When he came out of art school in the late 1950s, Richard Hollis was a painter. His move towards typography and graphic design was made gradually. As one had to do in Britain when design education was still so undeveloped, he picked up knowledge by just looking. He remembers Toni del Renzio's jobs for the ICA, for the uninhibited handling of different weights of type, as among the instructive work of that time. He did attend typography evening classes at the Central School, set up by Edward Wright, but by then taught by George Daulby. At this stage he was interested in "action typography", in the Wright spirit, and was dismissed from the course at the Central – not by Daulby – for using type that was too large. Wright's work for the exhibition "This is Tomorrow" (1956) was an important inspiration.

Hollis got into design through his own silk-screen printing: doing posters as well as art prints. The make-it-yourself approach has remained as a strong thread; given a cloth to clean a lorry, during National Service, he made a rag book. At this early stage he was doing abstract "concrete" work and, in the Swiss spirit, was able to imagine a unified sphere of visual

"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 some of the great figures elsewhere 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 other forays. A trip to Cuba was reported and self-published as a broadsheet. He also lived for a year in Paris, working for Galeries Lafayette with art directors such as Peter Knapp, a Swiss by nationality but not by graphic alignment – and in Paris for that reason. Returning to Britain 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 graphics and "construction"), sign-theory a decade or so before it got popularised, and visiting teachers such as Paul Schuitema and Emil Ruder.

These were formative experiences which helped to set Hollis firmly in the modernist, internationalist camp. His work was then fairly straight "Swiss": sanserif, ranged left, images and text bowing to the dictates of the grid. The intriguing turn came as he realised the inadequacy of this approach for articulating content. Towards the end of the 1960s one sees a search for other principles of organisation: the large indent (of the first line of a paragraph) through which another axis of alignment can be found; or the intelligent use of axial symmetry. A tension between freedom and constraint, be-

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

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tween 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 loved by creative people). "Inventive" is rather the word to characterise 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 once even suggesting a reprint of a poster ("well, if you aren't happy with it..."). Just as he remembers the pleasure 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 expensive. After some muddled 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 a book as a three-dimensional matter of sequence 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 firm was Pentagrammed. Here he encountered genteel 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 around Pluto, especially, that the "Graphic Ring" formed: a group of designers (Hollis, Robin Fior, Ken Campbell) who never got round to formal meetings, but found means of putting a growl (GrR!) after their names. A particularly energetic and angry younger colleague, Clive Challis, became an "AGrR" – 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 *New 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 also, the books that Hollis designed for and with John Berger – *G, Ways of Seeing* (both 1972), and *The Seventh Man* (1975) – are further confirmation of the conditions 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 his interest in process, in the unfinished and the interim, can find scope for expression. He is at his best with texts and images that tell about the material 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; it's not about imposing the designer's hieratic," he says, apologising for the pompous tone. In this content-determined, antiformalist approach, he is very different from designers 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-spacing of photoset headlines and the ancient craft of Letrasetting, which Hollis still practises. The studio-hands of the big design companies can't allow themselves the time for this, even supposing that they are conscious of the importance of fine tuning. With the technical constraints of text composition now more or less gone, so 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 is finding a graphic language for the client; it's not about imposing the designer's hieratic"

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 equivocal: admiring the experimental approach, questioning the results. While understanding the French enthusiasm for Brody – he makes an eloquent French gesture – one is more likely to find Hollis talking with Joseph Brodsky. (He was a director of the magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation* as well as its designer.)

Richard Hollis thus finds himself in a paradoxical position, though he is by no means alone in it, of a modernist defending some traditional, craft virtues. The computer, if he could get 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 publisher needing design direction. At present, it is unlikely to be an English-language firm.

