

THE PRIZE OF SUCCESS

In the speech that Patrizia Crivelli gave at the opening of *Swiss Design 2002*, she explained that the evening represented both a closing point and a starting point in federal design promotion. She was correct in more ways than she meant. 2002 can be described as the end and the beginning of a new era of promotion. The SDA were at a cross-roads, and their relaunch signified a watershed in the promotion of design in Switzerland. The evening also symbolised other endings and beginnings that went further than the introduction of a new model for design promotion. First, 2002 symbolised a new reign. It formalised the beginning of the new school's sovereignty over design promotion and the wider design scene. Secondly, it had a major impact on design tastes by updating the hitherto understanding of "good" design, which was now to be located in the cultural sector. Thirdly, it rewrote the rules of success, which no longer had any relationship with commercial viability but were grounded in critical acclaim, regardless of the precarity of it. And fourthly, it institutionalised a new definition of the graphic design profession, based on the practices of the new generation.

The relaunch introduced an ambitious new system for the SDA which aimed to update design promotion in line with changes in the discipline. The awards also reinvented themselves to convince those on the design scene that they were still relevant after a decade of being subjected to criticism in the specialist press, and during which designers had demonstrated less and less interest in them. The relaunch was accompanied by a "facelift" – an extensive overhaul of the Awards' visual communication – which the SDA used to enhance its design promotion activities. The 2002 exhibition employed extensive visual and curatorial devices whose metaphors on competitions and the judging process positioned the awards as a central node on the design scene. This, however, was not just a metaphor, because the SDA now became entangled within existing design networks. While the Design Service and the FDC were seemingly in charge of the shift in promotion, its impetus and its direction were equally shaped by a new generation of

dominant in design promotion. It was not the first time that the SDA had been leveraged by actors on the scene. Quite the opposite: professional associations had endeavoured to steer them for their own benefit since their inauguration in 1917. During the course of the 20th century, the role of promotion and the definition of “good” design evolved according to who was in charge. Initially, the associations anchored design promotion in the commercial and industrial realms. Their progressive loss of control, from the late 1960s onwards, happened in parallel with an evolution of the discipline, whose social and cultural dimensions were increasingly recognised by designers. By the end of the 20th century, the state had taken over design promotion. Though the professional associations were removed from the juries of the SDA and the MBSB, their influence was replaced by another when a new school of graphic designers, most of whom were born in the 1970s, began to determine the design promotion landscape. As their own networks proceeded to exercise a tight grip on the profession, their influence proved no less controlling than that of the professional associations that had preceded them.

By 2002, design promotion was largely controlled by communities for whom design was a lifestyle. The take-over they achieved gave new meaning to the title of Crivelli’s essay in the 2002 catalogue, “Design promotion as a network”.¹ As Heller wrote in that same publication, networks function best when “a mixture of different minds takes over [...] rather than just one”.² Yet there was little diversity in the self-referential communities that now gained control of design promotion: these practitioners held closely aligned views that were grounded in a new definition of their profession. They saw it no longer purely as a service but as a space for self-expression. These networks created a closed circuit of promotion in which their own members had a better chance of winning than outsiders did. Ironically, members of the older professional associations had been criticised for being similarly self-serving when they served on the juries of the SDA and the MBSB – something that had contributed to their removal at the time. But this was not simply a case

of *plus ça change*. Even when members of the associations had sat on the juries, the books to which they awarded prizes still offered a wide range of styles and work methods.³ By contrast, the projects awarded in the SDA after 2002 were much less diverse and all stemmed from the niche economy. Although the Design Service never set out for the new Awards to become a “design police” like other competitions had in the past, the insider networks formed by members of the new school effectively took on that role (Fig. 6.1). Thanks to the power they exerted on juries and commissions, they leveraged the SDA, and design promotion now embraced a narrow definition of “good” design that was almost exclusively aligned with the tastes of the new school.

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Crivelli 2002a.
Heller 2002, 174.
Guggenheimer 2004, 90.



Fig. 6.1

A humorous ad published by Lineto in *Dot Dot Dot* (2002). The slogan is a wordplay on the double meaning of “police”, which can mean law enforcement or typeface.

