# volumes

## volumes

#### WENYON & GAMBLE

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY

### foreword

'Artistic productions, unlike philosophical thought and scientific discovery, are the ornaments and expression rather than the creative substance of history.'

H.G. Wells, The Outline of History 1920

The divisions and distinctions made between art and science are often overstated and misunderstood. As H.G. Wells's contentious statement testifies, the low status of art in the public imagination, particularly in Britain, compared to the value of science, is longstanding and only too evident. Yet the important interactions between the two disciplines - although increasingly visible - are consistently overlooked. Certainly artists have always been interested in science and technology, from Leonardo to Richard Hamilton (to use two well known examples), there is a rich tradition of art emerging from and reflecting on scientific thought and development. And of course the progress of photo-graphy over the last 150 years or so, and its much debated position within art, is part of that tradition.



wenyon & gamble's former studio at The Royal Greenwich Observatory, Herstmonceux Castle, sussex, 1987

The young British artists Wenyon & Gamble stand at the sharp end of this historical pattern. Michael Wenyon's background is in science - he studied physics and optics at Bristol University and Imperial College, London - while Susan Gamble studied fine art at Goldsmiths' College, London. Since meeting at the Goldsmiths' Holography Workshop in 1980 they have developed a sophisticated language with this medium, and the confluence of scientific ideas and artistic expression has become the very subject of their work. Volumes is their first solo exhibition in London and the most comprehensive overview of their work to date. The exhibition furthers The Photographers' Gallery's commitment to showing outstanding new developments from a broad spectrum of photographic practice.

Wenyon & Gamble are among the few artists who have successfully harnessed holographic technology to serious artistic concerns. In 1987, while artists in residence at the Royal Greenwich Observatory, they became fascinated by its beautiful library of books and particularly by its first edition copy of Isaac Newton's Optiks, published in 1704. Inspired by Newton's analysis of light, and seeing links between his use of light interference and diffraction and the inherent properties of holography, they began their own investigations into the science of light and optical phenomena. But, as they have said, 'Rather than commenting directly on the aesthetics of nature as revealed by science....we set out to refer to the conceptual process of science and its visual manifestations.'

Their experiments have since produced some stunning visual forms, exploiting the full illusory potential of holography while taking it far beyond the level of gimmickry with which it is so often associated. Works such as Newton's Rings and The Fringes of the Shadows of the Knives (both 1987) are confident and mesmeric abstractions that shimmer in vibrant colours. Responses to Newton's observations, they also conjure what we can imagine to be the hot-house spirit of his scientific enquiry. People have often referred to these works as having an 'alien beauty'. In the form of glass plates mounted on delicate painted easels they play on unlikely combinations of past and present; hybrids between old and new, they fuse early photographic apparatus with the latest optical technology. To enhance these qualities and to expand the illusory, artificial nature of the holograms themselves, Wenyon & Gamble have also created stages or environments for their work using theatrical lighting effects and photographic projections. Drawn into these installations the viewer's visual experience becomes also a physical, spatial one, where the real space of the gallery and the 'image space' contained within the hologram (sometimes apparently infinite) interact.

Volumes brings together the most important examples of

Wenyon & Gamble's work from 1987 onwards. It also includes the first showing in Britain of work completed while they were teaching in the art department of Tsukuba University in Japan from 1990 to 1992. In this work, Bibliography, and in a new related piece, Scroll, made especially for this exhibition, the artists have taken their fascination with books and libraries a stage further. Here books have become the subject, or as Chris Titterington has suggested, the 'phenomena' around which the works are made. Both Bibliography and Scroll deal with books as vulnerable artifacts of late twentieth century culture. The holograms and computer drawings appear to refer 'back' to books, as things already exotic; museum objects resonant with history and ideas, their form to be preserved, copied, schematised, symbolised and transformed into icons of a preelectronic era. In this more recent work the holograms have become simpler and more 'factual', the artists this time deliberately foregrounding and ironising the documentary potential of the medium. Here too the extravagant, theatrical installations built around previous works have been replaced by a cool minimalism that makes reference to the dynamics of a contemporary museum display - developing further the theme of marrying old and new, past and present.

