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# The Information Department at the Ulm School of Design

OSWALD, David; Prof. | HTW Berlin University of Applied Science, Germany

*HfG Ulm, information department, design education, language, communication*

Ulm is known for its educational model, particularly for product design and visual communication. Yet the school's smallest department — Information — has hardly been discussed. It can be considered a leftover of an initially planned political school. However, it represents the will to integrate all aspects of modern life into one school. Bill tried to push the department into advertisement, but it was Bense who directed it towards information theory.

## 1. Introduction

The Ulm School of Design (Hochschule für Gestaltung, HfG) has been widely acknowledged for its pioneering model of design education, and has influenced design departments in many parts of the world. Today, the HfG's most renowned departments are product design, and visual communication — generally the predominant disciplines of design and also big departments in Ulm. It seems only natural that until today, the smallest department of the HfG is hardly perceived at all, and has only been covered marginally in literature: the Information Department.

In total, only 25 students had been matriculated in the Information Department, of which only seven finished their studies with an HfG diploma. In spite of the students' moderate demand, the history of this department is revelatory for the Ulm School as a whole. Early HfG concept papers and curricular plans reveal controversies over the relation of design education and 'political method'. Initially planned as a standalone department for political method by the school's initiators, it was later — under the influence of designer Max Bill — replanned as a department for journalism and advertisement. However, it was Max Bense who finally had the most formative influence on the department. He introduced rigorous topics like logic, structural analysis of language, cybernetics, and information theory. Within the given context of pioneering product design and visual communication, the Information Department developed into what has been characterised as a 'kitchen of design theory' by Gui Bonsiepe (Krampen 2003: 159).

## 2. Prologue: Post-War Democratization and the *Ulmer Volkshochschule*

The plans for the Ulm School were driven by an anti-fascist, democratic impetus. Inge Scholl, the later initiator and founder of the HfG, and her younger siblings Hans and Sophie had initially been engaged in the Hitler Youth in Ulm. However, with the beginning of World War II, Hans and Sophie Scholl started to turn away from Nazism and eventually became active resisters in the 'White Rose' circle. After being caught distributing anti-Nazi pamphlets, they were executed in 1943 (Zankel 2008). Immediately after the war, Inge Scholl and Otl Aicher started to organize public lectures in Ulm to throw a light on the Nazi past, and to promote a political and cultural new beginning, taking up the humanism and anti-fascism of the 'White Rose' resistance group. By 1946, this led to the foundation of a community college for adult education (*Volkshochschule*), offering evening lectures mainly in literature, politics, philosophy, and theology, and also art and science.

## 3. Planning Phase: Shifting Relations between Politics and Design

One of the guest speakers of the Volkshochschule was Hans Werner Richter, initiator of the 'Group 47', the most influential association of avant-garde authors in post-war western Germany. Richter aimed for a 'humanist socialism' and the reinvention of truly 'universal universities' (Spitz 2002: 56-57). In Scholl and Aicher he found kindred spirits with a hands-on attitude, quite different from often resigned German intellectuals, who — after the Nazis' industrialisation of war and death — saw an irresolvable contradiction between technology and culture, and therefore oriented back to classic pre-industrial German culture of 'Goethe-Schiller-Beethoven'. In contrast, 'the Ulmers [...] were attempting to rescue

the concept of *Industriekultur* from Nazi corruption by regrounding it with humanist tradition of social responsibility and moral education' (Betts 1998).

Around 1949/50, Aicher, Richter, and Scholl developed concrete plans for a full time college — to be named 'Geschwister-Scholl-Schule' after the Scholl siblings. A typewritten synopsis lists seven major subjects: Politics, journalism, broadcasting, photography, advertising, industrial design, and city planning (Scholl 1950). It also advocates a still up-to-date universal approach, which today would be referred to as 'interdisciplinary':

The time for exclusive professional specialization is over. Politics, science, art, and economics must be viewed in their integral relationship. Education for knowledge must be replaced by education towards unprejudiced *universal thinking*.

