

Dr. Stefan Soltek Frieder Grindler, Poster – and the Performance Commences
Text taken from the book of Frieder Grindler

After photography established itself next to drawing, painting, and printed graphics as a medium for the reproduction of natural phenomena, it ventured into the realms of imagination, into the imaging of compositions beyond naturalism, on the back of ever advancing technologies. The surreal staging – in particular the alienation of bodies through montage and demontage, application or deconstruction and through the strongly contrasting use of light and shadow – invalidated the portrayal in the traditional sense and began to project pictorial ideas that provoked something preposterous and fantastic, something dreamlike and frightening in visions beyond what was realistically visible.

This intensified way of not so much reproducing what is visible but of questioning it, was especially bound to surprise the photographic image, which initially had been able to claim a specific autonomy as an improved possibility for almost documentary mirroring. Step by step and in the wake of the movement studies by Eadweard Muybridge in the seventies and eighties of the nineteenth century, pure reproduction was replaced by construction and reflection on the medium as such, as ever via compositional and stylistic interpretation through image selection, exposure, and technical controlling. An important impetus in this direction came from László Moholy-Nagy, particularly in his „vision-in-motion“ period. An additional aspect in regard to the expansion of picture content and picture genesis is especially valid in view of the combination of photography and poster as it determines the work of Frieder Grindler: Thus Moholy-Nagy taught „how to make use of photography in order not to merely follow the general optically and technically attainable ways of seeing but also to portray their psychological, anthropological or other elements.“ Thus he attached importance to the „close content-specific connection of different forms and genres of art, including for instance drama, architecture, poetry and film.“¹ Here we can see a direct link to photography as an expressive means in the context of theater and society in the way poster designer Frieder Grindler has developed it over decades.

It is essential to remind ourselves that a central „pre-image“ of photography as formulated in Plato’s allegory of the cave is not the reproduction of a natural situation but, as it were, an „experimental set up“; the philosopher arranges people sitting in a cave in such a way that they are forced to look at the back wall of the cave where, due to the glow of the fire behind them, objects can be seen as shadow plays. These objects are carried behind a back wall in such a way, that they just reach over its edge and can thus be projected. Daylight penetrates from the far-away cave entrance, and only if one is turning – according to Plato – can the awareness of what is essential be conceivable.

This intellectually stimulating distinction of levels of reality between the appearance and essence of objects thus required temporal-spatial staging, and this staging anticipated respective procedures from the photographer to accomplish preparatory work for his subject before even using the camera: namely to create a preliminary picture that must then be reproduced to achieve the intended figurativeness, the „picture-reality“, so to speak.

Some names need to be mentioned as examples: Marcel Duchamp, André Masson, Man Ray, Herbert Beyer, László Moholy-Nagy; it is typical that they are all artists between the media – between painting, object, and photography. The utilization of the object trouvé in terms of painting technique and compositionally put in the context of the thought processes of Cubism, or the related constitution of the readymade, represent vital steps towards the artistic creation of a subject. The latter’s meaning or essence has to be considered as a concept, then positioned in a context and finally caught in the picture and „realized“.

It cannot be surprising that this development in fine arts, theoretically associated with Futurism and even more present in the Schwitters and Tzara in Dadaism and André Breton in Surrealism, was reflected in the pictorial world generated in cultural, political and also commercial life for the purpose of pointing to facts.

In this context, El Lissitzky or Vladimir Sternberg and the whole era of political pictorial art in the Russia of the twenties and thirties, have to be cited. In Germany, this applies particularly to the picture creations of John Heartfield, which as signs of their time, manifest an explosive political power and succinctness as artistic statements. Heartfield’s photomontages serve as

examples for the development of photography and poster art, especially for their study at academies of fine arts.

If we apply this observation to Frieder Grindler, one of his central works merits our attention: It deals with discussions about stationing American Pershing II missiles in Germany at the beginning of the 1980s. Intended to counterbalance the Russian medium-range missiles pointed at targets in Germany and France, they nevertheless caused heated protests and were seen as the spearhead of global armament and as an evocation of nuclear war.