#### David Chandler The Photographers' Gallery, London

## wenyon & gamble: the beauty of science

CHRIS TITTERINGTON

Like the best artists Wenyon & Gamble are concerned to create work that gives visual pleasure. Indeed, within current aesthetic conventions, many of their pictures are identifiably beautiful. Beyond the attractive surface however, and in a crucial way, the work would seem to be about ideas. Here I must make it clear that by this I mean much more than the usual sense in which all work could be said to be about ideas. Indeed, this work is much more than conceptual - its sheer beauty is a guarantee of that. What I mean is that the thing that stimulates them, the thing that seems to empower them to make the work, is their basic perception of the world of ideas - specifically those ideas encoded within the field of human activity we now call science. Thus the beauty of their work is less a depiction of the beautiful phenomena of the world that science investigates, less this, than an equivalent for the beauty of the ideas themselves - ideas that have become associated - even coextensive - with such phenomena during the historical unfolding of physics. This beauty then is the beauty of theory or of knowledge. But even this description may merely be a half truth however, for I suspect that their work's beauty is also an equivalent for their own experience as perceivers of the world of ideas and its loveliness, and the light in their work thus seems to be a reflection of their own minds – minds 'lit up' by the mental processes they survey in the history of science.

Perhaps this perception accounts for their preoccupation with libraries – particularly the library of the Royal Greenwich Observatory formerly at Herstmonceux, and the library of Tsukuba University in Japan. In the recent work *Bibliography* 

for instance, the books themselves become phenomena very like the natural phenomena their texts may describe or explain: just as the bubble chamber path is a trace of the passage of particles in space, words become a visible trace of where ideas have been. Significantly, in this connection, their choice of optical phenomena to use in the work seems often to be associated with the intellectual achievement of a wellknown scientist. It is almost as if the details of human history are of primary importance - the discoverer transcends the discovered. In some works that historical figure is Isaac Newton, in others George Airy. What seems fundamental to each of these works is that the visual form of the light phenomena described in each work appears to become an equivalent for the mental pattern of the mind that discovered it. Now this clearly relates to a whole area of epistemology that has been debated throughout the history of philosophy the question of whether the world can be separated from the artifacts of the perceiving mind? Such questions would seem, however, not to be the primary concern of these pictures. In a revealing sense I would suggest that the pictures relate to an area of esoteric imagery that was produced during both the late seventeenth century and late nineteenth century precisely the periods of Newton and Airy. Here I mean the quasi-scientific, mystical images of the type exemplified by the work of Robert Fludd, or by John Varley Junior's watercolours made for the Theosophist Charles Leadbeater.<sup>1</sup> The fact that these figures are associated with mysticism should not discredit them - their grasp of science may have been imprecise and have lacked rigour, but they understood something that in modern times is often missed, or suppressed – namely the insight that subjective experiences - ideas - are real phenomena (if one can use the word 'phenomena' concerning the non-material, subjective aspects of the world). Accordingly, the images Fludd and Varley produced attempt to picture this missing mental component of nature. In science, subjectivity is so rigorously avoided that in many ways it is made to seem an illegitimate or illusory part of the world, and their images were an attempt to redress this imbalance.

Wenyon & Gamble's pictures may work on many other levels – including the obvious one that they illustrate the beautiful and singular properties of light - but I can think of no level on which they operate better than the level of envisualisations of mental phenomena. If these artists are interested in the history of ideas, then they are interested in mental aspects of the world as they existed historically. Like geological ages, like species of plant or animal, like stages of biological evolution, even like events of human history, these ideas occurred - were real, and in their actuality gave rise to actual and vital effects. Indeed, what better visual form for the subtle mind of Isaac Newton – its complex harmonies and shifting inquisitive dynamics during his light experimentation, than Wenyon & Gamble's Newton's Rings or their equally beautiful and mysterious The Fringes of the Shadows of the Knives? I believe that Newton himself would have understood this turning away 'from the beauty of the cosmos'<sup>2</sup> inwards towards the beauty of the human endeavour named science; for Newton was less completely involved in hard science, with its emphasis on pure phenomena and knowledge for its own sake, than we would like to believe. Even if we discount the fact that he was involved in alchemy and hermetic philosophy, we are left with the deeper truth that his religion ensured that he was heavily anthropocentric.<sup>3</sup> For him, scientific knowledge still referred primarily to the human subject, and was thus not only a tool for human use in our dealings with the physical world, but a vehicle in the spiritual life of mankind – a tool for salvation.

#### Holography and Ornithology

A telling anecdote concerning holography's position within contemporary art theory involves the exhibition which (at the time of writing in April 1993) is currently showing at the Hayward Gallery on London's South Bank. This is the work of the American artist James Turrell. Amongst the light environments and models of his crater observatory project, are four holograms. Most people who see them would not know it though, for the pieces are almost without the illusion of the third dimension and what is more, Turrell has more or less concealed the fact that they are holograms – certainly the labels make no mention of it. To do so would probably have risked condemning the works to almost automatic disqualification from being taken seriously.<sup>4</sup> Artists have not been slow in recognising that the holographic technique carries with it a number of undesirable associations in the contemporary mind. These are roughly that the work is gimmicky in nature and badly made, and that the maker is likely to be only demonstrating the technique. Wenyon & Gamble have been all too aware of this situation but have chosen to confirm their allegiance to the medium while somewhat distancing themselves from other holographers.

