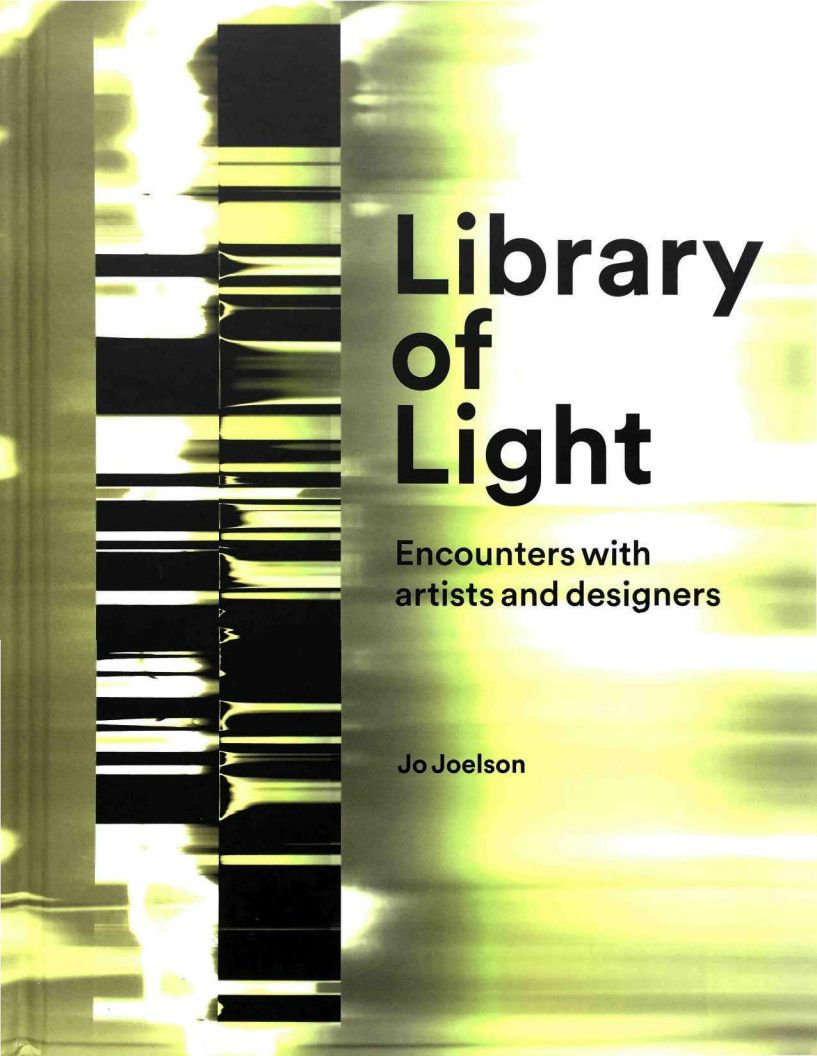

Library of Light

Encounters with artists and designers

Jo Joelson

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Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon

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The partnership 'Wenyon & Gamble' has been active for 36 years and during this time they have pioneered and mastered holography as a fine art medium. During their collaborations they have made work that has contributed to a new visual language, extending the perceptual possibilities of holography through its combination with other photographic techniques. They live in London and New York, with studios in both places, and their work has resulted from residencies in a number of observatories and scientific institutions including the Royal Greenwich Observatory and Royal Observatory, Edinburgh, MIT and the Boston Athenæum, with a period living and working in Japan, based at the University of Tsukuba, near Tokyo. Gamble has a fine art background and a PhD in the history of science while Wenyon studied physics and optics. They met at the Goldsmiths' Holography Workshop in 1980/81. They were made UNESCO Laureates for their work in technology as art in 1993.

Portrait of Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon, New Cross, London, 2017.
Photo: Jo Joelson.