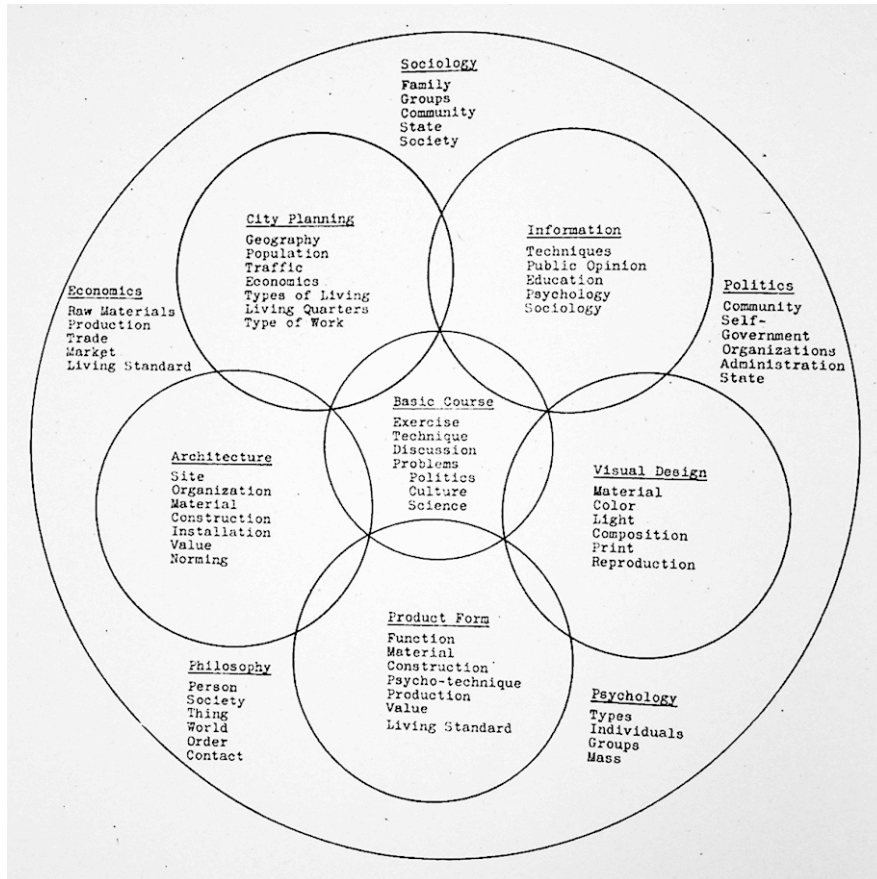


Figure 1. A diagramme from a 1951 concept script illustrates the school's universal approach (Scholl 1951).

The chances for obtaining the necessary funding increased a lot when Bauhaus graduate Max Bill, in contrast to Aicher already an internationally renowned designer, architect, and 'concrete' artist, joined the planning team. The price for Bill's coalition was a substantial change of the school's focus. Bill succeeded in transforming the concept from a political school with integrated art, to a design school that integrated some political education. This became also manifest in the school's new name Bill had enforced: *Hochschule für Gestaltung* (school of design). This shift made Richter withdraw completely in 1950, leaving a big gap in the subjects of politics and journalism (Spitz 2002: 86, 95).

#### 4. 1953–55: A Beginning without Information Department

In 1953, the first students started their studies at the HfG. The construction work for the new school buildings had just started, so classes were still held in the Volkshochschule. In the first year all students took the 'basic course', so the first year could be used to plan and build-up the departments. Whereas other departments already had their leading figures, the Information Department was still lacking a full time head to push things forward. In an early HfG information brochure (HfG 1952), the yet non-existent Department was described with a focus on journalism and advertising:

The training is structured like an editorial office or the advertising department of a company. The basics of journalism and working methods are learned like they are necessary in practice. It is planned to expand the department into radio and television.

In a syllabus the general orientation was mainly towards politically responsible journalism, with a strong emphasis on practical work (HfG 1953a). This was seen as a completion, or a rather a replacement, of traditional education of journalists at universities, which as such was hardly existent. The usual way of becoming a journalist was studying classic literature at university and adapting to the very different practice of journalism afterwards.<sup>1</sup> Being innovative at its time, the list of topics<sup>2</sup> reads not too extraordinary today:

- News, information sources, editorial, comment, review, interview, report, feature.
- Public relations, operating manuals, text and image, montage.
- Economy, business management, copyright law.
- Means of advertising, ads, placards, shop window, brands, packaging, brochure.
- Political science, constitution, parliamentarism, parties, unions, organizations.
- Opinion polls and statistics, interview techniques, test methods, market research.
- Copy text, typefaces, typography, photography, film, graphics, window dressing (sic!), exhibitions.

