



## Conversation with Dr Martin Mäntele

**Director of the HfG-Archiv Ulm**

**by Valentina Rossini**

Martin Mäntele is director of the archive at the former Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, the school of design commonly known as HfG Ulm, lecturer at the HfG Schwäbisch Gmünd, and taught design history at the universities of applied sciences in Ulm and in Würzburg-Schweinfurt. With him we talked about the Ulm Model, developed by the HfG Ulm, which influenced and transformed the teaching of design, and we discussed design education today and social responsibilities.

Opening in 1953, the HfG Ulm sought to leave its mark not only in design and design teaching, but also in the creation of a new kind of German citizen that could act as a bulwark against Nazism ever emerging again. This mix of design thinking and social and political awareness continued throughout its history, in different guises, under the leadership of Max Bill, Tomás Maldonado, and Otl Aicher. Critically, the history and experience of the HfG Ulm opens a space for us in the present to see how things might be done differently.

Design *is* now slowly responding to the increasing and urgent need to consider broader issues such as working conditions of labourers and the problems of environmental damage. The condition of the built and manufactured environment is a central interest of Unterweiss, and how it can be rearranged and reformulated to better support citizens is a question of paramount importance. So while the HfG Ulm may have closed in 1968, its legacy and its ongoing discussion may indeed help point us in new directions – the conversation presented here with Dr Martin Mäntele is part of that process.



# Unterweiss

Conversation with Dr Martin Mäntele

*Valentina Rossini:* The HfG Ulm started out in 1953 from a connection between the German activists Inge Scholl and her husband Otl Aicher, along with the Swiss architect Max Bill. What brought them together and what did they want to do?

*Martin Mäntele:* After the Second World War, Inge Aicher-Scholl was director of the Volkshochschule, the adult education centre in Ulm, when together with her husband Otl Aicher and a group of friends who called themselves Studio Null, they decided to found an institute providing a higher level of education. The *hochschule* was supposed to teach general subjects such as philosophy and history, and called “Geschwister Scholl” in memory of Inge’s siblings, Hans and Sophie, who were assassinated by the Nazis for leading the intellectual resistance movement the White Rose. In 1948 Otl Aicher and Inge Aicher-Scholl were travelling in Switzerland when they met Max Bill, the Swiss designer who would later in 1949 organise for the Swiss Werkbund the exhibition “Die Gute Form”, a collection of consumer goods considered examples of good design. Thanks to his contribution the original concept changed; it was Max Bill who had the idea of re-establishing the Bauhaus, a *New Bauhaus*, and of giving the *hochschule* a neutral, less nostalgic name. Guided by the anti-fascist impulse of the founding members, the school programme aimed to educate the younger generations on how to live in the new democratic system, and to grow individuals with independent mind-sets in the hope that the same conditions that led to the Third Reich would never happen again in Germany.

*Valentina Rossini:* With Tomás Maldonado, second rector of the HfG Ulm after Max Bill, a number of reforms were put in place. Of what did they consist? What was the main premise of the revolution?

*Martin Mäntele:* The main change introduced by Maldonado at the HfG Ulm certainly relates to team working, both among classmates and among different

departments. Projects like the Braun designs, the Hamburg Hochbahn, or the Lufthansa corporate image which not only included its popular logo but also tableware, were developed thanks to the collaboration between product designers and graphic designers, and I think this is the main reason why their outcomes were and are still considered so successful. Students and faculty members were forced to create a dialogue despite the boundaries raised by different skills and cultural backgrounds, and the way the building and the classrooms were structured was meant to facilitate communication too. Indeed, Max Bill was very aware of the importance of a functional building and pushed for having a new site rather than using the already existing infrastructure – even if he conceived designers as “god-artists” as in the Bauhaus tradition, in the plaster workshop for instance he designed an open space with a big table where students and lecturers could work together at their projects, looking at what their colleagues were doing, and helping each other.

*Valentina Rossini:* Indeed, collaboration determined the success of the innovative educational approach still known today as the Ulm Model. What were the different departments and how did they work together?

*Martin Mäntele:* At the very beginning there were four departments: Product Design, Visual Communication, Information, and Architecture; then, in 1961, a Film Department was established as a spin-off of Visual Communication. During the first year of study, students from all departments had to attend the same foundation courses so to have a common background, a base to start with before undertaking the specific training in their own fields, a “same-set” of knowledge to ease the dialogue when developing new projects. Hence the Ulm Model is not just built on collaboration, but also on being interdisciplinary and on developing a wider cultural foundation.

