

## 47

# The Łódź-Orwo Collection

CAPTIONS BY JAN KUBASIEWICZ

**The Łódź-Orwo Collection is a set of two hundred 35-mm slides documenting urban typography and visual communication in the city of Łódź, Poland, in the late 1970s. The slides were part of a bigger collection, which originated from a student research project at the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź.**



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Students were asked to capture the urban visual environment, samples of typography, signage and more on 35-mm transparency slides. Over the years the collection grew to several hundred, but when project leader Jan Kubasiewicz defected to the United States in 1987, the whole archive of prints, books, photographs and slides was left behind in his studio. Over the years the archive was moved from place to place, and as a result the slides, together with other items, were assumed lost.

But a break came in 2009, when a single box of two hundred slides from that collection was unexpectedly rediscovered. The current name of the collection refers to the Orwo-Chrom brand; “made in GDR”, it was the only diapositive transparency film stock available in Poland (or any of the Eastern Bloc countries) at the time.

Although only a fraction of the original collection has been preserved after all these years, its documentary value is enormous. In terms of typography, it presents a unique dialogue between the large propaganda billboards and shop windows of small “private enterprises”, between posters promoting film premieres and ads for local discos and ironing services – the everyday life of a city as contained in its typography.

Advertising mural for government-owned *Prexer* (1), a manufacturer of military optical equipment, is a good case study of large-budget corporate marketing treated as “propaganda”. The murals functioned more as public relation announcements than advertising. Consumer products did not really need any advertising. However, government-owned brands wanted visibility. The *Prexer* mural is a purely abstract visual solution reminiscent of best examples of Op Art by Alberto Biasi or Vasarely, and has nothing to do with the direct advertising of the consumer products they manufactured, such as film and slide projectors. On many occasions, the fashionable Op Art visual vocabulary became an adopted strategy in advertising various government-owned companies, big and small, from textile manufacturer *Ortal* (3) to a *Kaskada* restaurant (2).





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“At Every Workplace We Forge the Future of Poland” (4) is a display panel designed with a minimalist approach to typographical composition: sans serif Helvetica font, asymmetrical, flush left type arrangement, supported by abstract rectangular shapes of vibrant colour demanding attention. Helvetica was a novelty font at the time, imported as Letraset sheets (for designers that meant “progress” over Akzidenz Grotesk). Type was enlarged photographically, prepared as stencils, and painted manually. The Letraset sheets did not include Polish diacritical marks, and that became a laboratory for type design “experiments” – often very poorly executed.

The panel “Good Work” (5) is an amazing example of a search for originality and uniqueness in font selection that went too far. The font known today as “Arche-type Catalogue Solid” (The Foundry) was originally designed by Wim Crouwel in 1970 specifically for the branding of Claes Oldenburg’s exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Holland. An unknown designer who appropriated the font to that propaganda slogan, provided – intentionally or not – a rather sarcastic overtone to the message. The modular and organically shaped graphemes of Crouwel’s design are paired with a grid of squares with slightly rounded corners and placed on large-scale panels behind a chain-link fence.



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The concert promotion for international celebrity Charles Aznavour is a 3-dimensional structure made of plywood (an abstract sculpture itself) on which a number of posters were mounted (6). On the adjacent structure fencing the main sculpture, the photographic poster of Aznavour is mounted next to the poster of Maria Limonta, another international celebrity performer. Her portrait-based poster was designed by Walde-  
mar Świerzy, a prominent member of the Polish School of Posters.



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On the billboard advertising the 1976 American feature film *The Battle of Midway* (7) a local designer freely appropriated graphic components of the original poster for the Polish release (designed by Andrzej Krajewski, another member of the Polish School of Poster elite). Such practice was rather widespread. Many local announcements were executed by local artists following the visual language of well-known celebrity designers. However, many craftsmen letterers tried to preserve their autonomy, as in the case of the local poster for the 1976 Martin Scorsese film *Taxi Driver* (8).



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On many occasions, announcements of local cultural events became informal interpretations of pop-art visual vocabulary executed free-hand by community organizers, not necessarily designers (9).



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In contrast, new entrepreneurs, with a lot of courage, hope and funding, identified with the American dream of self-made millionaires. Their typographical identity referred stylistically to the 19th century American typography of the “wanted” posters (10), so well documented in the Rob Roy Kelly Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, or the most fashionable Push Pin Studio-inspired ITC fonts. The signage of such storefronts as “Tali Jeans” (11), “Jeans Boutique, *Dernier Cri*” (12) not only perfectly represented the merchandise – jeans, apparel, accessories – but aggressively disconnected their visual language from an elegant European tradition in favour of the visual manifestation of the “nouveau riche” in the American style.