The mass demonstrations in the Hofgarten of Bonn University are still in people's minds as clear statements of the German public's objection to war, as protests were never again repeated as stringently and broadly. Grindler staged his photo poster as a montage of an original picture of the demonstrators taken from the air and the immense shadow of a missile hovering over the crowd. The black-and-white picture inevitably awakens memories of pictures of aerial warfare as they stand before the German public's eyes to this day. Documentaries, feature movies and photo documentations of the two world wars, but also the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, have engraved in people's minds the eerie mosaic of dark and light spots that are the result of ruined houses and the areas in between. Just such a structure becomes manifest in the aerial photograph of the mass demonstration. Scattered across the lawn like a net made of more or less dense throngs of people, the dark spots can be read as a sea of bombed houses. The missile in the picture emphasizes this association. Colossal above the gathered crowd, the shadow announces the proximity of the missile and is a symbol of death; like a real, present-day counterpart to the pictorial fiction of the medieval dance of death, with the skeleton and individual dancers exchanged for the bomb and the crowd of those who are endangered. Years later, Hollywood was to cast a similarly effective shadow of threat in *Independence Day* (1996). Grindler's poster, however, stands out because of the simplicity and the validity of the pictorial statement. Much later, the poster for Handke, *Der Ritt über den Bodensee* (The Ride across Lake Constance) was created. Here, too, injury is the topic, however different in its dimensions. Again a shadow, again a wide background. Here the „water“-surface, pierced by a pin. Its red head and the shadow it casts cause pain to the viewer. As far apart as the events may be and as different as the posters are in other respects, they both manifest the ability of their creator to turn the pictorial plane into a monument, to make it say, „Feel this!“

Pictorial plane, stage, place of action: theater. The history of the pictorial verification of the essential content of statements, chosen from a wide spectrum of formal possibilities, reaches far back. A characteristic period is the Renaissance, demonstrating with its books of emblems how moral, historical and mythical facts can be amalgamated into a concise combination of picture and text. This was followed in the eighteenth century by the camera obscura on whose rectangular planes rays of light were concentrated and onto which perspective details of the real panorama were focused.

The modern photo poster has been fertilized by these precursors; in the process, the theater poster succeeded in becoming a trailblazer.

Yet only few designers, supported by reasonable producers and theater directors, have been able to internalize this connection as much as Frieder Grindler. The whole life of his posters is characterized by the scene and the act, by the impulse of authors and stage directors. He has done his share to move the poster away from advertisement to being the first and last scene of the play. Both inclusive and conclusive information on who will act when and where. His posters remain as testimonials to the culture of performing; as emblems of the plays, they condense the multitude of scenes into the one before and the one after.

In doing this, Grindler makes use of the pictorial experience he has gained between graphic arts and photography. If he thinks of the poster, he inevitably thinks of one pictorial representation, but not necessarily of a single motif. From early on, his future-oriented planning allows for the derivation from one or the combination of one with the other picture. How, in three steps, the one reactionary ruler turns into several revolutionary rulers, is demonstrated by the threesome of the accordingly transforming bust(s) in the poster for Camus' *Die Gerechten* (The Just).

A good ten years later, Grindler again takes up this division in three steps. He follows the course of the 1981 theater summer season in Stuttgart by depicting three stage windows.

They permit a view of a steel-blue sky at three different times of day as shown by a passing cloud, first seen in its entirety, then in part and finally just as a tuft. It is very beautiful the way the three-partite series of time windows runs counter to the direction of reading the four-block banner of text announcing the theater event, thereby focusing the latter in time and space. A further variation on the picture+picture strategy is the equal division of the poster plane into two pictures of equal importance. An example is the poster for *Der jüngste Tag* (The Day of Judgement). The stopping of time on this rather unique day becomes manifest in the stupendous street scene „in situ“ of the play, provoking Mannheim's theater-going population with the fact that they could potentially be faced with the end of the world here and now. More harmless in content yet even more optically powerful is the poster *Hin Schauen* designed years later; the faces of cheerfully smiling female visitors immediately in front of the camera lend it a marvelous presence. Slightly off-center, one colored yellow, one blue, the juxtaposition of the almost identical faces suggests staggered moments in time and speed to what happens and what can be seen. A masterly merging of picture and writing supplements the dynamics. Yet another comparison with the much more recent works for the theater festival at Expo 2000 shows the adherence to the division of the pictorial plane: The clear basic disposition of a lower half typography against a pink background and an upper half, allows a completely free choice of subject and technique (graphics, photo) in the two pictorial motifs without losing the unity of the poster.

In these works is coldly calculated that which appeared years earlier in the poster for Herzog Theodor von Gotland (1994) (Theodore Duke of Gotland) as a daring and vehement tear through a curtain in accordance with the tragedy. A picture and another picture – for the 2000/2001 season, as well, Grindler finds a solution for and demonstrates his preference for this duality. In the now vertical juxtaposition emphasized by strips of texts, he not only refers back to *Der jüngste Tag* (The Day of Judgement), but also confirms the creative further development of the medium in the same way his teacher Hans Hillmann had succinctly introduced it into the movie poster. The poster as a movie clip is a concept that impresses to this day, as Grindler has demonstrated in many variations.