The Product Design Department was the most important one because of the number of students enrolled (249), yet the small Information Department was one of a kind, something never seen before. Here, lectures from people like Max Bense and other influential philosophers, writers, and journalists aimed to open students' minds and to generate inputs for innovative ideas while playing with words and manipulating informative texts. The Information Department worked in tight collaboration with the other departments identifying, already in those days, sustainability as a fundamental aspect of every product and production process. The Ulm Model must be therefore analysed in terms of concepts rather than of pure aesthetics, even though it is clear that every school can be recognised within a certain style.

I do believe in the importance of information and knowledge exchange and I think that the Ulm Model is still a valid approach. However, today, shorter and shorter education spans and bachelor programmes make it useless and oblige students to deepen their own cultural level by themselves.

*Valentina Rossini:* If the teaching at the HfG Ulm set the design methods we still apply today, why is Bauhaus more famous?

*Martin Mäntele:* (Well, the Bauhaus is much older and has had more time to become famous!) Firstly, teachers such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Walter Gropius, and many others, contributed to its popularity by already being active and known outside of the Bauhaus, while only a few names of equal calibre and influence could be found in Ulm. Secondly, the HfG Ulm was mainly theoretical rather than practical, and as a consequence only a handful of projects were meant to be sold and even less have been produced long enough to establish themselves as sort of design icons. Merging these two aspects together, one can assume that the peculiarity of the HfG Ulm of not educating “god-artists” and of

focussing instead on the projects themselves is the main reason for it to remain little known. Indeed the HfG Ulm moved the value of design from the person to the object, so also changing the way in which design was marketed. A good example is the Lufthansa logo: while very famous itself, I guess the general public does not know it was developed in Ulm.

That said, people have a cliché in mind about the Bauhaus. Furniture pieces as the Wassily Chair designed by Marcel Breuer and produced by Knoll have become classics because after the Second World War the middle class used them to convey a status, to show professional success, and to identify itself as a group of modern open-minded people. I do not see the Braun appliances developed within the HfG Ulm operating in a similar way – you would need a certain attitude to buy Braun rather than other brands.

*Valentina Rossini:* As Gui Bonsiepe stated in his speech at the Metropolitan University of Technology in Santiago, Chile, in 2005: “More and more, design moved away from the idea of intelligent problem solving (James Dyson), and drew nearer to the ephemeral, fashionable and quickly obsolete, to formal aesthetic play, to the boutiqueisation of the universe of products of everyday life. [...] Design has thus become a media event – and we have a considerable number of publications that serve as resonance boxes for this process.” How can *good designers* communicate with the general public in order to push back against this shift? Is there still a place for *good design*?

*Martin Mäntele:* One should provocatively ask: should designers always think about *good design* or is it a secondary matter related to trends? Luckily enough, there are people with values who have now recognised the fact that mass production comes at a price and who have started pondering more and more what to buy in relation to how things are produced, damage done to the environment,

slavery and dangerous working conditions. Nonetheless, please tell me if there exists even a single product that is durable yet affordable for the general public? This was already a core problem for all of those who tried to reform design processes, including William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. In this society money is a very sensible argument, and making people spend more money is extremely difficult; you either have the financial capability to invest in *good*, usually artisanal products, or you do not have a big salary and you prefer to pay less so as to be able to buy more. For example, when speaking about electrical appliances I see energy use as more important than design mainly because it can be translated into savings on the bills.

*Valentina Rossini:* According to Max Bill, Gestalt should be a mix of form, function, and beauty. However, the abundance of graphic imagery that surrounds us does not always fulfil these requirements. While it is simple to recognise when a product works successfully, it is not obvious as to how to assess graphic design. Do you think the general public can distinguish Gestalt from not-so-well-made graphics?

*Martin Mäntele:* Formulated at the beginning of the Twentieth century, Gestalt theory is so foundational that it is still in use today for giving defined guidelines and parameters to assess the quality of a design, of the whole as well as of its single components. Actually, it is Maldonado who can be given the credit of having brought the Gestalt theory into the design education. But it does not necessarily mean that designers apply it in their everyday practice, being very difficult to understand. If designers sometimes lack the basic knowledge to comprehend the Gestalt rules, you can imagine how impossible it can be for the general public! Making a comparison with more immediate visual art products such as pictures or paintings, one can easily notice that feelings are the main driving force in

determining what one likes or not.

