



RICHARD HOLLIS: WORD AND IMAGE

DESIGN

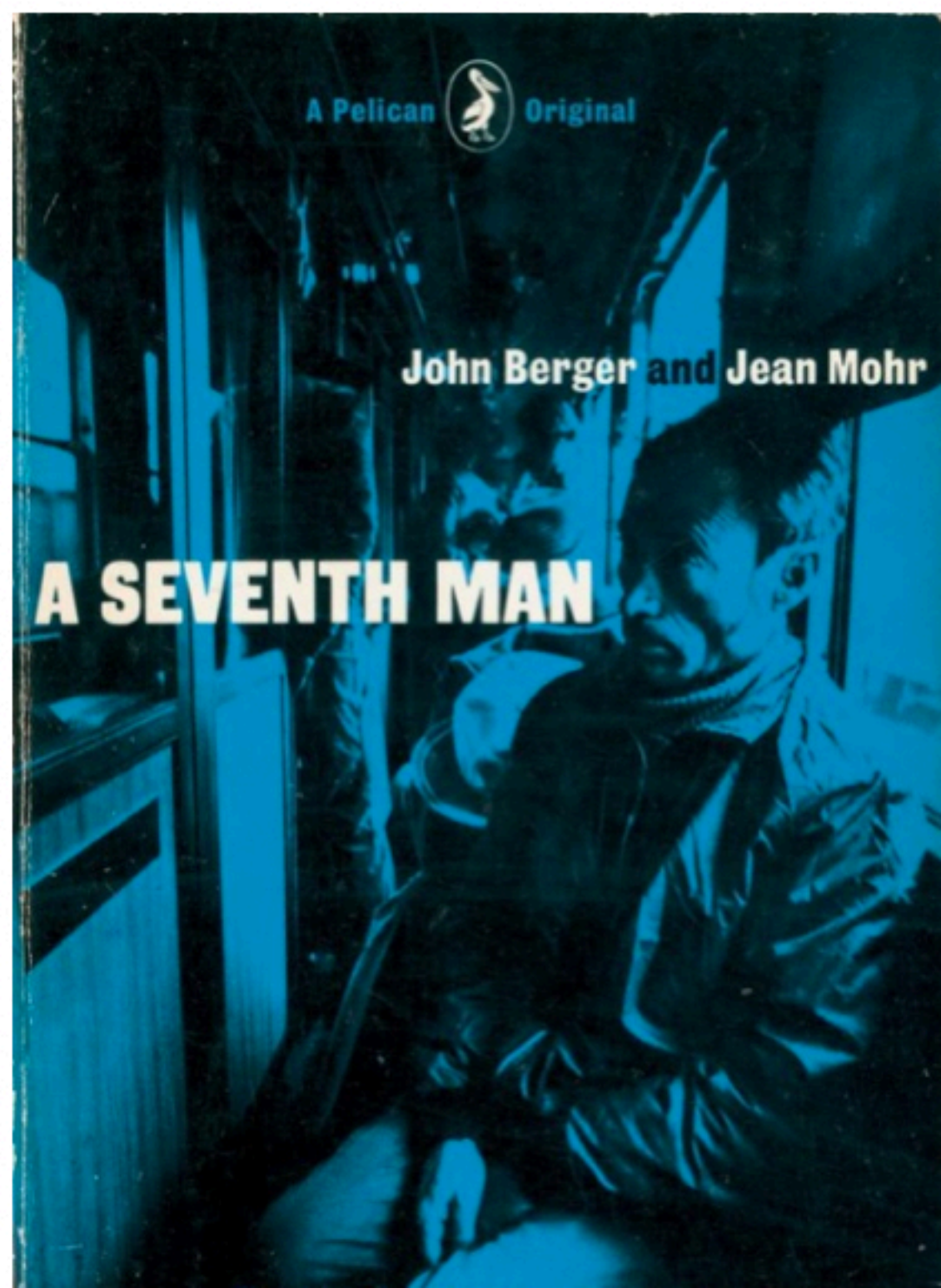
EXHIBITIONS

By Paul Hetherington
16 Apr 2012

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Little known outside the graphic design world, Richard Hollis is described as “the graphic designer’s designer” by Emily King, curator of the exhibition at [Gallery Libby Sellers](#). A retrospective of his projects since the late 1950s, consisting of around one hundred items, all are drawn from the planchests containing his personal archive at his studio in the basement of his London home.

