

# The Ghost in the Machine

Anthony Aziz +  
Sammy Cucher

Keith Cottingham

Kenjiro Okazaki +  
Yoshinori Tsuda

Jeff Wall

Susan Gamble +  
Michael Wenyon

**LEAVING** traditional photographic practice behind, the five photographers (or photographer teams) represented in this exhibition turn to computer technology in the making and conceptualization of their photographs. Roland Barthes' claim that "Every photograph is a certificate of presence" has become obsolete, for with these updated technologies comes the abolition of previously held assumptions and truths about photography's position in relation to reality and authenticity. In fact, every photograph presented in this exhibition is a certificate of absence. What is missing is evidence of the processes from which they were created. Also missing is the notion of the photograph as the record of one moment frozen in time. Playing with bits of extant photographic information over a protracted time, these artists both collapse and elasticize the familiar photographic moment. . . .



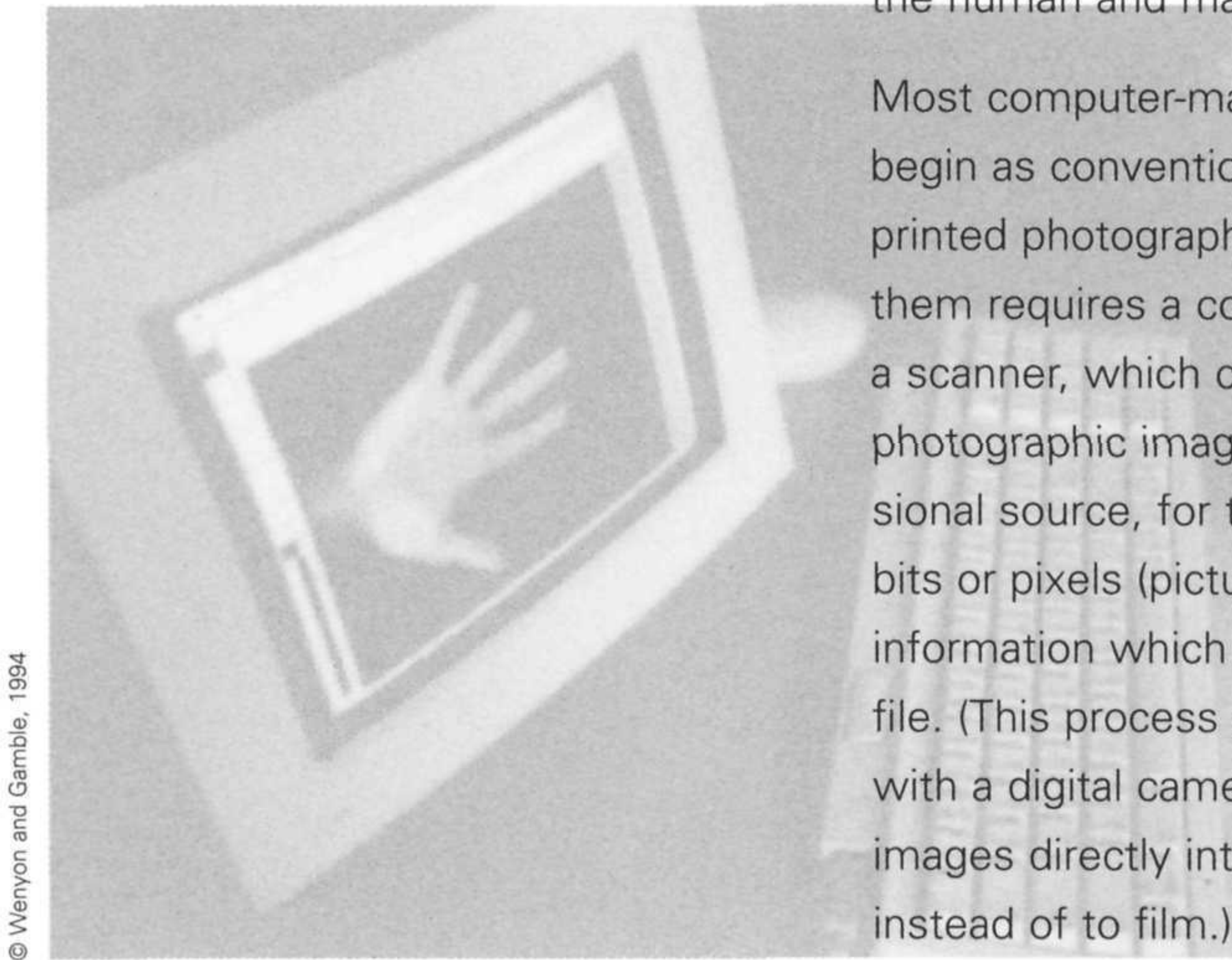
## The Ghost in the Machine

...The artists' own hands do not enter into the fabrication of this work. Significantly, however, the human body constitutes a critical touchstone throughout the exhibition. Though inhabited, there are no figures within these photographs with whom we can identify. Bodies are displaced or dismantled by the technological processes from which they were created. The photographs' surreality or unreality reveals a spectral presence born during the human and machine collaboration.

Most computer-manipulated photographs begin as conventionally developed and printed photographs. To manipulate them requires a computer equipped with a scanner, which converts a traditional photographic image (or any two-dimensional source, for that matter) to digital bits or pixels (picture elements) of information which make up a computer file. (This process can be refined a step with a digital camera, which records images directly into a computer file, instead of to film.) Each pixel represents a discrete numerical description of its size, location and color within the larger image and is infinitely manipulable. The complete work, therefore, can be adjusted on both a microscopic and macroscopic scale with a variety of tools, some of which approximate the capabilities of artist's implements and materials like paintbrushes, pencils, erasers, and paints. Like traditional painting, a work can be gradually created, part by part. The digital process also allows an image to be easily and infinitely replicated with no loss of quality. There is, strictly speaking, no original, a notion at odds with modernist standards of value.

