

## Holography and the Landscape Tradition

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### ABSTRACT

This presentation will examine the relationship between artist-made holograms and the landscape tradition in art. Following selected examples of significant historical movements, various directions in the visual arts from throughout the second half of the twentieth-century will be explored as well as specific post modern strategies in image making. The presentation will then focus on more recent technology-based and media works including video, installation art and holography. Finally, examples of landscape and nature-based imagery in holography will be examined in depth through works by individual artists. The motivating ideas and issues behind landscape holography will form the basis of the presentation's conclusion.

### HOLOGRAPHY AND THE LANDSCAPE TRADITION

"One of my dreams is to build a lab in the countryside to bring high technology into nature and nature into the lab. Working in the woods through all four seasons, I would like to use natural shapes and forms, recording elusive details."'

With these simple words holographer Rudie Berkhout poetically describes a union of two seemingly irreconcilable worlds: the existing natural environment and technological progress. Berkhout is certainly not the first artist to express an interest in uniting the two, but he is a new addition to a long tradition of individuals who seek to unify potentially opposing realms. In painting, photography, installation, video and now holography, artists throughout history have turned to the landscape and nature-based imagery as their source of inspiration, the subject of their explorations and more recently, the material of their art itself.

For centuries artists have consistently employed landscape iconography as both central image and background element. Without recounting the history of landscape art here, it is important to recognize the fact that many artists working at different times have felt a closeness to nature. During certain periods, groups of artists depicting the landscape have produced revolutionary works which have had lasting effects on the history of art, for example, seventeenth-century Dutch painters or, of course, the French Impressionists.

Landscape painting, however, relies partially on the pictorial illusions created with devices including perspective and color modulation, as well as the viewer's "willing suspension of disbelief" to borrow a term from the theater. In this way, a painting of the landscape functions like a window, the perimeter of the canvas or panel determines one's view. In photography, another medium in which the landscape has, and continues to play, a significant role as subject, this window allusion is also applicable. But it is ultimately in holography that a true "window" is possible; a window which reveals its subject as a volume occupying space.

To expand on the area of landscape photography, it is evident, in exemplary works by masters such as Ansel Adams or Minor White, that photography has a suitability for recording and interpreting the landscape in a medium other than paint. But beyond the more straightforward approach taken by many artists making photographs, other directions have evolved which use photographic techniques to image the landscape in less than traditional ways.

More recently an interest in painting and photographing the landscape has emerged as a discourse of post modernism. Younger artists including Joan Nelson, Chris Pfister and Lorie Novak use landscape imagery as a device to investigate their conceptual concerns. In Nelson's intimate panel paintings, cracked and distressed surfaces and image fragments resemble sections of larger, antique, landscape pictures. Pfister's "hunting scenes" and similar pastiche subjects teeter between post-modern irony and drawing room kitsch. Novak's color photographs record the ephemeral illusions created when the artist projects slides onto towering trees during the dead of night, and combine images of the human figure with that of the outdoors. The elusive quality of these temporal installations, made permanent in the photographs, is metaphorical for the changing nature of both individual and collective memory. Yet whatever the intellectual strategies at work in these examples, the fact remains that a landscape image is their visual core.

In addition to work in the established media of painting and photography, a number of artists who work with installation, technology and time-based media have similarly embraced the landscape as their point of departure. These include temporal site-specific works (for example, Christo's Running Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, California, 1972-1976) and earthworks (Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, 1970). More recently there has emerged a number of artists whose work strives to effect measurable change on the existing environment. They take this art in directions other than that of solely employing imagery derived from nature, sited in the landscape or using the earth as its substance. The work of these recent artists is often collaborative and cross-disciplined, engaging and involving both artists and non-artists alike.

