

Playful Application Curatorial Essay

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The 1972 Munich Olympics had high hopes to convey to the world a new image of peace, coexistence, and friendship for Germany, after the Berlin Olympics of 1936 held during the Nazi regime. Designed with a playful colour palette, minimal police presence, and a record number of athletes and sporting events, “The Happy Games” were set to be the biggest Olympics yet. This was due in large part to graphic designer Otl Aicher, whose meticulous approach to changing Germany’s international image, curating a playful experience for visitors, and creating synthesis of sport and art, made the Munich Olympics a turning point that changed the aesthetics and the appeal of the Olympics. The Munich Olympics has since been critically acclaimed as one of the most well-designed and aesthetically coherent Games ever to have been implemented. However, it was during this Olympics that there was a violent attack in the Olympic village—later named the Munich Massacre. This was an attack by the Palestinian militant group, Black September, that resulted in the death of eleven Israeli Olympians. Instead of the Munich Olympics being remembered as a visual redefinition of Germany’s international image, it is forever marked with the violent imagery of this attack.

Along with the Munich Olympic Committee, Aicher had dreams of creating a utopian environment, one that visually showed that Germany was a new country now and implemented themes of peace and unity throughout. This intentional and critical way of designing played an important part in the Munich Olympics, which were themselves an important part of the massive task of reframing the country’s global identity. Germany’s oversimplification of the reconciliations they were engaged in at the time led to an Olympics that employed design elements presenting a playful and carefree narrative, yet within the event, failed to acknowledge past and present conflicts in a meaningful way.

Aicher was a graphic designer and typographer known for establishing the Ulm School of Design and for his work in corporate branding. Historically, he was very strongly opposed to the Nazi movement. He was arrested in 1937 for refusing to join Hitler Youth and had to go into hiding in 1945 due to deserting the German Army during World War II. His longstanding opposition to Nazism made him an enthusiastic ideological fit as the lead designer for the Munich Games. The Olympic Games are created, and can be viewed through many different thematic lenses, one of which is international diplomacy.² Aicher recognized the important diplomatic role that this particular Olympic Games were to play in history, saying, “trust cannot be gained through words, but instead only through visual proof and the winning of sympathy. It is not about explaining that this Germany is different, but about showing it.”³ Aicher was committed to using design as “both a negative foil and an inspiration for strategy and technique”⁴ in his quest to give Germany a new image in the eyes of the world.

While he wanted the design to feel playful, he took his task very seriously and produced a rigid and “unambiguous decision making hierarchy” so that he was able to “prevent a variable system losing its potency and ultimately disintegrating.”⁵ As Aicher put it, “The look of the Munich Olympics” would have to

“maintain the positive aspects of Berlin while at the same time eradicating its negative connotations.”⁶ He wrote:

There will be no demonstration of nationalism, and no enormity of scale. Sport will no longer be considered an adjunct of, or preparation for military discipline. Pathos will be avoided, as will ceremonial awe. Depth is not always expressed through earnestness. Lightheartedness and non-conformity stand just as much for serious subjectivity. The Munich Olympics should have an unforced character and be open, carefree, and relaxed. It is clear that this will give them an emphatically celebratory character. Celebratory not in the traditional institutional sense but in terms of play-ful improvisation.⁷

Aicher meticulously crafted the environment throughout the Games by using three basic elements: scripts, signs, and colours. For scripts, every Olympic text, including signs, brochures, posters, etc. were to be printed in the Univers font. The text was laid out in long thin columns, to make blocks of information easier to read, and was all in lowercase, in homage to the Bauhaus style.⁸ Aicher wanted signage to help to guide human traffic in a natural way that allowed people to intuitively make choices, so he developed a series of easily understandable pictograms to be used on wayfinding signage. These pictograms were very precise, “positioned within an exact grid of orthographical and geometric coordinates. Rules and grids determined the proportions of heads, torsos, limbs, the representation of sports equipment, and the distinguishing features of male and female athletes.”⁹ Aicher is most well-known for these pictograms, the most iconic being his men’s and women’s restroom signs, which have been used almost ubiquitously in public restrooms since.¹⁰

In terms of colour, Aicher wanted to diverge completely from the reds and yellows associated with the Nazi Party, so he chose the “core colours to be light blue and green, supported by silver and white, and supplemented by yellow, orange, dark green, blue, and occasionally even brown.”¹¹ Because of this extensive colour palette, the rainbow came to be another symbol of the Munich Olympics. To Aicher, the rainbow “symbolized aesthetics in their ultimate form and appearance without losing a sense of the fleeting and playful” and offered visitors the chance to “experience humanity as a unified whole, as a model of society without violence or borders.”¹²

As a part of Munich’s original bid for the games, the Committee promised a synthesis between art and sport. With this in mind, posters were high on their agenda. The Olympic posters were to be of “high artistic quality that had to be world famous”¹³ and “established and avant-garde trends in art ought to be represented.”¹⁴ Well-known international artists were “encouraged to incorporate a relationship with the Olympic idea, and the contemporary Olympic games in the present time.”¹⁵ Under this loose criteria, commissioned artists produced a wide array of images, some abstract like, Eduardo Chillida’s graphic black and white design some sports related, like Hockney’s depiction of a swimmer, and some humorous, like Tom Wesselmann’s illustration of a huge single foot. In these posters, this synthesis of art and sport portrayed quintessential Olympic themes such as unity, internationalism, and diversity. “Five series containing seven posters each were produced. Some versions of posters were produced on high quality paper—these were done by way of limited edition aiming at a collectors’ market.”¹⁶ They were to appeal to people with artistic interests, to be hung in places like universities, schools, museums, and

galleries.¹⁷ Because they were produced in both wide and limited editions, they were able to be displayed everywhere, but also could also be collected and kept as pieces of artwork.

