

Ad hoc-irregular, heterogeneously formalistic, ironically illusionistic: in 1980 the Swiss architectural team Trix and Robert Haussmann produced an experimental design instrument for architecture and furniture design and theory in the form of the "Log-O-rythmic Slide-rule". An exhibition in Studiolo Zurich takes the title of the iterative vocabulary as a starting point in order to reactivate this and other almost forgotten works.

The legacy of modern design tradition is everywhere in Switzerland: Helvetica permeates corporate design in graphics, just as the polished moulds of an international furniture style permeates public space. Studiolo now demonstrates how architectural traditions, as an alternative to "form follows function", can be interpreted in an ironic fashion. For once the self-reflexive gesture of current art productions does not polarize. The *manierismo critico* of interior designer Robert Haussmann, now 80, and his long-standing partner, architect Trix Högl (b. 1933) opens up a field of discourse in contemporary art. Their intimate retrospective shows how they have undermined *Gute Form* with visionary designs since the 1960s.

On arrival to the converted studio building it is difficult to assess what the generously proportioned basement has in store with regards to playful surprises. A strangely monotonous sound installation resounds: it is the newly recorded multilingual reading of the "Log-O-rythmic Slide-rule", a vertical word sequence with a modular structure between the letters A to Z. It is also presented as a photocopied work board. Against this sound backdrop, small items of furniture position themselves in a surprisingly self-confident manner on loosely distributed plinths. These items are too small to furnish a living room, and yet too large for a dolls' house. The stump of a column with regular fluting expands horizontally and in a radial, deconstructivist manner towards the chest of drawers (*Lehrstück II: Störung der Form durch die Funktion* [Teaching item II: disruption of the form by the function], 1978). Bright neon light does not break through the diffuse atmosphere of the room as ceiling lighting here. The light comes from curved fluorescent tubes that attract attention as the legs and backrest of a chair. Above its padded seating area, covered in synthetic leopard skin, the gaze finds a large, stretched-out cloth in the background. On a black-and-white grid pattern, it depicts the skyline of the Big Apple with the silhouette of the UN headquarters. The glass box is surrounded by a knotted cloth with a stripe pattern, as if by a scarf. The ensemble is represented in the exhibition space as *Lehrstück IV: Seven Codes* (1978), a cupboard made of precious wood inlays and mirrors, as well as a postcard motif. Next to it is the yellowed sketch of an arch detail of *San Marco* (1976). Its plain wooden frame echoes the ones filled with elusive broken mirrors that hang on the whitewashed brick walls.

After Robert Haussmann made a name for himself as a chair designer and owner of a furniture shop, the collaboration with his wife Trix manifested itself for the first time in 1967 on the occasion of the auction *Chair Fun* organized by the Schweizerischer Werkbund (SWB). Compared with the anarchic designs by Memphis, the *Neon Chair* (1967 / 2012), shown here as a re-edition, was developed surprisingly quickly. This fragile, dysfunctional seat indicated the direction of further designs on an advertising poster with the title *De Sede is Latin for Sitting* [orig.]. Under the label of the jointly founded *Allgemeine Entwurfsanstalt Zürich*, and from 1978 also as part of the legendary Alchimia studio, the two architects, shaped by the modernist canon during their training, lamented an impoverishment of the formal vocabulary in

commercialized and institutionalized design. Anti-classical mannerism served Trix and Robert Haussmann as a mine for a new concept against frozen norms.

The aim was not, however, to imitate the historical style of the 16th century. Instead, they adapted its artistic rhetoric. Expertly and precisely executed techniques of illusion, absurd distortion, anamorphosis, reflection as well as the play with scales and contrasts continue to appeal to our senses and are effective as an ambivalent re-interpretation of an ousted ornamental style. In light of this background, the exhibited *Lehrstücke* [teaching pieces] now reveal themselves to be concepts of the mannerist manifesto.

The motif of the study, anticipated in the existing inventory of the top floor with a table and a writing desk, is repeated in the exhibition downstairs as a table installation. A rich display of archival materials presents the diversity of the *manierismo critic*: as *Lehrstück VII: Multifunktionalität – Stuhl/Musikinstrument* [teaching piece VII: multifunctionality – chair / musical instrument], a chair takes on the function of a guitar for example. Trix and Robert Haussmann did not just implement their manifesto in the form of theoretical models, they also did so architecturally: the interior of the restaurant Da Capo in Zurich's central station, for example, recreates its façade in a mimetic manner, while the painted marble walls and mirrors create an illusionist stage. Trix and Robert Haussmann created further eccentric accents in Zurich with the design of the Kronenhalle bar, the Weinberg gentlemen's fashion boutique and the underground *Shop Ville* in the station.

As a result of the schizophrenically interpreted language in conjunction with the designs and their penchant for potential literature (Oulipo), their work was originally subsumed under the vague term "postmodernism". Their avowed commitment to complexity and contradiction can in no way, however, be reduced to standard stereotypes. While they quote architectural forms from Giulio Romano to Piero Ligorio, the elaborate execution inflates interiors and furniture into precious jewellery cases. The teaching pieces are always reduced in design and colour and only become ironic-fantastic pastiches as a result of paradoxical functions. In their exclusive-intellectual design suggestions they paint "high and low", i.e. humorously against the grain.

The experimental-playful language of the display brought the young exhibition organizers Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen together with their idols. *Studiolo* is also updating a historical model as a theoretical and physical illusory space.

Gabrielle Schaad, published in *Domus*, April 2012