The exhibition Fragile Ecologies: Artists' Interpretations and Solutions,<sup>2</sup> and its accompanying catalog, is an excellent survey of artists working to produce real environmental change. In the catalog's introductory essay, the exhibition's organizer Barbara C. Matilsky eloquently describes the artist's role in effecting this change, "Artists are in a unique position to effect such environmental changes because they can synthesize new ideas and communicate connections between many disciplines. They are pioneering a holistic approach to problem solving that transcends the narrow limits of specialization. Since art embodies freedom of thought, spirit, and expression, its creative potential is limitless. Art changes the way people look at reality. In its most positive mode, art can offer alternative visions."<sup>3</sup>

While some of the artists in Fragile Ecologies incorporate a variety of kinetic and electronic media in their work, it is also important in this discussion of the landscape to consider works based primarily in advanced technologies, including the medium of holography. While much of this technology-based work is diverse in terms of concept, format and presentation, and might involve elements of time and/or interactivity, there are relevant and persistent questions which must be put forward: Why do artists consistently attempt to reconcile the natural world with human invention and progress through the creation of technology-based art using landscape subjects? And what connection does the work of these artists have to static works created without the use of advanced technologies, connections to painting and photography? While it is impossible to address these questions in a general way, they are important to consider in examining the works on an individual basis. Before leaping into a discussion about holography it might be beneficial to review a selection of examples created using other, yet related, media.

In the area of video there is an ongoing relationship between subjects based in nature and video's high-tech materials and processes. This relationship is manifested in both what might be termed "broadcast" video and video installation. Unlike video installations, which often include static sculptural elements in addition to moving images, in broadcast video the work exists solely in the world created on the monitor's screen, independent of other components. In this discussion, however, three-dimensional installations, which incorporate video, will be discussed.

In the mid-seventies video guru Nam June Paik created, among other works, a TV Garden (1974-1978) which interspersed monitors among live plants, and Video Fish (1975) which incorporated aquaria and live fish. While Paik's contributions unquestionably opened the medium up in innumerable ways, and the artist is still likely to be the most visible video artist in the

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world, a generation has emerged whose individual and collective approaches to video have expanded the groundwork laid by Nam June Paik. In the late 1980s, the exhibition American Landscape Video: The Electronic Grove explored the work of seven artists through their large-scale installations.<sup>4</sup>

In his essay for the accompanying catalog, the exhibition's organizer William D. Judson elaborates on a central thesis of the project, "'Landscape video' has become a genre not only through the representation of landscape, but also through the appropriation and modification of what landscape means in our cultural and artistic traditions. Indeed, video has been an especially important medium for defining new directions in which to carry the landscape tradition."<sup>5</sup> With great confidence the terms "landscape holography" and "holography" could be substituted throughout this quotation to make a corollary statement on that medium. Included in the exhibition were large-scale works by Mary Lucier and Rita Myers, individuals who have established themselves in both the field of video and in a larger contemporary art arena. Certainly the work of any of the other artists included could be examined here, but this essay will focus on installations by these two.

Mary Lucier's Wilderness (1986) is a three-channel work presented on seven monitors each sitting on top of a faux classical column. In Wilderness, the artist explores a relationship between nineteenth-century American painting and the contemporary landscape. In writing about the work, Lucier describes her intentions in creating Wilderness: "By returning to many of the original sites depicted by 19th-century painters, I have attempted to simulate on video the qualities of atmosphere, light and time as rendered by these artists, and at the same time, to set up an ironic dialogue between the past and present, the mundane and the poetic, real and ideal."<sup>6</sup> In Wilderness, Lucier employs various strategies to visually interpret, connect and subvert images from nature. It is also important to keep in mind that the "ironic dialogue" to which Lucier refers is evident not only in video works, but other technology-based works which explore the landscape including electronic and computer art, sound art and holography.

Rita Myers' contribution to the same exhibition, entitled The Allure of the Concentric (1985), uses four channels of video which play on individual monitors placed amid sculptural elements including large rocks. The worked is centered, both figuratively and literally, around a dark pool of water over which are suspended three leafless trees. On one end a metal gate allows passage into Myers' world, and diagonally opposite the gate, across the pool, are three fortress-like towers. The monitors and other elements surround and face the work's center. As the artist describes, The Allure of the Concentric is "an expression of the mythic desire for ultimate renewal and regeneration...."

