

Words and images in time and space: An exploration of the use of text in fine-art holography

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Abstract

This paper explores the tradition and current usage of text in fine-art holography. Transporting written material from a page or a computer screen into another medium profoundly alters or influences the meaning of the words and the visual context they then inhabit. Fine-art holographers have used text and lettering in their work in many ways to enrich the communication between artist and audience. Some of these explorations have included: using text to escape the mimetic element of the medium of holography; expanding on the effects of concrete poetry using movement in three-dimensions; incorporating text and lettering in holographic images as a metaphor for the storage of knowledge; and using fragments of text and lettering to depict or emphasise the difficulties inherent in communicating through both media – art and writing. This paper examines some of these approaches and argues the interactive effect of text and image allows the holographic artist to reach towards a deeper communication with the audience.

1. Introduction

Text – words or lettering – has been an integral part of creative image-making ever since the ancient Egyptians used hieroglyphics and the Chinese used decorative calligraphy as forms of visual communication. In Western art the integration of text and image can be traced back to the illumination of religious manuscripts in the Middle Age. This paper explores how modern and contemporary artists, especially fine-art holographers, have used text, and aims to answer the question: how does the use of text enrich a work of art?

1.1. 2D/3D: Public space made private

Modern and contemporary artists have explored the use of text and spatial dimension to investigate issues of public and personal life. In 1912 Braque and Picasso's experimentation in painting with analytic cubism led them to expand the surface of the canvas outward, towards their audience. Collage was born when they began to use found graphics, in the form of advertisements and newspapers, and built fragments of the everyday world onto the surface of their paintings. Picasso and Braque created a new creative space with their synthetic cubist works, creating a three-dimensional image out of a two-dimensional surface. This creative space reached outward, beyond the surface of the painting, making inroads into their viewer's physical and psychological space. The public world is brought into the realm of private or personal space – as illustrated in Picasso's 1913 paper collage consisting of charcoal, India ink and chalk on paper, *Guitar* [1]. The painting included ripped newspaper cuttings describing political events, and

wallpaper, juxtaposing the personal and political in a domestic setting.

Using text in a way to build on the tradition of using the printed word in collage, fine-art holographer Douglas Tyler produced a mixed media work, including reflection holography and found objects in his 1997 *Ephemeral Garden*. Tyler [2] described his work as:

...seeking answers in our new landscape by collecting and gathering. For me, the code to our civilization, which we ceaselessly seek to comprehend and understand, lies hidden in the complex mosaic of everyday errata and ephemera about issues such as gender, race, breast cancer....

Tyler's use of text and holographic imagery brings the outside in to the viewer, exploring public and private worlds. The printed, formal text is juxtaposed with the intimacy of the images inside the holograms in an attempt to make personal sense of the outside.

Other contemporary artists collect text and use it to opposite effect – rather than taking the public world and making it private. The American conceptual artist Jenny Holzer uses public media to display the intimate. In *For the City*, projected on the Fifth Avenue side of the New York Public Library, October 6–9, 2005 [3], Holzer uses a two-dimensional project of text onto three-dimensional surfaces to blur the boundaries between personal and public space.

Holzer uses text to claim back public space previously claimed by the commercial world of advertising. The viewer expects to see advertisements when in public; Holzer subverts these expectations by overlaying two-dimensional text which projects very personal or intimate ideas to the outside world. For example, in her 1986 work which appeared on a theatre marquee in New York, the text said "... it is in your



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

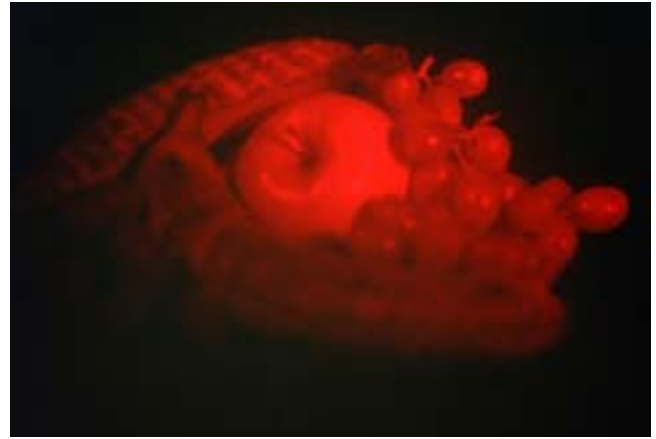


Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

self-interest to try to be very tender..." [4]. Holzer brings contemporary fine art out of the gallery space and into the public realm.