The Design Service pointed to changes in the discipline as one of the reasons for the 2002 relaunch. Indeed, the newcomers had moved beyond their predecessors’ definition of the profession. One of the main reasons for this professional shift was a loss in creative independence due to the rise of branding and marketing. The newcomers adopted the position of outsiders for whom economic viability was of little importance as long as they could develop innovative design languages. These designers worked predominantly on self-initiated and cultural projects because they were the ones offering the most creative autonomy and the potential to take an authorial position. Instead of joining professional associations, which they associated with the old school who had refused to

recognise their new practices, the newcomers preferred informal communities. In striving for recognition, they communicated their new professional identities through self-representation, self-promotional materials and the type of commissions they took. The SDA associated themselves with the new school in order to reposition themselves at the centre of the design scene. By extension, the Awards promoted its professional models and ideas. If in the early 1990s, critics had argued that the SDA needed to include more experimental design, by the end of the decade the balance had tipped in the other direction. “Commercial” or “industrial” work was no longer awarded in the prizes, which became instead a means for the newcomers to further the design discourse. They did so successfully: the design projects given prizes by the SDA remain well-received by designers across the scene, and the Awards are rarely criticised in the specialist press. However, both the SDA and the newcomers paid a price for their joint success.

6.2 A price to pay

6.2.1 Conserving culture

Over the past two decades, the SDA have given prizes to outstanding graphic designers. The quality of their work is not disputed, and many of them have rightly gone on to play an influential role on the scene. But with every award comes the question of causality.⁴ Did the SDA recognise the best designers in the field, or were they merely conforming to criteria set up by the SDA? As I have explained, the answer is a combination of both. First, the SDA played a role in constructing taste. If a visitor had been asked to define “good” graphic design based solely on a visit to the 2002 SDA, they would have concluded that it had to result from a quasi-artistic, semi-autonomous practice existing outside the industrial realm. Had the SDA been steered by another group of designers, they could have equally placed their emphasis on any other type of design. For instance, the Design & Art Direction (D&AD) awards⁵ in the United Kingdom and the German Red Dot award⁶ recognise mainly commercial work including advertising, branding, packaging and digital marketing. Conversely, the New-York

based Arts Director Club (ADC) Annual Awards – which claim to be the oldest, continuously running design industry-organised awards – recognise both commercial projects for clients such as Apple and Spotify, and less commercial ones, such as a children's illustrated book series or a publication for the ZHdK.⁷ However, in the eyes of the insiders of design promotion, corporate or industrial work was unacceptable, despite the fact that most of them engaged in this type of work.⁸

4 Frey & Gallus 2015, 9.
 5 The D&AD organisation was founded in 1962. It is open to designers worldwide.
 Though it is unclear how many designers apply every year, its first edition already boasted
 2,500 entries (D&AD n.d.).
 6 The Red Dot award was founded in 1955. It receives more than 18,000 international submissions
 a year and has a strong focus on commercial graphic design. Its communication design
 category includes advertising, packaging, corporate design and brand identity
 (Red Dot Award 2021a; 2021b).
 7 ADC n.d.
 8 Rappo 2021.

In the MBSB 2008 catalogue, the graphic designer James Goggin – whose views were shared by many newcomers – explained the primacy of non-commercial work as being a result of a lack of interest in independent designers on the part of commercial clients:

A common criticism of contemporary progressive graphic design is its ostensibly narrow field of projects and clients: invariably within the cultural sector, a kind of ghetto [...]. However, such criticisms often ignore the realities of graphic design practice and modes of commissioning. [...] arts clients seemingly remain the only ones willing to entrust projects to independent designers and small studios. [...] most of these studios would happily take on the challenges of mass-market publishing [...] [but] the opportunity seems largely absent.⁹

9 Goggin 2009, 36.

from the cultural sector was innovative, and commercial clients were not keen on taking risks. At the same time, his statement was an example of the “unconscious collusions” evoked by Bourdieu that feed the collective belief of the field.¹⁰ The implications of this type of declaration, which are at their most powerful when they are least obvious to participants in the field, allowed the new school and its value systems to assert their position in the SDA. The newcomers had a two-pronged strategy. They declared cultural design to be the only acceptable type of work. In doing so, they themselves determined the tastes of the scene, which in turn helped to maintain their position. Promoting cultural design as the only legitimate field meant conserving their own power. This was the SDA’s self-perpetuating cycle: they declared that good design was only possible in the niche economy and then awarded precisely this type of design, thereby closing the loop of promotion at the expense of other practices and designers who were not part of the insider networks. Indeed, the many blind spots of design promotion showed that the SDA did not just award the best design, but also functioned like a closed circuit, upholding the power structures they had established.¹¹

¹⁰ Bourdieu 2002 (1974), 197–199, 205.

¹¹ The SDA did not award the “worst” either. However, when presented with comparatively innovative projects, they systematically awarded members of the insider design networks, as I demonstrated in chapter five.

