

**The New York Times** Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

March 11, 2012

# Richard Hollis: The Maximum Minimalist

By ALICE RAWSTHORN

LONDON — It was not what he wanted to hear. When Richard Hollis signed up for evening classes in painting at a London art school in the mid-1950s, he showed his work to the teacher, the artist William Turnbull. “When he looked at it, he said: ‘You should be a graphic designer,’” Mr. Hollis recalled. “I was horrified by the idea, but he was absolutely right. I had a lot of facility, but, of course, facility has nothing to do with being creative.”

Horrified or not, Mr. Hollis took the advice and pursued a career in graphic design that seems to have aligned perfectly with his interests. Through his work, he has explored his passion for art, literature and politics, and forged long working relationships with the art critic John Berger and the artist Steve McQueen, as well as with the Whitechapel Gallery and bastions of British radicalism, such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and New Society magazine.

Now 77, Mr. Hollis works from his studio of 20 years in the basement of his London home, surrounded by books, photographs and the corpses of antiquated computer printers. A spry figure with a tendency to understatement, which is characteristic of Englishmen of his generation, he is little known outside the graphic design world, but widely admired within it for his singular approach and the conceptual rigor of his work, which expresses complex ideas clearly and economically without resorting to stylistic trickery. A retrospective of his projects since the late 1950s is to open March 23 at Gallery Libby Sellers in London, and a book of his writing on design will be published next month.

“Richard is concerned above all else with meaning,” said Emily King, the design historian, who curated the retrospective. “He wants people to understand the images and the texts that are part of his designs and, in particular, he wants them to understand how they work together. His work is an argument for the necessity of intelligence in design.”

An example is Mr. Hollis’s best-known work, “Ways of Seeing,” the 1972 book that accompanied a television series made by Mr. Berger on the consumption of visual

imagery. Starting with the opening line, “Seeing comes before words,” the text begins on the cover, rather than on an inside page, and Mr. Hollis positioned the images beside relevant passages of text. By doing so, he ensured that each one serves a functional purpose by enhancing the reader’s understanding, and is never purely decorative.

If ever his system proved problematic, for example, by splitting an image between two pages, Mr. Berger, who he had befriended when they both worked on *New Society*, would finesse the wording. “I’d say ‘Could you cut it a bit?’ and he’d say ‘Yes, of course,’” Mr. Hollis explained. “The only way for me to work was to sit with the writer, or the artist or curator, and go through the book page by page. That’s what’s fun about design. It is a social business.”

Mr. Hollis learned graphic design on the job when he set up a silk-screen studio in his apartment to make ends meet after leaving art school in 1956. “I’d silk screen posters for artists and add type to them at a printer’s down the road,” he recalled. “That’s how I began.” He then designed books and taught graphic design, before spending a year in the art department of the Parisian department store *Galleries Lafayette*. A friend, Norman Potter, asked him to return to Britain in 1964 to develop a new design course, which would adopt a holistic approach by combining different disciplines, at an art school in Bristol. “He said: ‘Look, I think we could make a new Bauhaus,’” Mr. Hollis recalled. “We had a lot of fun, but of course it met with a certain amount of astonishment and a certain amount of resistance.”

When he spotted an ad in *New Society* for an art editor of the magazine in 1966, Mr. Hollis applied for the job and went back to London. By then, he was also designing the quarterly journal *Modern Poetry in Translation*, which he continued for 40 years, and would soon begin his work for the Whitechapel. Mr. Hollis describes his career as if every encounter was accidental, and each assignment came about “by chance,” as he words it. He was roped into the poetry journal by his neighbor, the poet Ted Hughes, who was one of the co-founders, and started working for the Whitechapel after a chance conversation with the director. One of his jobs was for an artist whom he happened to sit next to on a coach.

“I was very lucky,” he said. “I can only once remember going round with a portfolio, which was such a humiliating experience.” Thanks to his income from teaching and, later, from writing on graphic design history, he could work mostly on his own terms. “One of my friends had a job with a publisher and they used to stand over him and say: ‘Try making that blue,’” he said. “Being a graphic designer should be like being a doctor: People come to you with a problem and you find a way of treating it. They shouldn’t come with a broken leg and say, ‘I want a splint of these dimensions.’”

Not that he would have been receptive to such demands. When the designer Christopher Wilson described his experience of working with Mr. Hollis in the graphic design magazine *Eye*, he recalled “three-day arguments over line endings.” Mr. Hollis sees design as a “social service” in which the designer is charged with solving “a puzzle” and should do so as frugally as possible, for example by experimenting with using color sparingly, but to maximum effect, and with folding paper, rather than binding it.

“Richard is always seeking the thriftiest solution,” Ms. King said. “He told me that in the postwar period, people would employ professional designers to save money because they understood best how to make things with minimal means.”