

Article

When the Image Takes over the Real: Holography and Its Potential within Acts of Visual Documentation

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Abstract: In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes discusses the capacity of the photographic image to represent “flat death”. Documentation of an event, happening, or time is traditionally reliant on the photographic to determine its ephemeral existence and to secure its legacy within history. However, the traditional photographic document is often unsuitable to capture the real essence and experience of the artwork in situ. The hologram, with its potential to offer a three-dimensional viewpoint, suggests a desirable solution. However, there are issues concerning how this type of photographic document successfully functions within an art context. Attitudes to methods necessary for artistic production, and holography’s place within the process, are responsible for this problem. The seductive qualities of holography may be attributable to any failure that ensues, but, if used precisely, the process can be effective to create a document for ephemeral art. The failures and successes of the hologram to be reliable as a document of experience are discussed in this article, together with a suggestion of how it might undergo a transformation and reactivation to become an artwork itself.

Keywords: ephemeral; document; documentation; Bartram; hologram; holography; artwork

1. Documenting Ephemeral Art: Flat Death and Being There

Ephemeral art, such as performance or live art, requires documentation to prove its existence beyond the moment of its happening. The answer is often photographic, yet there are issues for the legacy of the work with this type of response. The event is date and time stamped by the photographic document, which stands as proof of it taking place, which locates it to a specific time and to a certain place. A two-dimensional photographic document of the ephemeral event or happening resigns the embodied experience to a “flat death” in this way. The document proves its existence yet denies the opportunity of its experience. The actual experience of the ephemeral artwork is, therefore, lost to the viewer of its document. They see only its record of happening created through a particular view and vantage point. Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, suggests that “flat death” is the fate of the three-dimensional experience represented photographically, so from this perspective, this result is not unexpected. The depth and varied nuances of the event go largely unrepresented in the photograph, and, in Barthes’ terms, a flat and dead image is the result.

The hologram, however, with its spatial and three-dimensional realisation of an image, offers a potential solution to this problem. In providing a view of the dexterity and depth of an inert object or human body, it creates a more comprehensive photographic document that exists as a potential act of legacy. Although this cannot fully account or attest to the experience (as that can only occur through active and present observation), the three-dimensional representation within the hologram allows for greater understanding of “being there” at the time of its happening. The hologram, therefore, is potentially more suitable to document the active and first-hand art experience. Yet, appropriateness and suitability are as open for debate with the hologram as with its two-dimensional counterpart, concerning how it successfully operates in this context.

2. The Wonder of Things

The hologram is a thing of wonder. It offers an apparent view of an object that appears three-dimensional on a flat surface. The image glistens when enlivened by light. As light touches the surface of the hologram, it exposes the object, held as if in suspension, at its centre. Moving one's position around the surface of the image, whether by turning the hologram between the fingers if small enough or by shifting the eye from one side to the other, the object is momentarily revealed. Then, it disappears, leaving the surface appearing dull and lacklustre. The image is visible and "exposed" only in certain viewing positions. Seeing these light-enhanced objects within the hologram brings a type of observational delight. This animated snapshot accounts for some of its wonder, because it appears to emerge out of the depths of the holographic surface, somewhat like an apparition. Moving from the dull and undescriptive surface to one that is light-saturated and suffused with depth, it opens up a challenging and questioning regard for its very existence. How can this be, and what made it? Produced by lasers and reliant on technology, it is beyond most of our frames of reference, comprehension, and experience. This, together with its light-possessing and -yielding properties, informs the onlooker about how it is perceived, triggering a sense of preciousness and magic. The holographic process is a systematic re-articulation of the relationship between the object and its fixity through photographic means. Holding the moment of capture of the object in stasis, its three-dimensionality allows the historic and contemporary to exist simultaneously. They are present concurrently. This is beyond photography, a two-dimensional means by which to hold captive a moment that cannot be revisited. Time stops when the shutter closes with photography. Holography, through its ability to capture convincing three-dimensionality, imbues a sense of the image being "active". One sees different angles and perspectives of the object in the hologram, which creates a sense of being present and "there". This "sense" is born of being able to move around the image within the hologram spatially, to take advantage of different observational potentials. The object within the hologram appears to extend beyond the boundaries of the film plane, negotiating and offering a different way of being seen. The perspective of the image changes in relation to the viewer's position to the hologram, and this creates a feeling of movement around the object. Turning the three-dimensional subject into a two-dimensional photographic image, the hologram presents an alternative to standard lens documentation. In this way, the record of a historic time and place becomes an active proposition in the here and now—a document that is not just a document; the past and the present in seeming simultaneity; a representation of life that is in fact dead. Ephemeral, spooky, unreal, un "there".