There is a possible, alternative perspective to this. Building on Moulin and Becker, Menger outlined the processes which legitimise certain artistic practices over others, offering a model to explain the gap between talent and success.¹² While recognising that individuals have different abilities which are not fully observable, he also highlighted two mechanisms which were at play in the SDA. First, someone’s quality is inferred from the attention given to them by others (demand begets more demand).¹³ In the case of the SDA, this was self-explanatory; those who won repeatedly were recognised as the most successful, and so the SDA were responsible for creating critical recognition. Secondly, selective pairings act as a lever in the mechanisms of cumulative advantage.¹⁴ These pairings are a strategy for furthering one’s

career in which creatives associate themselves (at least temporarily) with others who are either as talented as they are or more so, while cumulative advantage is a process in which a very small initial difference between two individuals can lead to a highly different degree of success between them.¹⁵ The networks of promotion were a direct illustration of these selective pairings whereby like-minded, talented designers assembled in communities and benefitted from collaborations within them. Design communities produced a cumulative advantage: their designers made better work, and therefore they won. In that sense, the SDA actually – and fairly – recognised the best work in the field. Yet as the sociologist Marie Buscato has argued, this perspective is incomplete. Several studies have demonstrated the persistence of inequalities based solely on gender, class or ethnicity, beyond differences in talent.¹⁶ In the case of the SDA, there is no other explanation for their many blind spots: the awards partially legitimised networks, stereotypes, norms or gendered conventions by simultaneously making them appear “natural”.¹⁷

¹² Menger 2009, 527–533; 2014, 142–143.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 531.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 532.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 520, 527–529.

¹⁶ Buscato 2010, n.p.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

6.2.2 Precarious passion, subsidised success

Graphic design has long been described as a “long-hours, low-turnover profession”.¹⁸ Moreover, cultural clients have always welcomed young designers who do not mind being badly paid as long as they have “creative freedom and a real sense of identification with the work”.¹⁹ While such commissions were normally seen as a step between one’s studies and the professional market, the SDA now presented cultural work as the only legitimate market – despite the fact that it only represented a fraction of design jobs.²⁰ As the graphic designer Ruedi Baur remarked in the 2005 SDA catalogue:

The generation of the thirty to forty years old [...] has difficulty in developing beyond the experimental stage, and in leaving one cultural dimension in favour of a wider context.²¹

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Julier 2017, 50.
Ernst 2000b, 39.
Notter 2021; Party 2021.
Coen 2005, 58.

The accent put on freedom and creativity has to be replaced within a wider “cultural turn” in the 1990s, during which culture and the economy de-differentiated their business practices.²² This convergence and its consequences have been well explored in the literature.²³ Workers typical of this turn were young, their positions permanently transitional, and they focused on creativity as the means to find “pleasure in work”.²⁴ These attributes largely applied to the newcomers, who turned to inverted business models where everything came second to creativity – “especially money” – but where they could have full control of their practice.²⁵ This stance, which the design historian Thierry Chancogne referred to as *otium*, the opposite of *negotium* (business), became central to the newcomers’ vision of their profession as a lifestyle,²⁶ a model supported by the SDA which increased the precarity of the field.²⁷ This generation happily undertook work that was badly paid, had long working hours and unpredictable patterns, because they were enthusiastic about it.²⁸ As the art historian Michelle Dedelley found out when she interviewed the winners of the 2003 SDA, their ambition was primarily “to enjoy their work”, though they sometimes went against their client’s wishes at the risk of losing the commission.²⁹ This positive narrative opened the door for exploitative, unstable and unregulated work and led to an increasingly precarious position for designers,³⁰ who justified their insecure position with the impetus gained from making good work, which in turn helped them to create a positive self-image despite their difficult conditions.³¹ Ideals of self-improvement and self-determination were therefore a cover for increasing hierarchies and power relations such as those described by Boltanski and Chiapello.³² *Otium* fundamentally contradicted the realities of *negotium* and the fragile economic model that came with it.

Aspiring designers wanted to create excellent projects and be acknowledged by the awards, but that often meant rejecting any development of their businesses.³³ Heller pointed out that “Swiss design works for the cultural market and does not seek to rise to a different level”, which was a “noble attitude” that rejected the financial aspect of design.³⁴ The SDA promoted an unrealistic economic model. This was perverse because, as Hebdige explained, “the relative success of a few individuals” who acted as outsiders to the system created “an impression of energy, expansion and limitless upward mobility” which, for most designers, never materialised.³⁵ While the newcomers created excellent work which was rightly awarded by the SDA, their rejection of business led to the creation of what Party described as “a Swiss [...] scene known as subsidised graphic design” which only existed thanks to state funding.³⁶ In a somewhat perverse consequence, this made the financial contribution of the awards even more important for designers in the cultural sector, who had “plenty of work – just not work that pays”³⁷. While the reliance on cultural clients inevitably came with less desirable aspects including low pay, long hours and a limited pool of clients, the desirability of these practices was rarely questioned by the specialised press, and almost never by designers.³⁸ Many agreed with the practices promoted by the SDA and adopted them as professional models. In the 2005 SDA catalogue, Windlin even argued that “Swiss designers need recognition more than money”³⁹. This may have been true for the most successful designers of the new school, but less so for those who came after them, many of whom adopted highly precarious professional models.⁴⁰

