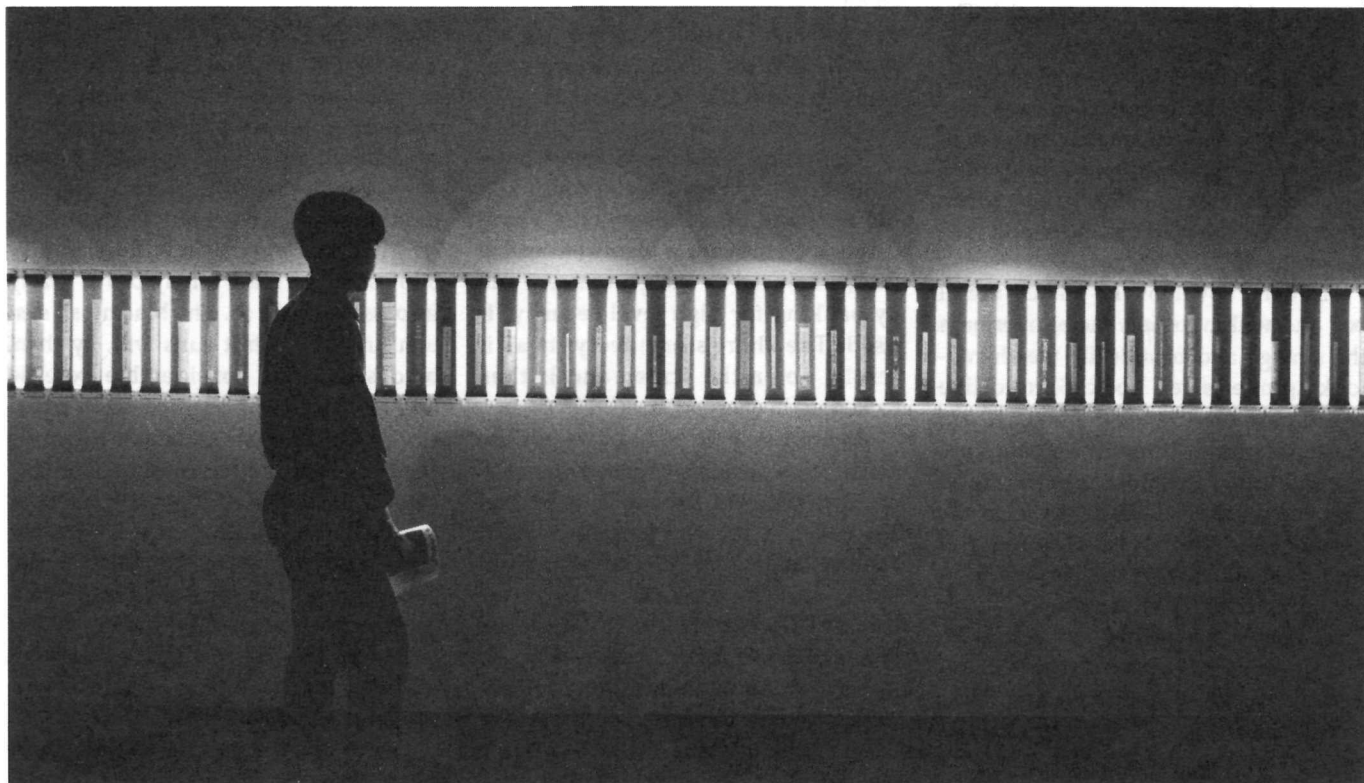


WENYON & GAMBLE

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Wenyon & Gamble, *Bibliography*, 1992

Michael Wenyon and Susan Gamble's library consists of 127 books which aren't there. They usually show their non-existent collection in sections of approximately 54 volumes, depending on the size of the gallery, and the combination of titles is rearrangeable and differs each time. All the books on view remain permanently at Tsukuba University in Japan, yet Wenyon & Gamble are able to exhibit them all over the world and have made sure they can be moved with relative ease. The works don't even require much shelving space – seen from a distance, they appear suspended on the wall inside a zebra of dark niches enclosed by strips of intense light. Viewed at close range, the spines yield the same secrets they would if seen in any other library and the covers recede into darkness, apparently normal until the viewer notices that they defy gravity and lean against thin air. Like fish in an aquarium, the books are exposed to the eye yet remain out of reach, their inner knowledge

intact. It would actually be easier to grab hold of a fish with bare hands than to grasp one of these books that float before the eye since, despite their three-dimensional appearance, they are pure illusion.