Although holography was invented in the 1940s it has only become a viable medium since the development of a powerful, coherent light source - the laser - in the 1960s. Holography's effective birth then came at a time when art was enjoying a brief but highly charged love affair with science and technology. Indeed, as Margaret Benyon's show at the Lisson Gallery in 1970 perhaps demonstrated, holography was born into a welcoming world. However, as the utopian progressivism of the sixties was abandoned, holography fell victim to commercial exploitation and the attitudes I have described above. Worse still, apart from the work of artists like Bruce Nauman and Benyon herself, many of the early practitioners were largely attracted to the medium for its technical novelty, and the holograms they produced ultimately disappointed the larger art community. As far as celebrity goes, holography enjoyed a revival of sorts in the late1970s and early 1980s: not only were there cheaper lasers and even colleges teaching holography, producing a new generation of artists, but the currency of certain theoretical views of the nature of the universe and of man, and which used holography as a central metaphor, gave the medium a certain vogue. These theories were enshrined in the work of physicist David Bohm and neurologist Karl Pribram. Indeed in the pages of Revisions magazine, philosopher Renee Weber interviewed and hosted conversations with these two men and also embryologist Rupert Sheldrake - conversations where holography was used as a means of envisualising their ideas, and a new buzz-word was invented: the Holographic Paradigm.<sup>5</sup> In respect then of its intellectual credentials, holography took on, for a while, a feeling of the cutting edge of the new. Lastly, holography has enjoyed a brief celebrity in the aesthetic style of certain melancholic postmodernists - artists such as the painter David

Salle and photographer Frank Majore. Here the work mimics the look of early holograms – a kind of realism married with a strange feeling of absence – in red or green monochrome.<sup>6</sup>

It must be apparent by now however, that this discussion of holography's place in the artworld is deeply flawed in its basic premise. For one thing it furthers the misapprehension that there is a history of holography. Well perhaps, indeed, there is - if one looks for one; if one builds one, but the connections made between the practitioners in such an enterprise are generally superficial and tend to obscure the less easily identifiable concerns of the individuals themselves. In many ways I am reluctant to place Wenyon & Gamble in the context of holography altogether. As I said at the very beginning of this piece, they are creative individuals who happen to work with light and photographic media in a way that produces images bright in colour and with interesting illusory properties. These happen to be holograms. As the artist and birdwatcher Barnett Newman once said - "art history is for artists, as ornithology is for the birds".

Chris Titterington is Assistant Curator of Photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

#### Notes

Annie Besant and C.W.
 Leadbeater, *Thought Forms*,
 Theosophical Society, Madras,
 1978 (originally published in
 1901). *The Spiritual in Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Los Angeles
 County Museum of Art, 1986, is a
 good general source for the
 whole esoteric tradition.

2. Wenyon and Gamble, *In the Optical Realm*, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 1991, p. 3.

3. For Newton's esoteric interests see: F.E. Manuel, *A Portrait of Isaac Newton*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968.

4. For a longer discussion of holography in this context see my essay, *The Hidden Art, The Creative Holography Index*, Munich, vol I, no 1, p 1–8

5. David Bohm, Wholeness and the Implicate Order, Arkana, London, 1983; Karl Pribram, What the Fuss is all About: The Holographic Paradigm and other Paradoxes, Shambhala, London, 1982; Rupert Sheldrake, A New Science of Life, Fontana, 1981.

6. For a discussion of this see my *Light into Art*, New Scientist Magazine, 117 no. 1598, London, Feb 4, 1988, p66-68.

## works

1987 - 1992



newton's rings, 1987 300 x 1200 mm hologram on easel, with photo-projection

the fringes of the shadows of the knives, 1987 300 x 1200 mm hologram on easel, with photo–projection





#### Stella Maris and Radii

The image in *Stella Maris* consists of optical caustics, a complex pattern and phenomena inherent in light which can be seen underwater (as light passes through water) and in certain astronomical observations of stars. Caustics are of recent interest in optical physics because they behave according to the mathematics of catastrophe. They are random and chaotic. The optical caustics seen here are real, not simulated by drawing or computer; they remain an optical form in holography.

In *Radii*, large Airy's Discs appear through tubes, as if a star through a telescope. The differing sizes and angles of the image are due to the effect of colour on the human eye, they only *appear* to be different.