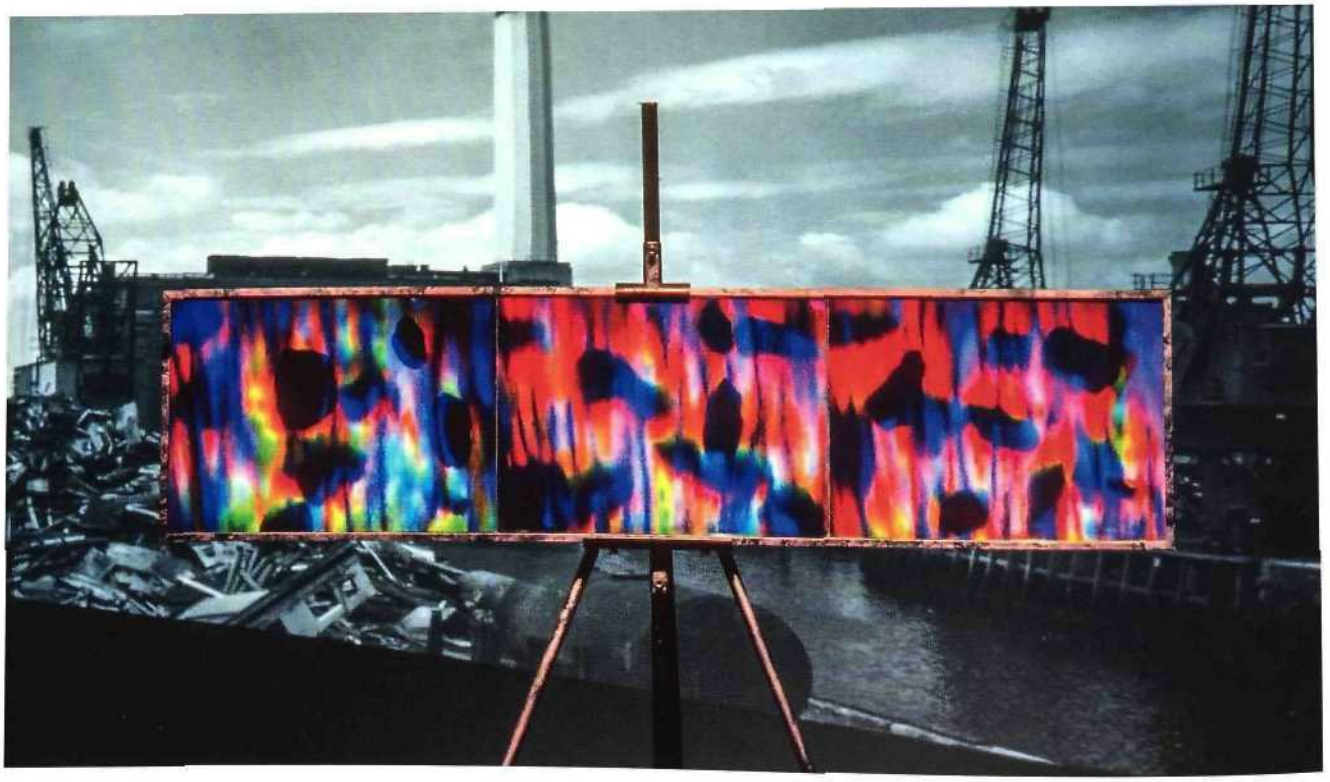
JJ: How do you think of your relationship to light?

Susan Gamble: It's our medium, and so it's everyday to us, but light can of course be difficult to manage and control, and in some cases dangerous. Because we use artificial light to make the work and then light it, we're always dealing with technology which is always changing, so it's complex.

Michael Wenyon: For me, well, I've been interested in light phenomena from childhood, keeping a collection of flashlights, interested in how light worked, how you could make something appear in the dark. I studied light in an analytical kind of way through physics, and during my physics degree I discovered photography. I wanted to be an artist then, for many reasons.

JJ: What then drew you to work with holography as a medium?

