

# Why N.Y. Art World Shuns Holography

BY D. TULLA LIGHTFOOT

**It is** important for us as display holographers and therefore as visual artists to understand the art establishment in New York City. The city remains an important centre for the U.S. and the world. It has a well structured art establishment with many art galleries, museums and alternative exhibition spaces. New York also is home to major art magazines which cover exhibitions and disseminate the information coast to coast. And in terms of viewing public, there are 7.1 million people in the city itself and 17.5 million in the surrounding metropolitan area.

Although the number of art shows exhibiting display holography in New York has dramatically increased in the last few years, these shows have not taken place in traditional art galleries or museums. And little has been written

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The events of 1975 (see *WAVEFRONT*, Vol 1:1) are known to most art professionals interviewed and this might act as a double-edged sword, with artists being leery of rejection on the one hand, and art professionals fearful of controversial reviews and reception on the other. Mark Leibowitz of the M. Knoedler and Company gallery pointed out that if galleries didn't feel threatened by holography they would exhibit more. Galleries are commercial enterprises and fear losing clientele.

Knoedler gallery, on East 70th Street near Central Park, exhibits works by artists such as David Smith, Frank Stella, Jules Olitski and Robert Motherwell. In the '70s, Knoedler represented Salvadore Dali, who at that time decided to try his hand at holography. But his holography was exhibited because he was a major artist already represented by Knoedler. Leibowitz assured me that if another of the artists represented by Knoedler chose to work in the medium the results would be exhibited. That hasn't happened, and the reluctance of reputable artists to use the medium adds to Leibowitz's belief that holography is not an accepted medium. He warns that holography seems to be heading towards commercial interests and away from fine arts.

Sonnabend gallery at 420 West Broadway in Soho has exhibited holography in the past, but again, the work was by an artist already represented by the gallery — Simone Forte — who had chosen to work in the medium. Nick Sheidy of the gallery said holographic works have not been exhibited since the Forte show, but if one of the gallery's represented artists began to work in holography, the work would definitely be shown. He also said it's possible that artists working exclusively in holography could be shown at the gallery, but only Mrs. Sonnabend, owner of the gallery, decides who she represents. Interested artists typically send slides to Mrs. Sonnabend with a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Ivan Karp, owner of the OK Harris gallery, also on West Broadway, recently exhibited holographic work by Scott Nemtsov. Gallery personnel say the artist has had two shows in the space. Although Nemtsov's work is selling well, display holography is risky art business, Karp said. A successful businessman, Karp can afford to take that risk and is interested in having innovative shows. He laughed when he mentioned that his shows haven't been critiqued in 14 years. He acknowledged that most gallery owners don't know if a market exists for holography. He thinks it's too soon for holography — the medium is too new and the art world doesn't seem to have an interest in holography. Karp sees more than 100 artists a week, of which he selects

few, if any. He does not view slides or videos of holographic work. The artists would have to set up the work in his gallery. If Karp felt the work had potential, he would visit the artist's studio. Studio space in New York would be desirable if not imperative.

To Susan Hirschfeld, curator with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum on Fifth Ave., the fact that OK Harris now represents an artist working in holography is a

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good indication that the art buying and viewing public is ready to accept holographic art work. Museums are at the top of the art establishment hierarchy in New York, but are tightly interwoven with the galleries and art journals which together make up the art network. Part of Hirschfeld's curatorial responsibilities are to visit galleries and note contemporary trends. The Gallery Guide is an important tool used by her and her colleagues to in-

form them of current shows.

Art magazines and journals are also important — not so much for reviews, but as indicators of what is new and exciting. The cover of *Art Forum's* summer 1985 issue contained a laminated hologram augmenting a portion of a photograph by Lucas Samaras. Although Samaras' work was continued inside, very little mention was made of the cover or artist Dan Schweitzer's contribution to it except for the customary cover blurb.

Silvia Hachfield of *Artnews* told me she would be the one at the magazine to talk to about holography, and that she had no views on the subject and was not interested in it! Obviously, holography is not a hot issue for many writers on art. They are not ready to seek out exhibitions occurring outside the mainstream art network, and are not even willing to discuss holography when someone appears at their doorstep. Again, if an established artist like Samaras uses holography, they do not shy away from the medium, as in the case of *Art Forum*, and in this case have a similar attitude to that of the Knoedler and Sonnabend galleries.

Art professionals interviewed see holography not as an art movement like dada, minimalism or pop art, but as a medium like color photography or lithography, in which an artist can either do the work or initiate it and send it to a lab for final execution. The fact that established artists are not using holography in this manner indicates to them that holography is not yet an acceptable art medium.

Thoughts such as these may also be in the minds of arts funders who, according to Ian Lancaster, new director of the Museum of Holography, have been more eager, at least in the recent past, to grant awards for work in holography to established artists, rather than to holographers. An artist with the reputation of an Andy Warhol or a Keith Haring would wittingly or unwittingly be a powerful advocate of the new medium and therefore of the artists working in the medium.

Such advocates are important to the art establishment, where excitement plays an important part in generating shows and funding for shows. John Szarkowski, director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, said that at his museum curators must compete for expenditures. An exhibition of holography would cost more than an exhibition of drawings or photography, which virtually could be hung with thumbtacks. Many display holographers insist they be present at the hanging to tune in their work, sometimes being flown in and housed for the occasion. New lighting apparatus contributes to increased costs,

at holography in traditional art journals in New York. Video art and computer graphics have not fared so well.