The poster for the play *Gesäubert* (Cleaned) – three figures in motion appear in front of one another, the first as a large shadow in the background, the second as an ecstatically striding shape and the third as a small figure lost in thought in the corner – opens one's eyes to a further kind of montage: the picture within the picture. This is not about the additive effect of juxtaposition but about the alienation created by putting several things inside each other. It can be one and the same in a completely homogenous way, like the staggering of photos of a wall for *Fidelio* in order to insinuate captivity, but it can also be different things: A detail is integrated into an initial motif as a counterweight but also as a component of the picture as a whole. Whether in *Electra*, *Die siamesischen Zwillinge* (The Siamese Twins) or *Fluch der verhungerten Klasse* (Curse of the Starving Class), in each instance the human face provides the starting point of the arrangement, each time offering a different solution for setting the optical trap which inevitably forces the viewer into contemplation. In an extreme way the starving figure: A man's gaunt face fills the landscape format of the poster and his eyes, more suggested than visible, guide the attention to the mouth. This is exactly the point where the second pictorial element interferes; namely the mouth, a mouth opened wide, depicted screaming and screaming even louder since the artist has placed it at an angle to the face and in color. A hybrid grimace lets us hear, see and even smell the hunger.

The compository means of doubling the subject adds to its catchiness. This doubling up can make a concrete fact clearer or refer to a time lapse effecting verification by delay. Thus *Alte Zeiten* (Old Times) can be read as the staggering of a bust in space and time. Its silhouette in profile, attacked by flash rust, represents impermanence, vanitas, but majesty too, between the pyramids of Cheops and the presidents' heads of Mount Rushmore (South Dakota). Factual reality, on the other side, is the competition between *Vormund und Mündel* (Guardian and Ward) with the latter appearing as a small fingertip, penetrating the mighty mountain of the top of the finger. This finger in the finger shows Grindler's readiness to make something forceful perceptible pointedly without having to resort to brutality, particularly since the element of surprise is as marked as the element of pain is ambiguous.

The human figure dominates the world of motifs for Frieder Grindler the poster designer. Naturally, it offers an especially broad spectrum through which to comprehend the world of the stage play, but it also compellingly represents the first motif, in which the viewer of the poster will find him/herself. Grindler includes himself in this process. He obviously becomes the

mediator, the second stage director, not on the stage but at a distance from it.

His figures keep consistently to the central axis. Here they form the focal point and fascinate with their individual way of alienating themselves in order to accentuate the content of the play.

Very impressive is the way the Mitmacher (Participant) gets caught in the monumental screw that turns him with it. Brusquer is the aggression emanating from the cracked figure of Woyzeck, which matches the engraved signature. An alienation referring to a differently stylized inactivity is exuded by the body image of a dark-skinned model covered in ping-pong balls. In the production of Repertoire, the balls dance in the black light and produce a staccato in light and sound with their clicking on the wooden floor.

The posters with seated figures form a group of their own. Grindler invents a rich sensory world in order to make the seated persons, shown from the front, the back, or side, float between situational gravity and a bizarre cancellation of the same. A particular tension holds the seated persons in a semblance of stillness, yet they are in fact alert and present in the moment. Extreme differences in size compared to the surrounding figures and landscapes underline the effect, as can be seen in *Der Marquis von Kent* (The Marquis of Kent) and *Bernarda Albas Haus* (Bernarda Alba's House). In addition, it is the fading face, „shrouded in clouds“, that leaves the viewer with a kind of riddle, a search to be undertaken.

The repertoire of figures is supplemented by the numerous works that make either the hand or the face their central object. In *Seid nett zu Mr. Sloane* (Be Nice to Mr. Sloane) the fist clenched in an (pseudo) obscene gesture provocatively protrudes from the picture and contradicts its title. The unclenched, cupped hand holding an object – various poster artists have used this motif – is turned by Grindler into the frame for a face for *Porgy and Bess*. His best-known arrangements of faces are probably those for *Nacht der Puppen* (Night of the Dolls) and for *Kaspar*. Each is captivating in its treatment of the motif, and the posters of the body in focus and the body as a face or hand especially characterize a specific way of emphasizing the plastic quality of the motif by making it bulge. As if carved out of its base into a cameo, the poster optically blows itself up into a relief not only on the surface but also beyond it, thus moving extremely close to the viewer. It captivates the gaze, not only because the large bespectacled eyes are vacant and the thumb is peering out of fleshy fingers, but primarily because a subtle form presents itself. The minutely controlled black-and-white contrast emphasizes this effect.