I was talking to two critically acclaimed independent designers at an opening in 2018. They had each won the SDA and the MBSB multiple times and gave the impression of having successful careers. Yet they asked me if I had any leads for work. I expressed my surprise, which is when they clarified that they had “plenty of work – just not work that pays”.

Hochparterre 2002.
Coen 2005, 58.
Berthod *et al.* 2020b.

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Designing the scene

The answer to my opening question – what was the effect of the relaunch of the SDA on the field of Swiss graphic design? – is multifarious. Thanks to their renewed relevance, the awards had an indisputably positive influence on the scene, which notably flourished thanks to means that were unrivalled internationally. They offered recognition, afforded financial support, gave access to professional networks and provided momentum in launching designers’ careers. On the other hand, the reorganisation left some more ambivalent legacies. The SDA were leveraged by design promotion insiders who redesigned the profession and influenced its production by enabling pockets of the scene to thrive. By extension, those who oversaw the politics of the SDA ruled the Swiss design landscape. They shaped the field not only by supporting specific practices financially and critically, but also by erecting a monocultural professional paragon. The design field became ruled by a “singularity regime” which mirrored that of the art market – one in which success was inevitably tied up with the critical acknowledgement of the insiders and a rejection of mainstream definitions of design practice.⁴¹ Winning the Awards was in itself not sufficient to predict a designer’s success, which was largely defined by his connections with the networks of promotion (I write “his” because the winners were mostly men). The insiders’ influence came at the expense of other designers and their professional models, which receded into the background. The loop of promotion inevitably led to a skewed historiography of Swiss design in which the insiders were canonised. In this sense, the awards functioned as both carrot and stick, by rewarding certain practices and erasing others.

In this history, told from the perspective of design promotion, the Awards were therefore always more than just a

prize. As “tournaments of values”, they influenced the taste of practitioners and influenced the kind of design that was created.⁴² The SDA did not simply provide a measuring stick for “good” design but participated in defining it by mirroring the opinions of those in charge. While I have identified gender, education and geography as determining factors among those who became “insiders” in design promotion, many questions remain to be explored. For example, was this situation specific to the time frame of the SDA relaunch, or were the awards always controlled by generational groups self-fulfilling their own prophecies? Was this situation unique to graphic design professions in Switzerland, or were other countries experiencing a similar shift? And what about other creative professions, both in Switzerland and abroad, such as fashion, photography and industrial design? Another area for research would be the embedding of this shift in broader cultural sociology. What influences did these shifts have in terms of discourse in design education, but also on the wider historiography of contemporary graphic design?

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Becker 1982, 100–103; English 2014, 137.

What is more, those who were absent inevitably make only a brief appearance in this book. Many other networks exist in Switzerland, each governed by its own set of values. They point to a number of areas where more research is needed. Some of them organise their own awards, which are equally concrete expressions of the scenes they represent. The *100 Beste Plakate*, the Swiss Poster Awards and the Weltformat poster competition offer as many opportunities for further research that might compensate for the blind spots of federal design promotion. A new award even appeared in 2021, the *Junge Grafik* competition (Fig. 6.2). It is a biennial prize aimed at young designers still in education. Many of its organisational characteristics reflect an attempt to bring a more balanced perspective to the scene. On its website and on social media, this award spares no effort to confirm that it is open to students from all educational backgrounds, from the VET route to higher education.⁴³ Its nine-person jury is composed of five women and four men from a range of scenes and generations, such as the

design promotion outsiders Demian Conrad and Felix Pfäffli, but also regular winners of the SDA and the MBSB, namely Bonbon's Valeria Bonin, Larissa Kasper and Jonas Voegeli. Furthermore, the award hints at the possible return of professional associations on the scene: its sponsors include the *Schweizer Grafiker Verband* (Swiss Graphic Design Association, SGV) and the Swiss Graphic Designers association (SGD). The role of awards on the design scene is thus far from over.

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Junge Grafik 2021, n.p.



Fig. 6.2

The homepage of the *Junge Grafik* competition, which launched in 2021.

