

*Chairman Rolf Fehlbaum*, by Tibor Kalman. German Design Council and Lars Müller Publishers  
Reviewed by Victor Margolin

The culture of design, some critics would argue, was invented in Italy where manufacturers of furniture and household goods such as Zanotta, Triade, Cassina, and Alessi have for years created memorable catalogues, exhibitions, and keepsakes to lend a flair to their products and convey an image of corporate liveliness. Now, outside of Italy, we have Rolf Fehlbaum, CEO of Vitra, whose company manufactures innovative office furniture and who built a remarkable museum in Switzerland to showcase the history of chairs. Designed by Frank Gehry, the museum forms part of an architectural complex that includes Vitra buildings by Zaha Hadid, Nicholas Grimshaw, and Tadao Ando. Fehlbaum also sponsored the production of no less than one hundred classic chairs, all in miniature, which are currently touring the world as a delightful exhibition.

Last year the German Design Council (Rat für Formgebung) gave Fehlbaum its Federal Award for Design Leadership to recognize his successful career as a design entrepreneur and promoter. Tibor Kalman's book *Chairman Rolf Fehlbaum*, was jointly published by the Design Council and Lars Müller to commemorate this occasion. Although it consists of a bulky aggregate of pages between two covers, recalling at a smaller scale the gargantuan tomes by Irma Boom and Johan Pijnappel (*thinkbook*,) and Bruce Mau (*S.M..L. XL*), it consists almost entirely of pictures and functions more as a keepsake than an informative volume.

Kalman began to work seriously with visual sequences when he was the editor of Benetton's cultural magazine *Colors*. There he often treated the theme of cultural identity with a light touch. He continues to exercise his considerable wit in *Chairman Rolf Fehlbaum* but his one-liners are sometimes not funny or inappropriate. Though Kalman has perfected the art of the visual gag he sometimes ends up with a superficial response to a subject that demands more depth. His reference to Chairman Mao's Little Red Book which dictates the title, scale, and red cover of the Fehlbaum volume provides a good laugh so long as one doesn't push the analogy too far. When one does, it simply falls apart since Kalman surely is not suggesting that Fehlbaum has created a set of slogans to dictate furniture design that are comparable to those Mao invented to prescribe political behavior.

Kalman begins the book with a whimsical history of seating that mixes historic and ethnographic photographs with scenes from films as well as images of wheelchairs, lawn furniture, and even an electric chair. He follows the strategy he employed at *Colors* by forging images from cultures around the world into sequences that suggest shared values beneath the appearance of difference. Kalman's anthropological approach to the history of chairs is hardly scholarly though it does establish sitting as a cultural activity and thereby sets the stage for a history of Fehlbaum's career at Vitra.

In the early 1950s Fehlbau's father began to produce furniture by Charles and Ray Eames in Europe and Kalman presents a generous selection of photographs that depict the Eames's and their chairs. This leads into the story of how young Rolf began to work with his father and then took over the family business with his brother Raymond. Through a clever selection of images Kalman affectionately conveys Fehlbau's passion for chairs and establishes him as a man who loves to travel. His refreshing presentation of the Vitra CEO gives the reader a sense of him as a person. This provides a helpful context for the remainder of the book—more than half of the five hundred and ninety pages—which depicts images and projects of the many designers from whom Fehlbau has commissioned chairs or buildings.

From the time he founded M & Co. in New York, Kalman has always taken an irreverent and frequently unexpected approach to his projects. His strength is not in the making of the images themselves but in generating the ideas behind them. His best work provokes a rethinking of a particular idea or genre but his decision to work extremely reductively has at times ended in superficial results. While *Colors*, for example, was in many ways a celebration of a common humanity shared by young people around the world, it was also criticized during Kalman's tenure for overlooking many of the complexities of cultural identity.

The story of Rolf Fehlbau's career is hardly as complicated as the cultural relations among the world's multifarious social groups, but we might have learned more about Fehlbau from a volume that did not rely so heavily on pictures or gags. While this volume is a worthy means to commemorate Fehlbau's award, by its presentation as a book for sale in the Lars Müller catalog, it also promises more than it delivers.

The disparity between expectations and content is less an issue in the two issues of *workspirit*, the Vitra magazine with which Kalman was involved as designer or conceptualizer. These issues, which function simultaneously as catalogs and annual reports, rank among the best examples of corporate house organs. Here the minimal text works to the designers' advantage since the images of Vitra office furniture, designers, and cultural projects are self-evident. Here too Kalman's witty forays into exotic picture research are balanced by the pragmatic intent of the publication. While his overall contribution to Vitra's corporate culture is not as intellectually stimulating as is, for example, Alessandro Mendini's to the culture of Alessi, Kalman has done much to show us Rolf Fehlbau as a thoughtful and dedicated human being while also representing Vitra as a vital corporate enterprise with a deep commitment to enriching our culture.

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First published in *Eye*, vol. 28, no. 7 (Summer).