

Swiss Pop Art: Forms and Tendencies of Pop Art in Switzerland

Madeleine Schuppli

Pop Art, one of the most important movements in postwar art, originated in Britain and the United States before becoming internationally prevalent in the 1960s. Different forms of Pop Art developed around the world—and Switzerland was no exception here. Stimulated by the new and provocative global tendencies, Swiss artists produced works some of which refer, in differing degrees, to international models. At the same time, a specific variety of the movement also emerged that obeys an internal logic in the evolution of Swiss art.

This book is being published in conjunction with the exhibition *Swiss Pop Art: Forms and Tendencies of Pop Art in Switzerland* at the Aargauer Kunsthaus and is the first to examine this topic in depth.¹ Neither at the time (in the 1960s and 1970s) nor in the decades that followed did curators or writers get to the bottom of this phenomenon. However, to conclude from this that Pop is not germane to Swiss art and that the subject was skated over because it lacked substance would fall short of the mark. Rather, the low level of attention it received has to do with the predominance of other movements (such as Concrete Art), with the conservative social climate that prevailed in the 1960s, the tendency for the term Pop to be endowed with negative connotations, and also the fact that at the time there was still almost no market for contemporary art.² This last factor is very much at odds with the orchestrated promotion and marketing of Anglo-American Pop Art.³ Moreover, what we today subsume under Swiss Pop Art was only seldom labeled as such at the time it was made. In practice, the term was hardly ever used.⁴

In the course of our research we stumbled upon a wealth of material. Our investigations yielded a list of around 170 artists from all cultural and linguistic regions of Switzerland whose oeuvre reveals a relationship to Pop Art, the end result being that the works of 51 visual artists are now presented in the exhibition.

Our exhibition and publication set out to review a chapter of Swiss art history that is virtually uncharted territory. From a distance of around fifty years, we look back at the eventful period of the 1960s and early 1970s. In the international sphere our undertaking is one of many. Exhibitions like *Europop* at the Kunsthaus Zürich, *German Pop* at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, *Pop Art in Belgium!* at the ING Art Center in Brussels,

The World Goes Pop at the Tate Modern, London, and *Reflejos del Pop* at the Museo Carmen Thyssen, Malaga, have explored similar themes.⁵ A conference we held in Aarau one year prior to the opening of the exhibition included several of the curators responsible for these shows.⁶

When we began some five years ago to think about a possible review of Swiss Pop Art, it so happened that, without our being aware of it, a number of similar projects were being undertaken in different parts of the world. Clearly the time was ripe for a new and revised reading of an art movement that was half a century old. The renewed interest has been fueled by a series of different factors. One important aspect is the contemporary social issues of today, such as the flood of media and commercial images. Even if the underlying conditions and topical dynamics are different, there is a thematic bridge leading from today to the subtle play with everyday visual stimuli in which Pop Art practitioners were engaging fifty years ago.⁷ Another significant factor is, of course, the establishment of a global perspective on art history,⁸ which seeks to break open the

1 Previous publications comprise *Pop Art und verwandte Strömungen in der Schweiz*, exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Thun, edited by Georg Dolezal, Thun, 1980; *ArteperArte SwissPop: Giovane Swiss pop; Scenografia Swiss pop; ArteperArte Flash 12*, exh. cat. Mercato Coperto, Giubiasco, Giubiasco, 2012. The *Swiss Pop* exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Thun in 2006 was not accompanied by a catalogue.

2 In an interview conducted on December 6, 2016, Monika and Markus Raetz averred that there were a few individual artists of their generation who were able to live from the sale of their works. These were, however, exceptions.

3 See the essay by Kornelia Imesch, "The World and Switzerland Go Pop – or the Return of the Ever Present", pp. 91–112.

4 Cf. the essay by Yasmin Afschar, "Once a Pop Artist, Always a Pop Artist? The Reception and Perception of Pop Art in Switzerland," pp. 231–252.

5 *Europop*, exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich, Feb. 15 – May 12, 2008, curated by Tobia Bezzola and Franziska Lentzsch; *German Pop*, exhibition at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Nov. 6, 2014 – Feb. 8, 2015, curated by Max Hollein, Martina Weinhardt, and Lea Schleiffenbaum; *International Pop*, exhibition at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Apr. 11 – Aug. 29, 2015, Dallas Museum of Art, Oct. 11, 2015 – Jan. 17, 2016, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Feb. 18 – May 15, 2016, curated by Darsie Alexander and Bartholomew Ryan; *The World Goes Pop*, exhibition at Tate Modern, London, Nov. 17, 2015 – Jan. 24, 2016, curated by Jessica Morgan and Flavia Frigeri; *Reflejos del Pop*, exhibition at the Museo Carmen Thyssen, Malaga, Apr. 22 – Sept. 4, 2016, curated by Lourdes Moreno.