King is right: everyday passers-by who glimpse work in the window will see nothing remarkable, the exhibition is municipal nostalgia in other respects. Hollis’s work leaves little trace of the designer’s hand, no sign of ego. Yet to a graphic eye, work of brilliance and intelligence is displayed thoughtfully in a series of appropriately frugal vitrines constructed from Grey Board and plexiglass. Engaging at every turn of the page, a fascinating history lies behind much of his work. For all that, there is no “hero image” to be found in a Hollis composition, his understated —rather than minimal— work, demonstrates the quiet voice can often be heard below the shouting.



Like an obscure album in your Dad's record collection that you one day discover, generations of graphic designers have reached the moment when Hollis's legacy speaks to them, each feeling it is special and to their own. His work went under the design media radar though the '70s and much of the '80s, and was rarely published. He appeared in a few design magazines over the 1990s, an early issue of *Frieze* and an interview in the 2004 book *Communicate*.

Exposure peaked in *Eye* magazine's major feature on Hollis by Christopher Wilson in 2006, ten timely pages showed clearly—that far from being uneventful—his work had retained all of its impact over the last four decades and was in every way as vibrant as could be found in edgy young design studios scattered across the N and E postcodes of London. It resonated with the millennium-age of graduating graphic designers who rejected the complex and rich possibilities that computers afforded them, in favour of a hand-worked look that drew on letterpress style typography and austerity of image.

Hollis himself is a thoroughly decent and unpretentious man. Beginning painting as a child, he enrolled to study art but learned the trade of graphic design when he set up a silk-screen studio in his Holborn flat to make ends meet. He offered both printing and design of posters, and was able to gain work on this competitive edge. He sees design as a social service, always seeking a prudent solution with maximum impact. As if finding the notion of 'full colour' rather bourgeois, his designs deliver satisfyingly in two and three colour arrangements. Today anything less than full CMYK printing is an artistic and political statement by the graphic designer: A confrontation, a refusal to seduce. In an age of three-inch thick Taschen books on every subject worth printing, and many worth not, Hollis's meagre publications in two and three colour remind us that it was once necessary to think creatively in order to communicate in anything other than shades of grey.

His work embodies socialist principles in thought and form. Few serif fonts or the monumental centering of type is to be found, and the colour red features prominently and often in his portfolio. According to Hollis this is because it offers the most striking combination, rather than a desire to make a political statement. Political or not, Richard's leanings can be readily seen through choice of client and project he takes onboard. Exploring a passion for art, literature and politics, his customers number many publishers, public art galleries and radical thinkers such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, *New Society* magazine and the African National Congress. Destined to be a director at publishers Faber and Faber in 1976, he fell foul of his establishment employers when they believed his left-wing tendencies would lead to unionisation of the company.

... "But I know, and whatever your verdict, events cannot be stopped ..."

We have all of us tried to the best of our knowledge and conscience to do our duty towards the International, the Communist World Revolution."

These were Eugene Levine's last words, written before his execution.

On 7 April 1953 a Soviet government was formed in Munich led by police, army and workers. It had little working class support and was doomed to failure. But the Communists refused to let it pass without a fight to the death.

Eugene Levine led the defence of the Munich Soviet. He was born in Russia, educated in Germany and became a writer before coming to Munich. He took part in the 1933 elections in Russia, was imprisoned in Germany, joined the German Social Democratic Party and then, during the war, the Independent Social Democrats and the Socialist Workers' League. He was one of the few Communists to be elected to the Reichstag.



1940-1953

Central Executive of Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets in December 1933.

He took part in the January fighting in Berlin, and then worked for the party in the Ruhr. He was in jail and again in Berlin.

It was at the beginning of March he was sent to Munich where he met his death.

This is the book of his life and of the Munich Soviet. By his wife and comrade Rosa Levine-Meyer.

LEVINÉ

The Life of a Revolutionary
by Rosa Levine-Meyer

£1.25 Pluto Press  Book Link

ISBN 0 09916 10 2

"The Communist Party of Great Britain is the
 the best of our knowledge and conscience to do
 our duty towards the International, the Communist World Revolution."
 These were Eugene Levine's last words, written before his execution.
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Leviné

"We Communists are on leave... I do not know if my leave or whether I shall be shot."
Karl Liebknicht and Rosa

Throughout his career Hollis has designed a great many books, for publishers including Penguin Books, Faber and Faber, Macmillan and Ars Nikolai. Additionally, he has authored several design titles including *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, part of Thames and Hudson's ubiquitous World of Art series. A passion for books is clear. He says of his approach to their design, "I tried to make the book into a three dimensional object", achieving this through innovative approaches such as wrapping images from front to back cover, and placement of text on their spines designed to seduce bookshelf browsers. However, in his most radical and critically acclaimed approach to book design, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Hollis audaciously begins the text narrative on the cover.