Wenyon & Gamble have been making holograms together since they were employed to create the Holography Workshop at Goldsmiths' in the early Eighties (Gamble had studied fine art at Goldsmiths'. Wenyon had done an MSc in Optics at Imperial College and was the author of the first text book on holography to be published in this country). Both wanted to push the boundaries of holography beyond its gimmick-ridden technical achievements and to begin an exploration related to philosophical and painterly ideas. Their interest in working with books was fired during a residency in 1987 (financed by South East Arts) at the Royal Greenwich Observatory, then based at Hurstmonceux Castle in Sussex. The pair worked among the Obser-

vatory's historic texts on the science of astronomy, its treatises on lenses and mirrors, light and optics, and used a far younger but nevertheless related discipline – holography – to comment on similar areas of investigation. The Observatory's copy of Newton's 1704 *Optiks* provided parallels between his practice and the modern processes used in making holograms and there were further links with the work of Sir George Airy (1801-1892) based on the defraction of light. The residency at Hurstmonceux resulted in sculptural pieces where books had a role rather different from that in Wenyon & Gamble's more recent work. Large black and white images of the Observatory's library shelves were projected onto backdrops behind easels supporting coloured holograms demonstrating the scientific findings of the authors of the books; Newton's Rings glowed in front of the tomes which contained the information about their discovery.

The same thread runs through

Wenyon & Gamble's later work even though it is presented in a different way; books on astronomy, art and science are among the chosen titles in their travelling library culled from the art department of Tsukuba University the collection of which contains Japanese and foreign books dating from a hundred years ago to the present day. The volumes are presented by means of a documentary form of hologram used by museums to record valuable objects for practical purposes, thus limiting as much as possible the element of trickery inherent in the art. Whilst the initial impact of the holograms is likely to cause astonishment in the short-term future at least, it is the cultural associations of the books which spark the greater energy. The ladder of images, still and mysterious, is beautiful in itself and pays homage to the instinct which drives us to catalogue and collect, whilst the spines act like markers in the chain of human civilisation. By simultaneously providing the container of information in a respectful setting and yet breaking our habitual 'reading' of the object, the display makes the viewer stop before the outer cover and consider the achievement of the culture which

has produced each book, freezing a moment which is all too easily taken for granted in daily life. The pages of the books we see before us are as unattainable as conversation with a dead author yet the images have an emotional resonance far beyond their own elegance. The rain may tell us that the spine and covers are not what matter in a book, yet it is true to say that most books spend most of their existence closed and viewed only in this way; using the language of minimalism, Wenyon & Gamble demonstrate that dormant texts have poignant voices too.

Working in a country where they didn't even recognise the elements of the alphabet (the artists took up teaching posts in Japan in 1990) finding English titles in the library must have been reassuring confirmation that the familiar, known environment was still ticking on back home, whereas the stories of actual Japanese texts were no more available to them than of those their hologram twins. Ruskin, Gombrich and Kenneth Clark take their places beside books which point up the contradictions of Wenyon & Gamble's display – *The Critic's Eye*, *Dark Matter*, *Hopes and Fears for Art* – and the (to

some of us) unintelligible foreign titles. On another level entirely, the strings of titles, linked and yet separate, form a strange poem able to be read backwards and forwards, just as the placing of the glass segments which contain the spines plays a steady rhythm across the wall. An added twist comes from seeing the holograms in an age where the rise of screen technology threatens to turn the traditional book into an endangered species to be found only in archives.

Wenyon & Gamble's library has not yet been seen in Britain although it has twice been shown in Japan (at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography and at the Art Tower Mito) where it was set alongside computer drawings relating to the books. They have been invited to work at the Edinburgh Observatory where (funding permitting) they will prepare work for the 1994 Centenary celebrations.