Anyway, it is very difficult to assess tangible products too, and when buying new objects people usually follow their gut. Max Bill promoted things which were considered to have *die gute form* (a good form), courses on how to furnish homes were organised at the Volkshochschule in Ulm and throughout Germany, and exhibitions aiming to educate on how to choose what to buy were held by the Werkbund. Today, I think this approach would not work anymore because we have all grown up with post-modernism, the era in which everyone has gained the right to decide for themselves, and no one would accept such suggestions on what suits their living rooms. We have gone too far into liberalism and there is no turning back, at least not via aesthetics. Once again, the only valid arguments may be connected to energy consumption, labour policies, and ultimately, money.

*Valentina Rossini:* Well, critics online try to direct us towards one product rather than another.

*Martin Mäntele:* Generally speaking, can you trust blogs? Is it an independent critic? Are reviews truly written so as to help make a decision on what to buy? I recently read a review about a new line by Tiffany's, a series of everyday objects composed of sterling silver cans shaped like the tin cans used for vegetables, sold at about 900 USD. No critical comment was made.

*Valentina Rossini:* The idea of the HfG Ulm was for designers to be trained as "complete individuals": technical skills had to be complimented with a strong moral, a social sensibility, and political involvement. But are those like Otl Aicher now just considered as distant idols, or are designers still trying to keep this ideal alive and relevant?

*Martin Mäntele:* There have always been designers like Otl Aicher with a broad individual knowledge, a complete approach, and a great sense of responsibility. Then there have always been designers who just enjoy what they do. Of course *berufskollegs*, *hochschulen*, polytechnics, academies, and universities provide different levels of education, but nevertheless everyone is free to engage in self-learning. This is something students should be more encouraged to do: lecturers can teach only up to a certain point, then students have to keep reading, broaden their minds on their own, and not demand that everything is solved just by studying at school. Four-year or three-year programmes are definitively not enough to widen one's own horizons.

*Valentina Rossini:* As stressed by Bonsiepe in the *Ulm* journal, the word design is a "vague and undefined" term that covers an ample range of human activities including the creation of military weapons – it should speak about projects developed for people and society, but it ends up embracing things against people and society. Can we put the moral act back in design?

*Martin Mäntele:* Of course we can put the moral act back in design, but, once more, it is an individual question and it depends on one's own independent thinking and set of values. To be blunt, it also depends on where one finds employment since it is not a designer's task to establish the vision of a company. Using an actual example, many fashion brands have been held up for producing cheap clothes in unfair working conditions, often involving chemicals toxic to workers, the environment, and consumers. Still, a lot of designers work for those companies and millions of people dress with those clothes.

Obviously, there was no fashion department at the HfG Ulm, and I say obviously for good reasons since fashion changes too fast – it is a very basic need to cover oneself but it is related to clothes or fabrics rather than to fashion as a trend.

Moreover, when the HfG Ulm was established, Germany was undergoing a process of reconstruction which demanded the production of home furnishings. This is the fundamental issue: to know what is needed in a specific place at that very moment.

Right after the HfG closure in 1968, an ecological movement of former students started doubting mass consumption. This means that in less than fifteen years, in Germany, a shift in perspective had already happened. One cannot give global solutions to similar problems in different parts of the world – they need targeted answers. One has to look to what is important now and what might be important in five, ten, or twenty years.

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## Further Investigations

Otl Aicher, *The World as Design*, Ernst and Sohn, Berlin, 2015.  
A collection of essays and lectures by Aicher across a range of topics and themes that were central to him as a designer. In particular the chapters "Hans Gugelot" and "Bauhaus and Ulm" are worthy of note in connection to the HfG Ulm.

Gui Bonsiepe, *Design and Democracy: Civic City Cahier 2*, Bedford Press, London, 2010.

One of the leading staff members at the HfG Ulm. These later writings by Bonsiepe reveal that his passion for understanding and revealing the larger context in which design happens remains undiminished.

Jens Müller and René Spitz, *HfG Ulm: Concise History of the Ulm School of Design*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich, 2014.

As the title suggests, a general introduction to the HfG Ulm. In German and English, it includes four short texts covering the school's purpose and history along with photographs that evoke something of the school's atmosphere.

Ulmer Museum and HfG-Archiv, *Ulmer Modelle – Modelle Nach Ulm: Hochschule für Gestaltung 1953-1968*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2003.

Released in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name, this German and English-language book explores the Ulm Model and what it meant and continues to mean for designers and design.

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