

BIBLIOMANCY



B I B L I O M A N C Y

an exhibition of holograms by
Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon

The Boston Athenæum
February 12 – April 25, 1998

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All other photographs
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As always, in the creation of exhibitions as complex as this one, there are many people and institutions to thank. We were extremely fortunate that the considerable talents of Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon came so fortuitously to rest among the collections at 10½ Beacon Street. We are grateful to them for preparing an exhibition of striking, almost futuristic, beauty, an exhibition that — despite its modernity — never loses its focus on the traditions that are implicit in all the books on our shelves.

The entire hologram project was predicated on the availability of a vibration-free platform (more often used for extremely sensitive medical tests) on which to photograph the book. The Athenæum and the artists are happy to acknowledge Alan D. Gertel, President of Kinetic Systems, Inc., of Boston, who generously donated this table to the Library. This gift was arranged by Moss J. Blossvern, and Craig Correia came to the Library to set it up and train the artists in its use.

Anna C. Jeong, a Manager at Integraf, Lake Forest, Illinois, helped to procure the difficult to find glass plates on which the holograms were made.

Chemicals were supplied by VWR Scientific Products, Bridgeport, New Jersey. Jess M. Klarnet of High Output, Boston, facilitated the rental of the complicated lighting setup for the gallery, and Bruce Campbell of Bennett Electric supervised the lighting installation at the Athenæum.

For the catalogue, we are grateful to Norman Bryson for his intelligent and thought-provoking essay on the holographic process, and to Judy Kohn, of Kohn Cruikshank, Inc., Boston, who designed the elegant catalogue and the exhibition invitation.

At the Athenæum, Curator of Painting and Sculpture Michael Wentworth has been a champion of the Library's artist-in-residence program since he engineered its revival in 1993. His choice of Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon couldn't have been a better one and, as supervisor of their project, he saw to it that they had the space, equipment, and encouragement they needed, and oversaw the preparation of the gallery and the complex installation

of the holographic plates. His team consisted of Art Department Assistant Hina Hirayama, Associate Director Ruth Morley, and Editor of Publications Ann Wadsworth, who worked tirelessly with him and with the artists on every phase of the project's development and realization. Conservator Nancy Coda did much of the installation work, with Head of Conservation Stanley Cushing and Conservator Barbara Hebard. Paper Conservator Anne Pelikan provided valuable consultations. Associate Director John Lannon oversaw the installation of the lights, and building engineers Frank D'Agnello, Guillermo Fernandez, and Nazrul Quadery prepared the gallery with their usual flair for the dramatic. Events Coordinator Monica Higgins cheerfully supervised the events surrounding the exhibition opening and lectures. Associate Curator of Prints and Photographs Catharina Slautterback, and Athenæum photographer Clive Russ graciously shared their darkroom space with the artists.

Our warmest thanks to them all.

Richard Wendorf
Director and Librarian

INTRODUCTION

*Artist-biographers
Susan Gamble and
Michael Wenyon
peruse the Athenæum's
new book bins.*



Reading the nineteenth-century archives relating to the arts at the Athenæum, one is continually struck by the Library's involvement with the artists of the time, and with the direct role it often played in the creation of works of art, usually as a patron or collector, but almost as often as a disinterested and benevolent agent in the facilitation of particular projects and promising careers. One of the earliest of these cultural interventions was the introduction of Horatio Greenough to the Library sometime about 1817, when Thomas Handasyd Perkins, the Chairman of the Fine Arts Committee, found him making a chalk copy of Binyon's bust of John Adams (presumably the marble in Faneuil Hall rather than the plaster cast the sculptor presented to the Library in 1819, still to be seen on the fifth floor). He introduced Greenough to William Smith Shaw, the first Librarian of the Athenæum, who promptly gave him the run of the collection and a piece of carpet on which to cut his chalk when he was moved to copy the statuary. The boy was twelve years old. He went on to Harvard, to Europe (at Perkins's expense, in one of his ships), and a distinguished career as the first professional sculptor in America.

The Athenæum was diligent in fostering what Mabel Swan, an early historian of the collection, called “the sober pursuit of fostering the arts,” and encouraged artists to make use of the painting and sculpture collections for educational purposes. Artists were quick to avail themselves of the invitation, and must have imparted a colorful artistic disorder to the Library that cannot always have pleased the orderly soul of a librarian. The positive value of artists in the Library was always recognized, however, and allowances were made. But in a growing city, a growing library put increasing emphasis on its books, and in the 1870s much of the art collection, built so intelligently over seventy-five years, was transferred to the new Museum of Fine Arts in Copley Square. With it went much of the Athenæum’s role as a patron of the arts and its close connection with contemporary artists.