Technological advances have always prodded artists, none more than photography. 19th Century painters such as Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec were beguiled by the camera's new way of seeing, and occasionally used photographs as sources for their paintings. Painters coveted photography's authoritative voice, its ability to freeze a moment forever, and its ability to render the kind of detail difficult to achieve in painting. But despite photography's great popularity, it was still a medium tethered to a machine. This mechanical taint, as well as its use for extra-aesthetic functions, were primary reasons for its ongoing struggle to establish itself as a serious artform. When painters began to wrestle with individual and societal concerns in the mid to late 19th century, photographers continued to concentrate on the traditional genres originally popularized by painters: landscape, still life, and portraiture. It was not until the early 20th century that photographers such as László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray eschewed straight representation in favor of experimentation with photographic processes.

A photographic precedent akin to digital manipulation is photomontage, practiced by artists since the early 20th century. Photomontage is constructed of collaged or multiply-exposed images which are rephotographed as a single photographic image, thus combining the pictorial techniques of modernist abstraction with the realism of photography. Photomontage can therefore express the Modernist's fractured vision of the world, in allowing multiple or conflicting points-of-view to infiltrate a medium thought to render absolute truths.



Detail of Susan Gamble  
and Michael Wenyon's  
studio



If we look for precedents to digital manipulation it may be more instructive to consider conceptual art rather than earlier photographic practices. Conceptual artists urge alternative, often cerebral modes of approach, and call upon the viewer to actively participate in the construction and unraveling of meaning in their work. In their hands the photograph is not a picture of something but an object about something. The computer is a natural tool for conceptually-oriented artists, as it is ordinarily programmed according to conceptual systems such as listing, categorizing, and language. If a digitally-manipulated photograph maintains any validity as an artifact, then it is as an artifact of the artifice, process, and conceptualization involved in its construction. Digitally-manipulated photographs may no longer represent the physical world around us, but they do convey the formula of the conceptual framework from which they developed.

The artists in *The Ghost in the Machine* employ technology to comment on its effects upon society. They poignantly convey humankind's increasing displacement in the face of technological development. Keith Cottingham subverts the familiarity of the photographic portrait by creating fictitious beings from an array of photographic and other two-dimensional sources.

