

The Highlights - The People's Representation: On Staged Graphics in Klaus Wittkugel's Work

Klaus Wittkugel, exhibition advertisement
for *Das Lichtbild (The Slide)*, student work, Essen, 1931.

ESSEN, GERMANY, 1931. Young graphics student Klaus Wittkugel designs an advertisement for a fictional exhibition of photography; it takes the form of negative and positive photographic prints of the exhibition information itself, photographed again on a colored ground. Resolutely Modernist in its typography and structure, *Das Lichtbild* reflects a knowing self-consciousness about methods of reproduction and a nearly pedagogical impulse to expose its own construction to the viewer. Perhaps Wittkugel is inspired by other contemporary graphics that confound the real and representational to reveal their technological origins, such as László Moholy-Nagy's *14 Bauhausbücher* cover with its cleverly flipped photograph of the catalogue's own printing plate, or his Folkwangschule teacher Max Burchartz's commercial advertisements and brochures that use sophisticated photomontage and perspectival shifts to represent architectural products and industrial machinery.

Left: Klaus Wittkugel, photographic advertisement for *Richters Bücherei (Richter's Bookstore)*, Essen, 1930; Right: Klaus Wittkugel, photographic advertisement for *Bad Driburg*, Essen, 1931.

Other photographic works by Wittkugel from the same period seek to excite and estrange the viewer through complex optical and graphic effects. As Jan Tschichold had noted in 1928 in *Die Neue Typografie*, "Staged commercial photography exists at the border of fine art. Through illumination, arrangement, and framing, effects can often be achieved that have an astonishing similarity with works of art." (1, author's translation) Constructed out of glass lenses and paper, Wittkugel's advertisement for a bookstore evades clear spatial readings; a second piece for a bathhouse creates an enigmatic atmosphere using projected light on multiple mirrors and glass planes.

Wittkugel's interest in staging graphics and typography continues a thread from his prior training: in the 1920s, he spent several years dressing windows as an apprentice at a Hamburg fabric store. This formative experience laboring over window displays laid the foundation for his later transition to two- and three-dimensional constructions. In a commercial context, the shop window functions as a frame for carefully arranged

assemblages of objects and graphics that must surprise the viewer. To Wittkugel the student, it may seem only natural to make the leap to treating the frame of the printed page itself like a physical window.

Klaus Wittkugel, exhibition posters for *Qualität (Quality)*, Halle and Magdeburg, 1950.

EAST BERLIN, GERMANY, 1950. In the nascent German Democratic Republic, Wittkugel works as the head designer for the Socialist Ministry of Information. Its mandate includes shaping consumer desires and educating the populace, who are only now emerging from the ravaging effects of World War II. *Quality* is a traveling exhibition designed by Wittkugel that focuses on the craftsmanship of East German products over aesthetics, echoing Max Bill's 1949 Swiss exhibition of design, *Die Gute Form (The Good Form)*. Wittkugel's exhibition encourages East Germans to both produce and purchase high quality goods in their dual roles as exemplary workers and consumers.

Posters for the exhibition show a finely detailed photo-realistic rendering of a magnifying glass. With careful focus, it scrutinizes the construction of the exhibition signet and poster typography itself. This formal approach hearkens back to Wittkugel's student experiments yet takes them one step further: here, the lens is positioned as if in the hands of the poster viewers themselves, positing an active role in the pursuit of 'quality.' The staged poster, rather than presenting a reflection on reproduction or an object of contemplation, becomes a site for engaged examination.

Left: Klaus Wittkugel, exhibition poster for *Unser Fünfjahrplan (Our Five Year Plan)*, Berlin, 1950. Right: Klaus Wittkugel, book cover of *Deutsche Plakatkunst (German Poster Art)*, Berlin, 1956.

