

Sharp

Shooter

His Latin designs in Germanic Switzerland made Buenos Aires-born Alfredo Häberli an outsider – and brought him great success.

WORDS *Lilia Glanzmann*
PORTRAITS *Mirjam Kluka*



‘**O N E** of my cherished childhood memories involves playing with Matchbox cars and then counting them before carefully putting them away in a little pouch. That was my world – the world I liked best. Even today, I don’t know why I liked my turquoise car most of all: the attraction was tremendous, and still is. When I moved to Switzerland from Argentina as a teenager, the sole thing I packed was my little bag of cars, even though I’d stopped playing with them by then. The turquoise car was an Iso Grifo Rivolta, whose shape – purely coincidentally – was drafted by my idol, Giorgio Giugiaro, at Bertone Studios. Later, the Iso Grifo grille inspired the backrest of my Segesta chairs for Alias.’

‘Even though I had to learn German to attend the Zurich School of Design, I did manage to acquire my diploma as a product designer. Someone else might have stopped going to school or just given up entirely. The challenge triggered the opposite in me. I thought: *I’ll show you.*’

‘Born in Buenos Aires, I didn’t know anything about Swiss design. Maybe that explains why I became such a fan of its history.’

‘I’m a big admirer of anonymous objects – objects created simply to fulfil a function or a specific need, or to express joy or passion. The drawers, pinboard and shelves of my studio are full of such objects: the wooden seat of a rowing boat, a rubber glove for gardening, a Japanese toothbrush. Together with art and fashion images, they create and stimulate my world of colour and form. I have a book of collages – colours, compositions, abstract imagery – that I’ve collected without rhyme or reason. When I’m developing a range of colours for a fabric collection or an interior, I use these collages to achieve harmony or contrast. It’s all about a feeling, a mood.’

‘During my first visit to the Milan Furniture Fair in 1985, I experienced the craziness that is the design industry. There was no internet; there were no smartphones. Design guides were rare. I got information by talking to people, even without knowing their names or the names of the exhibiting companies. I just walked around looking, constantly wondering where I should go and what I should see. I had a fantastic three days. You could ride in the dark-blue limousines, even as a student. From then on, I went every year.’

‘When I got back from Milan, I wrote down the names of the companies I liked. It was my dream to work for them one day. When I talked about it at school, my teachers made remarks like: “Hang on, those are *trendy* things – consumer goods.” Such designer objects weren’t well-known in Switzerland. They were clearly postmodern – quite a contrast with what we were learning at the Zurich School of Design. I didn’t understand the work I’d seen in Milan, but that’s why it was appealing. I wanted to make sense of it. Today I’m working for almost all the companies whose names I noted in the 1980s.’

‘I loved the library of the Museum für Gestaltung. I spent every spare minute there. I knew – and still know – every book on the shelves. I’ve read every issue of *Domus*, from the beginning.’

‘I can only work with people I like’

‘I learned a lot from the Italians. Achille Castiglioni is definitely one of my idols, as are Bruno Munari and Enzo Mari.’

‘My parents were working for Swissair, and we children could fly for free. I remember my parents saying, “Alfredo, books are important, but you’ll learn from experience.” So I travelled a lot as a student – one week in Barcelona, the next in London – forging contacts in the international design world.’

‘Since becoming a father myself, I’ve learned to trust my instincts even more – as children do.’

‘I set up my studio one week after graduation. My first assignments came five years later, from Alias, Driade and Zanotta. My Swiss colleagues and the local industry didn’t approve of working

for foreign companies at that time. It was taboo – they were convinced that “the Italians don’t pay you”. Hannes Wettstein and I were pioneers in that respect.’

‘Certain ideas can be pursued only if manufacturers let themselves be persuaded by the impossible. And such manufacturers can still be found in Italy.’

‘Because I can only work with people I like, I’ve learned to be brave enough to say no – something I never thought would be so difficult.’