The majority of the population do not visit art museums. The following table shows how closely an interest in art is related to privileged education.

General proportions of art museum visitors according to level of education:
Percentage of each educational category who visit art museums

	Grades	High School	College	Postgraduate
Visit no museum	52.0	31.2	17.8	—
Visit one museum	25.0	31.2	24.0	25.0
Visit two museums	15.0	25.0	25.0	25.0
Visit three or more museums	8.0	12.6	33.2	45.0

Source: Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le Bourgeois et le Ouvrier* (Paris, 1966), Appendix 5, table 2.

The majority take it as axiomatic that the museums are full of holy relics which refer to a mystery which excludes them; the mystery of unaccountable wealth. Or, to put this another way, they believe that original masterpieces belong to the preserve (both materially and spiritually) of the rich. Another table indicates what the idea of an art gallery suggests to each social class.

Of the phrases listed below which does a museum remind you of most?

	Manual workers	Service and clerical workers	Professional and managerial
Church	36	15.0	25.0
Library	10	10.0	25.0
University	10	10.0	25.0
Government work or enterprise	10	10.0	25.0
Banking	10	10.0	25.0
Country and domestic life	10	10.0	25.0
Country and domestic life	10	10.0	25.0
None of these	10	10.0	25.0

Source: *ibid.*, Appendix 4, table 2.

In the age of pictorial reproduction the meaning of paintings is no longer attached to them; their meaning becomes transmittable; that is to say it becomes information of a sort, and, like all information, it is either put to use or ignored; information carries no special authority within itself. When a painting is put to use, its meaning is either modified or totally changed. One should be quite clear about what this involves. It is not a question of reproduction failing to

reproduce certain aspects of an image faithfully; it is a question of reproduction making it possible, even if that an image will be used for many different purposes that the reproduced image, unlike an original work itself to them all. Let us examine some of the ways the reproduced image lends itself to such usage.



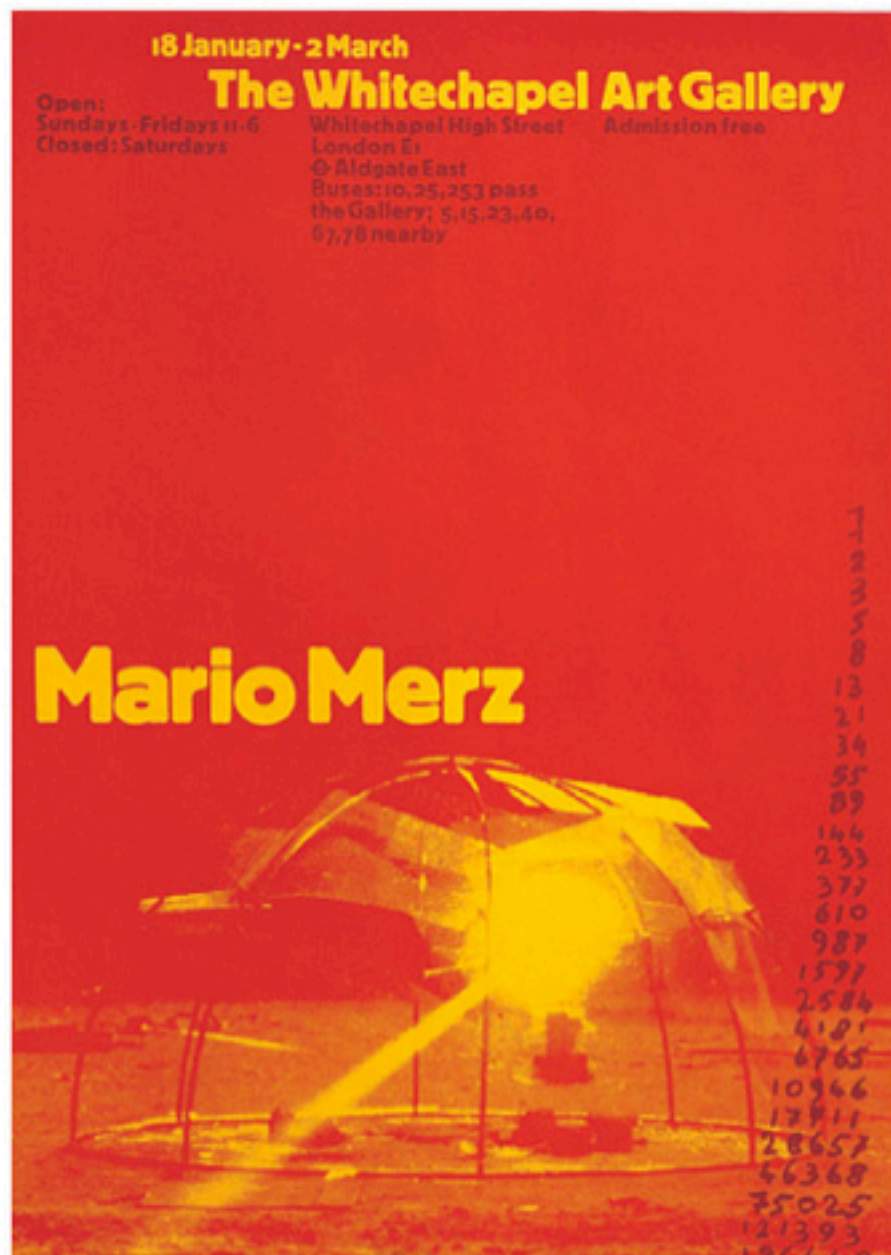
Reproduction isolates a detail of a part of the whole. The detail is transformed. An allegorical figure becomes a portrait of a girl.