Constructed within the computer, the portraits question the separation of image from matter, of soul from body. In Anthony Aziz and Sammy Cucher's *The Dystopia Series*, figures whose facial features have been digitally removed represent an extreme reaction to the dangers of society. Though safely barricaded from the outside world, the price for this protection is their complete isolation from human interaction. Kenjiro Okazaki and Yoshinori Tsuda employ still photographs and interactive electronics to explore systems of religion, economics and politics, as well as the worlds of cognitive science and technology, other areas where the invisible and intangible are taken on faith. Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon bridge art and science in their holograms and digitized photographs, combining objectivity with aesthetic allure. Their new photographs of scanned human bodies and isolated body elements explore the uses and symbology of the body in spiritual, medical and aesthetic realms. Jeff Wall has long been interested in experimenting with traditional aspects of narrative and pictorial construction. Wall now often works with the most available contemporary technologies to construct his pictures. He sees computer manipulation as "a way to infuse a kind of poetic sensibility into photography's inherently indexical quality."

How do we begin to imagine the future of photography? As photography forever reshaped the role of painting, digital photography will inevitably affect traditional photographic practice. More artful forms of traditional photography such as holography and pinhole photography seem to be enjoying a rebirth of popularity as photography drifts farther from its tether to extra-aesthetic function. Now that the veracity of photography is so compromised by the capabilities of digital manipulation, perhaps traditional photography will be free to enjoy a purely aesthetic agenda.

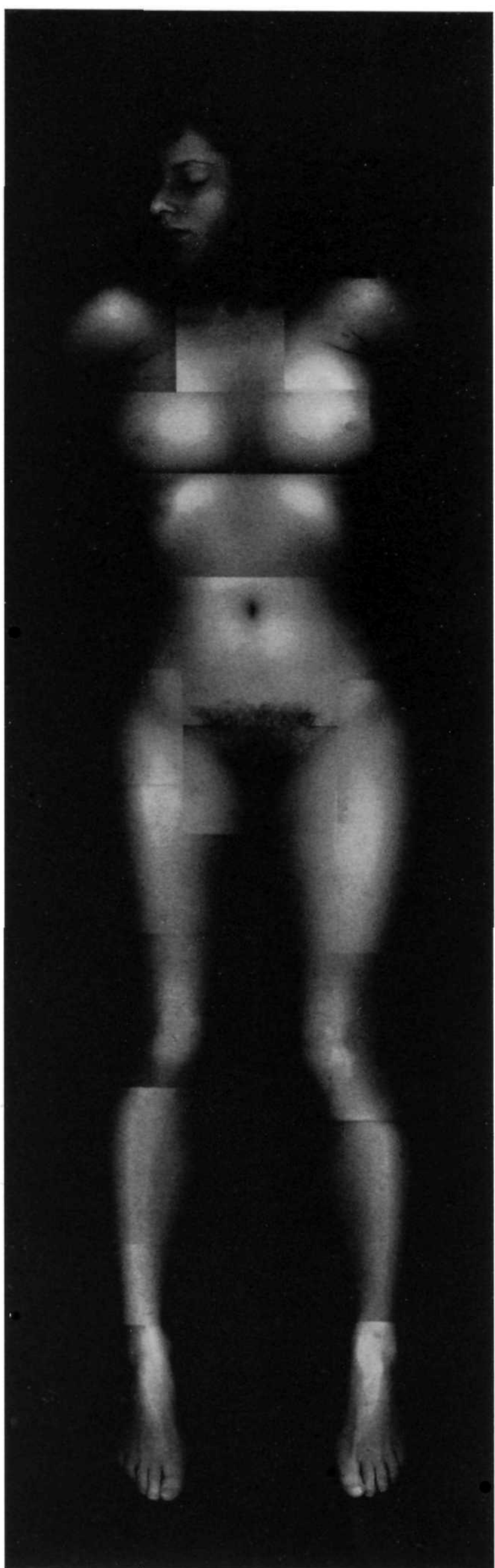
Will photography—in any form—be able to maintain a valid claim as a medium of representation? If so, would there need to be some official or government system developed to establish authenticity? Is establishing truth still important to a culture that no longer expects it in public discourse, advertising or politics?