MW: I was a student in Bristol. It was the early days of the Arnolfini and I would go to all the shows. I got into photography and we had a darkroom in the house. The photography was more my passion than my degree in physics. There was a project to



Wenyon & Gamble, *Power*, 1987, H300 mm × W1200mm, hologram on easel, with black and white back-projected slide, shown in artists' studio in Berry Street, London in 1989. Work was exhibited at the Livesey Museum, London. Background image by artists of Ferranti Power Station, Deptford Creek, now demolished.

Photo: Courtesy Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon.

make a hologram – that was in the 1970s, you know – and making a hologram was nothing anyone in the physics department had ever done. My friend Julian and I did some research and as a result the first hologram we actually saw was the one we made ourselves. Here was holography, something new – it was that modernist impulse, new tools to bring new artistic territory. I liked the idea of having to understand how to turn physics into art.

SG: I was a fine art student at Goldsmiths College, when myself and two friends went to see the *Light Fantastic* exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1977. There were metre-square, laser-illuminated holograms – bright green, argon dustbins or skulls, or telephones. We were kind of punks, so it was the banality of the subject matter, the contrast between the theatricality of the light and everything really, that hit a spot for us. But I do remember there was one thing in that exhibition that ruined it – the futuristic, computer-generated music, Jean-Michel Jarre, or something like it. You would be walking around the exhibition, the lights would go out and a laser light show would begin above your heads – a grid descending to this computer-generated music. It appeared as if something solid was coming down above you; people in the audience would scream. There were other holography exhibitions that came after those at the Royal Academy that weren't as grand or as well designed but there would always be this kind of music. One of the designers of the *Light Fantastic* exhibition was Anton Furst, a film and set designer who had also studied at Goldsmiths. So to build on the interest from that exhibition, they set up the Goldsmiths Holography Workshop which is where I met Michael.

JJ: How have the various technological developments that have occurred since then changed your relationship to holography?

MW: Well, I didn't find that it was a very productive direction when claims were made for holography that it was this modernist utopian thing. After the 1970s I don't think anyone felt that and there was a more critical approach to technology. For me that somehow rolled into postmodernism and its concerns; something more complicated and critical seemed to be necessary.

JJ: How did that critical stance get embedded in the work?

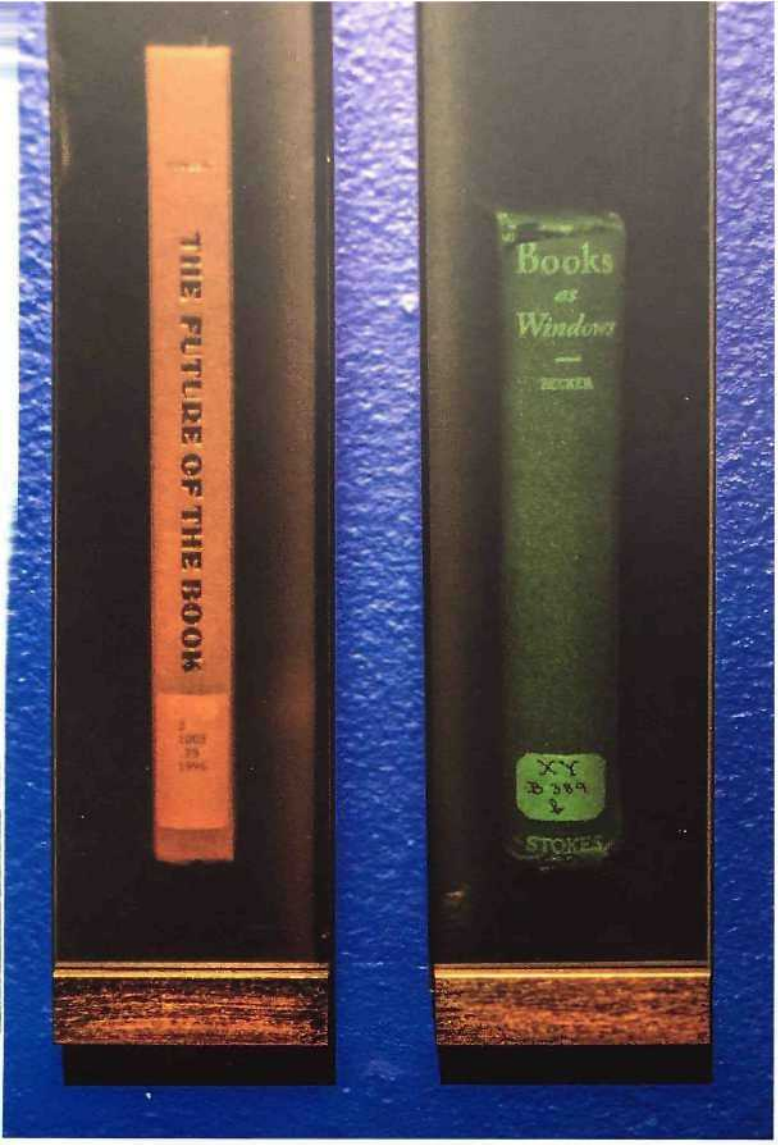
MW: There was a sense when Susan and I began working together that we were trying to undo this myth of holography. It was almost a way of working, to find something you were good at and undo it – not in a completely anarchistic way, but more of a way of understanding how the medium itself was mediating what you saw.