Concentric circles created by water droplets cause the pool to metamorphose from an abyss into a source, metaphorically calling forth, at its outer reaches, the archetypal landscapes of the desert, mountain and forest, eternal, boundless, yet mutable."<sup>7</sup> For Myers, video serves as an ideal medium through which to develop her interests in sacred sites and natural cycles with its ability to repeat sequences of images, manipulate time and motion and simultaneously present distant locations or distinct terrains.

In addition to video installations, prior to embarking on an exploration of holography, it is relevant to this discussion to examine pieces by the collaborative team of Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel and by audio artist Liz Phillips. Quite different in concept, subject and material, the work of these artists is related in their common use of interaction, energy and motion.

For a number of years, Jones and Ginzel have created environments that incorporate low-tech, "erector set" engineering to produce ethereal, phenomenal effects. While much of the artists' work is temporal, their creative process involves developing full theatrical tableaux which often appear to the viewer as mystical, even magical, landscapes. From a viewing position, all sorts of rotating, swinging, hovering, misting and kinetic activities recall the changing complexion of the desert or rain forest, the eruption of a volcano or a winter blizzard, or perhaps the surface of some distant planet or what lies at the earth's core. Behind the scenes, however, much of what creates this magic is simple engineering. Often the artists adapt household appliances or commercially available devices to produce these awesome effects.

While their installations may not resemble the natural environment in a literal way, they are tied to the landscape tradition in their reverence for the sublime forces of nature and the miraculous effects of its seasonal cycles. In the course of their construction or exhibition, some glitch may interrupt or halt movement or prevent a pivotal action from taking place. Similarly in nature, small and unnoticeable upsets to the ecological balance produce serious ramifications.

Liz Phillips uses sound as her primary medium. In 1987 Phillips produced the environment Graphite Ground based on a Japanese garden. Originally created at San Francisco's Capp Street Project, and subsequently re-erected at other museums, Graphite Ground is an installation, an audio work, an interactive exhibition and a contemplative site. Created in response to Phillips' visits to the manicured gardens of Japan, the work includes a small central screened structure housing its electronic "brain"; a slightly raised wooden walkway; stepping stones, raw copper elements and large rocks which are grouped throughout a ground covering of raw wool, and a sound system

which responds to the garden's visitors. This sound system uses energy fields created around specific copper and rock groupings to activate changes in what Phillips describes as the work's "soundscape."<sup>8</sup> As the fields are changed by the number, location and movement of viewers, the sound of the piece changes in response.

Graphite Ground uses a combination of organic materials (raw copper, raw wool) and sophisticated technology (sound system, electronic "brain") to create a surrogate of nature. Actually, Phillips' garden is not much further from the natural world it replicates than are the controlled environments of the Japanese rock gardens on which Graphite Ground's imagery is based. Whereas in Japan the gardener is responsible for the various elements which he or she tends, in Graphite Ground the viewer plays a part in shaping the final work.

With an entire history and tradition of landscape art in perspective, and with the brief preceding exploration of how it has continued into the present through a wide variety of media, an investigation of the work of artists making holograms is now appropriate to consider. I have chosen to discuss seven individuals, taken from a much larger group, who make holograms with landscape imagery.

Rudie Berkhout, based primarily in New York, is one of the best established artists making holograms. For some time Berkhout has used abstracted landscape subject matter. Recently he completed a large permanent public work in the central atrium of a new classroom facility at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Light Train (1992) incorporates eight thirty inch by thirty inch holograms that cascade down a towering wall near the building's entrance. A waterfall, a spring shower, a series of shooting stars, Light Train feels particularly at home in a structure dedicated to producing future engineers. The installation also provides an excellent example of how public art can, and often should, reflect the complexion of the surroundings for which it is created.