If we are to regard the eerie in image making, Roland Barthes and his critical consideration of the resonance of the photograph seem relevant. Although Barthes' discussion in *Camera Lucida* mainly concerns his specific reflections on photography, such as the history and constructed essence of the image, it also highlights deliberations of resonance, melancholy, and death. The photographic image represents a death of a specific time and reflects posthumously on a particular moment. Barthes observed that with "...the photograph we enter into flat death" (Barthes 2014, p. 92); yet, with the hologram, there is a representation of death (in terms of documenting a time past for Barthes), renewed by situating the subject spatially. However, this mutability does not allow for physical and conceptual stabilization in the sense of Barthes' observations or for a precise response to its current state. In a hologram, the three-dimensionality of the image, which is different from the two-dimensional photograph, does not fully represent Barthes' flat death. Instead, it represents a more dynamic, but spatial, death. This adds critical complexity to the process of holography and the hologram (which increases its sense of wonder), forging a relational adventure between the perceived and actual understanding of the image and its subject. Establishing a constructed criticality from "perceived" to "actual" knowledge of the artwork in this way removes it from the conventions that determine the three-dimensional, the site-specific and the embodied. It is not static as an object might be perceived and perhaps not a document that appears fixed and finished. This defiance ensures that the aspects of criticality are both engaged and of enduring interest. An enhancement of its intended analytical and perceptible framework occurs as a consequence. The observational distance that the

“flat” document permits is denied, and tension is engaged. It does not stop still to allow meaning to settle and for distance to be born of acquired knowledge. Instead, it asks that an individual and independent experience determine how the image/object appears at a particular time. This requires a confrontation and immediacy with the hologram, which is dependent on the conditions in which it is sited or installed.

Defying spatiality in its two-dimensional flatness and three-dimensional portrayal of an image, the hologram is both a reflective, factual document of the past and an active representation in the now. Documentation of an event, happening, or time is traditionally reliant on the photographic to determine its ephemeral existence and to secure its legacy within history. Essentially, the photographic document proves it occurred. However, if we are to follow Barthes’ idea that the photograph is a potent and responsive emblem of death, then its appropriateness for referring to the ephemeral is questionable. The event is represented, but the experience is lost and cannot be revisited. Here, the photograph acts as a memorial to, and of, the event. Its flatness does not allow for an evocation of embodiment in depth, as the actual experience is unrepresented. The hologram, with its three-dimensional references, is actually a memorial with depth. This spatial depth and attention to three-dimensionality makes the experience appear a little more present. Holograms bring the event closer to the now, and this is of value for documentary representation of the active or temporal.

Holography proposes and demonstrates tensions between time past and the present, within a document that both evidences and uses itself historically and contemporarily. Through the spatial and temporal relationship between the photographic image and its transformation to hologram, the document and its three-dimensional reanimation coexist. This not only sets the agenda for past and present, but also for the flat and the spatial. Holography, therefore, is a unique demonstration of how the critical tensions engaged in two- and three-dimensional image making can exist in synchrony, as each occupies the same representational territory for the image. This unyielding tension sees possibilities for photographically capturing the ephemeral object beyond the purely archival.

3. Preservation of the Ephemeral–Performative and Live Art

Ephemeral artworks uncomfortably transform into an archival document through still or video photography. Whilst this evidences their existence, it also denies the transient intentions of the artwork. Ephemeral artworks seek an active and present audience, witnesses connected by both event and experience—but they do need to be preserved in some way. A paradoxical situation: how can ephemerality and transience be preserved for artworks that rely on this concept, when photographic documentation is the antithesis of such an activity? A solution may lie in responses to the active and present tense of the artwork itself and how this can accommodate fluidity. The fields of performance and live art have long tussled with the question of correct and appropriate methods to document their experience. A hologram’s light-infused three-dimensional portrayal of perspectives allows a viewer to “see” the “body” or corpus of the image through access to multiple viewpoints and angles—these possibilities are available through the spectral, conceptual, and visual spectrum of multiplex holography specifically. This method captures images from moving film, and as the process begins from movement, it is, perhaps, suitable to refer to the acts of embodiment. Such a process is not unlike being present in the space of a performance. The movement necessary for access to the depth and nuances of the spatial within the holographic image is responsible for the enlivenment of the object held within it, and the shifts in the viewer’s position affect how they gain access. In effect, their relationship and bodily alignment to the hologram is responsible for how they “see”. As a simultaneous document (as an image captured of a time and place) and *non*-document (as a re-represented three-dimensional version of that time and place that is seen only by movement of the observer’s eyes and body, the hologram accepts and refutes the conventional, which can be valuable for the documentation of ephemeral art.