In the late twentieth century the function of the Athenæum has once again changed. No longer one of the five largest libraries in America, the Athenæum has begun to place renewed emphasis on its traditional role at the cultural heart of the city. Exhibitions have as vital a place in the programs of the Library as they did in the nineteenth century, and lectures, concerts, and an occasional theatrical

performance go as far as we are able to gather all the arts under a single roof. For many years the Athenæum has done what it can to foster the careers of local artists and their peers in New England, as the recent exhibition “Contemporary Ceramics in New England Today” made clear last winter, and this habit of “fostering” — in combination with a consideration of the traditional role of the Library as a patron of the arts — has gradually evolved into the idea of an artist-in-residence program. It was clear from the beginning that the Athenæum had to play an important part in the artistic equation, and so it was decided that the work of the artist-in-residence had to be based on the collections of the Library, evolving from direct interaction with aspects of its books, or architecture, or art collections — or anything else, indeed, that might provide the necessary stimulus. This approach also guaranteed a natural means of interaction with staff members and readers that seemed essential for the project to succeed.

Thought and deed came together with near perfect timing in 1993 when Abelardo Morell, the Boston-based Cuban-American photographer, inquired about working with illustrated books in the collection for

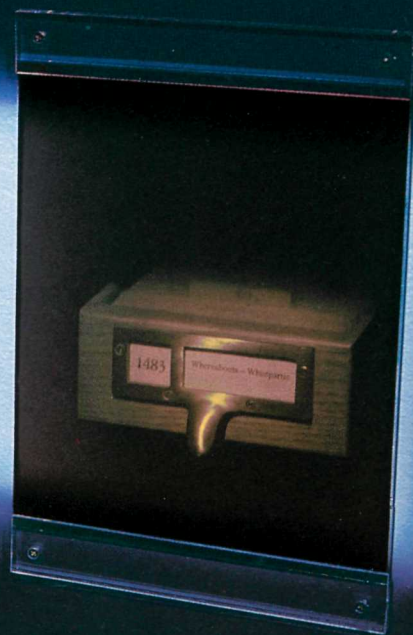
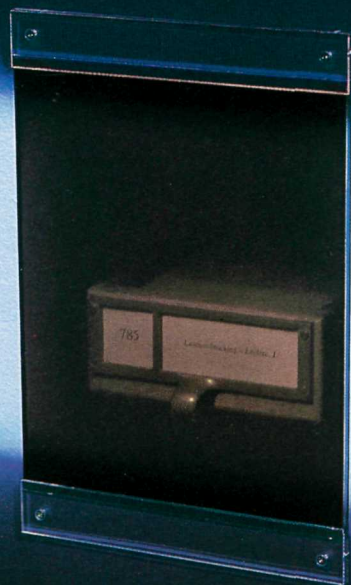
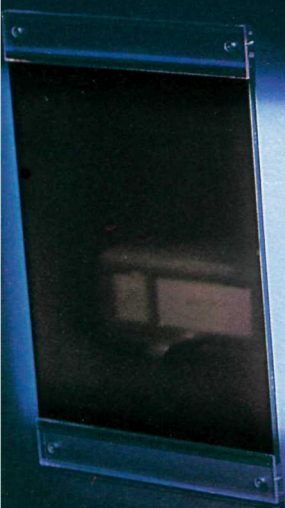
a series of photographs. An artist of immense distinction and a man of the most warm-hearted learning, he was made artist-in-residence practically on the spot. He was a perfect choice. We spent a rewarding year rediscovering familiar collections through his eye, and it is safe to say that none of us will ever again look at books in quite the same way. His work at the Library was featured in "Looking at Books," which was surely one of the most beautiful exhibitions ever mounted in the gallery. The elegance of his photographs — serene, witty, and intelligent — was more than proof that the collections could make new works from old.

