

Placing Critical Pressure on Creative Holography

Subjects: Theory of Art

Created by:  Andrew Pepper

In her seminal PhD thesis, submitted to the Royal College of Art, London, in 1994, Margaret Benyon, MBE, postulated the question “How is holography Art?”. ([Benyon 1994](#)) Within her 226 pages, she attempted to put pressure on the ‘How’ not the ‘Why’ or the ‘If’, using the lens of her own, considerable, research in the field.

The broad issues surrounding this area of critical debate have not been extensively or continuously explored, either from within the field of practising artists investigating holography as a process, medium and methodology or through broader discursive platforms within the visual arts. The medium remains, for most, a curious optical innovation that lacks critical consideration.

Perhaps, almost 25 years later, Benyon’s question is somewhat redundant, or too blunt an instrument to accurately pressurise the extensive research which has taken place over this period. Artists have actively extended the vocabulary of holographic imaging, not only through disrupting the technology, which makes it practical, but also through an attempt to investigate its visual, conceptual and practical vocabularies.

The 'third' dimension paradigm and illusion of reality

The field of creative holography is not known for its critical introspection. There is limited analysis of its development as a practice, process or methodology employed by artists who struggle to place pressure on their own work in the medium. Their comments often slip into a diarised or practical declaration of the “how” rather than the “why”.

A great deal of generalised reportage in popular media frames attempts to engage with clear commentary, critical observation and primary research. Critical analysis does exist but, as with many fringe or pioneering media, you really have to hunt for it. Critical pressure is not something a reader might casually come across in a contemporary art journal. Tenacity is required.

Frank Popper, in his review of art in the electronic age, commented that “[i]n order to build an historically legitimate aesthetic of holography one has to detach oneself from the dependence upon the photographic paradigm so important in understanding computer art. The persistence of this paradigm reveals itself especially in the overemphasised ‘third’ dimension of holography” ([Popper 1993, p. 37](#)). It is this “third” dimension on a flat surface, the illusion of “reality”, which both attracts and distorts critical interrogation.

There appears to be a great deal of “fence-sitting” by artists, critics, curators, publishers and cultural observers. Commentators, including artists who work in the field, are unsure where creative holography “fits”. It could be a remarkable and genuinely significant medium. However, it may not be, polluted as it is by the tacky commercialism of spectacular visual flotsam. A similar issue exists in other media. There is a world of terrible painting, sculpture, performance, installation, graphics, moving image and conceptual making. Why then is it so difficult to view a critical framework for holography? The worst of the worst in holography cannot be any less awful than the worst examples in other media.

A fifty-five year history

There appears to be a tipping point, which has not yet been reached, in the critical discussions around holography. The technical process is a little over 70 years old ([Gabor 1948](#)), and artists began to work with it as soon as it became viable as a display technique in the mid-1960s ([Leith and Upatnieks 1965](#)). Within three years, the first acknowledgement that this new technique might be relevant to artists appeared in the, then recently established, Leonardo journal ([Wilhelmsson 1968](#)). So, at most, it has been viable for artists for 55 years.

The use of video by artists is of a similar vintage. A recent survey and retrospective exhibition of work by Nam June Paik at Tate Modern in London attempted to chart the significant development of his practice in particular and video art in general—interwoven

against a background of the Fluxus movement and enthusiasm for “new” technology. The exhibition drew on 50 years of cultural analysis, which has now generated further (current) critical observation around the impact the “father of video art” made on a changing media landscape (McMullan 2019). That type of “rolling” analysis has not happened, on a similar scale, with holography. This is not “sour grapes” on the part of myself and others working with holography (although it is easy and convenient to characterise it as such). It is fact.

The comparison between holography and video as media is clearly a blunt one. “Holes” can indeed be “picked” in it, but this type of basic overview can sometimes be helpfully provocative. A literature review of holography clearly indicates that the books that are published deal with the technical aspects of an optical process; generalised, procedural development; self-help or broad cultural observations framed from a scientific or engineering point of view. Within these publications, there are moments of critical commentary, but they lack depth, context or authority.

There is a need to encourage a considered critical view from practitioners, curators and observers. Most recently several artists, makers, academics and curators have attempted to investigate and develop a critical discussion as part of "Holography—A Critical Debate within Contemporary Visual Culture" (1). It is a compact 'start'. There is a long way to go, but the observations in this publication uncover first-hand observations and reflections within a medium, process and methodology easily dismissed as an optical novelty.

References

1. Arts Special Issue "Holography—A Critical Debate within Contemporary Visual Culture". www.mdpi.com. Retrieved 2020-6-23

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