Pages from *Godard* (1980), published by the British Film Institute. Hollis pasted up pages of text, which was set chapter by chapter as author Colin MacCabe wrote. Pictures are mostly freeze-frames, placed just where they are referred to. The side column gives the line from which headings and first lines of paragraphs are ranged. The design structure avoids the fetishism of the isolated perfect image, enabling the discussion of the processes involved in Godard's films
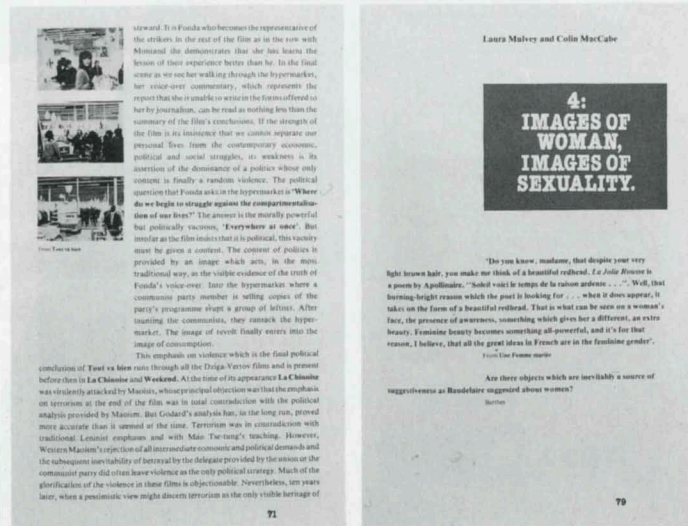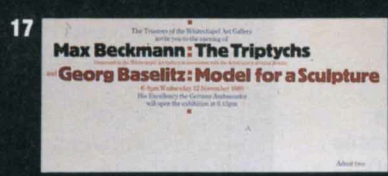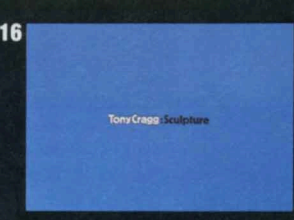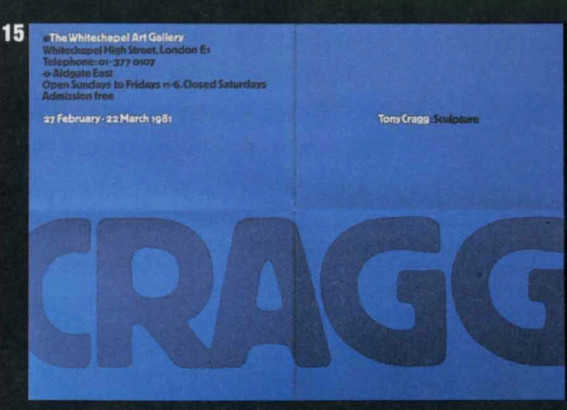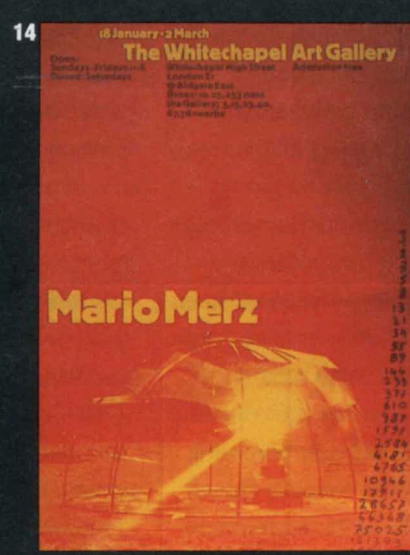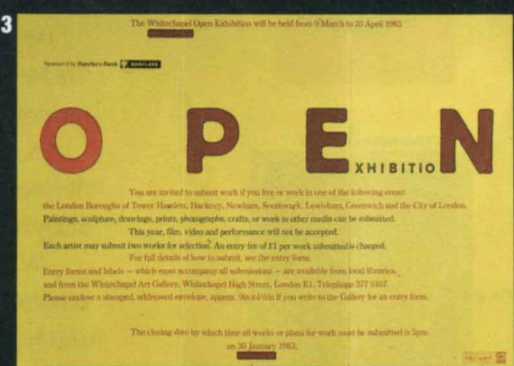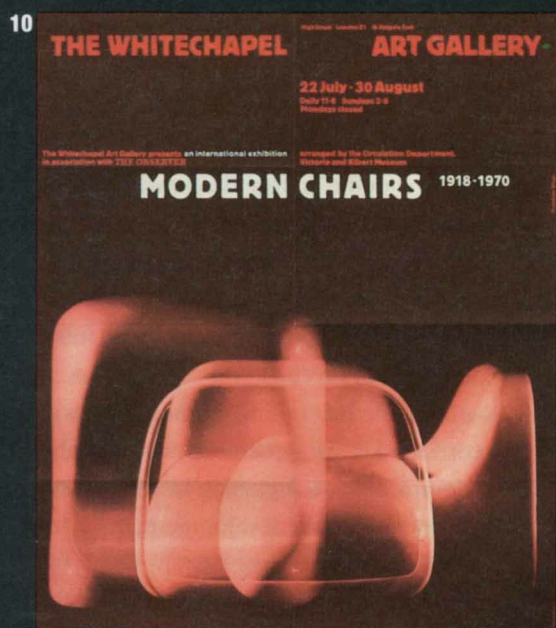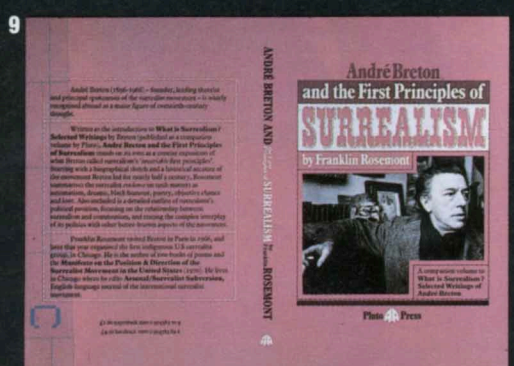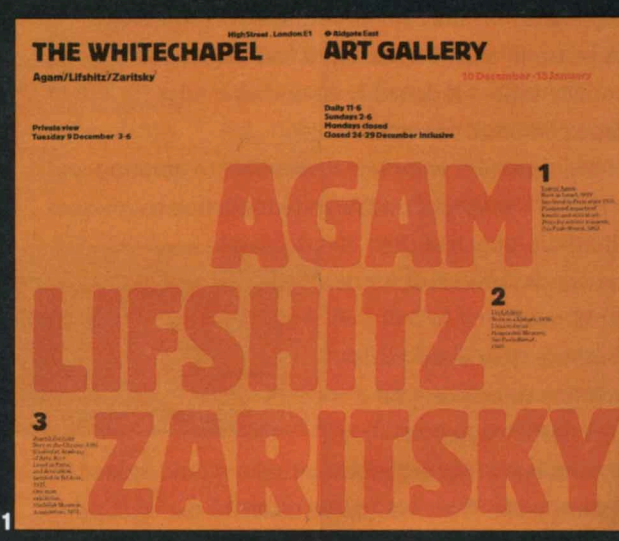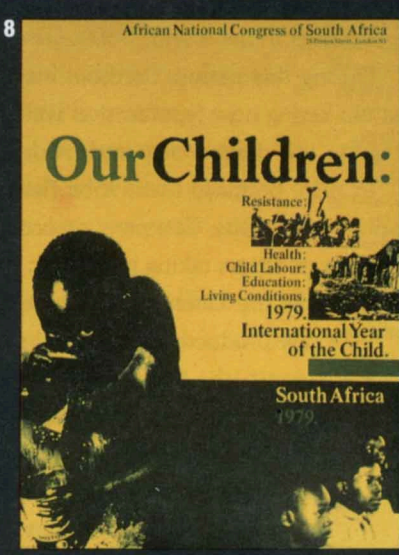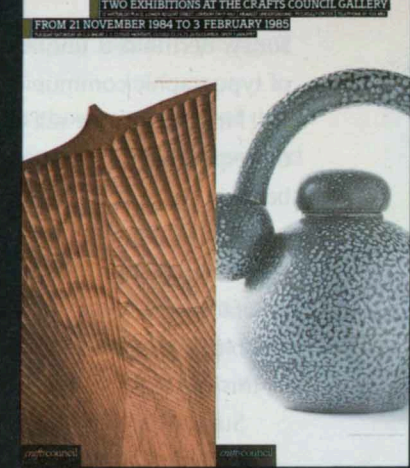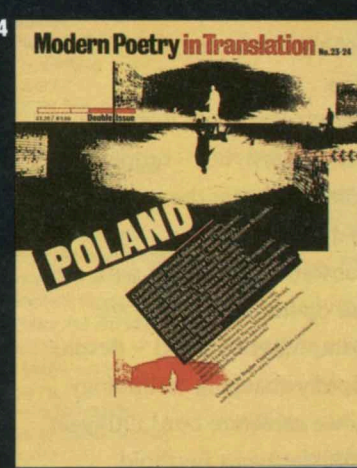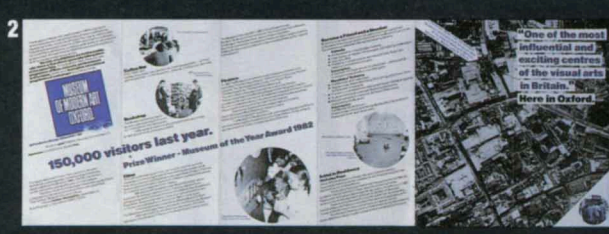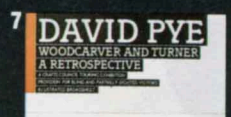
Specimens from twenty years of jobbing graphics illustrate Richard Hollis's inventive approach. For Oxford's Museum of Modern Art, an events sheet uses split-duct printing for a bleeding sun, 1; with publicity leaflet, 2. Covers for *Modern Poetry in Translation* in 1967 and 1975 show a loosening of approach, 3–4. For paired Crafts Council exhibitions, a poster, 5, is cut to make a folding exhibition guide, 6–7. A set of ANC posters use rough photographs and type, 8. The type on a Pluto Press jacket, 9, is appropriately bizzare. Hollis used the typeface Block, not then generally available, for the Whitechapel Art Gallery, as in the folding posters from his first spell with the Gallery 10–11. Delicate colour effects were achieved by tones and over-printing on a leaflet, 12, and broadsheet, 13. Two later posters, 14–16, use specially drawn, non-ranging numerals. An invitation card, 16, centres around colons