Max Bense had been teaching as a guest lecturer since the opening of the HfG in 1953 (Walther 2003). The interim curriculum for 1953/54 lists Bense as lecturer for 'Aesthetics', and for a seminar on the 'Theory of Beauty, and the Mode of Being of Works of Art' (HfG 1953b). Being a full professor of philosophy at Stuttgart University, Max Bense could only serve as a part-time department head. Still, he took responsibility for the curriculum development and tried to help finding someone appropriate to lead the department. In an updated version of the information brochure of 1955, Bense's influence becomes noticeable (HfG 1955):

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.

The focus is now set on problems of information and communication — which sounds noticeably more theoretic and scientific, less skill and craft oriented. The terms 'advertisement' and 'journalism' are placed back to a second sentence and complimented with 'cybernetics' — an emerging predecessor of computer science, based on information and systems theory.

After the withdrawal of Richter, attempts had been made to gain another progressive author to lead the department. In 1955 negotiations with avant-garde writer Arno Schmidt failed — mainly due to Bill's depreciatory concept of the department as a public relations service for the school, and a text provider for Visual Communication. Bill's view obviously was stuck in the 1953 program with its focus on journalism and advertisement, ignoring Bense's reforms completely. In her diaries, Schmidt's wife Alice describes how a meeting between Schmidt and Bill turned into a hefty quarrel, when Bill asked Schmidt to teach students how to develop 'sharp advertising copy and slogans' (Schmidt 2008). It is circulated that Schmidt's answer back was analogous to 'Do not even think I will sell your nicely designed toilet lids' (Bonsiepe 2011).

## 5. The Bense Era 1955–58: Pumping Intellectual Matter into the School

Bense published his plans for the department in 1956 ('Texts and Signs as Information: An Experimental Curriculum for Information', Bense 1956a). In the introductory remarks the impending consequences on literature studies are addressed: 'A radical shift from traditional philology towards the measurement of information in all types of texts — be it utilitarian copy or artistic literature'. Also a close cooperation of the Information Department with the Visual Communication Department is announced, 'due to their shared scientific foundations found in semantics and information theory'. Bense divides the curriculum into two parts: Information Science and Information Practice. Whereas the description of Information *Science* fills more than two pages with detailed lists of 30 teaching subjects, Information *Practice* (i.e. journalistic text types, advertising copy etc.) is dealt with in only two sentences. A more than obvious emphasis on scientific and experimental topics at the expense of applied journalistic and commercial writing.

<sup>1</sup> Compare interview with Gui Bonsiepe in (Krampen 2003: 155) and (Kalow 1962).

<sup>2</sup> The list has been shortened by the author.



Figure 2. 'Experimental Curriculum for Information' (Bense 1956a).

The planned curriculum displayed a novel approach to text work. Text now was to be examined under the aspect of how much information it contains, using means known from natural science. Emphatic philological interpretation of literature as pieces of written art was rejected. The liberal arts approach to text exegesis was to be replaced by precise analytic means like statistics, logic, and syntactics. In a way, this anticipated the direction the school should take with its science-oriented reforms of 1957/58. Just like artistic painting was regarded useless for visual communication, an artistic approach to text was considered useless for contemporary verbal communication. Also in the exercises he proposed, parallels to Gugelot's modular approach to product design and Maldonado's assignments like 'grid surfaces, Paeno curves, exact-inexact' can be found. In Bense's experiments, text and language are not treated as literature, but rather as linguistic systems (Bense 1956a):

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

Of course Bense could not teach all of the 30 proposed subjects along with his duties in Stuttgart. He tried to fill gaps by recommending colleagues to teach in Ulm, among others Elisabeth Walther, and Abraham Moles (Walter 2003). They gave lessons not only in the Information Department, but also in shared scientific subjects for students of all departments. It is safe to assume that this input contributed to the school's tendency towards a greater integration of scientific methods into the design process. The dispute over this development eventually resulted in Bill leaving the school in 1957 — a consequence that Bense regretted, since he always respected Bill and his 'concrete art' painting.