Prior to Light Train, Berkhout produced numerous smaller works using a landscape theme. Event Horizon (1980) not only reveals to the viewer a swirl of abstract elements in a horizontal composition, but the title allows its viewer to immediately grasp the artist's intentions. The New Territories (1984) presents, in diptych format, a deep and seemingly never ending field. The viewer is invited to journey into the work, beckoned by glowing trails and seduced by intense colors. Transfer 339 (1987) uses two well-delineated paths to entice the viewer to move deep into the hologram's core. Later works, including Primal Mix I (1988) and Breakthrough (1990), create more fanciful, if not fantastic, worlds in which the viewer may enter. While in some cases these works present their landscape imagery in a literal fashion, all examples point to Berkhout's consistent and persistent employment of landscape subjects.

Japanese holographer Setsuko Ishii has incorporated images from nature in many works, some taking the form of sculptural installations. In Riverside (1983), Ishii embeds holograms in a swirl of white pebbles. Walking through this environment one discovers glistening glass plates on which the artist has recorded images of the pebbles that she mounded and shaped to form the imaginary river bank of the work's title. The experience is reminiscent of that of finding smooth rocks, shiny shells and tiny sea creatures on a routine walk along the beach. Instead of an obvious image like that of a starfish or a fragment of driftwood, Ishii offers no prize for this beach hunt but rather more of the work's rock subjects. The holograms embedded in Riverside's pebbles are anticipated as rewards for the chase, rewards which in reality are only illusions. This consistent subject matter manifest through the various materials comprising the installation also evoke the focus and feelings of solitude or isolation one might experience even when submerged in an environment as concentrated and intense as the artist's Tokyo home.

In 1985 Setsuko Ishii installed Riverside at the Museum of Holography in New York as part of a solo exhibition. In that installation, Ishii hung large sheets of clear flexible plastic from the ground to above the viewers' heads to form a semi-circle behind the low, floor-oriented piece. Not only did the plastic sheets create interesting visual effects, they made conceptual references as well. While extending the water illusion back and up, the semi-circle formed a relationship between land and sky, simultaneously acting as both. Perhaps more interesting, however, is the way in which this backdrop reflected the visitors' images and in a sense allowed them to enter the work on a different level. Viewers could not only walk among the artificial river bank created with holograms and pebbles, they became part of the entire visual tableau.

Like Berkhout and Ishii, New York-based holographer Dan Schweitzer is another firmly established artist whose vision has, and continues, to shape the directions of holography. And like these other two, Schweitzer employs landscape subjects as either the primary or secondary imagery of his art. In some cases the landscape has a significant presence, as, for example, in Stargate (1980), which imagines a futuristic terrain, or We'll See (1981)/Timescape (1978), which presents a window view of changing seasons in the form of a small sculpture. In several of Schweitzer's holograms or hologram/sculpture combinations, the landscape is one of many sources on which the artist draws his visual, conceptual and spiritual inspiration.

Londoner Martin Richardson used a wide variety of materials to make a series of works which originate in the philosophies and traditions of Conceptual art. English Oak (1982) brings together a hologram and a sculptural tree trunk;

Triangle in Landscape with Hologram (1982-1983) combines holography, photography, drawing and writing. It is a complete year's work in the form of a sketchbook, photographs and a hologram. While the sketchbook became the artist's personal journal or diary, the photographs recorded seasonal changes at a specific site which Richardson selected.<sup>9</sup> In a way that is common to the other artists already discussed, Richardson sought to somehow reconcile or unite the natural world with the technological one: "In retrospect I think it was the complete opposites that attracted me. On one hand I had attempted to work with the complete and infinite simplicity of nature itself, whilst on the other felt drawn to the sophistication of man-made technology. My guess is that Triangle in Landscape with Hologram forms the pinnacle of both interests."<sup>10</sup>