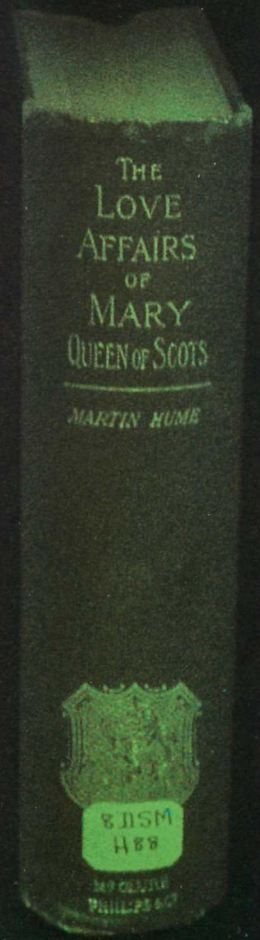
We have been fortunate in finding artists on our doorstep. Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon, like Horatio Greenough and Abelardo Morell, found their way to us. English artists who had worked extensively in Japan and were now living on Beacon Hill, they attended a new members' reception and with a drink in hand mentioned that they were in fact artist-holographers with an interest in books. A curatorial visit to their studio at MIT was followed by others, and they began work in the Athenæum darkroom in 1997. The spare elegance of their holographic images, balanced between illusion

and reality, asserting and denying the physicality of the object in the most tantalizing way, has given us the remarkable exhibition "Bibliomancy." The optical fidelity of their holograms makes their "books" seem magically tangible, and yet remote and inaccessible at the same time. In an age when the future of the book is being transformed by developments in communication technology, these technologically-based images pose intriguing questions about the future of the printed word and the book as an artistic object.

Michael Wentworth

Curator of Painting and Sculpture





BOOKS, TOO,
HAVE THEIR DESTINIES:
WENYON & GAMBLE'S
"BIBLIOMANCY"

by Norman Bryson

It would seem that every product of technology has its heyday. Black-and-white television gives way to color; CDs replace LPs. The pursuit of technical perfection means that, sooner or later, every one of the devices for reproducing sight and sound that we currently take for granted will one day end up on the scrap-heap. Yet in this general march of progress, holography is the one reproductive medium that seems to have never fully arrived.

When the news broke, more than a generation ago, that there now existed a medium capable for the first time of reproducing objects in three dimensions, holography seemed to herald a brave new world of 3-D cinema, photography, and television. It was true that the first holograms to appear in technical journals and science museums were a shade disappointing: the chess sets, suits of armor, daggers and still lifes did not quite live up to expectations. But that was presumably because holography was still in its infancy, at a stage of development comparable to the earliest experiments in cinematography. At least in popular imagination, faith in

holography's promise was for a long time unshakable. When, in *Star Wars*, the beleaguered Princess Leia sent out her intergalactic call of distress ("Obi Won Kanobe, you're our only hope"), her message was, of course, encrypted in holographic form. Later on, when the denizens of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* felt the need for some advanced kendo lessons, or a walk in a rainforest, naturally they repaired to the holodeck.

But over time, the promise of ultimate illusion that holography released into cultural space gradually became detached from holography itself. What was required of the media of the future was that they reproduce motion, like cinema: yet this was precisely what holography could not deliver. The *viewer* of a hologram might move about, but the objects stonily stayed put. Slowly the cultural fantasy of illusion's final frontier shifted elsewhere; currently it is synonymous with VR (virtual reality). Which leaves holography where, in fact, it always has been: in temporal limbo. As virtual reality began to assume the futurist mantle that holography had briefly worn, and the holographic medium could be examined more coolly, what became apparent was its stark anachronicity: it seemed hardly to belong to its own time, let alone the future.

Virtual reality is clearly part of the current wave of new technologies. It depends on the most advanced cybernetic system presently available, the interactive computer, and in its principles and procedures it is obviously part of the same generation of devices as the Internet and the Web. Holography, by contrast, seems scarcely to belong to the twentieth century at all. The absence of a negative, and of the means to generate multiple copies, places it in evolutionary terms alongside such early progenitors of modern photography as the daguerreotype — as does the hand-finished, labor-intensive method of its construction. Aside from its use of the laser, almost everything about holography suggests the nineteenth-century photographer's studio: the careful painting of emulsions on glass, the option of tinting in order to make the non-chromatic image appear colored, the painstaking trimming of glass plates by hand — even its use in "fine art" settings, to simulate traditional art objects, or to record the kind of artifacts that belong in the museum.