JJ: You were experimenting with the quality of the light and the final image.

MW: Yes, it turns out if you're looking at holograms carefully, one of the factors to be considered is that you're recording the whole field of light which is coming off the object, so it is the texture of light that is recorded. And the visual appearance of a surface finish is to do with how the light is reflected in the whole 3D space around it. We were making some not particularly three-dimensional holograms, but we were controlling the diffusion of light, where it was going, and its colour. Generally, this wasn't something that immediately came to mind with regard to what holography is about, but it became a very important property for us – and benefitted from us being a partnership: we could always discuss and develop ideas about what it is that we're seeing.

JJ: In the 1960s holography was promoted as a 'medium of the future'. Is there a leading edge today?

SG: In the '60s holography was taken up as being something that existed at the level of science fiction – that's what gave it its futuristic impulse. In the catalogue for *The Light Fantastic* show at the Royal Academy they cite the appearance of a hologram in the 1976 film *Logan's Run* as a means of depicting the world in the twenty-third century. And, yes, science fiction attached itself to holography. I think that's what we're seeing now when we see how the term hologram is used to describe any number of 'Virtual Reality products'. The leading edge will be with the military, and in 50 years' time maybe we will see what that leading edge is or was. Socially there has always been a drive towards the development of the possibilities in immersive environments right back to the eighteenth century



'The Future of the Book' and 'Books as Windows', two holograms from *Bibliomancy*, 54 holograms of books, Wenyon & Gamble, 1998. Each hologram is a H430 mm × W80 mm glass photographic plate. *Out of Place* exhibition at the Magnan Metz Gallery, New York, 2016.

Photo: Courtesy Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon.

– from painted panoramas to stereo photographs to holograms to computer-generated 3D films to IMAX. There's always going to be this desire for the immersive.

MW: That's one of the things I would probably call a myth about holography. My feeling about it is that if you described to somebody 300 years ago what photography was, they're more likely to imagine something like holography: you have a surface, you leave it somewhere, you record light falling on it and then you let the light out and people begin to see images, and because it is limited by an aperture, it is like a window you look through. I think it's actually more difficult to understand what the lens does and how it transforms the world. I sometimes say, if holography was invented before photography someone would still have to invent photography. There is no simple technological evolution that leads you from photography to holography.

JJ: Is it about time and re-animation?

