly modeled itself after the Munich school.←
11. Written during his tenure at the HfG, Bense's volumes of the "Aesthetica" series offer excellent insights into the subjects he dealt with (Bense, 1954, 1956a, 1958, 1960). In 1974 the volumes were translated into Italian by Giovanni Anceschi, a former student at Ulm (1962-1966) (Bense, 1974). On the relations between Ulm and Italy, see Anceschi & Tanca (1984).←
12. HfG Ulm, Übergangslrplan für das Studienjahr 1953/54 [Transitional curriculum for the academic year 1953/54]. 1953, HfG-Archiv Ulm.←
13. HfG Ulm, HfG-Informationsbroschüre 1955 [HfG information brochure 1955], 1955, HfG-Archiv Ulm.←
14. Walter Dirks and Alfred Andersch as well as sociologist Harry Pross are specifically mentioned. Otl Aicher, Letter to Max Bill, October 5, 1950, HfG-Archiv Ulm; and Otl Aicher, allgemeinbildung in der hochschule für gestaltung [General education at the HfG],

- manuscript, no date, HfG-Archiv Ulm, Se 85.2.↵
15. Arno Schmidt's magnum opus, *Zettels Traum*, was published in 1970. The original manuscript was already laid out in three columns. The graphic design, along with marginal notes, comments and deletions, gave the text a multidimensionality already suggestive of the possibilities of digital text display.↵
  16. Arno Schmidt, Letter to Tomás Maldonado, September 5, 1957, File Arno Schmidt, HfG-Archiv.↵
  17. On the role of art at the HfG, see also Kitschen (1995).↵
  18. HfG Ulm, HfG-Informationsbroschüre 1952 [HfG information brochure 1952], 1952, HfG-Archiv Ulm.↵
  19. Gert Kalow wanted to wait until the sound studio was completed before starting an advertising campaign – the official inauguration was to launch the newly reorganized Information Department. However, the inauguration never took place; instead, Kalow resigned from the school.↵
  20. . Both Pross and Rittel became important figures in journalism sciences and planning theory, respectively, after they left Ulm. Harry Pross was to become professor at the college of publishing and communication sciences at Freie Universität Berlin in 1968. There he developed the influential “Berlin Model”, which – thanks to his theoretical knowledge (semiotics, hermeneutics, et al.) and a stronger link between theory and practice – became a model for journalism courses at other German universities (Pross, 1997). Horst Rittel, who started out at the HfG as a mathematician and subsequently became a planning theorist, has lately been rediscovered in the context of design research as the originator of the wicked problem theory (Rittel, 1972).↵
  21. Otl Aicher, Letter to Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, April 13, 1963, HfG-Archiv Ulm, Guest Lecturer Files, A-E, AZ 1057.↵
  22. Otl Aicher, Correspondence with Ilse Grubich, October 21 – November 6, 1963, HfG Archiv Ulm.↵
  23. The first three issues of the magazine *ulm* (quarterly report of the HfG Ulm) were published simultaneously, probably in January 1959, followed by No. 4 in April and No. 5 in July 1959.↵
  24. In some cases students received warning letters from the university administration because of their critical attitudes, see HfG Archive, personnel files HfG.↵
  25. List of published books, retrieved on August 1, 2015 from <http://guibonsiepe.com.ar/guiblog/libros> (last retrieved on 1 August 2015).↵
  26. Of the five graduates of the first generation enrolled at the HfG, three continued their education (art history, environmental design, communications and sociology). The two others worked as designer and design scholar and as scientific editor and psychoanalyst, respectively.↵
  27. Of the ten other information students, three became journalists, three worked as freelance writers and one became a filmmaker. Two subsequently studied economics and political sciences and economics, respectively. The career path of one student can no longer be traced.↵
  28. In the early 1960s, Aicher had developed a corporate design for Deutsche Lufthansa. Subsequently, various HfG alumni from the Visual Communications Department went to Lufthansa headquarters in Frankfurt to assume continued supervision of the corporate image, including Hans G. Conrad, Hermann Roth and Claus Wille.↵
  29. See HfG-Archiv Zug. 247, brochure: “Fußnoten zur Ergänzung der Leseranalysen des Bundesverbandes Deutscher Zeitungsverleger [...]”.↵
  30. See Peter M. Michels' “Bibliografie”, 2011, retrieved on August 1, 2015, from: <http://peter.michels.perso.sfr.fr/biblio.htm>.↵
  31. Klaus Krippendorff, Über den Zeichen- und Symbolcharakter von Gegenständen – Versuch

zu einer Zeichentheorie für die Programmierung von Produktformen in sozialen Kommunikationsstrukturen [Sign and symbol character of objects – An attempt at a sign theory for the programming of product forms in social communication structures], theoretical part of the diplom thesis, 1961, HfG Ulm. HfG-Archiv, Diplom 62.5.↵

32. The magazine form was founded in 1957 by Wilhelm Wagenfeld (product designer, former director of the Bauhaus metal workshop), Jupp Ernst (graphic designer, product designer, and teacher), Willem Sandberg (graphic designer and director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam), and the museum director Curt Schweicher. The writers, including the publishers themselves, were above all practical designers. In the beginning, form published Johannes Itten, Walter Gropius, Gustav Hassenpflug, and Max Bill, among others, as well as architecture historian Siegfried Giedion and the writer Erich Pfeiffer-Belli, who had studied at the Bauhaus.↵
33. Otl Aicher, *allgemeinbildung in der hochschule für gestaltung* [General education at the HfG]. manuscript, no date, HfG-Archiv Ulm, Se 85.2.↵
34. This is further reflected in the fact that the Information Department was not mentioned in the 1963 exhibition on the HfG, which was designed by Herbert Lindinger and Claude Schnaidt – and the exhibition itself included almost no text.↵
35. Hanna Laura Klar (personal communication, March 14, 2013) states: “At the time, [the school’s administration] thought we’d write texts for their products. We never did that”, Klar was one of the last graduates of the Information Department; she went on to become a director and filmmaker.↵
36. The existing programs for Medienkonzeption are located in computer science department. The curricula therefore have a strong technical focus. However, they integrate visual and interaction design, storytelling, and text (like at Furtwangen University Applied Sciences, see <http://www.hs-furtwangen.de/studierende/fakultaeten/digitale-medien/medienkonzeption-ba.html>, last retrieved on August 2, 2015), or they integrate interaction design with media and communication sciences (like at Kiel University Applied Sciences, see <https://module.fh-kiel.de/Medien/StudiengangTabelle?StudiengangID=10002>).↵
37. “Cast” is a course specialization in the design program of Zurich University of the Arts. It is focused on audio-visual content production for online and mobile media.↵
38. Technische Redaktion is a study program at Hannover University of Applied Sciences, combining computer science, management, text, linguistics, technology, and visual communication (see [http://technische-redaktion-hannover.de/studium/#abschnittID\\_1](http://technische-redaktion-hannover.de/studium/#abschnittID_1), last retrieved on August 2, 2015).↵
39. For instance “Art and Design Science” at Folkwang University of the Arts, “Design Studies” at Halle University of Art and Design, Strategische Gestaltung [Strategic Design] at Schwäbisch Gmünd University of Design, or “Design Research” at Anhalt University of Applied Sciences.↵