Artist-holographer Michael Wenyon considers the positioning of lights as he installs two holograms in the Athenæum gallery.

There is something about holography that is essentially untimely; it was born too late, or too soon; in a sense its time has never come. Unlike the Victorian stereoscope — or, today, the Internet — the holographic image has been curiously unable to forge any kind of serviceable pact — in order to sustain and generalize itself — with the pornographic impulse. Even the military have been hard put to discover strategically useful applications (though there are apparently some, in aerial combat). While other media lie so deeply embedded in their time that they can be used as instantly legible stereotypes for an era — the sepia print, the black-and-white TV — holography seems historically placeless and disconnected. Some of its aspects go with a nineteenth-century studio or craft world; other aspects seem to suggest an aborted future, an antiquated utopia — though perhaps the medium still has a little of its old futurist magic, its holodeck allure.

Yet this quality of temporal homelessness, of never fully arriving on the scene of history, is in fact one of holography's most intriguing properties — and one that Michael Wenyon and Susan Gamble play upon and elaborate, to the point where holography is able to challenge and dislocate our normally secure

conceptions of time, of progress, and of history itself. Being homeless, holography can only migrate in time, and as it does so, it is able to reveal something of the way that cultural processes, too, are never wholly rooted in their own time, or exhausted there. To be in culture is to move among many different times and spaces, within a present that is more like a palimpsest than it is like a fresh page, more like a nexus than a point on a line.



*A view of the installed
holograms in the Athenæum
gallery as seen from the second
floor Long Room.*

For holography's historically displaced and migrant condition, "Bibliomancy" finds a surprising counterpart in the world of objects: the book. The essential move of Wenyon and Gamble's installation is that of layering the hologram over the book, of mapping the book onto the hologram, in such a way that between these two apparently unconnected modes of reproduction — moveable type on the one hand, analog coding on the other — unforeseen resonances and resemblances begin to take shape. For in its inability to locate itself securely in history the hologram is not alone: its wandering, unsettled temporality is something that holography shares with the life of books — that is, if we understand the culture of the book in a certain way.

What "Bibliomancy" insists on, in the books it displays, is their intricate and idiosyncratic relation to historical time. It is, of course, entirely possible to understand the historicity of the book in straightforward, chronological terms. Certainly this is the approach we would quite reasonably take if our interest in the book as a form were strictly functional, or utilitarian. If I am a scientist, what I need to discover is the latest, the most advanced state of knowledge in any given field. What was thought about the field fifty years ago, or even ten, is of no concern to me. In fact it would

quickly prove disastrous if I were to base my inquiry on data that have become obsolete. Antiquated editions, archaic bindings and curious typefaces are sure signs of precisely what I need to avoid.

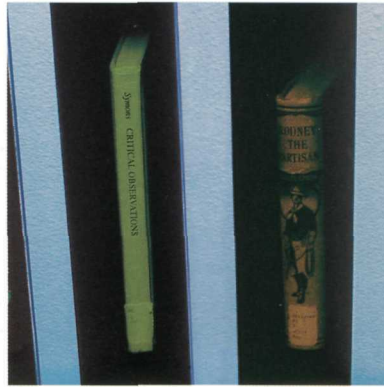
The perspective here, which is based on the idea of the irreversible advance of knowledge, is resolutely a-historical or anti-historical. Since the laws of nature are universal and unchanging, historical time has no bearing on my inquiry. The historical past exists in only one relevant form, and it is negative: I need to know when my information may be out of date.

It might be thought that this unwaveringly linear sense of time as unidirectional advance is a feature of scientific knowledge only, and that in the cultural sphere a different sense of historicity would necessarily prevail: why study history at all, if it is synonymous with error? And yet the idea of cultural time as linear — as an arrow that flies in a single direction — has in fact been crucial to the modern understanding of history. Each of the books in "Bibliomancy" is redolent of its specific, unrepeatable historical moment. Indeed, the titles have clearly been chosen so as to dramatize to the greatest possible degree the local contexts and circumstances of their production.

*Athenæum artists-in-residence
Susan Gamble and Michael
Wenyon consult the old Cutter
card catalog.*



Rodney the Partisan, for instance (to take my personal favorite), belongs unmistakably to one precise historical moment: its eponymous hero, wearing gear that manages to combine ideas of boy scout, explorer, Mountie, and head boy, could only exist in the context of the high point of imperial optimism —



and folly. The (notably slim) spine of the *San Francisco Social Register* similarly sums up a whole world at a particular moment, a world absolute in its sense of confidence, decorum, and exclusiveness. These two examples can stand for what happens across the whole dazzling array of “Bibliomancy’s” titles, chosen as they are for the resonance and intensity of their historical associations.