Head and hand, or hands, rather, come together to form a simple but suggestively strong character in order to throw light on the figure of Othello. Shifting films of the basic colors magenta, cyan, yellow, and black turn the posture of the head supported by the hands into a vibrating gesture of utter strain.

In this work in particular, the typography stands out, the diminishing size of the capital letters supports the moving motif of the head-figure. From the early posters onward, Grindler assigns to typography a definite yet quietly subdued role. It has the function of a prelude, a prologue or – in graphic terms – of an almost playfully marginal aside. Certainly to this day and seen in the work as a whole, the design of the lettering and its absolutist role as a language-image-sign does not play first fiddle. And yet some works stand out in this respect and prove Grindler's search for border areas. The progress of technology and its subsequent application by

Grindler can be clearly seen when comparing the program poster for the Darmstadt Theater in 1975 and the corresponding advertisements for the Stuttgart Theater about thirty years later. The flow of the writing – here by typewriter, there typeset on a computer – causes an objectification just as does the canon of colors. It is not a matter of course when looked at over a long period of time, that the design in its accentuated change between columns and fields stretching over several columns keeps the variable handling of the basic raster vivid. Yet the designer is not only successful in organizing a mass of text in an inconspicuously skilled way. A purely typographical poster announces George Tabori's farce *Mein Kampf*. In a well-balanced way, Grindler mixes monumentality (the „M“) and the distortion of the unruly amalgamated letters by replacing the „i“ with Hitler's hand raised in greeting. Contrasting red with blue, Grindler integrates the absurdity of the Führer's pamphlet and its condemnation by Tabori into the picture.

Highlights are posters such as ART (Forum Sulzdorf 87), ART again, six years later, for an exhibition in (his own) Faculty of Design at the Würzburg academy and an invitation to a party in the Stuttgart Theater in 1989, where he uses free play with capitals in a similar way. All three feed on the proneness of the letters to the border of their immediate function as a word. Probably the most beautiful work, for the Music Academy Festival in 1992, takes this even further. Against a black background a trace of light winds its way in glaring red, seemingly to the beat of sounds.

„Light penetrates without sound“, Karl Krolow quotes the lyricist Pierre Reverdy in a paragraph of his essay entitled „Writing with light“. The best style, according to Reverdy, speaks in a soft tongue and Grindler follows this in a wonderfully playful way. He mounts the small lightbulb of a toy train onto the bow of a violinist, which thus put in surprising motion, mutates into a visible sound track. And, like an overtone voice, the accompanying written text settles on top of it with its blue flow of letters and numbers.

Two clients provide an opportunity to sum up and honor Frieder Grindler and the spectrum of his design criteria.

One is the playhouse in Stuttgart. From the 1990s onwards, an extensive collection of posters and program booklets has been created. In these works, Grindler takes up various early design features and translates them into a color-intensive, vivid play of variations. The program surveys appear in a wall news sheet that is as full as it is vivacious. With great mobility, Grindler weaves photography and color in strips or in sections into the text paragraphs over a basic background raster. In the process, he pulls out all stops in order to arrange the design elements in front of and behind each other, or to juxtapose and thus accentuate them. The principally four-column arrangement sometimes opens up into a window, or becomes more compact in one section and wider in another, but never loses coherence. An essential feature of this coherence is a red wedge (El Lissitzy) that serves as a cornerpiece. As a highlight or a trompe l'oeuil, it catches the eye, boldly providing certainty about where and when the curtain rises from the prelude to the actual play.

The schematic costumed figure with the raised right arm serves as a second signature. Greeting and awareness, presence without emphasis, the figure plays on the antique gesture of the emperor and the actor. The figures appear not stylized into a label but „live“, in the „study of movement“, for which Grindler has asked all those acting on stage to front the camera for a snapshot. He assembles the multitude of the resulting photos into registers, movie strips, and – related to the archetypal Mybridge arrangement – into an allover-cover where the now lighter, now darker individual pictures cause a cloud-like change of illumination across the whole picture. Movement, dynamics, direction of light – theater.