4. Holography as a Possible Creative Process

Holography and holograms appear to be an impressive addition to the potential of a document to be enlivened and reactive to the present. This quality, coupled with the delight of witnessing the image exposed by light within the surface, sees the hologram become of interest to artists and those working beyond the field of holography. However, is it the “ooh” and “ah” responses to witnessing a hologram’s qualities that really make it attractive to artists, so is it really viable as an alternative document? Beyond the technologically productive capabilities of holography, artists acknowledge its capacity to produce an artefact in its own right (such as sculpting or drawing with light). How successful this is in creating a coherent and succinct visual narrative, however, is debatable. Bruce Nauman, an artist making holograms in the late 1960s, explored the medium for its capacity to articulate and document the moving body. This activity is also present within the practice of performance artists such as Carolee Schneemann, to which the theorist Amelia Jones refers when discussing her artwork in *‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation*. Ephemeral art and the photographic document and documentation for Jones are mutually useful as the “event needs the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph needs the [body] art event as an ontological anchor of its indexicality” (Jones 1997). The remains or evidences of Schneemann’s live performances in the 1970s specifically, as discussed with Jones in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, are available as still images, and these, as the artist states, “become the work and a substantiation of it” (Jones and Heathfield 2012, p. 445). For Schneemann, the document is akin to being an “archaeological discovery” of the once live and alive, whilst also performing at a distance from its original criticality (Jones and Heathfield 2012, p. 445).

Extending this view on photography, holography, then, seems a more viable and useful means by which to attest to an event, particularly as it adds greater three-dimensional depth to better reflect its spatial experience. Contorting his body and face to make two series of holograms, *Making Faces*, 1968 and *Hologram H*, 1969, Nauman tested the medium’s critical malleability in response to documentary conventions. In these series, Nauman performed directly to the camera, setting the experience of the live within a relational discourse of body to lens. So, his performance within the holographic studio, which used a pulsed laser and complex optics to freeze a nanosecond of time and space, offered Nauman the opportunity to make a portrayal of (his) body as active and performing. These are successful to a certain degree and develop an intriguing response, particularly as they were made at the end of the 1960s when holography was not widely accessible beyond the science and engineering laboratories in which it was being developed. Certainly, it was not used by many artists at that time, who, perhaps, could not afford such experiments (maybe this is the preserve of the wealthy and successful, but that is for another essay). Yet, Nauman used the holograms in *Making Faces* as the source for silkscreen prints in 1970, hereby making a translation of the three-dimensional image to a static representation of a different type. Did Nauman believe that the hologram was not enough or was he seeking to extend the process into a multi-relational, -faceted, and -composed documentary only to be disappointed? Perhaps the more traditional means of making artwork seemed more suitable, more viable to the artist and the artwork, in a time when wonder should perhaps be limited to small and discreet outings and experiential opportunities. Or, perhaps, the hands-on process of “making” was necessary to fulfil the visual existence of the idea for the artwork for Nauman, to ground it *as* artwork.

5. Containing the Space—Aspects of Loss

Bruce Nauman was concerned with the body, the moving, the dexterous, the animate, which brings an engaging critical consideration for the hologram in this context. Whatever the failings or unfulfilled effects of the process for the idea to satisfy the demands of the artwork visually (if any exist), there is an engaging and exploratory process brought into the critical framework of making by using holography to capture the moving body. Its suspension within the two-dimensional pictorial plane seals the image of the body almost as if in a box. The situation of the body in this context is given greater emphasis through the three-dimensional perspective of the hologram. Essentially, the

hologram represents the image of the body as more fully and spatially formed, whereas the photograph offers one that is flat. In some ways, the spatial properties of the hologram hold the body as if in a cage or cell—a captive body held in stasis and suspended animation by the frame and depth of the hologram. Cells and spaces of containment are intriguing in regard to issues of isolation and confinement, and perhaps, this is where the hologram is of use. This act of physical and illusionary containment suggests that the represented object is of interest and value. In some ways, what it offers best is the spectacle, or spectacularisation, of the object. It makes it important to see by giving the object priority within the image plane.