6 The two-day conference took place at the Aargauer Kunsthaus on April 8 and 9, 2016, and was staged in cooperation with the Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA). The lectures on the first day presented current research approaches and exhibition projects: "Towards a Capacious Pop," Bartholomew Ryan, co-curator of *International Pop*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and independent curator based in Pittsburgh; "When the World Went Pop at Tate," Flavia Frigeri, curator of *The World Goes Pop*, Tate Modern, London; "German Pop, or How the American Lifestyle Shook Up the German Petite Bourgeoisie," Lea Schleiffenbaum, assistant curator of *German Pop*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, and an art historian based in Berlin. The afternoon concluded with a round table with Walter Grasskamp, Professor of Art History, Academy of Fine Arts (AdBK), Munich, Flavia Frigeri, Bartholomew Ryan, Lea Schleiffenbaum, and Madeleine Schuppli; the event was moderated by Eva Ehninger, Laurenz Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art, University of Basel. The program also included an evening lecture by renowned Pop theorist Diedrich Diederichsen, "Pop Art: On the Re-entry of the Distinction between High and Low, or the Veil and the Veiled."

Western-influenced canon and introduce a transcultural perspective. The exhibitions mentioned at the beginning of this essay also set out to open up a "global", "international," or indeed regional view of Pop Art and move away from the (overly) simplistic model of a primarily Anglo-American tendency.⁹ The rereading should thus also be seen as a striving for differentiation in the wake of an art discipline that has been reorienting itself for the last ten years. A far more prosaic reason for the current activity within this research field is that many exponents of Pop Art are still with us today—bearing in mind their age, it may well be that in ten years' time there will be almost none of the original actors left to interview. We thus seized the opportunity to conduct a range of interviews with artists, representatives of institutions, and art critics who were influential in the 1960s and 1970s. This recourse to oral history proved to be a rewarding undertaking given the frugal treatment the topic has thus far received. To begin with, our image of the prevailing zeitgeist was brought more clearly into focus, the networks among the actors emerged more vividly, and it was possible to obtain a great deal of precious information on the processes of making and reception and on the whereabouts of certain works.

Topics and Terms

Pop Art was part of an ebullient way of life, the expression of the carefree lifestyle of a group of artists who were all still in their youth. However, the movement represented a temporary phase in the creative output of the individual protagonists. Yet to conclude from this that Pop Art found itself in a "cul-de-sac"¹⁰ in Switzerland would be a mistake. A closer look reveals the inherent importance of the temporary dalliance with Pop in the work of a number of artists and the impact it had on their artistic development. For example, Franz Gertsch's Pop Art period clearly ended in 1969 when he turned to Photorealism. Pop Art thus constituted the first major phase in his oeuvre.¹¹ Urs Lüthi, on the other hand, who was born in 1947, making him one of the youngest practitioners to take up Pop Art, was strongly influenced by his involvement with the movement, which reverberated through his later work, as Pop became an artistic approach that has remained valid for him to this day.¹² Peter Stämpfli, who made the biggest splash internationally with his Pop Art works,¹³ struck on the motif of the automobile in 1963 and from 1969 on chose to make the car tire and its tread the sole object he would depict in his work, a decision he has held with to this day. Like Stämpfli, Emilienne Farny encountered Pop Art in Paris and subsequently portrayed the world of urban consumerism with an undercurrent of irony. Based on this experience the artist lighted on her brand of critical realism, which she used as a means to reflect on the Swiss metropolitan idyll.¹⁴

Besides the clues to be found in individual paths of creative development, of which there would be many other examples, Pop Art made a contribution in general terms to the history of Swiss art in the twentieth century that should not be underestimated. "Rousing itself from the spiritualism of postwar art with its tendency to the symbolic and thus to abstraction, art in the 1960s awoke to a new sense of vitality and a reaffirmation of the world we live in. There arose a fresh interest in social realities, in technology, industry, and science, and the altered understanding of nature that the latter engendered, and this led to new forms of artistic realism and the return of representationalism."¹⁵ As mentioned earlier, only some artists, specifically the young ones, were enthused by Pop Art, and by 1972, if not before, they had turned to new forms of expression, such as Geometric Abstraction, Photorealism, (Central Swiss) Inwardness, and, first and foremost, Conceptualist tendencies.