The second client, and one intimately acquainted with Frieder Grindler through their cooperation, is the screen-printing company, Wagner. Grindler has most of his posters produced as screen prints rather than of offset and makes use of the special color effects and surface brilliance of this printing process. Screen-printing allows Grindler time and again to investigate topics related to the medium of the silk screen. The slightly shifted application of the individual colors on top of each other in screen-printing becomes as optically apparent as the integration of various pattern motifs into the raster of the screen. As if seen through a magnifying glass, the backgrounds are turned into foregrounds and the poster becomes an active plane of irritation.

What remains in the end as the prospect of future developments? This much is evident: Frieder Grindler is not frozen in a finalized way of seeing the poster as being assigned to this or that technique and effect. On the contrary, he demonstrates a permanent search for new facets. Thus two posters have recently come to attention wherein the photo is applied to the background and a typographic oval shape is used as a motif-related dominant form in its own right, like a sticker. There are hints of the old Hans Leistikow, with his similarly mounted strips of lettering, and Grindler admits to new inspirations as the source. It is clear that he will repeat this process in several instances. The play awaits its next acts

1 Ursula Czartoryska, „Diachronie und Synchronie in der Kunst als Fotografie“, in F. M. Neusüss, Fotografie als Kunst; Kunst als Fotografie (Colone 1979), p. 320.

Kurt Weidemann

The media tycoon Hubert Burda calls self-aggrandizement the secret of success. Anyone mastering the art of downplaying himself would therefore be condemned to a lack of success. Thus any service, if performed with dedication and passion and hence without self aggrandizement, would similarly be excluded from success. Instead, it would bring inner peace. Attention is the initial key word for success: the attention of others. For nobody consciously fools themselves (though at times we certainly do so unconsciously), although we are all most interested in ourselves. Yet this alone cannot be a recipe for success. Whoever loves to indulge in self-contemplation cannot be successful in our achievement-oriented society. We have to produce something others want or need, something that interests them, makes them curious, fills them with enthusiasm. And if what we produce is remarkable, above average, or even extraordinary, there is no need for self-aggrandizement, no need to play to the gallery.

Any initially value-free contemplation can, after all, turn into profound respect – or contempt. If one's performance is continuous, if it is even growing, it merits respect and possibly admiration without the need to put on a show. A stage production is, after all, not naked reality but its exaggeration, its conversion into something extraordinary.

In his book *Das einfache Leben* (The Simple Life), Ernst Wiechert developed a view different from that of Hubert Burda. He writes that it is easy to withdraw from this world without resentment and grief, „if one has seen the heroes eating their radish backstage.“ This means that one has seen through stage productions, that one has had enough of them. Whoever is uncomfortable with self-aggrandizement and is successful without it and from it derives a healthy self-confidence, does not have to take the detour of staging themselves.

Without having mentioned Frieder Grindler's name, I have really talked about him from the outset. That is because he is not a showman, not one who puts himself on the scene, not one who pushes to the front – yet he is not without success. Frieder Grindler is what was once called a designer of advertising graphics, who creates graphics by order and does so over the whole range of his profession. This can be seen above all in his posters and their smaller siblings, book covers, in the design of periodicals, record covers and the opening credits of movies.

Designing posters requires productive perception and pictorial thinking. What is familiar and everyday is altered and treated in such a way that it catches our eye, captivates our attention. He has designed around 250 posters exclusively for those whose payments are the lowest and whose demands are the highest: for playhouses and opera houses, for concerts and ballets, for tragedies and comedies, for theater, music, and television. His clients, finally or primarily, are called Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Xaver Krötz, Ödön von Horvath, Alfred Döblin, Sam Shepard. He does not stage a whole evening for them but ensnares our eyes for a few blinks, as Oscar Wilde put it: „What one doesn't talk about never happened at all.“ Thus Grindler not only must stir our curiosity or challenge us to a silent dialogue, his appeal has to trigger action: I have to want to see, hear, experience what he announces. Anyone who thinks this should not be too difficult in light of the insatiable curiosity of people should try it just once. The visual barrage our eyes are subjected to every day makes catching our attention a feat. A poster for any convenience food has an easier job in getting its message across than a drama about jealousy, power, love, tolerance or decline.

The land of poets and thinkers does not know its poets and thinkers anymore, but it knows the players of the national football team. Even communication businesses, advertising agencies, and publicity consultants scarcely know the half a dozen celebrated poster artists in Germany. If our compatriot Friedrich Schiller is correct in stating that man is only really man where he plays, then the professions wherein playing is a prerequisite for creativity should somewhat shake up our nation, which is lost in needless suffering.

Metaphorically speaking: we should chase people out of their easy chairs and get them onto the trampoline.