EAST BERLIN, EARLY TO MID-1950s. During the most difficult period of Stalinist aesthetic policy in the GDR in 1950-51, Wittkugel comes under scathing public critique for his "Formalist" graphic approach and his use of abstract form and typography instead of populist iconography. His poster for an exhibition on East Germany's first Five-Year Plan employs the marching numerals of the coming five years as bold, confident sculptural figures. This offense condemns the poster to particularly bombastic scorn in the Socialist party organ, *Neues Deutschland*:

"An abstract, intellectual play with numbers and forms takes precedence over depictions of people and clear symbols...This ever-dominant Formalist approach to visual communication continues to find its expression in other experiments that show a hatred of mankind." (2, author's translation)

By the mid-1950s, the aesthetic regime has loosened enough to allow Wittkugel's continued work within a Modernist idiom. His graphics for exhibitions, posters, and book covers are well-regarded within East German cultural circles. For one of the first academic books in the GDR on the art of the poster, Wittkugel creates an abstract, planar cover: the word "PLAKAT" ("POSTER") is distributed asymmetrically over a single surface to create the illusion of dimensionality. Trapezoids of varied scales and colors represent the chaotic liveliness of a poster wall in a diagrammatic manner. The cover insists on being read in perspective, as a scene laid out for view.

Left: Klaus Wittkugel, exhibition poster for *Das Plakat (The Poster)*, Berlin, 1957; Right: Klaus Wittkugel, campaign poster for *Die Besten in die Volksvertretung! (The Best Ones for the People's Representation!)*, Berlin, 1957.

EAST BERLIN, 1957. After over a decade of both professional success and occasional censure, Wittkugel finally enjoys his moment as the pre-eminent graphic designer of the East German Socialist republic. In 1957, Wittkugel wins the National Prize of the GDR for his work in organizing and designing the spectacular, immersive propaganda exhibition, *Militarism without Masks*. His subsequent work with staged graphics shows the marks of this political recognition. What started as a self-conscious means for design to reveal its own construction begins to mirror the complexities intrinsic to Socialist public engagement.

A poster announcing an exhibition of posters contains a set of posters placed within their natural context, only moments after having been hung. The posters themselves are not the "Formalist" graphics of Wittkugel's earlier work, but rather monochromatic nationalist icons, including a heroic portrait of the East German president, Wilhelm Pieck, pastoral scenes, industrial workplaces, and allusions to 19th century German Classical literature. The image's warm sunlight picks out two text-only colored posters, which employ a Modernist typographic language to announce the exhibition title and information. A tilted perspective and bright blue sky heroically frame the poster column and leaning yellow ladder, inviting viewers to continue the labor of wheat-pasting East Germany's posters themselves.

From the very same year, Wittkugel's campaign poster, *Die Besten in die Volksvertretung!*

(The Best Ones for the People's Representation!), calls for workers to take part in national politics. Here the action suggested in Wittkugel's earlier works is made explicit; the human figure, previously absent and existing only by implication, is present and hard at work. The poster typography divides into two distinct levels: the stripped down sans serif typesetting in the posters-within-the-poster contrasts with the painted lettering on the wall that communicates the poster headline. The workaday sans serif has been overwritten by the people's hand. As a locus for nationalist labor, or as an exhortative document of participatory politics, these staged graphics are no longer formal and reflective. Instead, they demand active collaboration, like the work of graphic communication itself in the Socialist state.

NOTES

1. Jan Tschichold, *Die Neue Typographie: Ein Handbuch für Zeitgemäss Schaffende*. (Berlin: Verlag des Bildungsverbandes der Deutschen Buchdrucker, 1928; reprint, Berlin: Verlag Brinkmann & Bose, 1987), 90.
2. Hans Lockoff, "Schluss mit dem Formalismus bei unseren Plakaten," *Neues Deutschland*, February 6, 1951. Cited in Sylke Wunderlich, "Plakatkunst in der SBZ/DDR 1945/1949-1969" (Dr. phil. dissertation, Universität Leipzig, 2003), 51.