The obvious challenge in developing a thematic scheme of the kind attempted here consists in determining the borders. Defining them and demarcating the field of inquiry is a task laden with pitfalls. How should we define Pop Art? Who should be included as an exponent of Swiss Pop Art, and how can we sensibly stake out a temporal frame for it? How are we to deal with the fact that the boundaries between it and other artistic movements are somewhat vague and porous?

We resolved the question of terminology by invoking a traditional definition of Pop Art and thus applied criteria that seemed to be broadly accepted. This encompasses the orientation toward the phenomena of everyday culture influenced by the mass media and technological progress. Our stock of images came from comics, advertisements, commercial art, and the media. It is important here to note that the motifs were mainly drawn from secondary visual material, so that figures and objects were not rendered from reality but were instead based on (photographic) models. The term was coined in London in the 1950s but was first used to describe a new movement in contemporary art in New York in the 1960s. However, Pop Art is not a style, school, or artist group but rather "a loose association of artists with a similar artistic approach."¹⁶ The question of which artists should be included here is still a rich subject of controversy.¹⁷ For the *Swiss Pop Art* exhibition we decided to focus on works rather than artists—in other words, the relationship to Pop Art is tied to specific works. If any given author in the retrospective survey of their work is now associated, for example, with the *Nouveau Réalisme* of Conceptual Art or Photorealism, this need not be at odds with the fact that in the early phase of their creative output we can identify works that represent a "form of Pop Art."

We specified the time frame as the period from 1962 to 1972. In 1962, Marc Egger's

Carscape was the first work to be produced in Switzerland that had a clear connection to Pop Art. In the same year in New York, the legendary Pop Art Symposium was held at the Museum of Modern Art, and it was here that the term was officially introduced.¹⁸ For a decade, up until 1972, a relatively easygoing attitude to life persisted, which was marked by a sense of optimism about the future and a certain “idyllicism” and “pleasurable experience of the world.”¹⁹ Even the critical spirit of the movement of ‘68 did nothing to throw the underlying positive sentiment out of kilter. In 1973, the oil crisis shook the *Wirtschaftswunder* society and signaled the end of the economic boom—scoring the attitudes of a whole generation, an incision that quickly sapped the social nutrients that fed the “Pop Art way of life.”

Exhibition and Publication

The exhibition concentrates—in the words of its subtitle—on the “forms and tendencies of Pop Art in Switzerland.” This reflects the fact that we are faced with a gamut of entry points and different manifestations. Besides taking into account temporal criteria and those relating to matters of form and content, in our choice of positions we naturally also looked at qualitative aspects. The distance in time from the period in question certainly made this undertaking easier. Not all the works have aged well: some are no longer convincing from a modern perspective and were set aside as a result. An encyclopedic comprehensiveness was never our aim.

However, this book has made it possible to extend the focus wider, facilitating not only an informed view of other media like design, commercial graphic art, and music but also a discussion on the metalevel, whereby aspects such as context, reception, and influences are examined. The renewed interest in Pop Art around the world in recent years has been accompanied by a relativization of the focus that in the past was trained almost exclusively on the US and the UK. Kornelia Imesch substantiates this in her text along with the fact that in the current reception increasing emphasis is being put on political and socially critical Pop Art. She also debunks the perception of Pop Art as a purely affirmative movement and an artistic form that was almost entirely shaped by men, exposing this idea as the product of outmoded reductionism.

Franz Müller points out that Pop Art has as yet scarcely been mentioned in Switzerland’s national art historiography and has been marginalized in most institutions. In his essay he shows how Pop was argued down and had almost no champions in the profession in the 1960s and 1970s. One difficulty was that Pop Art was seen as an American movement, which reduced its Swiss “disciples” to imitators. Müller’s analysis makes even more apparent the

degree to which a careful appraisal of Pop Art is needed now in the national context.