The conflicts that preceded the Munich Olympics were numerous, and Germany was actively connected to many of them. "Bringing the Games to Munich, involved dealing with the old and the new in equal measure" and Israel and Palestine had a long history of conflict over the occupied territories in said region.¹⁸ This conflict came to a head with "the founding of Israel, which was supported by many European nations including Germany, three years after the end of World War II."¹⁹ Palestinian viewed Jewish settlers as "colonial intruders representing an alien and unwelcome civilization" on their indigenous lands, while Jewish people saw themselves as "a persecuted people asserting their right to equal standing among nations by a return to their historic homeland."²⁰ Germany tried to maintain good relations with both Israel and Palestine. They supported the nation of Israel, making reconciliation payments to them after World War II. However, the relationship between the two nations was still delicate at best. Despite Germany's efforts, Israel still constantly "reminded a resentful Germany of its guilty past"²¹ As Kay Schiller and Christopher Young note:

When the Israeli athletes marched into the Olympic stadium in Munich, their country's relationship with the host nation was diplomatically solid but emotionally fragile. Their parliament, for instance, would gladly welcome a friendly visit by a soccer team of German MPs, but pounce when one of its members commented that sporting events might help overcome the past. This delicate balance between mutual support and deepest hurt provided the frame for the Israeli team's entrance in Munich.²²

There were also many attacks between Israel-aligned nations and Palestine before the Games. In 1970, for instance, "King Hussein of Jordan's army attacked the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in Amman, killing some three to five thousand guerrillas and capturing four camps in ten days."²³ And in 1972, "A few months before the Olympics, the PLO hijacked a Sabena flight from Brussels, forcing it to land in Tel Aviv and demanded the release of 315 prisoners from Israeli jails."²⁴ Despite Germany's support of Israel earlier in 1972, "Chancellor Willy Brandt made efforts to re-establish good relations with the Arab world. However, the Olympic Committee torpedoed his attempts, and refused to acknowledge two requests by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to compete in the Olympic Games."²⁵ Overall, these small efforts, as Francine Zuckerman's documentary, *After Munich* notes, "were entirely undermined in part by their history of reconciliation following the war, where Germany actively supported the creation of the Israeli state, thereby alienating them from most nations in the Arab League."²⁶

It was a week or so into the Olympic Games, early on the morning of September fifth, when the world awoke to the news of an attack taking place. The Palestinian militant group Black September "had snuck and then shot their way into the Israeli quarters at the Olympic Village. By 5:00 a.m. they had taken 11 Israelis hostage, killing one and wounding another."²⁷ The group demanded the release of 234 Palestinian prisoners held in Israel, and also requested an airplane to fly them and the hostages to a safe location in the Middle East. The attack was highly televised, and by the end of the day, all of the hostages, one police officer, and five members of Black September, were involved in an ambush, and then a shootout at the

Munich airport. They all died in the crossfire. Throughout the televising of the attack, the Games continued. After the announcement of the casualties, there was finally a 24-hour suspension on the Games, the first time this had ever happened.²⁸ The organizers of the Games were devastated. Chancellor Brandt remarked: "My disappointment at the time was intense because the Olympics on which we had expended so much loving care would not go down in history as a happy occasion."²⁹

However, during the planning of the Games, it was known that there were rising tensions between Palestine and Israel, a fact never acknowledged within the event itself. There was not a lot of effort put forth to accommodate both nations equally: Israel was accommodated in many ways, but Palestine was not. On the day after the attack the Games continued and in the years that followed the family members of the victims of the attack were paid considerable sums by the federal government. "But the heart of these gestures" note Schiller and Young, "was the desire to deny all guilt— the government explicitly designating its contribution an act of generosity."³⁰ Once again concern would fall on how Germany appeared to the rest of the world. For Palestine, however, there were retributions in the form of new policies and attitudes. Schiller and Young write:

The terrorist attack undoubtedly influenced the West Germans' view of their Olympics. In the immediate aftermath, surrogate victimhood in sympathy with Israel played into a much-enhanced appreciation of the Games but mutated quickly into reprisals and policy change against foreign workers. Into the following year, it was this and a dislike of Palestinians that continued.³¹

Despite Aicher's enthusiasm for creating a positive image for this new chapter in German history, the legacy of the Munich Olympics is forever marked by the international conflicts the Committee tried to ignore and suppress, and the consequences of these actions. While the elements of Aicher's Olympic identity "expressed social changes and political discourse, they far from simply reflected them."³² But while design and ceremony can be uplifting and democratic, it can only do so much to create the utopia we desire or prevent the crises we ignore.

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4. *Ibid.*, 99
5. *Ibid.*, 103.
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7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 100.
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11. Schiller and Young, 102.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Margaret Timmers, *A Century of Olympic Posters* (London: V & A, 2012), 82.
14. *Ibid.*
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16. John Hughson, "The Cultural Legacy of Olympic Posters," *Sport in Society* 13, no. 5 (2010), 756, accessed May 26, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430431003650943>.
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19. Hahn Tapper Aaron J. and Mira Sucharov, *Social Justice and Israel/Palestine: Foundational and Contemporary Debates* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 8.
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22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 195.
24. *Ibid.*
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26. *Ibid.*
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29. Schiller and Young, 2.
30. *Ibid.*, 219.
31. *Ibid.*, 235.
32. *Ibid.*, 225.