Does a bias exist in regards to holography? Are museum curators and gallery owners intentionally shying away from holographic art work? Does this have anything to do with reviews and criticisms of the 1975 show of holography at the International Center of Photography? Did the poor reception of the medium over a decade ago stigmatize holographic work, and is there fear that inclusion of such work would lessen an establishment's reputation today?

There is evidence that some repercussions from that show still exist. Cornell University, director of the International Centre of Photography, told me he hasn't thought about holography since the holography show 11 years ago. Hilton Kramer, editor of *The New Criterion* and reviewer of the 1975 show for the *New York Times*, said he has not seen any examples of holographic art work since he wrote about the



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which must correspond to an increased excitement about the work on the part of the curator for him or her to convince the director that such a show should be presented.

Szarkowski felt there is a curatorial waning of interest in holography. He said the curiosity is gone and holography has nothing new, vital or exciting to offer. When it was pointed out to him that major museums outside New York City and the U.S. are backing and funding important shows of holographic art work, Szarkowski replied that these places have not had them before, whereas New York has already passed through the "curiosity in the new medium" stage.

John Hanhardt, of film/video at the Whitney Museum of American Art, called this initial curiosity about holography by museums "Gee Whiz science stuff". He felt it is important for holography to find advocates, if not at the top of the hierarchy in the example of a major artist, then at the grassroots level. He felt it is unhelpful that art magazines don't cover holography, because curators need education about the subject. He said a critical language for the medium needs to be developed to initiate dialogue on holography. When asked if a curator of a major museum would not make a better and more powerful advocate for holographic art, Hanhardt looked as if his hands were tied. Then he replied that American curators are not as all-powerful as artists might think and European curators have more freedom to try new things.

Museum professionals interviewed were eager to deny a bias against display holography. The Guggenheim's Hirschfeld noted that although the definition of art has broadened over the past two decades to include video, music and performance art, holography is still excluded from the traditional artist network. At the time Hirschfeld was interviewed, the Guggenheim featured a show in which photographs hung on walls and assemblages of rocks lined the walkways.

Roger Malina, editor of *LEONARDO*, a journal of arts, science and technology, felt there is a bias in that holographic art is only viewed in specialized places; major shows are excluded from reviews; and it is unheard of for New York art museums or galleries to purchase holographic art work for their collections. The Museum of Holography's Lancaster also felt that the bias evidences itself in the fact that curators are not yet trained to appreciate the complex aesthetics and mechanics of a hologram and the unsolid space within it.

Artists worry about the archival standing of their work, and how long their holograms will last, and how they should pro-

duce their work, possibly as prints and in limited editions. But Hanhardt said major museums are just not ready to collect holographic art work, while Hirschfeld acknowledged that the Guggenheim's collection aims are mainly in painting and sculpture.

Professionals in the area of photography seemed the least open to including holographic art work in shows at their institutions. Maria Morris Hambourg, associate

curator of the department of prints and photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said she felt no responsibility to exhibit new media when the best of photography's past is rapidly disappearing. Asked if holography might encourage the attendance of a younger generation, she said photography has the same appeal to this generation and explained that the display of modern art is not a priority at the Met. (A new wing of the museum devoted

exclusively to modern art, with its own curators, opened in January, and perhaps these people will be more receptive to holography.)

Hambourg spoke of holography's elemental colors and of the difficulty in obtaining subtlety in the medium. She also suggested that abstract painting with light is reminiscent of color photographic work done in the '50s and also of paintings by Hans Hoffman, already done and nothing new.

She then admitted that she has not seen much serious display holography, as artists are not bringing their portfolios to the museum, and there are few shows of serious holographic artwork in New York for curators to view. Hirschfeld said that in 10 years of working at the Guggenheim, she has never once been approached by a display holographer. She felt holographic artists must get their work out to the public and build more of a profile in the art scene. Part of their invisibility is due to the fact that information about exhibitions is not reaching curators.

These responses indicate display holographers will not find strong advocates among those involved in photography. Perhaps photography itself is not securely enough accepted as an artistic medium for curators to feel comfortable sharing its place with holography. Perhaps it is more content-related: two-dimensionality versus three-dimensionality; bright colors versus black and white tonality. The Whitney's Hanhardt predicted that within five to 10 years holographic artists will be included in its exhibition program, and reminded me that it took 70 years for photography to assert itself as a serious art medium.

All art professionals interviewed were aware of the Museum of Holography, most had undoubtedly visited it and had gotten most of their ideas about holographic art from work displayed there. Most were very surprised and interested by photographs I showed them of select artists' recent work, and were unaware that these artists working in the medium had grown and matured as much as they had.

This surprise must be attributed to the fact that the Museum of Holography is not solely a museum of holographic art work and I gathered from talking to Lancaster that it has different functions from that of a gallery, some of these functions being to gather and disseminate information on the broad field of holography as a whole.



It is this writer's opinion that work is not exhibited there for solely aesthetic reasons. At times work in the museum is displayed for historical and other reasons and this might confuse one whose concern is artistic growth and development. The museum