

6 - OPENING PAGE OF THE FIRST U.S.
EDITION OF JAMES JOYCE'S ULYSSES



6-POSTER FOR PFÄFFERLI + HUBER PHARMACEUTICALS

In late 1958 Bettler, now twenty-nine, was commissioned by Burgwald-based pharmaceuticals manufacturer Pfafferli + Huber AG to design a running series of posters celebrating the company's fiftieth anniversary. He was already aware of reports concerning P + H's involvement in testing carried out on prisoners in concentration camps less than fifteen years before, and when the telephone call came, was about to tell this would-be client to "...go to hell. But fortunately the wheels in the brain were faster back then [...]. In that split of a second I had the feeling that I could do some real damage."

Bettler accepted the commission - a decision which cost him several left-wing friends. "But I knew I could win them back later. The agony was biding my time. When I said yes to the job, I had no idea how subversion could work with a large client who would check everything over and over. The first set of posters gave P + H exactly what they wanted: a new style of design."

Early the following year a second set of posters were presented, one by one over a series of meetings, for the client's approval. Only after they had been printed did Bettler's masterplan come to fruition: "The beauty of it was that, taken alone, each poster was utterly inoffensive. But you must remember that everything has a Zusammenhang; a context. These posters would be seen together in horizontal rows. And I was very careful with my briefing of the bill stickers."

On hundreds of sites around Burgwald and neighboring Sumisdorf, the posters appeared in fours. In the first a clowning child's body made an "N"; in the second a woman's head was bowed inside the "A"-shaped triangle of her forearms. An old man's contortions in the third poster ("that took forever to shoot") sketched a "Z." No prizes for guessing that the girl in the final poster stood defiantly still, her almost silhouetted profile as stiff as, well, a letter "I," for example.

– "I'm Only a Designer": the Double Life of Ernst Bettler, Christopher Wilson, Dot Dot Dot #2, 2001

Ernst Bettler Poster for Pfafferli + Huber
Pharmaceuticals, 1959,
Silkscreen print, 154 x 112.3 cm