There are nuances and subtleties created by the surrender of the performing body to the stasis of the hologram. Here, an inertia is created that goes beyond the standard form of documentation. It “sort of” works in a way that a conventional, still, two-dimensional photograph of an event cannot, which is further enhanced by its observational need for activation by light and movement. A doubly embodied gesture activated by viewing. A reasonable vehicle for documenting the live body in the right conditions. However, what of those who engage with holography to capture the presence of a sculpture? Louise Bourgeois makes sculptural “cells”, spaces of occupation and containment that suggest a holding and presence of the body, even if that is not in situ. In their physicality and materiality, her sculptures are referential of the body absent and (suggestive of post-) mortal. In certain circumstances and artworks, it appears as if a previously occupying body or bodies have recently left. Indeed, when details resembling the physicality of a human are included in her sculptures, they are dismembered and isolated, heralding images of torture and death and the body past. Somewhat reminiscent (for me certainly) of the sexually explicit, multi-body psychoanalytically informed narratives by Georges Bataille in his novel of 1928, *Story of the Eye* (Bataille 2001), illustrated by the artist Hans Bellmer, they speak of narrations of past acts of disembodiment and violence. Sculptural materials stand in for corporeal matter. Limbs are plaster (for example) rather than flesh, made rather than once a living body part. When constructed to include these details, such as in the artwork *Leg* (Bourgeois 2002) of 2002, the sculptures embody the essence of the living and corporeal represented as dead and immaterial. This effect is demonstrated in the holograms made by Bourgeois exhibited in *New Order: Art and Technology in the Twenty-First Century* at MoMA, New York, in 2019. (MoMA 2019). The sculptures of Bourgeois evoke the eerie and macabre through their use of cast and fabricated objects. The holograms at MoMA are in keeping with this intent but with the addition of the sense of observational movement that a hologram imbues. Through the observer’s interaction and exhibition site, her holograms offer a different, documentary, point of access to the complexities within her sculptures. In her Guardian newspaper review of the MoMA exhibition, Frani O’Toole suggests that the holograms create “their own medical moving images” (O’Toole 2019). The holograms contain images of the objects common to the sculptures of Bourgeois: cells, iron beds, cages, and dismembered human limbs made in plaster. They appear as if snapshots of a particular viewpoint of a sculpture’s exhibition installation, bathed in light. In some ways the holograms create a deeper connection of intimacy with the observer than the sculptures seen in situ, as they are drawn into observation at close range. Scanning the hologram to reveal the image rather than stepping back in order to “see” the full detail of an exhibited sculpture, the observer is drawn intimately into an engagement with the macabre worlds represented. They present an intimate “seeing” of Bourgeois’ representation of torture and dismemberment at close and affecting range.

Barthes stated in response to Sartre that there is a “poverty of the image” that comes to fruition when denied a full narrative, as one would find in an illustrated novel or text (Barthes 2014, p. 89). There is certainly a poverty created by the history that is held within a photograph, one that can incite mourning for the lost experience of that time. A yearning is created for time experienced but gone or simply not encountered. Peggy Phelan states that the “centrality of the single perception (the “perfect” viewpoint) is fortified through the experience of its loss, just as the endless process of establishing psychic identity is punctuated by its loss”, and any eventual mourning is part of the process (Jones and Heathfield 2012, p. 25). I propose that mourning is inevitable for visible and

experiential loss (whether by having seen and not being able to revisit as with conventional gallery works, accessing the document and documentation after missing the event, or seeing nothing and hearing second hand) and part of its necessary posthumous and affective aftermath. At the very least, there is a disaffection and sense of experiential *lack*, which initiates a process of dispossessed and distanced critical mourning. This distancing and separation from the density in criticality of the original encounter dilutes affective potency for the artwork, leaving its observer deflated and experientially short-changed. Although Phelan's notion of invisibility giving legacy maintains a truth to the original (and it is an approach that I attest to, as imagination, as embodied response, pertains more to the experiential), it still carries the weight of loss. One suffers the effects of not witnessing first-hand the breadth of the artistic act in the time and space of its happening, and the document is a monument to grieving in this respect. By not being able to experience and embody that experience in its intended ephemerality, the document becomes an object of loss for the observer.