As part of the team that turned this 1970's BBC television series into a book, he devised a revolutionary system for combining word and image inspired in part by the broadcast format, and his interest in the 'supranational' form of pioneering Swiss School graphics.

Hollis describes the thought process: "Images were placed in the text where they're discussed, rather than on page of their own. As you read you knew exactly what was being talked about. It was a substitute for description: instead of talking about something, you show the objective visual evidence. That's how I wanted to do *Ways of Seeing*, rather than have images by the side or text followed by a page of images". Still in print, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* remains an influential must-read of art studies, and Hollis's layouts continue to awaken generations to the notion that art is a weapon and pictures are political. Undertaking intense and long working relationships with critic and author John Berger, the artists Bridget Riley and Steve McQueen amongst many others, his approach is —and was— the antithesis of commercially orientated design studios.

Alongside designing books, Hollis worked for the Whitechapel Gallery from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s, the latter years under the directorship of Nicholas Serota. Undertaking a major reshaping of this East London gallery in 1985, Serota took the decision of replacing Hollis and appointed a youthful Peter Saville as designer of a new logotype and publicity system. In the midst of that transitional decade in graphic communication, Hollis's posters, catalogue and ephemera looked out of time. His work reminded us of the educational books we sullenly studied in a modern comprehensive. In some cases these *were* the books we studied. They were of *another era* to a consumerist generation only just learning to decode the appropriation of design's rich history.



Poster Design for the Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1980.

Hollis's Block sans was retired, and a neo-classical system based on Eric Gill's *Perpetua* typeface rolled out at the Whitechapel as post-modernism shifted from painting to poster. Hollis considered the new identity superficial, and challenged Saville's premise as appropriate for the architecture. Ever the penny saver, Hollis also remarked on the incoming designer's use of staples on leaflets... which would cost more than his simple folded solutions. In the cultural shift of decades to come, the mainstream commodification and 'cappuccinofication' of public art galleries would lead to a form of branding wholly unconcerned with the cost of staples.

Aged 77, Hollis remains an active designer and has regularly lectured and written on design and art throughout the last two decades. His website biography modestly states: "Works as a general graphic and book designer. He has a small studio with never more than one assistant. There is no particular style: each job acquires its own". In the light of such reserve, it seems a grandiose summary of Hollis's influence and lasting impact on graphic design today would be out of place. I shall refrain then, not because it is inappropriate, but because I believe its true significance is still yet to come.



Eye magazine, Vol. 15 Spring 2006

Recommended reading for homework tonight is Christopher Wilson's 1996 feature in *Eye* magazine, Alice Rawsthorne's *The Maximum Minimalist* article for the New York Times *T*, plus the mine of inspiration at Hollis's own website. The publication *About Graphic Design*, a collection of writings by Richard Hollis published by Occasional Papers will be launched at the Whitechapel Gallery, London on April 26 with a talk by Hollis and Nicholas Serota.

TEXT: Paul Hetherington

Richard Hollis, is at Gallery Libby Sellers, London 23 March – 28 April 2012. Curated by Emily King. Exhibition design by Simon Jones.