We present these works together, in an installation modelled on the telescope dome. We see them standing con-

ceptually as a pair, representing two con-trasting paradigms of science: *Stella Maris* is a complex and broad landscape, *Radii* is elemental, atomistic and narrow. The contrast parallels a wider difference between the more subjective and relativist picture of reality embraced by modern science and the isolated, absolute world pursued by the Victorians.

Wenyon & Gamble

opposite radii (detail), 1989–91 three 500 x 600 mm holograms above stella maris, 1989–91 five 500 x 600 mm holograms installation for *Les Artistes et La Lumiere*, Centre Nationale Art et Technologie, Reims, 1991 bibliography 1991/92 fifty four 430 x 80 mm holograms





zone one (from the heavens), 1989 50 x 1600 mm hologram installation at The Tate Gallery, Liverpool,1989

the book by its cover computer drawing, 840 x 405 mm





### book works susan gamble & Michael Wenyon

Michelangelo is said to have spent months in the quarries of Carrara, unable to tear himself away from the sight of all the marble blocks in which he saw the shapes of works without number waiting to be liberated. The scholar's quarries are libraries. His form of indulgence is the reading of catalogues of second hand books which, to his mind, conjure up visions of curious lore and possible clues to the riddles of the past. But there is at least one thing in common between art and scholarship: both may appear to be utterly useless – as useless in fact as are all dreams and memories.<sup>1</sup>

#### Bibliography, 1991-92

During a period of teaching at Tsukuba University in Japan, we found the art library there full of Japanese texts that we could not begin to read, sitting on the shelves next to books in English and other European languages. It was a peculiar combination of the strange and the familiar. In this foreign library we felt like tourists searching for exotic sights. We were scholars, of a new language and culture, looking for the points of contact and struggling to understand new forms.

The arts of the past are an important strand in the memories of mankind, and long may they remain so. Shrines, monuments and images remain in front of everybody's eyes when books are forgotten and documents buried in archives.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States a National Research and Education Network proposal exists to build a three-billion-bits-persecond communication network over high speed fibreoptic cables, with computers that can transmit the entire *Encyclo*- *paedia Britannica* in a second. This project should be completed in 1995 and will connect major universities and research institutions.

Language is not an organisation of natural stimuli, like a beam of photons; it is an organisation of stimuli realised by man, and as such, an artifact, like any other artform.<sup>3</sup>

Technology promises access to information without the need to see or handle a book: yellowing books and documents can now have their contents scanned in digital form onto optical discs. Perhaps the need for a printed page as the original form of any text will ultimately disappear. The book itself may change, take on a new form, perhaps losing the aesthetic character we now know. An old and fading book has a sentimental quality, having passed through many hands – surviving not only time but constant changes in the pattern of ideas. Accessing information through networks will remove this physical contact with text and language as objects.



We are coming to the end of the culture of the book. Books are still produced and read in prodigious numbers, and they will continue to be as far into the future as one can imagine. However, they do not command the centre of the cultural stage. Modern culture is taking shapes that are far more various and more complicated than the book-centred culture it is succeeding.<sup>4</sup>

This seemed an appropriate moment to consider the role of the book as a vulnerable artifact in late twentieth century culture. We decided to extend our cultural exploration of the library to the making of our art. The library of Tsukuba University would define a convenient boundary to our enquiries, its holdings of books providing the context to consider our own position as students of Japanese culture.

We were interested in recording books as three-dimensional objects in holograms. The idea of a holographic recording of a book seemed mysterious in itself, throwing up questions we were keen to explore and resolve. During 1991 and 1992, we produced 127 separate holograms, each depicting a single book. We used a straightforward documentary form of hologram developed in the Soviet Union solely for the documentation of objects, and used in museums there to record and display valuable items that might otherwise not be shown. It is called the Denisyuk hologram after the scientist who invented it.

The Denisyuk hologram records a hologram of an object placed directly in front of a photographic film or glass plate. The object may even touch the emulsion at one point. The emulsion is clear, or as clear as the manufacturer can make it, so that the object can be illuminated from behind the film or plate by light transmitted through it. The resulting image can be very beautiful, exploiting the hologram's potential to record details and texture at high resolution, as well as the play of light that animates a real object as a viewer moves past it.

The subjects of the books in *Bibliography*, the final work, vary from old Japanese texts on astronomy to contemporary art criticism. Their selection was not random, but followed certain definite – though varied principles. Although we could not read titles in Japanese Kanji characters, we chose Japanese books with as much care as those in the English language.