Nearly 150 years ago Oliver Wendell Holmes referred to photography as "the mirror with a memory," and perhaps this is one historic notion about photography which still holds true. Although we may not recognize or resemble the figures in the photographs presented in this exhibition, they reflect both the current state of photography and the times in which we live, as processed through the computer's hidden studio within.

**Ron Platt**

*Assistant Curator*







## Wenyon + Gamble

There is a rich tradition of art emerging from and reflecting on scientific thought and development, whether Leonardo Da Vinci's anatomical illustrations or Howard "Doc" Edgerton's stroboscopic camera images. Since meeting at a holography workshop in London in 1980, artists Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon have explored the interconnections between art and science; in fact the focus of their collaborative output is the commingling of scientific inquiry and aesthetic visualization.

Wenyon + Gamble are among the few contemporary artists' whose primary medium is holography, a form of photography invented in the 1940s which creates illusionistic three-dimensional images in vibrant color. Holography has been widely disregarded as scientific or commercial novelty, yet Wenyon + Gamble have utilized the medium as a forum for their elegant conceptual investigations into the studies of light and optical phenomena. Recently the pair spent a year at Edinburgh's Royal Observatory in Scotland working on *The James Clerk Maxwell Tartan*. The piece comprised a large multi-part hologram, within the Observatory itself, which resembled both rainbow and tartan, in recognition of the Scottish scientist's heritage, as well as his discoveries relating to the electromagnetic spectrum.

For this exhibition Wenyon + Gamble invest the classical tradition of the nude with a more scientific sensibility in a new series of digitally generated and manipulated images of naked human bodies, photographed from life.

The pair worked with 'whole body' scans, and 'details' of parts of the body scanned—a thumb or tuft of hair, for instance—enlarged to such an extent as to verge upon abstraction. The whole body scans are pieced together from a sequence of images, each taken by the model with a hand-held scanner. The practice conflates the cold applications of medical technology with a more intimate self-exploration of the body.

Considering how the practice of digital manipulation disrupts the notion of the photograph as a moment in time, one is led to reflect how this work contrasts to the traditional photographic relationship to the nude, in which the camera stops time for a split second to capture "the perfect moment." These whole body images recall the recently deceased, when the clock ceases altogether, or a ghostly presence which exists physically only outside the computer. Starkly exposed in white against a black background, the bodies appear to float serenely in a tank of dark liquid, hovering mysteriously between life and death, ephemeral and material.

Left: *Untitled*, 1994  
laser print on paper  
72" x 21"

Right: *Untitled*, 1994  
laser print on paper  
72" x 21"



Oct. 8–  
Dec. 18, 1994

**MIT List Visual  
Arts Center**

Wiesner Building  
20 Ames Street  
Cambridge, MA  
Tel: 617 253 4400

**Exhibition Checklist**

**Aziz + Cucher**

*Chris*, 1994  
*Mike*, 1994  
*Lynn*, 1994  
*May*, 1994  
*Maria*, 1994  
*Martha*, 1994  
All works from  
*The Dystopia Series*  
digitized ektacolor prints,  
40" x 50" each  
Lent by the artists

**Keith Cottingham**

*Fictitious Portrait I*, 1993  
*Fictitious Portrait II*, 1993  
*Fictitious Portrait III*, 1993  
color copier prints,  
45 1/2" x 38" each  
Lent by the artist  
Courtesy Christopher  
Grimes Gallery,  
Santa Monica

**Wenyon + Gamble**

All works *Untitled*, 1994  
laser prints on paper,  
variable dimensions  
Lent by the artists

**Kenjiro Okazaki +  
Yoshinori Tsuda**

Excerpts from *Random  
Accident Memory*,  
1992-94  
slide projections and  
laser prints on paper  
variable dimensions  
Lent by the artists

**Jeff Wall**

*The Giant*, 1992  
Cibachrome transparency,  
fluorescent light,  
display case  
19 1/8" x 22 3/4" x 4 3/4"  
edition of eight  
Courtesy Marian  
Goodman Gallery,  
New York

Jeff Wall photo courtesy  
of Patrick Painter Editions  
All other reproductions  
courtesy of the artists