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## Visualiste

### Defining a New Job Title within Graphic Design in France

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“Visualiste” is a job title coined in the mid-1960s in France. Although Larousse’s Dictionary, one of the most comprehensive, popular repositories of the French language, did not include this term, it made its way orally within the design community and beyond. By the first half of the 20th century, graphic design had emerged as a new activity in Western countries.<sup>1</sup> Evolving at the intersections of different disciplines such as advertising, fine arts, illustration, printing, and typography, the terms used for this activity varied over time and were sometimes multiple in nature.<sup>2</sup> In France, the names for it oscillated between *affichiste* (poster maker), *artiste graphique* (graphic artist), *maquettiste*, and “visualiste.” In the 1950s, a growing professional consciousness emerged among graphic designers who were actively engaged to carve out a professional status for their activity by exploring their professional field and defining its boundaries. Finding and defining a new

generic term for it was part of this process, to which the rise of “visualiste” testifies.

#### The *Rencontres internationales de Lure*

The *Rencontres internationales de Lure* (international meetings of Lure) were held annually from 1952 onwards in the village of Lure in southern France. These offered a site where the status and role of the graphic designer were discussed, along with the possible names for the profession. The *Rencontres* were founded by Jean Garcia, Robert Ranc, and Maximilien Vox, and their main goal was to “[...] élaborer collectivement une doctrine vivante du graphisme International, susceptible de donner une âme aux révolutions techniques qui se préparent dans le domaine des procédés. [...]” (collectively develop a living doctrine of International graphic design and to give a soul to the forthcoming technical revolutions).<sup>3</sup> The *Rencontres* developed into a professional association in 1957, the Association des compagnons de Lure, and its annual meeting still serves as a platform of exchange where ideas and knowledge can be shared between professionals active in the fields of advertising, graphic design, printing, and typography. In addition, its steering committee has regularly invited personalities from artistic and scientific disciplines including architecture, psychosociology, semiology, and sociology to discuss topics related to communication. In order to give these



Fig. 61

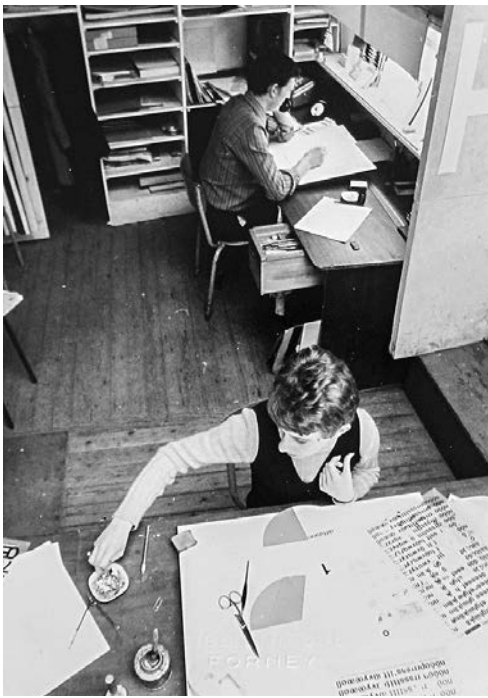


Fig. 62



Fig. 63

Fig. 64

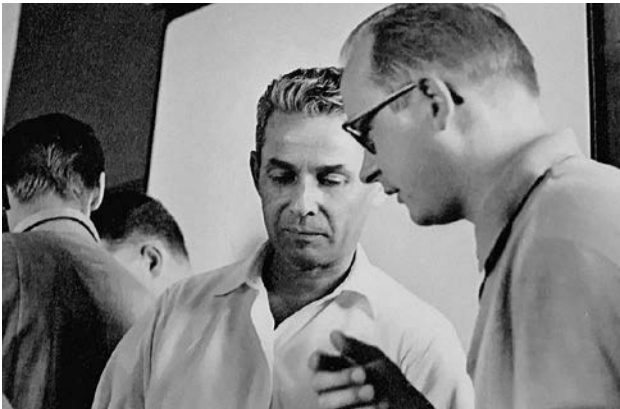


Fig. 61  
View of the second Studio  
Hollenstein, ca. 1960.

Fig. 62  
Studio Hollenstein's  
employees at work,  
ca. 1960.

Fig. 63  
View of the typesetting  
department of the Studio  
Hollenstein, ca. 1960.

Fig. 64  
Albert Boton, photograph  
of Albert Hollenstein in  
discussion with Josef Müller-  
Brockmann during the *Ren-  
contres de Lure*, 1965.

meetings an *international* scope, *foreign* delegations were soon introduced, and practitioners from Western countries were invited to give lectures, such as the Swiss Josef Müller-Brockmann and the American Aaron Burns. In their formative years, the meetings were dominated by discussions around terminology. Although the term *graphiste* was initially suggested as a generic term, it was not approved by the members of the association.<sup>4</sup> The annual report for the year 1954 mentions different terms in several languages, from *Grafiker* and *maquettiste* to *craftsman*, thereby bearing witness to a lengthy battle of ideas about appropriate terminology.<sup>5</sup> [Fig. 64] As Marina Emmanouil writes in her doctoral thesis: “the translation of foreign terms can introduce complexity to the meaning, function and purpose of design in a local context.”<sup>6</sup> The international dimension of this meeting could help to explain why there was so much difficulty in defining a French term for graphic design. But this semantic blur is not exclusive to graphic design.<sup>7</sup> A similar example can be found in the field of industrial design in France during the same period, as the historian Claire Leymonerie explains in her book *Le temps des objets: Une histoire du design industriel en France (1945–1980)*. She identifies the use of different terms as an indicator of discordance between practitioners who came from different backgrounds, and who did not share the same definition of their activity.<sup>8</sup>