6. Not Witnessing

The lack of full reference and testimony to an enhanced experience is where any failings of holography reside. This is due to a "not witnessing". The loss of the actual and "within the present time" experience is felt when viewing the hologram. Although it may represent the embodied and three-dimensional reality of an event more than the two-dimensional photograph, it cannot replace "being there". Instead, it acts as a substitute or replacement for the actual experience. For although a more active document than the traditional, it still does not satisfy the necessary testimony of the performing body for Nauman, who sought to make screen prints to satisfy his claims for the legacy of the artwork. The representation by Bourgeois of her sculptures in holograms could in no way account for being there and seeing their form in situ as the artist originally intended. So, the act represents loss and creates observational mourning of, and for, the experience. A loss to criticality is the consequence of a lack of first-hand experience of specific details, colours, and vibrancies. The ephemeral artwork sets its own agenda in acknowledgement of loss and grief, to combust when conditions dictate, which the artist predetermines. The artist may feel the loss himself or herself, but they know it will expire, as that is the ephemeral artwork's intention. The viewer, however, has no way of managing his or her grief and is unlikely to even acknowledge this state, as he or she has no say in its life, either in the moment or thereafter. This inherently makes the document and documentation of ephemeral artwork troublesome. It highlights affective mourning of the neglect of experience when perceived second hand.

An answer may lie with precision and construction. The hologram requires the same level of criticality to be an artwork as a performance or sculpture and to be treated as a medium of making as any other. A requirement for this may be (but is not absolute, as with the right agenda, the hologram could flourish as an artwork in its own right) for it to become a component part within an artwork. Strategically, with certain conditions in place to position it integrally, the hologram can fulfil the critical demands of an artwork to see it transcend the legacy of the document. When integrally positioned with other components that create a relational dialogue, the hologram enters a taut limbo between life and death, of living and loss. In this situation, it is in tension between document and documentary through a systematic re-articulation of the situated art experience and its photographically fixed representation. Here, the historic (representation within the hologram) and the contemporary (its place within a new situation) are simultaneously represented within a constructed assemblage. Invariably, this may include a confrontation of low- and high-fidelity values, as the objects to which it relates draw the hologram into a critical discussion of complexity within spatial making. The hologram relies on high fidelity to exist, and those lasers and skills do not come cheap. The more conventional art object or installation might take skill and training to make, but the artist's hand alone set to work in their studio is often the low-tech agency responsible for their critical manufacture. Combining high and low elements is, perhaps, where it gets interesting for the hologram within the context of the artwork.

7. Conclusions

How might an artist negate the effect of loss when making artwork as a hologram if this creates a void in representation of intent? Indeed, can the sense of mourning for the experience of the art object represented within the hologram ever be surpassed if its reality can never be revisited? The wonder of the hologram itself can take over, seducing the artist to use it experimentally without possibly realising that its capabilities do not fulfil the remit and intent of the artwork. This is perhaps what led Nauman to make screen prints of the original holograms in *Making Faces*, to continue the trajectory and story of the artwork as if to engage it in a two-step process of evolution. Bourgeois' acts somewhat defeat the objective of the original sculptures. On exhibition, the sculptures are already immobile and secure in their situated physicality, and in compounding this inertia, the hologram deals them a further deadly blow. With the right conditions and circumstances, however, the hologram can exist as a vitally engaging contemporary artwork, but there is a need to consider how it performs in its contemporary existence. In contrast to the work of Bourgeois and Nauman, the difference lies within its being drawn into the here and now by a re-configuration of its value beyond the magic of its making. The "oohs" an "ahs" need to be ignored to get to the core of the hologram's possibilities and potential. It can be a part of contemporary practice, but it needs to be treated as a process such as any other and one that is only included in the making of an artwork from the beginning. As a component within an artwork, it can add value: it can aid how the artwork creates and identifies knowledge and the observer's understanding of its intent. Perhaps, science needs to embrace the art, and not vice versa. Then, we might get somewhere in its progression within the language of art.

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