Betsy Connors, based in Somerville, Massachusetts, came to use the medium of holography after working for some time in photography and video. In 1991 Connors completed Future Gardens, an installation comprised of over forty holograms, a computerized lighting system and an audio component. Future Gardens, like Liz Phillips' Graphite Ground, is the result of the artist's visit to gardens in Japan." When Connors returned to her studio she attempted to recreate, or perhaps interpret, experiences similar to those she had when wandering through these foreign environments. The botanical imagery which appears in the holograms is derived from the landscape near and around Connors' home in the Boston suburbs, and includes not only bamboo, but maple, oak and similar foliage. Three-dimensional illusion, animated lighting and sound are combined in the installation to simulate the atmospheric conditions of its garden source. For Connors, "The real yet unreal quality of the formal Japanese gardens created a feeling that only art or music had previously inspired in me. I was very affected by the power of these gardens which in most cases was visual but was also sometimes very spiritual."<sup>12</sup>

In addition to Phillips' Graphite Ground, Future Gardens is more directly related to another media installation piece: Nam June Paik's TV Garden. Connors acknowledges Paik's work as a source of inspiration and point of departure.<sup>13</sup> And like both Graphite Ground and TV Garden, Future Gardens employs surrogate elements to replace real things, for example, in Graphite Ground a sandy surface cover is created with raw wool; TV Garden's video monitors become living, blossoming bouquets, and Future Gardens uses three-dimensional illusions to evoke a lush, dense garden growth. In each of these examples one experiences, again in Connors' words, the use of "new technology to explore older subject matter or traditional concerns."<sup>14</sup>

The collaborative team of Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon (working under the name Wenyon & Gamble) have explored nature-based imagery in their installation works at times,



primarily through phenomenological subjects. The artists recently relocated to Boston from London, after having spent an extended period living and working in Japan. Beginning in the mid-1980s, Wenyon & Gamble explored these subjects in works including Trail (1987), The Heavens (1989) and Stella Maris (1989-1991), often combining theatrical lighting effects and other light-based media (slide projections, etc.) with holograms. Stella Maris goes beneath the sea to imagine an ominous underworld "contained" in a monolithic wall on which the holograms are mounted. Theatrical lights hidden behind the wall create a blue aura around its perimeter. Without using literal images of underwater creatures, Stella Maris evokes a dark, mysterious place which exists concurrent with the one above water level that is dry, sunny and land-bound. The Heavens incorporates a series of narrow holograms lined end to end to form a strip of sky. Like Stella Maris, The Heavens incorporates lighting effects. When the viewer peers into the narrow strip of holograms an entire galaxy of stars is visible. As Susan Gamble describes, this work directly resulted from the artists' own experiences in nature: "In 1986 we purchased a home by the sea. At night we would look out at the light changing on the sea....The Heavens was inspired by looking out at the sea and sky at night, where you see stars and lights from passing ships on the horizon." <sup>15</sup>

The artists and works discussed here offer only a glimpse into the use of landscape and nature-based imagery in holography and this discussion can in no way be limited to these examples. As a guide to those interested in exploring the art of additional individuals who work or have worked within the landscape tradition, the following brief list of names is offered: New York-based artist Sam Moree, who incorporates whole or fragmented landscapes in his elegant sculptures; Doris Vila, also based in New York, and in particular XICO (1983-1984), a large multi-hologram work which records rock formations in a horizontal format that recalls geological stratification; Montreal-based artist Georges Dyens, who creates large- and small-scale multi-media sculptural tableaux, and finally John Kaufman, who works in Point Reyes Station, California, and whose sensuously colored holograms often employ fragments of natural imagery or render artificial landscapes.

It is impossible to close this discussion of the relationship of technology-based media, including holography, to landscape art because it has only just begun to develop. The work of all of the artists surveyed in this essay is meaningful to a truer understanding of how the tradition continues, regardless of creative approach or choice of material. Furthermore, the visibility of this art, through exhibitions such as those I have described are critical steps in broadening the knowledge and appreciation of the work both in terms of the general public and the art world. Rather than approach the work

as a complete break with what had come before, it is more accurate to connect it to the past and see it as a new and distinct direction for the future. The French Impressionists took their canvas and paints out-of-doors to work directly in and from nature, an experience not altogether different from Rudie Berkhout's desire to "build a lab in the countryside."

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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