

opinion

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Something in the air: Stephen Benton and a 'family' reunion*



About the author

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During the heady days of the late 1970's and early 80's holography was the new buzzword, the ultimate visual medium. It had everything: lasers, three dimensions, mystery, danger, complexity and visual impact beyond anything we had seen before. It was also quite good at making the most mundane objects look interesting. No wonder then that the band wagon almost collapsed with a rush to climb on it. TV producers loved it. The scientists looked so "scientific" in their white coats and "Flash Gordon" laboratories. The artists looked so "artistic" in their smocks and makeshift holographic studios.

The massive lines of eager visitors to holography exhibitions, around the world, was tangible evidence that "people were interested". Once it was clear that very few of the protagonists would be making personal fortunes, and digital imaging became cheaper and simpler, things cooled. Techniques and processes were guarded, particularly in the commercial, design and art sectors where publishing research results is not the norm. The general impression was that the holographic cake was of a restricted size and quite a few people wanted the largest slice of it – human nature!

That is not to say that work in the field stopped. The optical scientists and researchers continued to expand the technology and answer many questions. The artists and designers created and researched because they were "driven", or to make their clients happy. The process and the resulting medium expanded enormously, embracing the digital world. Photons and electrons were becoming part of the same imaging process. Things settled, calmed, matured. That was the 90's.

Now that we have survived into a new millennium, there is "something in the air". Interest in holography, and particularly visual holography, appears to be increasing. Respected museums around the world are purchasing

*The full Benton Vision meeting can be viewed at: <http://www.media.mit.edu/events/benton-vision.html>.

holographic art. Not much, it has to be said, but they are buying work which fits into their collections, and because they feel it is significant and important. The American Shearwater Foundation, which supports creative holography projects, continues to receive many more applications for funding than its annual budget can support. Artist-in-residence programs are offering a sensitive environment for people to create new work. Packaging, printing and security products are in almost every area of our lives now, just check your pocket or bag for the number of holograms in it. People appear to be interested again. Conferences and international symposia continue to attract plenty of attendees. There is a sense of "renewal", perhaps even renaissance, and no clearer could that have been than on 11th November 2004.

Benton Vision, held at MIT's Media Laboratory, was pivotal. Held to honour Stephen Benton, it was an overwhelmingly sad event, because Steve was not there to be embarrassed by the intense show of respect, but there was also an underlying feeling of renewed enthusiasm.

Hundreds of people made their way to Boston to celebrate Steve's life and work. Friends, family, colleagues, scientists, artists, writers, academics, fellows, entrepreneurs, students and philanthropists jammed into the Media Lab, and many who could not make it, were thinking about him on the eleventh. All of these people had, in some way, been influenced by Steve. It is difficult to imagine that anyone could have persuaded such a diverse group of personalities to be in the same room at the same time. Steve did and the room was bursting.

It is a fitting tribute that such an unusual group wanted to attend, and an even greater tribute that many wanted it to be a "start" rather than an "end". There were numerous conversations that evening, and in following days, about feelings of excitement. Of wanting to start something new, fresh. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that those involved with holography have matured. Many felt that being there was a little like the "family" coming back together again. Several of those who could not be there, felt that they were, somehow, missing a family reunion and perhaps they were right. Like a mature family, it is clear that not everyone will "get on" all of the time: that they will argue, fall out, stop sending Christmas cards, make up, and sometimes miss each other.

Steve passed on a great deal of his knowledge, through published papers, personal contact and his teaching. Perhaps, as a mature family (albeit conceptual) we will be able to follow Steve's lead and support the new generations of eagerly smiling individuals excited by the possibilities of holography in all its forms. The world will be a much less interesting place without Stephen Benton, but some of the things he showed us might spark new enthusiasm, make the memories of him more vibrant and encourage the tenuous family to show the new generation "how to do it".