Yasmin Afschar examines the reception of Pop Art in Switzerland. The tenor of the reviews penned by art critics tended to be hostile. It was for the most part somewhat older men (and a few women) who condemned this new movement, accusing it of being loud, banal, gaudy, and above all lacking in any depth. It is quite conceivable that their criticism was leveled not merely at the art per se but also at the young artists and their carefree behavior. In terms of content their discourse did not live up to the expectations founded on an educated middle-class understanding of art. Every

On the second day, artists and experts from the realms of art, design, and architecture addressed the question of what characterizes Swiss Pop Art: “Pop Art in Switzerland: An Attempt at a Definition,” Beat Wyss, Professor of Art History [AS PER PROGRAM; according to the Karlsruhe website he was Professor für Kunstwissenschaft und Medienphilosophie], Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe; “Pop Swiss Made: Scenes and Topographies of Swiss Pop Art,” Dora Imhof, a postdoctoral student at the Institute of History and Theory of Architecture, ETH Zürich; “From Everyday Life to Art and Back,” Renate Menzi, curator of the design collection at the Museum für Gestaltung, Zurich; “A Fun Gag: On the Arrival of Pop Art in the Public Space in Switzerland,” Bernadette Fülischer, theoretician of architecture and art, Zurich. The lecture series concluded with an artist talk with Urs Lüthi and Peter Stämpfli, moderated by Madeleine Schuppli, and the final event was a round table with Bernadette Fülischer, Dora Imhof, Renate Menzi, and Beat Wyss, moderated by Katharina Ammann, head of the art history department, Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA), Zurich.

- 7 See the essay by Kornelia Imesch, “The World and Switzerland Go Pop – or the Return of the Ever Present”, pp. 91–112.
- 8 Hans Belting et al. (ed.), *The global contemporary and the rise of new art worlds*, Karlsruhe, 2013; James Elkins (ed.), *Is art history global?*, New York, 2007; Jill H. Casid et al. (ed.), *Art history in the wake of the global turn*, New Haven, 2014.
- 9 See note 5.
- 10 Sibylle Omlin and Beat Wismer, “Lauf der Dinge – Lauf der Kunst: Schweizer Nachkriegskunst im Gespräch,” in *Rücksicht: 40 Jahre Kunst in der Schweiz*, exh. cat. Aargauer Kunsthau, Aarau, edited by Beat Wismer and Stephan Kunz, Aarau, 2000, p. 22.
- 11 Franz Gertsch in discussion with Madeleine Schuppli, Katrin Weilenmann, and Nicolas Wirth, Rüscheegg, September 19, 2016.
- 12 Urs Lüthi in the artist talk with Peter Stämpfli that was moderated by Madeleine Schuppli and formed part of the *Swiss Pop Art* conference at the Aargauer Kunsthau, Aarau, April 9, 2016. “That was actually what really interested me at the time. Emptying things of their content and thus representing them as if they were abstractions. [...] This ambiguity, which runs through all my work, was already evident at the time. In this respect I think that it was not merely a youthful peccadillo, as I often call it, but really a first small step in the direction I would later go—viewing the world as something completely subjective and equivocal.”
- 13 In 1963, Stämpfli represented Switzerland at the Biennale de Paris, where he presented himself for the first time as an exponent of Pop Art.
- 14 Starting in 1972, Emilienne Farny recorded Swiss idylls in her series *Le bonheur suisse*—that is, views of single-family homes and apartment blocks with characteristic details like green shutters, red tiles, and gardens enclosed by white fences or Thuja hedges. *Emilienne Farny: Paysage après meurtre*, exh. cat. Galerie Paul Vallotton, Lausanne, 1989. 15 Cited in Hans A. Lüthy and Hans-Jörg Heusser, *Kunst in der Schweiz 1890–1980*, Zurich, 1985, p. 101.
- 16 Tobias Lander, *Coca-Cola und Co.: Die Dingwelt der Pop Art und die Möglichkeiten der ikonologischen Interpretation*, Petersberg, 2012, p. 10.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 10–11.
- 18 As announced by the Museum of Modern Art on December 3, 1962.
- 19 The two terms are cited in Lüthy and Heusser, *Kunst in der Schweiz* (see note 15), p. 164.

young generation of artists that has thought something of itself and, moreover, proceeded to amount to something has been confronted with a generational conflict from which it has emerged with added vigor. There were differing degrees of intensity in how Pop Art was approached in Switzerland in the 1960s and 1970s, and this depended on the local scene operating at the regional level.