Each book speaks of its local, even parochial (in a temporal sense) point of origin, to which it is indissolubly tied. There would be no difficulty in ordering the sequence chronologically, in a spectrum from the oldest and most venerable (perhaps the decrepit *Essays Moral and Polite*) through to the most recent (maybe Umberto Eco’s *Faith in Fakes*). And the titles themselves describe a linear progress of history in other ways, as well.

For the books are hardly a random sample, and though each viewer is free to respond to Wenyon and Gamble’s holographic library according to his or her sensibility and inclinations, it is clear that the titles form clusters, or at least “waves” (with some themes emerging and disappearing, as others come forward). Many of these waves suggest historical thinking as the principal paradigm for cultural self-understanding. There is an implied history of the readers of these books, and of their changing interests over time: an interest, for example, in the connection with Great Britain (*The Love Affairs of Mary, Queen of Scots*; *Sir Joshua Reynolds*), and in Anglo-American relations (the wonderfully titled *Patience Wright: American Artist and Spy in George III’s London*, or, more down-market, *Celebrities of London*); a fascination with the pioneer history of North America (*The First Canadian*, *The Adventures of Lewis and Clark*,

Pale Face); as well as a concern for the shape of modern history (*How To Save Europe, Patrons and Patriotism*). The library provides answers to the epic questions: who are we? where do we come from? where are we going? The books' representation of the past suggests that for their original readers the volumes answered a deep-seated need to understand the world in modern and rationalistic terms, as the product of historical events and forces. Both the form of the books, with their intense period coloration, and the content of many of the titles, indicate the central role played by historical thinking, at the Athenæum, in defining a sense of cultural identity.

And yet in "Bibliomancy" the idea of history as a linear sequence from ancient to modern is constantly disrupted by another aspect of the book, its capacity for traveling — and changing — over time. The way that the books in "Bibliomancy" appear is very different from the random and collocated look of the volumes one passes by on any visit to the stacks: this is a very specific selection, a carefully crafted ensemble. Though each volume is bound to its historical moment and its local milieu, it is clear that their meaning as an ensemble belongs to the present — a present that none of the books could have themselves anticipated. They have been chosen

to represent the past *for* the present, and for *this* present. They belong to the past, and yet each volume has a trajectory that ends up here, in this new and very exacting collection. Though the books are saturated with the marks of their origin, each one has launched itself on a path that separates or cleaves from that origin and moves on into an uncharted future, to other times and spaces. "Bibliomancy" intercepts the books at a particular point in their journey, but they will continue to travel forward to new contexts and readers whose needs and interests are still unimaginable.

Walter Benjamin once wrote that what distinguishes the collector of books or the lover of books from the less impassioned reader is a sense that each book has its own fate: *habent sua fata libelli*. If I am reading a text for a course, say, in literary criticism, I may — ironically enough — be quite indifferent to the particular copy of the book that I am using. It need not be a first edition; an inexpensive paperback will do just as well. But to the lover of books it is not only the text but the copy of the text that fascinates, and obsesses: its physical existence, its craftsmanship, its story of previous owners and readers, its *sedimented* history, as an object that becomes layered and complex over time.

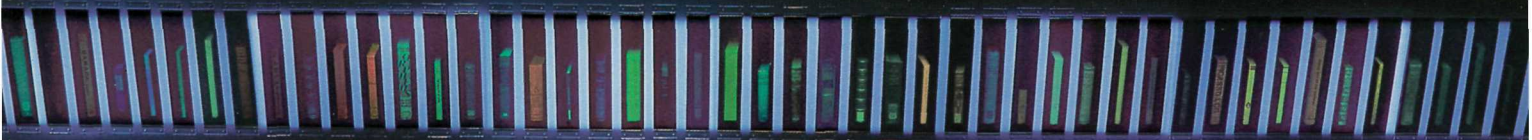
far left:
Artist-in-residence Susan Gamble prepares a book for laser photography in the Athenæum dark room.

left:
Three holograms of books from the Athenæum collections.