MW: We've actually had the experience of taking holograms out that we haven't seen for 20 years. In 2016 we had a show at the Magnan Metz Gallery, in New York City, called *Out of Place*. It was work that we'd made 20 years earlier and shown in Boston, and consisted of holograms of books and card files from the Athenæum Library. Just seeing them again was as if I was back there, seeing the actual objects. They appeared to be present. We started working with books when we were living in Japan – it was a way to engage. We made holograms from the spines of the books. We cut the plates to be the same shape as the book. As holograms, the books just became wonderful, magical objects in a way I can't really account for.

JJ: That is a very literal 'library of light', isn't it?

MW: It is. And there have been other works by artists about books as objects. But during that time, in 1990, when we were living and working in Japan, we were beginning to hear of something called the Internet, that it was imminent. Immediately people were discussing what is going to happen to the book: will it disappear or change? We made a hologram of a book called 'The Future of the Book'. So we took a different direction at that point in that we were making holograms of not just any objects but very particular objects, books. Then we had a residency at the Boston Athenæum, which is a very old library, and we made a hologram library. Both the Japanese library and the Boston library are 54 holograms of books.

It also meant that from a small unit you can make a huge collection and we discovered the whole joy of the collection. It was as if we were actually collecting books. The library in Japan had

a fantastic selection of books. If you thought that it would be nice to make a hologram of a book with a specific title, they had a computer catalogue, so you could search for that word, then look for books that had that word in the title and select them. Every book that is in our 'collection' has been hunted down.

JJ: So when they were displayed, was it completely random or did you try to categorise things or arrange them in a certain way?

MW: We tried not to categorise them too much because we didn't want to impose a particular reading. The last thing to say about that is that it had to be a hologram – it was the very nature of the hologram that was important. Someone said to me recently, why didn't you just show the books? To us it was the idea that these books looked like they were there, but they weren't. It had to be the illusion of a book or a library to work in the way we felt it worked, but at the same time there was no art in the way we made the holograms. We tried to make them look as much like the original books as possible.

JJ: Susan, you have referred to your work as 'optical allusion', as opposed to 'optical illusion'. Could you expand?

SG: I think that the work, when it's put together as a whole, is more than just an illusion because it will give you this allusion to a bigger context, like a library or an archive, where we've chosen objects that make up a kind of environment.

JJ: So it's alluding to a bigger context, not simply a rendition of an object?

SG: It's alluding to a particular period of time and time itself, I would say – in the sense that one of the recent holograms we exhibited in New York is called *Silverware* [sic] *Before Photography*, so it's an illusion of silverware on a table, but all the silverware is made before 1839. It is very old and yet it appears to be very new. But we're hoping to trigger some thought about holograms and how it

Wenyon & Gamble, 2016, *Silver Before Photography*, glass photographic plate, H430mm × W320mm × D10mm, on table with objects, view of installation in the exhibition *Out of Place*, exhibited at Magnan Metz Gallery, New York, 2016. Works in background: (left) *Coal in Space*, by Wenyon & Gamble, 2016, three wall-mounted holograms, and (right) *Silver on Silver'*, by Wenyon & Gamble, 2016, four daguerrotype).

Photo: Courtesy Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon.

is one of the last analogue photographic processes, one that uses silver salts in the emulsion. So it's still made using silver.

JJ: So holography is not the only medium that you use in your work?

SG: No, we also use digital photography and we use ordinary photography and we've recently made some daguerreotypes, but all the media we use are photo-technological – I would say it's photo-technology.

JJ: Would you consider working with Virtual Reality?

SG: The Virtual Reality headsets that I've experienced make me claustrophobic because I'm very aware that I've got something strapped on to my face – I dislike that. What I like about the hologram is that you don't have to wear any apparatus to see it and you can come across it like you can come across any object; and you can always walk away from it, walk around it. I don't feel that Virtual Reality appeals to me in that sense in the same way. I think it would be good for pornography.

JJ: How would you categorise your practice?

MW: I think we're somewhere in the terrain of photography as art. It doesn't work to only call it photography, but there is an overlap with photography because we're recording light. Actually photography is used in so many ways – there is x-ray photography, film, analogue and digital, lots of different photographies.