Dora Imhof describes the dynamic effect that Pop had, most notably in Bern and Aarau, although other centers like Lausanne and Basel—often under the aegis of local museum directors and curators—were infiltrated by Pop Art. The connection with Paris, London, and Milan served as an inspiration for the Pop practitioners, who were without exception young artists. This brings up the question of what is specifically Swiss in this local brand of Pop Art. Taking concrete visual examples, Madeleine Schuppli examines the extent to which Swiss iconography appears and how it relates to an international canon of themes. The position oscillates between leaning on and keeping a distance from primarily American models. What is also revealing is the orientation toward the local exemplified Astrid Näff walks the fine line between remaining faithful to the object and diverging into the world of abstract motifs, exploring both this scenario and the converse one of Pop-Art-tinged abstraction in the oeuvre of three artists with close ties to the Bern scene. She combines her observations with an exploration of the relationship between the phenomenon as a whole and the tradition of abstraction, which has particularly deep roots in Switzerland thanks to the output of the previous generation. In contrast to Art Informel, for example, Pop Art is also a transdisciplinary movement that proved to be permeable to other modes of creative expression. In this way, the music,²⁰ design,²¹ fashion,²² and commercial art²³ of the period from the 1950s to the 1970s were influenced by Pop. In the survey show *Les années Pop* at the Centre Pompidou,²⁴ in particular, one of the focuses was on the transdisciplinary nature of Pop. In the Swiss context there are also interesting cross-linkages outside the realm of visual art.

In the essay by Renate Menzi we encounter numerous protagonists who operated between design and Pop Art and found themselves meeting opposition from different directions. In furniture design it was a matter of drawing a line between one's own work and the "good form" that held sway; in graphic design it was necessary to get away from the clarity and austerity of the Swiss Style to create space for the "low culture" embodied by Pop Art—in Switzerland this produced a few handsome blossoms without ever bursting into flower. It is well known that a fair number of Pop practitioners also worked as graphic artists, a prime example being Andy Warhol. In his essay on commercial art Philipp Stamm shows

that the thoroughfare connecting Pop Art and graphic design was, however, a two-way street and proves his point with a whole series of eloquent examples from Swiss studios.

Pop music also arrived in Switzerland in the mid-1960s—in his essay Samuel Mumenthaler explores the connections and contradictions between the realms of visual art and music. Pop art and pop music were both firmly in the hands of the young, although in Switzerland, unlike in other countries, the scenes barely seemed to mix with one another. Nevertheless, album covers and concert posters were to offer a platform for interacting with the Pop aesthetic. According to Mumenthaler, however, the Anglo-American influence seems to have had a stronger and more sustained effect on the local music protagonists than on their counterparts in the realm of art.

Yet Pop did not merely include different media, it also began to conquer public space in the 1960s. The essay by Bernadette Fülcher for the first time examines and discusses the presence of Pop Art in this realm, the importance of which has so far been neglected. The integration of art in public space—already in itself a challenging endeavor—is particularly interesting in the case of Pop Art, even if it is a movement that very much champions the convergence of art and everyday life. In the examples put forward by the author, this convergence primarily operates via the interaction Pop promotes between the general populace and the artwork. The artists also interrogate the relationship between creatives, sponsors, and the public and seek to redefine this relationship along social-utopian lines. In the process, Pop emerges as an artistic movement with a strong focus on the present, which it tackles by employing reflection, comment, criticism, glorification, or even satire. It is thus particularly connected to its own time and represents a valuable contribution to our understanding of the social realities of the 1960s and 1970s. This aspect is considered, last but not least, in the chronology put together by Katrin Weilenmann and Karoliina Elmer, in which they spread out the tapestry of time that provided the backdrop to the evolution of Swiss Pop Art.

20 *Oh Yeah! 200 Pop-Photos aus der Schweiz: 1957–2014*, exh. cat. Museum für Kommunikation, Bern, edited by Samuel Mumenthaler and Kurt Stadelmann, Zurich, 2014.

21 *Pop Art Design*, exh. cat. Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, edited by Mateo Kries and Mathias Schwartz-Clauss, Weil am Rhein, 2012.

22 Geoffrey Rayner, Richard Chamberlain, and Annamarie Stapleton, *Pop! Design Culture Fashion 1956–1976*, Woodbridge, 2012.

23 *100 Jahre Schweizer Grafik*, exh. cat. Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, edited by Christian Brändle, Karin Gimmi, Barbara Junod, Christina Reble, and Bettina Richter, Zurich, 2014; Lurker Grand, *Die Not hat ein Ende: The Swiss Art of Rock*, Zurich, 2015.

24 *Les années Pop 1956–1968*, exh. cat. Centre Pompidou, Paris, edited by Mark Francis, Paris, 2001.