Inspired by Holzer's work, the author overlaid two-dimensional text onto three-dimensional surfaces in the *Food* series produced in 2002 [5]. The laser transmission master holograms *Breakfast* and *Lunch* are shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 3 depicting laser-etched words and lettering on bread and fruit. The author projects unexpressed desires onto external objects and describes the imposition of different cultural meanings onto food in these works, making the private – or intimate – public. Text was also used on the framing of the holograms, further emphasising an escape from the interior world of the hologram, outward, towards the viewer.

Q.1

1.2. Art, holography and deception

Artists have used text to draw the viewer's attention to the surface of an artwork to remind the viewer of the artifice of the image. Traditional artists and holographers used text

to escape the mimetic nature of art. In 1929, painter Rene Magritte brought his audience's attention to the artifice of representational painting with *Betrayal of Images* in which he depicted a pipe with the words 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' or 'This is not a pipe' underneath [6]. It wasn't a pipe – it was the representation of a pipe.

Holographic artists have similarly displayed a desire to remind their audience of the deception of the medium. Margaret Benyon's *Penetrate the surface...* [7] is a version of *Wrapped Flowers*, which draws the viewer's attention to the surface of the holographic film. The hologram has marks and the text 'Penetrate the surface of the emulsion...' written with silver pen on the surface of the glass. Benyon explains that "small silver pen markings tie the three-dimensional image to the two-dimensional surface of the holograms, so that both interact".

Holography is a unique art form. There is a space behind the surface of the plate or film, which the fine-art holographer uses creatively within the hologram. Also, there is a space in front of the medium itself: the artist can select images to ensure they project outward beyond the surface of the film.



Fig. 5.

These interiors and exterior creative spaces are bisected by the surface of the material on which the holograms rests – known to holographers as the plane of the image. Benyon explains her:

...written instruction to the viewer to 'penetrate the surface of the emulsion' eludes both to the physical act of viewing the hologram beyond the image plane, and the meta-physical act of penetrating superficial appearances.

The text in the author's hologram *Push* 2003 [8], in which the palm of a hand presses firmly up against the holographic plane of the image, emphasises the surface or plane of the image. The text was produced by laser-etching a word onto the mirror that the transparent film hologram was overlaid on. The text was taken from a book entitled *Boundary Power* by M O'Neil, C and E Newbold [9]. It describes the need for having strong emotional – or psychological – boundaries between people. The hand emphasises the boundary of the inside world or space within the hologram and the viewer's world outside the hologram. The fact the hand presses against the inside surface of the glass between viewer and the space within the hologram focuses the audience's attention on the boundary between them and the interior world of the holographic image.

1.3. Holography and information storage

Holography is a remarkable medium known for its capacity for storing large amounts of data. Artists have used different media to collect information and materials to catalogue parts of life, emotions, thoughts and ideas. American sculptor Joseph Cornell, pioneer of assemblage, produced boxes, often glass-fronted, containing collections of found items and precious information. The effects were nostalgic and surreal. Cornell often used text – either painted or collaged – from found printed material. His boxes contained within their space catalogues of items, carefully stored and combined.

Marie-Christiane Mathieu in *Margaret, Gregory and Me* (Fig. 4) produced in 1997 at the Academy of Media Arts (Cologne) [10] uses holographic text to explore historical research. This work, which included the conversion of



Fig. 6.

video footage into animated holograms (or stereograms), documented research gathered by the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead on both the visible and invisible aspects of Balinese culture. The holographic text in the piece appears to cast a shadow on the wall behind it. The holographic film, which appears to hang in space, is mounted on glass leaning against the wall. However, the words which appear in shadows behind the hologram are different to the holographic text – depicting a different story from the one anticipated. This duality illustrates something of the uncertainty of the findings of Mead's research, which were contested by another anthropologist.

Artists Wenyon and Gamble have also used holography to store knowledge in holographic space. In 1997 and 1998 they produced 50 images – reflection holograms – in a series entitled *Bibliomancy* [11]. The artists produced, among other works, a hologram of library card catalogues – in effect, documenting the organisation of the Boston Athenaeum, where they were artists-in-residence. The word 'bibliomancy' is defined by Wenyon as "the act of using a passage chosen at random from a book, often the Bible, to provide enlightenment about problems or questions" [12]. Wenyon continues, describing the creative process involved in producing the works below:

Q.2

The selection of books for these holograms itself involved a kind of bibliomancy of chance discoveries and impulsive decisions, which created meaning we had not anticipated when we brought the titles together. Each viewer will find his or her own readings, following individual associations and interests. A book is always more than the bare contents of its text, and this quality seems to be amplified in holograms that both assert and deny the physicality of the object [12].