‘I stopped explaining products, which is what we did at design school. What was your thought process? What was the intention? Nowadays, I say the product has to speak for itself. It’s something I learned from the Italians. They look at it and either they like it or they don’t. They don’t ask about the *idea* the way that Germanic people do. *Che bello* is enough.’

‘I’ve learned to tell the truth about a project – even if it’s very hard to do sometimes and even if it hurts.’

‘Maybe my naive approach has led me to success.’

‘When I met Jasper Morrison and Konstantin Grcic, I related to them on a personal level – it was an experience that came quite naturally.’

‘When I have a design block, I often flip through cartoon books. They reactivate ideas, relax my mind and bring a smile to my face. There are commonalities between cartoons and my work: leaving things out, achieving maximum communication with minimum strokes – and, when it makes sense, even without words. Just like design, cartoons are about lines, optimization and economy of media. My thoughts find a place in small sketchbooks or on notepaper. Perhaps I’ll compile them in a small book one day.’

‘Travelling is one reason why I never taught students in the past – it takes time. The other reason is that I’m hard on my colleagues who teach. I think it’s a disaster if they teach just because they didn’t make it as designers themselves. You need practice and experience in the industry to teach students; otherwise, it’s always some kind of sheltered workshop. ↪



Häberli's Zurich studio is filled with 'anonymous objects', which he says 'create and stimulate my world of colour and form'.



'Certain ideas can be pursued only if manufacturers let themselves be persuaded by the impossible,' says Häberli. 'Such manufacturers can still be found in Italy.'

ALFREDO HÄBERLI

1964

Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina

1991

Received a degree in Industrial Design from the Zurich School of Design (Höhere Schule für Gestaltung)

1991

Established Studio Alfredo Häberli in Zurich

2006

Lauded as guest of honour at the 20th Biennale Interieur in Kortrijk, Belgium

2008

Mounted retrospective, Alfredo Häberli: Design Development Surround Things, at the Museum für Gestaltung Zurich

2014

Received the Swiss Grand Award for Design

‘Now that I finally have time, I’ve decided to share my knowledge with the younger generation and will be teaching a masterclass in Basel.’

‘I spend one to three days a week travelling, mostly just day trips, but occasionally I stay overnight. You arrive somewhere, hop in a taxi, head straight to your meeting, and then it’s off to your hotel – or maybe to dinner somewhere in town. The next day, it’s the same thing all over again.’

‘In my role as a teacher, I want to ask questions that will provoke and motivate my students to enter uncharted territory. I’m excited about hearing their answers. I hope to see ideas with a strong character and a potential for becoming unique and distinctive products.’

‘Being able to work and make a living as a designer is wonderful. I hope that as many young people as possible will have the opportunity to share that dream.’

‘It’s important to have the courage to *move* towards your good fortune. In my case, it meant taking the train to Milan. Keep dreaming. And afterwards: keep working.’

‘Money never comes first.’

‘People imagine that my images emerge from some deep-seated source of inspiration – that everything just falls into my lap. But that’s just how it looks. It seems easy to outsiders because I love what I do from the bottom of my heart. But in the meantime, I’m working as hard as hell.’

‘What interests me is the variety, brilliance, innovation and surprising nature of contemporary products. As for my work, I try to observe and, in the process, to learn – from everyday life and from the people around me. As a designer, I look at the application of a particular technology or material in terms of its potential as a new typology. Is it original? Does it relate to traditional handicraft? And, also important, has it been done in a caring way?’

‘Ultimately, I believe that designing is yet another way of finding out about ourselves, of carrying out in-depth examination and, not least, of discovering new things – as I did as a little boy with my Matchbox cars.’ ✕

alfredo-haerberli.com



'From visualizing brainwaves to tasting a Francis Bacon artwork and listening to solar flares, I encountered provocative ideas that tickled my neurons.'