Wenyon and Gamble approach the book in exactly this spirit: like Benjamin's collector (in his essay "Unpacking My Library") they study and love books for "the scene, the stage, of their fate." It is the destiny of the book to travel, to leave its origin behind, as no more than a starting-point on a journey toward unknown destinations. In some contexts the book may appear charming, or ridiculous; its future effect may be to beguile and entertain, or it may act as a powerful independent agent, capable of changing the direction of history (the Bible, *Das Kapital*, *Mein Kampf*), or of transforming and enriching an individual life. If we consider the book as always existing in movement, in diaspora, its position in time changes: no longer confined to the past, to its parish of origin, it intersects at unpredictable points with the future; the book keeps returning, it constantly interrupts linear time. For the lover of books the discovery of an old book is an act of rebirth, of constant renewal. The historicity of the book is, then, in some sense an illusion, since any book that is in any way alive exists in the present, and only in the present. A book is a set of *potentials* that are actualized nowhere else save in the moment of contact with the present life of the receiver.

Like a hologram. For the hologram, too, exists only in the present time of viewing: that is the medium's unique claim to distinction. Though photographs are able to capture the instant, they also imprison it forever in that one suspended moment — which then dizzyingly recedes into the past. But the hologram, and perhaps only the hologram, is able to actualize the object within ongoing time. Though the difference between the photograph and the hologram is reputedly the latter's addition of the third dimension, depth, in fact it is the fourth dimension, time, that "Bibliomancy" explores. The books in the installation exist in a complex, recursive, jubilantly non-linear relation to history. Photographs of books confine them to the past tense, that of the fully accomplished action. "Bibliomancy" restores its books to a present tense which, nevertheless, travels in time and space to points past, present, and future. The truly fascinating dimension of holography, and of this installation, is its overcoming of historical fixity, or temporal closure: because the hologram exists always and only in the present, it can never be captured and confined within linear time. Its inability to arrive on the scene of history in any definitive or final sense is precisely what is magical about it.

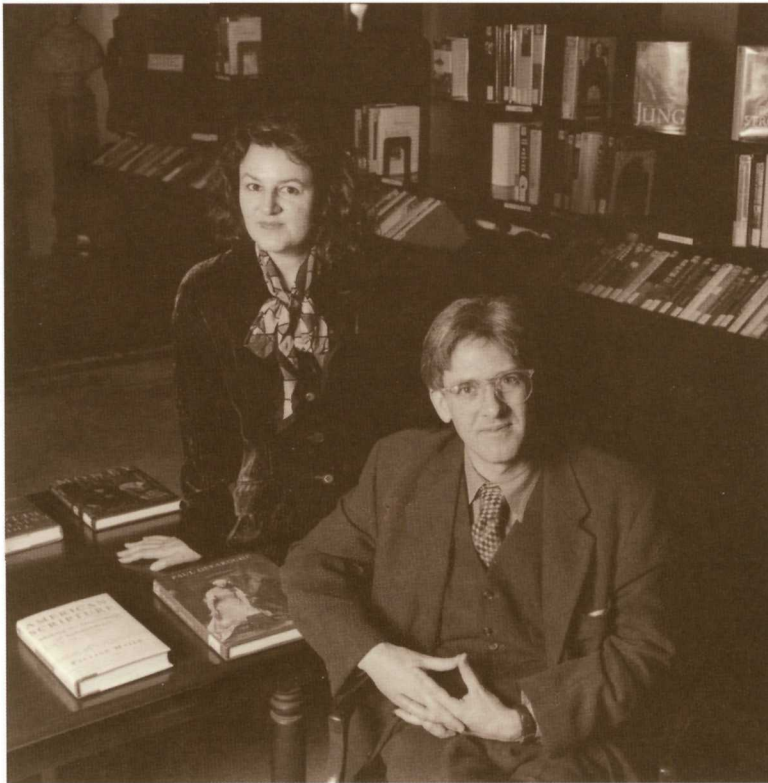
*Department of Fine Arts
Harvard University*



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they will continue
to travel forward
to new contexts and
readers whose needs
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still unimaginable.*