When Bense left Ulm in 1958 he concluded that he had been 'pumping intellectual matter into the school for four years' (Rübenach 1987). His lectures on philosophy, philosophy of sciences, logic, linguistics, mathematical operations, statistics, and communication theory were a crucial contribution not only for the Information Department. However, his distinct topic of 'Information Aesthetics' — failed to connect with design practice. The proposed quantitative analysis of art and design artefacts did not show relevance, neither for 'beauty' nor for what now is called usability. A theory in which aesthetics are defined based on statistical probability, and aesthetic information is equalled with 'negative entropy' (Bense 1956b: 48–51) is not wrong in principle, but simply not helpful for solving design challenges.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> An example from (Bense 1982: 328) may serve as an illustration: The amount of information  $H$  of a text of  $N$  characters of a repertoire of  $r$  elements equals:  $H = N \cdot \sum_r p_r \cdot \log 1/p_r$ . For instance, the word 't o m o r r o w' therefore contains 32,88 bit of information.

During its existence from 1955 to 1964, only 25 students have been matriculated in the Information Department.<sup>4</sup> These students can easily be divided into two generations. A first generation of only five students joined the department in 1955 after the mandatory basic course and finished their studies in 1959. Whereas in other departments there was a continuous intake every year, there was almost no overlap between this first generation and subsequent students of Information. The second generation joined the department between 1959 and 1962, when Bense had already left.<sup>5</sup> Hence, only five students got the ‘maximum dose’ of Bense input. Even if a sample of five is way too small to draw ascertained conclusions, it is noticeable that this generation took a distinct direction. Whereas the second generation later worked primarily in the area of journalism and publishing, the ‘Bense-generation’ shows a greater engagement in non-journalistic areas like design theory, design education, social sciences and communication, environmental design in their professional life (Müller-Krauspe 2003). An individual graduate worth remarking is Gui Bonsiepe, who stayed in Ulm until 1968 as a docent and editor of the ‘ulm’ journal, which had a strong influence on the emerging design discourse in the 1960s.

Gert Kalow, a journalist who had been lecturer in the Information Department since 1956, headed the department after Bense had left. During Kalow’s tenure the department oriented again towards journalism (Kalow 1962). After 1962, new students were not admitted anymore and the department was phased out in the following years (Müller-Krauspe 2007: 84).

## 6. Conclusion: Relevance for Design Education Today

The Ulm school was a place of controversy. A good amount of these controversies were about the question what design should be, and how to teach it. Some of the controversies were fought out already in the planning phase: The dominance of design over political education, the commitment to cover all aspects of industrialised production and communication, and the integration of natural and social sciences into the curriculum. However, there was a recurring controversy about the *relation* between design and science. The result is valid until today: Design cannot be completely absorbed in science, and not at all in ‘artistic intuition’.

Design disciplines traditionally are defined by a material-oriented view: Product designers use solid materials, visual communication designers use paper and ink, digital designers use pixels and vectors. In this perspective, someone using language is a *writer* — not a designer.

In contrast, when we take the perspective of user activity, the conclusion is different. There are design artefacts — be they solid, paper-based, or digital — that are defined by *use processes*, and there are those driven by *communication processes* (Oswald 2010). If we really want to educate *communication* designers, as opposed to *graphic* designers, then we should deal with all aspects of communication — visual and verbal. Otherwise design will continue to offer superficial auxiliary services.

Even if it has not become mainstream: The concept of integrating verbal and visual communication into one school was innovative in its time. Perhaps it is time to give the concept another try, it might help to reduce the designer’s lack of discursivity and could boost design theory once again.

### Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the cooperative people at the HfG-Archiv in Ulm, especially Daniela Baumann. Also special thanks to Gui Bonsiepe for giving helpful advice and always patiently answering e-mails.

<sup>4</sup> Older sources speak of only 14 (Lindinger 1990: 278) more recent sources count 25 (Spitz 2002: 18).

<sup>5</sup> Compiled information from diverse sources (Müller-Krauspe 2003 and 2007), (Spitz 2002:18), (Roericht 1988).

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## About the author

David Oswald is Professor for Design in Business Communication Management at HTW Berlin University of Applied Science, Germany. He studied Integrated Design in Cologne. He has lead frogdesign's user interface design group in Düsseldorf and Berlin, Germany. His research focus is on interaction and interface design, visualisation, semiotics and auditory interfaces. <mail@david-oswald.de>