With a mixed background in design and public relations, Australia's **Lara Mikocki** migrated from Milan to Amsterdam, where she's worked for companies such as Designboom, Droog and, more recently, Frame Publishers. Whether she's writing, curating or liaising with clients, Mikocki delights in sharing new and unexpected experiences with any audience she may encounter. Channelling her passion for communication and design, Mikocki sought out eye-catching 'creative hoodlums' to adorn the pages of *Frame 107*.



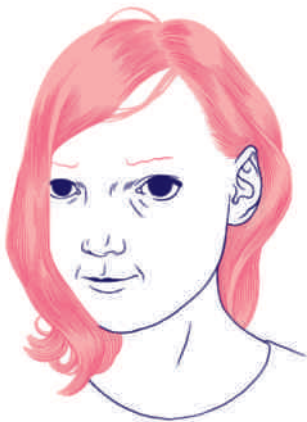
'Having once trained and practised as an architect, I really enjoyed shooting the things I found in Material ConneXion's fascinating library. The creative potential of such innovative materials is very exciting.'

Determined from the age of five to become an architect, **Alex Fradkin** studied and practised making structures large and small for many years before turning to his other – and ultimately greater – passion, photography. Sculpting with light, texture, volume and form, Fradkin regularly collaborates with architects, designers and editors on topics that range from architecture and design to travel and people. For *Frame 107*, he had his pick of the extraordinary collection of products at Material ConneXion's Manhattan library.



'While doing research, I learned that Hem was built in less than a year. Upon meeting Jason Goldberg, I immediately recognized where the energy for such a performance came from.'

For *Frame 107*, **Daniel Hofer** photographed Jason Goldberg and Petrus Palmér of Berlin start-up Hem. Born in 1982 in Düsseldorf, Hofer studied photography at the Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Upon graduating, he travelled to New York City where he eventually became an assistant to renowned photographer Martin Schoeller. Now operating a studio in Berlin, Hofer does freelance editorial and travel photography. His work has appeared in more than 30 international publications, including *Annabelle*, *Neon*, *Designer's Digest* and *Wired*. Among Hofer's many commercial clients are Mercedes-Benz, L'Oréal, and Credit Suisse.



'It was inspiring to visit Alfredo Häberli at his studio and hear all about his experiences in Germanic Switzerland. I found his passion for Matchbox cars most intriguing.'

A native of Lucerne, where she continues to live and work, **Lilia Glanzmann** is an expert on Swiss design. When she's not writing for *Frame*, she can be found fulfilling her duties as editor at *Hochparterre*, a popular Swiss publication offering the latest in architecture and design. With degrees in textile design and journalism, Glanzmann enjoys conveying knowledge of the creative industries in her various roles as design critic, lecturer or competition juror. For this issue of *Frame*, she got the inside scoop on Alfredo Häberli: Zurich's South American sensation since 1977.



'True material innovation tends to be focused on graduate projects and small design studios, but recent shifts in consumer sensibilities mean big businesses may be about to take notice.'

Writer and editor **Jonathan Openshaw** is a writer and editor based in London. His speciality is the relationship between creative industries and new technology. The former editor in chief of online platform *POSTmatter*, Openshaw currently works as editor at *LS:N Global* and is a Wellcome Trust arts grant holder. The subject of his new book, *Postdigital Artisans*, is the return to craft and materials in today's creative world. Openshaw dug deep into the world of materials for this issue's *Frame Lab*.



'It was a treat to catch the fascinating and ever-inspiring Alfredo Häberli at work.'

Dividing her time between Zurich, Prague and Hamburg, photographer **Mirjam Kluka** – whose roots lie in Switzerland and the Czech Republic – had over six years of freelance experience and a portfolio bulging with everything from fashion and editorial images to commercial commissions and advertising before opening her own studio in Zurich in 2007. Clients include top-notch international magazines such as *AS/H*, *Superior*, *Lone Wolf* and, lest we forget, *Frame*. Kluka has also worked with big names like Freitag, a fashionable bag label that featured in *Frame 105*. For this issue, she snapped photos of Alfredo Häberli at his studio in Zurich.