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.

In his essay, “Books, Too, Have Their Destinies: Wenyon & Gamble’s *Bibliomancy*” [12] which accompanied the Bibliomancy exhibition, Normal Bryson, Professor of Fine Arts at Harvard University, states:

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. . . the hologram exists always and only in the present, it can never be captured and confined within linear time.

1.4. Time and movement

The medium of holography allows artists to explore movement and time within their work. Artist Eduardo Kac developed a new visual poetic language using holography in 1993 with his *Holopoetry*. An example, ‘*Maybe then, if only as*’ is shown below [13]. As the viewer passes Kac’s holograms, computer generated words and letters combine, break up, and recombine according to the angle at which they are viewed – to create different words and meaning. Kac describes his poetic syntax as “organized in discontinuous space”. The interactivity of the poems ensure that the viewer cannot help but respond, moving back and forth in front of the hologram, captivated. Not only does the image move backwards and forwards in time, but it has depth, appearing in front and behind the surface of the hologram. No other



Fig. 9.

medium allows artists to explore images in time and space in a similar way. Kac’s dynamic poetry exploits the medium to its best effect. Kac uses holography for its four-dimensional scope.

2. Conclusion

Neither the written word nor the visual image can adequately communicate thoughts and emotions. All artists strive to communicate with their audience as successfully as they can, and using words and lettering help reach towards the meaning that exists somewhere between the visual image and the written word.

Artists have traditionally used text to provide an extra dimension and richness to the visual. The Synthetic Cubists [1] discovered that using text brings the outside or the public world into the realm of the personal or private, and contemporary artists such as Jenny Holzer [3] have used

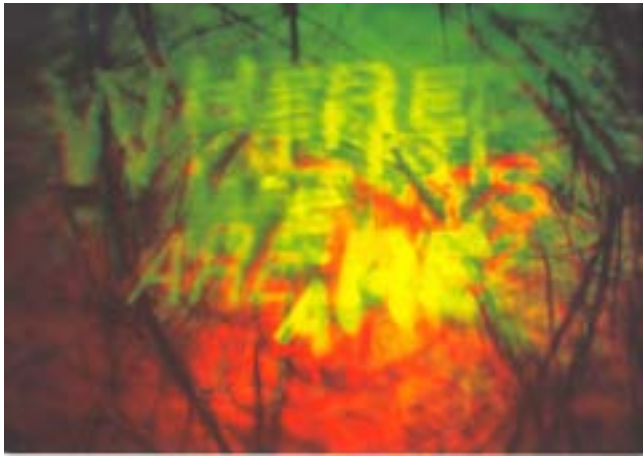


Fig. 10.

text to bring an intimate or private world into a more public arena to very good effect. However, the use of text within the medium of holography allows an artist to expand their visual vocabulary further – by adding the dimensions of space and time to their work. The spatial positioning of text – whether inside the plane of the hologram, straddling the plane of the image, or projected out in front of the hologram – adds another layer of meaning to the text and image. Thus, the combination of text and holography enriches the artwork with greater depth of communication.

No other medium can enable words to physically and psychologically inhabit our space. We can walk by Eduardo Kac's words [12] and try to grasp them, but they alter and change as we move in front of them. Mathieu's holographic text [10] too floats in front of the plane of the hologram, appearing ephemeral; her text casts impossible shadows, suggesting a solidity which isn't there. Mathieu uses holographic text and shadow to represent the difference between what appears on the surface, and what is happening underneath – what Benyon called the “meta-physical act of penetrating superficial appearances” [7].

When text is placed beneath the surface of the holographic plate, it takes on the appearance of solidity, of permanence and of stored knowledge. The fact that Wenyon and Gamble's texts [11] are placed behind the surface of the hologram adds an extra depth and weight to the image, and also a sense of history. The author uses text to wrap meaning around objects, and as the text is handwritten it depicts a sense of personal history. While the text and object appear to have solidity and permanence, paradoxically, all are immaterial. It is this paradox that makes holography a unique creative medium – a medium in which when text and holography are used together, they illustrate the artist's eloquent struggle to communicate.

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