JJ: Could you say something about the phenomenon of presence and absence within holographic art?

SG: You say absence, but do you mean absence when the hologram is switched off and it's absent? Or absence in the sense that the object is no longer there, it's absent? It's very interesting when people view a hologram and try to figure out what is different about it in relation to a photograph. When I look at holograms, at least our holograms, the objects in them seem more present, more alive almost than in a photograph. There is something about photography where you accept it as a past event, a past time, that it's encapsulated time. But when I look at some holograms, like the holograms we've made of objects, we try to light them in such a way that you can see the play of light across the object. So, if you're looking at a hologram of a box with a brass handle, as you move in front of it you will see light moving on that object as if that object was there, so the kind of physiological, visual cues that you are given are that it is present/real. To me there is a very strong presence in a hologram, stronger than in a photograph, and yet the object is absent. So the phenomenon of it being absent is actually only manifest when you can really say it is also present.

MW: I think holography as a medium has a rather peculiar relationship to time. Writing about our work with books, Norman Bryson said, 'Holography never seems to have arrived.' In a sense, the holography that people were promised didn't arrive in the way they were promised it would arrive.

JJ: Do you mean in a more technological way? Someone is going to appear before your eyes now in a kind of fantasy or sci-fi way?

MW: Yes, I mean there's clearly some kind of hunger or interest in the idea of a hologram. The word 'hologram' has been appropriated and it gets used to describe other types of effects. The idea of a hologram almost exists independently of the particular practice we do. You can't control that.

JJ: The experience of looking at a hologram, the object contained within, the subject has almost become a ghost. As Susan said, it's from another time but it feels like it's there.

SG: Yes, when I first saw the holograms at the Royal Academy, I did think that after that I would see a ghost, because in the way that science often informs us about the natural world, I thought, well then, if you can make a ghost technically, then why shouldn't they exist? The other thing about the hologram is it has become a word, a description that is used to describe all sorts of ghostly effects, like Virtual Reality. The entertainment industry has appropriated the term hologram, so you see rap stars or politicians appearing and appearing to interact on a live stage, and these kind of effects are described as a hologram, but they are not. That is not the technology that's being used. So the word hologram has come to mean 'a technical ghost' in a way, a kind of 'ghost experience'.

JJ: It's image-making ultimately, isn't it? You're using the tools in the medium of holography to realise image-making.

MW: But a hologram has a body. There is a physical object there and you can't ignore that. A lot of science fiction ideas about holography are more to do with almost implanting an illusion in somebody's brain that is completely free.

JJ: An image that is going to magic itself in the atmosphere somehow, without any apparatus?

MW: Yeah, the most recent thing we did in our show last November was we had a real object and a hologram. We just had very simple objects: one was real and one was holographic. This idea happened accidentally when we were setting up a hologram to look at it. Then we made the real object look like a hologram by lighting it with a coloured LED.

JJ: What were you trying to get the audience or a visitor to think about?

MW: Which one is real, I guess? I like it if people don't know they're seeing a hologram. It's actually an interesting critical exercise to apply to your work. Sometimes a hologram might fail because if you don't know it's a hologram, it's not interesting. It's a wonderful thing if you can surprise somebody.

I remember seeing a Susan Hiller show at the ICA and she had a slide projector on a piece of metal reflecting onto a wall. And all you first saw was this image on the wall made of light. And you had no idea how it was done. You could quickly find out. But for a moment there was just this wonderful magic, like you didn't want to know.

JJ: That is the criticism of science, that it spoils the wonderment, the illusion or the magic, when you understand the principles.

MW: I was lucky enough to see a James Turrell work in 1982 before I'd ever heard of him and in the very early works from that period he didn't use any artificial light – it was just a room with a wall in the middle with an aperture in it. You walked in one side and it appeared to be a grey painting on the wall – because the other side of the room was darker. And that was so magical. I walked straight out and then I thought I've got to go back and find out what this is. And then you discover it.