### Forging and spreading the term

The concept of “visualism” was formulated by the French graphic designer Roger Excoffon (1910–1983) in 1963 during a meeting in Lure, in the same year that he assumed the presidency of the association.<sup>9</sup> In his new function, Excoffon developed a cross-disciplinary program that reflected his concept of “visualism” and merged “advertising, photography, and audiovisual.”<sup>10</sup> “Visualism” emerged first and foremost as a means of differentiation from the movement *Graphie Latine* that developed in France from 1950 to 1965. This latter movement was led by one of the founders of the *Rencontres internationales de Lure*, Maximilien Vox (1894–1974), and defended a traditional conception of graphic design that was in opposition to “avantgarde movements of modern design.”<sup>11</sup> Excoffon had a different vision from that of the members of the *Graphie Latine*. He defined graphic design as an activity oriented on images and the audiovisual, and less on types and drawings. Finding a new term was an intrinsic part of this intention to defend a new vision of graphic design. The Swiss typographer Albert Hollenstein, who was based in Paris, shared the same vision as Excoffon. He was the founder of the Studio Hollenstein (1957–1974) and a member of the association of Lure, and he played an active role in promoting the concept of “visualism” both inside the community of graphic design and outside it.

In 1966, the Swiss foundation of Paris and the Swiss Helvetic Studies Group organized a Swiss cultural week at the Cité internationale de Paris (Jan. 13–23, 1966), at which Hollenstein was invited to give a lecture related to his professional activity in Paris. In his speech, he described his profession using the term “visualiste,” and provided a clear definition:

Today, between the one who decides a message or defines the axis of a series of messages, and the moment when this message is printed or diffused, there is an entire profession: the *visualistes*. These are a chain of specialists: in design, drawing and the development of maquettes [...] type designers, typographers, photographers. And then there are those who realize the results: the preparers, calibrators, retouchers, illustrators, editors. These are professions grouped in a global, professional branch: *visualization*. This is our new profession. It is practiced in a team, in a structure. (Aujourd’hui, entre celui qui décide du message ou qui définit l’axe d’une série de messages et le moment où le message s’imprime ou se diffuse, il y a une profession entière: les visualistes. C’est une chaîne de spécialistes: en conception, dessin et mise au point de maquettes [...] créateurs d’alphabets, typographes, photographes. Et ensuite, les réalisateurs: préparateurs, calibreurs, retoucheurs, illustreurs, monteurs. Ce sont autant

de métiers réunis dans une branche professionnelle globale: la visualisation. Ceci est notre nouvelle profession. Elle s’exerce en équipe, dans une structure.)<sup>12</sup>

This definition provided by Hollenstein reflected the organizational structure of his own studio. He built a multidisciplinary team mainly composed of illustrators, “maquettistes,” photographers, type designers, and typographers who were surrounded by administrative members (accountants, secretaries) and salesmen: “a chain of specialists grouped in a structure” who were able to provide a “complete work” as outlined by Hollenstein.<sup>13</sup>

The working space of his studio was organized as an open-plan structure in order to facilitate communication between the different members of the chain of specialists. [Figs. 61, 62, 63] Hollenstein employed a rationalized working system that was based on scientific management methods developed in the USA and that had spread to France through different channels.<sup>14</sup> It was widely adopted by emerging professions, such as designers,<sup>15</sup> who sought to structure their profession along the lines adopted by Hollenstein.<sup>16</sup> Through his lecture at the Cité internationale de Paris, Hollenstein aimed to promote the concept of “visualiste” by describing his own structures. At the same time, he contributed to the dissemination of the new term among a diverse, international audience. This was clearly successful, because the final report of the

Swiss Foundation used the word “visualistes” instead of the term *graphistes* (graphic designers) that had initially featured on the promotional flyer for the event.<sup>17</sup> However, its meaning was still being debated among practitioners. This was the case in 1967 during the meeting at Lure, where the Belgian typographer Fernand Baudin expressed his concern about this new term: “[...] Qu’est-ce que *le visualisme*? Un mot qui se traduit par *design*?[...]” (What is *visualisme*? A word meaning *design*?).<sup>18</sup> The emergence of the term denotes first and foremost a need to provide a new definition for graphic design. Despite this attempt to promote it both in the international design community and among the general public, “visualiste” never became an accepted, generic term.

- 1 The term was first used by the American type designer W. Addison Dwiggins in 1922; see Thomson 1997: 35.
- 2 See Aynsley & Wolfsonian 2000; Emmanouil 2012.
- 3 Mazerand et al. 1973: n.p.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ranc 1962: n.p.
- 6 Emmanouil 2012: 34.
- 7 This was not a French particularity either. See Martis 1985: 15–21.
- 8 Leymonerie 2016: 17.
- 9 Sesma Prieto 2014a: 231.
- 10 Sesma Prieto 2014b: 3.
- 11 Sesma Prieto 2014b: 2.
- 12 Albert Hollenstein’s notes, Hugues Hollenstein archives, Tours.
- 13 Albert Hollenstein’s notes, Hugues Hollenstein archives, Tours.
- 14 Delamadeleine 2018: 769–770.
- 15 Chessel 1998; Leymonerie 2016; Martin 1992.
- 16 Albert Hollenstein’s notes, Hugues Hollenstein archives, Tours.
- 17 Fondation suisse, report of the Swiss cultural week, 1966, French National Archives, 20090014/260.
- 18 Quoted in Sesma Prieto 2014a: 299–300.