Robin Kinross talks to Richard Hollis about his attempts to match the radical message of much of his work to his design method.

"It’s as if all we feared would happen with the introduction of photocomposition has actually come true" activity, without differentiating design from art. Like a few others of his generation, he did the "grand tour", going to Ulm and inviting himself to visit these newer, bolder places where on the Continent, or "just anyone who really cared about their work". It is a practice that, like the great figures, has died out. In the early 1960s, working from London, he went on forays. A trip to Cuba was reported and self-published as a broadsheet. He also lived for a year in Paris, working for Galerie Maeght, with art directors such as Peter Knapp, a Swiss by nationality but not by graphic alignment - and in Paris for that reason. His first exhibition, in 1964, Hollis led the graphics course within an experimental "school of design", established precariously at the West of England College of Art at Bristol. Here briefly there was an attempt at a modern design education, of the kind that never had a chance in Britain: cross-departmental mixing (between graphic and pure art); embrace of the new - the new ideas, the new ideas theory a decade or so before it got popularised, and visiting teachers such as Paul Schuette and Emil Ruder. These were experiences which helped to set Hollis firmly in the modernist, internationalist camp. His work was then fairly straightforward 'Swiss': sanserif, ranged left, images and text boxes all set alongside. The intriguing turn came as he realised the inadequacy of this approach for articulating content. Towards the end of the 1960s, he worked on a number of projects where the large individuality of the line - the line of a paragraph - which through which another axis of alignment can be found, or the intelligent use of axis symmetry. A tension between freedom and constraint, between experiment and respect for meaning and technical necessity: this is the dialectic, helped out by a nice sense of humour, that runs through his subsequent work. And this is what distinguishes it from the mindlessness of the merely "innovative" (the term so belief in progress that the the encounter characterises Hollis's production: accepting and at the same time playing with the constraints of process and budget.

Two customers especially have provided Hollis with the conditions for good work: the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, and the Whitechapel Art Gallery. He has designed posters, catalogues and leaflets for both galleries, and was house-designer for the Whitechapel, first under the directorship of Mark Glazebrook in the early 1970s, then later under Nicholas Serota. Glazebrook, for whom he still works, would be an example of a "good client": collaborative and keenly interested, and be almost even suggesting a reprint of a poster ("well, if you’re not happy with it..."). Just as he remembers the pleasures in the 1950s of getting Anthony Froshaug’s cards for St George’s Gallery through the post, so Hollis’s lessons in visual organisation came free every other month to anyone with eyes to see. When the Gallery was reopened in its up-market guise in 1985, Hollis was replaced by a design group. The new graphic style, in tune with the building, went white and refined. Hollis, who was one of the most scathing efforts with the leaflets, they have returned to Hollis’s format, but done without his zip and loving care.

Given his interest in folding and his painterly concerns, it might come as a surprise to find Hollis confessing that book design is what he likes above all. Perhaps not so surprising if you regard this as a three-dimensional, 'inventive' sequence of movement and movement. The stories of two publishing employments of the 1970s point to a moral about the British situation. The negative lesson came in the year of the hot summer (1976), when he was appointed production director at Faber & Faber, some years before the first Glazebrook period. Hollis encountered gentle literariness in quite extreme forms (a production controller reading proofs at a lectern). One weekend, symbolically and in good Modern Movement spirit, Hollis installed a pre-constructed office. The job was terminated after six months.

By contrast, Hollis’s work for Pluto Press, as designer and de facto art director, proved long-lasting and productive. Pluto was then a small and radical publishing house, whose books - both the covers and their often complex texts - fell readily into his design approach: there were no problems over modernity. It was about Pluto, especially, that the "Graphic Ring" formed: a group of designers (Hollis, Robin Flor, Ken Campbell) who never got round to formal meetings, but found means of putting a growl (GrB!) after their names. A particularly energetic and angry younger colleague, Clive Challis, became an "AGR" - though later got the sack. David King was close, but never joined. The common link, apart from shared political outlook, was a commitment to experiment, including an acceptance of honourable and educative failures. The now celebrated "constructivist" influences in the work were exactly appropriate to the content of those books and the campaigns of the time. But, especially in Hollis’s case, inspiration also came from less obvious sources: tabloid journalism (the "bullet" mark indicating discrete chunks of text), magazine work (he had been art director of Vet's Society in late 1960s), as well as certain books that were not particularly "designed", but - perhaps for this reason - could develop fresh approaches (he remembers especially a book by the French film director Chris Marker).

From this period on, through the books that Hollis designed for and with John Berger - G, Ways of Seeing (both 1972), and The Seventh Man (1975) - are further examples of situations that allow good work: texts and images of real content, and a sympathetic author prepared to sit down and help sort it out page by page, line by line. Here, the process of the unfinished and the interim, can find scope for expression. He is at his best with texts and images that tell about the original reality of something. It is not a very fashionable attitude, and it provides a fundamental explanation for his distance from marketing graphics. Hollis, and like-minded designers, are in the business of explaining, not of image or facade. "Design is a question of finding a graphic language for the particular client, the client’s understanding of the designer’s hieratic," he says, apologising for the pompous tone. In this content-determined, antiformalist approach, he is in very good company whose work always looks the same.

In such labour-intensive taking of pains lies the economic extravagance of this work; and also in such things as the cutting-up and re-splicing of photostat headlines and the ancient craft of Letrasetting, which Hollis still practises. The studio-hands of the big design companies have allowed themselves the time for this, even supposing that they are conscious of the importance of fine tuning. With the technical constraints of photocomposition, more or less gone, the notion of standards has collapsed. "It’s as if all we feared would happen with photocomposition has actually come true," Hollis admits. Recently he acted as adviser to Phil Baines for the graphic design of the Craft Council’s "New Spirit" exhibition, and could feel some kinship, across the generations, with Baines’s experiments with the old technology of letterpress printing. His attitude to Neville Brody’s work is a little paradoxical, but can allow itself the time for this, even supposing that they are conscious of the importance of fine tuning. With the technical constraints of photocomposition, more or less gone, the notion of standards has collapsed. "It’s as if all we feared would happen with photocomposition has actually come true," Hollis admits. Recently he acted as adviser to Phil Baines for the graphic design of the Craft Council’s "New Spirit" exhibition, and could feel some kinship, across the generations, with Baines’s experiments with the old technology of letterpress printing. His attitude to Neville Brody’s work is a little paradoxical, but can allow itself the time for this, even supposing that they are conscious of the importance of fine tuning.

While understanding the French enthusiasm for Brody - he makes an eloquent French gesture - one is more likely to find Hollis with Joseph Brodsky. (He was a director of the magazine Modern Poetry in Translation as well as its designer.)

Richard Hollis finds himself in a paradoxical position, though he is by no means alone in it, of a modernist defending some traditional, craft-based approaches. Hollis says, if he can, "let his hands on a good one for layout and page make-up, might offer prospects of ways forward. But the best help would come in the form of an enlightened graphic design direction. At present, it is unlikely to be an English-language firm."