#### The scholar is the guardian of memories.<sup>5</sup>

Although the contents of the books in *Bibliography* are known to us, from now on they can only be seen; in their present form, none of the books are readable. There is a strange, perhaps private, pleasure in knowing that within our holographic book images lie so many inaccessible two-dimensional representations of the three-dimensional world.

#### Scroll, 1992-93

Scroll, a new work made for this exhibition, evolved in Japan during our work on *Bibliography* and is related to it in both form and content. In 1990, on a visit to the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto, we saw a scroll of drawings by Bernard Leach. We were interested to see a western artist's appropriation of this Japanese form and in particular we liked the glass weights that held the scroll open. We initially credited Leach with this device but, unknown to us at the time, nearly all Japanese museums display scrolls in this way.

The ancient form of the scroll has reappeared again with recent technologies. We scroll through text on a computer, and fax machines spew out long scrolls of paper. A scroll can have a strong physical presence: a museum display of a major work of Japanese literature, for example, takes up a large space laid out in its entirety. Making these connections we became interested in pursuing this form again in our work.

Over the past few years we have fabricated, or drawn, invented texts and book pages using computer programmes designed to manipulate photographic imagery for desktop publishing. These drawings contain a random face of text in which the printed words become abstract, reduced to a graphic symbol or texture.

In *Scroll* the computer drawings are combined with holograms of books similar to those in *Bibliography*. The holograms are placed on the scrolls of computer–derived pages in the manner of a Japanese Museum display.

#### Notes

1. E.H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse, Art and Scholarship*, Phaidon, London, 1963, p106

2. E.H. Gombrich, ibid, p108

3. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, Hutchinson Radius, London, 1989, p28

4. O. B. Hardison Jnr, *Disappearing through the Skylight: Culture and Technology in the Twentieth Century*, Penguin Books USA, 1989, p264.

5. E.H. Gombrich, ibid, p107



faith in fakes, 1992 3 computer drawings, 600 x 210 mm each

#### Susan Gamble

b. 1957 London BA Fine Art, Goldsmiths' College, University of London, 1976–79 Foundation Course, Winchester School of Art, 1975

#### Michael Wenyon

b. 1955 Dayton, Ohio Winston Churchill Fellowship, 1982 MSc Optics, Imperial College, University of London, 1978 BSc Physics, Bristol University, 1974–77

#### Wenyon & Gamble

1993 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 1983 formation of partnership 1980–84 staff at Goldsmiths' Holography Workshop, Goldsmiths' College, London

#### **Individual Exhibitions**

1992 Bibliography, Art Tower 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 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; Butler Gallery, Kilkenny Castle, Ireland

#### **Group Exhibitions**

1992 Installation Age, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography 1991 Les Artistes et La Lumiere, Centre Nationale 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

Künstlichkeit und Wirklichkeit, Volkshochshule, Wuppertal 1985 *A Imagem Holográfica* (curated by W&G), Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

Artware, InterMedia Congress, Hamburg

1982 *The Holography Show* (touring exhibition, organised by W&G):

The Orchard Gallery, Derry and Ulster Museum, Belfast; Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff; Wolverhampton Art Gallery; Spectro Gallery, Newcastle–upon–Tyne; Stoke-on-Trent City Museum and Art Gallery; Aberystwyth Arts Centre; Williamson Art Gallery and Museum, Birkenhead 1981 *Spotlights and Glass Plates*, Goldsmiths' Holography Workshop, Goldsmiths' College, London

#### **Catalogues and Books**

1992 Critérium IV, Toshihiro Asai,
Art Tower Mito, p3
1991 New Directions in Holography, René Paul Barilleaux, Whitney
Museum, p 3&
Museum, p 3&
British Photography:
Towards a Bigger Picture, various
authors, Aperture (New York) 113,
p 59
1987 artware, David Galloway,
ECON Verlag, Düsseldorf, p 12

*Holographie*, Peter Zec, Dumont Buchverlag, Cologne, p 165–167

Künstlichkeit und Wirklichkeit, 'Die Täuschung führt sich hinter's Licht', Pieter Friese, Volkshochschule Wuppertal, p 54–57

1986 Science\* Art, Tom Blekkenhorst and Ansvan Berkum, Fentener van Vlissingen Foundation, Utrecht, p 58-59

1985 *A Imagem Holográfica*, Wenyon & Gamble, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

1984 Wenyon & Gamble, New Holograms, 'Duped by Their Art', David Briers, Glynn Vivian Art Gallery & Museum, Swansea

1978 Understanding Holography, Michael Wenyon, David & Charles Ltd, Newton Abbot, Devon

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