CURRICULUM VITÆ



Susan Gamble

born London,
1957

Fellow,
Center for Advanced
Visual Studies,
MIT, Cambridge,
Massachusetts, 1995

BA Fine Art,
Goldsmiths' College,
University of London,
1976-79

Foundation Course,
Winchester School
of Art, 1975

Michael Wenyon

born Dayton, Ohio
1955

Consultant,
The Polaroid Corp.,
1993-97

Winston Churchill
Fellowship, 1982

MSc Optics,
Imperial College,
University of London,
1978 BSc Physics,
Bristol University,
1974-77

Wenyon & Gamble

1997-98

Artists in Residence,
The Boston Athenæum

1996

Visiting Artists,
Haystack Observatory,
MIT

1993

Awarded UNESCO
prize for aesthetic
development of tech-
nological art 1993-94
Leverhulme Fellowship,
Royal Observatory,
Edinburgh

1990-92

Visiting Professors,
Institute of Art
& Design,
University of Tsukuba,
Japan

1987

Artists in Residence,
Royal Greenwich
Observatory,
Herstmonceux Castle,
Sussex, England

1983

Partnership formed

1980-83

Teaching at
Goldsmiths' College,
Dept of Fine Art,
University of London

Selected Individual Exhibitions

1994

"Light & Dark,"
Royal Observatory,
Edinburgh

1993

"Volumes,"
The Photographer's
Gallery, London,
and the Collins
Gallery, Glasgow
(1994)

1992

"Bibliography,"
Art Tower Mito,
Mito, Japan

1991

"In the Optical Realm,"
Wolverhampton
Art Gallery

1990

"The Heavens,"
Het Apollohuis,
Eindhoven

1989

"The Heavens,"
installation for
MultiMediale, Zentrum
für Kunst und
Medientechnologie,
Karlsruhe

1988

Musée des Augustins,
Toulouse

1987

Ramsgate Library
Gallery & Museum,
Ramsgate

1986

Williamson Art
Gallery & Museum,
Birkenhead

"Art by Laser,"

Salisbury Library
Gallery, Salisbury

1985

"Speckle Holograms,"
Goldsmiths' College
Gallery, London

1984

"Wenyon & Gamble:
New Holograms,"
Glynn Vivian Art
Gallery & Museum,
Swansea;
The Cooper Gallery,
Barnsley, Yorkshire;
Gallery Peter Ludwig,
Cologne

1983

Butler Gallery,
Kilkenny Castle,
Ireland

Selected Group Exhibitions

1998

"Dark Matter,"
Harris Museum &
Art Gallery,
Preston, England

1997

"The Physics of Art,"
The Fuller Museum,
Brockton, Mass.

1996

"Northern Lights,"
The Fruitmarket
Gallery, Edinburgh

1995

"The Landscape
Reinvented,"
The Mississippi
Museum of Art

1994

"The Ghost in the
Machine,"
MIT List Visual Arts
Center, Cambridge,
Massachusetts

"The Art of the
Book,"
Ruskin Gallery,
Sheffield

1992

"Installation Age,"
Tokyo Metropolitan
Museum of
Photography

1991

"Les artistes et la lumière,"

Centre National Art
et Technologie, Reims

"New Directions
in Holography,"
Whitney Museum
of American Art,
New York

1989

"Towards a Bigger
Picture II,"
Tate Gallery, Liverpool

"Critic's Choice,"
Air Gallery, London

Artec International
Biennale, Nagoya

*"3-Dimensionele
Fotografie,"* Perspektief
Gallery, Rotterdam

1987

"Towards a Bigger
Picture,"
Victoria & Albert
Museum, London

*"Kunstlichkeit und
Wirklichkeit,"*
Volkshochschule,
Wuppertal

Selected Writings

1995

Motoko Nakagawa,
Hon no bijutsushi:

*Seisho kara
marutimedia made
(History of the Art of
the Book: From the
Bible to Multimedia)*

1996

René Berger,
*The Technological Arts
at the Dawn of the
Twenty-first Century*

1993

Frank Popper,
*Art of the
Electronic Age*

1992

Toshihiro Asai,
Criterion IV

1993

Paul Barilleaux,
*New Directions in
Holography* (The
Whitney Museum)

1978

Michael Wenyon,
*Understanding
Holography*

Work in Public Collections

Victoria & Albert
Museum, London

Internet

1996

"Index," ongoing web
site work at
[http://world.std.com/
~wengam](http://world.std.com/~wengam)

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Susan Gamble and
Michael Wenyon (all others)

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The Boston Athenæum

10½ Beacon Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02108
Tel: 617 227 0270

