



Bibliomancy

Tuesday, October 30, 2001

Bibliomancy is the title of an installation piece by Wenyon and Gamble (collaborative artists Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon). During their 1997-1998 residency at the Boston Athenaeum Wenyon and Gamble set up holographic equipment in the basement and amassed a collection of images from the Athenaeum Library.

The exhibit looks like it belongs on some kind of futuristic spaceship from the past, (retro-futurism I think that's called). I'm talking about the recent past though, like the 80's maybe. *Alien, 2001, Flight of the Navigator*. There's a row of holograms mounted on the wall, eerie holographic book spines -- each looking as though it's floating in ghostly green science fiction preservation tank fluid, a relic on its way to a new planet. If you stand directly in front of the holograms, thereby blocking the spotlights focused on them, you can't see them. They depend on the lights for their existence and must be looked at obliquely. 3D objects that occupy a mere two dimensions, they are mysterious, impossible paradoxes, "Wonders of the Unseen World" as one book title puts it. What we see isn't really what we see; our eyes are not to be trusted. We used to have books and in the future we'll have virtual reality, but what we are looking at now is ghosts caught halfway between.

One can play with the titles of the books in relation to their context and to each other, building up an architecture of layered meanings and meta-texts. Titles such as "Art Criticism from a Laboratory", "Faith in Fakes", "The Future of the Book", "Books as Windows", "Flash - Seeing the Unseen Through Ultra-High Photography", "Europe - Going, Going, Gone!", and "Never Look Back" are evocative of Technology and Scientific Observation, notions of the past and the future, reality, legitimacy and representation. Some of them highlight the act of looking and draw attention to the holographic medium, others set up a discourse on the projected obsolescence of the book as a 3D repository of text, and as an extension of this treat the downfall of the authority of authored texts as a given.

The multiple layers of looking back and forward in time point to the subjectivity of reading. The past and the future are always fictional and wholly dependent on the present moment and each individual's interpretation. The word "Bibliomancy" refers to the random selection of a passage in a book for enlightenment. The passage will always have potential meanings that are relevant to the reader's own self and time.

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

Opposite the wall of book spines is a series of holographic photographs of library card catalog drawers. This is a funny idea. Archiving an archival tool - it makes us look at the assumptions that museums and libraries are based on, and the way they can take a mundane object from the past, an object which was regarded as only a means to an end, and put it on display as an object In-and-of-Itself. A joke as obvious as this one though, in the tradition of Duchamp's readymades, changes the object and destroys the legitimacy that museums claim for their exhibits. This is a poem and not a science.

The single-minded seriousness of this manic desire to classify, order and catalog is funny as well. In this joke Wenyon and Gamble are two obsessive librarians, determined to archive everything that exists. Finally when everything in the world has been labeled and classified, the exhausted librarians collapse in their chairs to catch their breath. Suddenly their eyes grow round and panic sets in - What to do now? What to do now, when everything has been archived? - and then the idea hits them - Well the library itself hasn't been cataloged yet! - and so they begin the process of labeling the library and everything in the library gets subcategorized as a part of the library collection, and so in this way they are able to go on forever.

There is something comforting about the archiving process that makes this kind of obsession understandable, despite its ridiculousness. The implication that things will never be completely lost, and that a certain structure and stability can be maintained infinitely is reassuring. The act of cataloging, filing and preserving relics serves our sense of the importance of our memories and experiences, both on a personal level and in the more abstract sense of "history" in general. We accumulate and discard "historical" materials, and our histories are reinvented to comply. As the years pass media might change, but new media are still used to the same ends, of which the utmost concern is always preservation of the present moment. Preservation of the past and the future as it is seen through the lens of today.

©2001 Larissa Niedzwiecka