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Disembodied Spirits: Spirit Photography and Rachel Whiteread's *Ghost*

The contemporary art world is—metaphorically speaking—haunted. In just the last two years, evidence of haunting, if not the specters themselves, could be found at the 2002 Whitney Biennial in the works of Jeremy Blake, Archive, Zoe Beloff, and Leighton Pierce. In the same year, Adam Fuss released his beautiful book *My Ghost*, a series of photographs that were also on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Gregory Crewdson introduced his new body of work, whose figures implied that the paranormal exists deeper in the suburban unconscious than we might have imagined. Anna Gaskell found herself commissioned by the Menil Collection to create a series of photographs and video depicting a haunted young woman, which she titled *half-life*, basing the work on Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Chrysanne Stathacos traveled the world with a biofeedback camera, photographing hundreds of people's "auras," a selection of which can be found in her book *Invisible Colors*. At his photography gallery in New York City, Keith de Lillis reintroduced Georgiana Houghton, a nineteenth-century British medium who, in collaboration with a photographer named Mr. Hudson, produced some of the most theatrical examples of spirit photography of her time. In 2001, Gary Simmons created *Ghost House*, a site-specific project for which he produced a series of his signature erasure drawings on the walls of an abandoned house at Ruby Ranch, near Las Vegas, New Mexico. Tony Oursler, in 2000, mounted his ambitious multimedia installation *The Influence Machine* in New York's Madison Square Park—a series of video projections, smoke machines, and sound tracks that suggests the ways that historical and current mimetic technologies have an impact on our daily lives.

Ghosts are all around us. But ghosts are not taken as seriously today, or taken with the same seriousness, as they were throughout the nineteenth century, when many scientists and scholars—largely through spiritualism but also in the nascent disciplines of science, psychology and psychoanalysis—examined the manifestations of spirits through telepathy, spirit photography, and séances. Instead, ghosts today are considered by most simply as novelties, entertainment found primarily in the movies and popular literature. *The Disembodied Spirit*, an exhibition I am curating for the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, suggests that the representations of ghosts can be understood as more and other than novelties and can, in fact, open the way for new understandings of vision and "reality" in our contemporary, digitized, hypermediated world.

The Disembodied Spirit features works by artists such as John Clarence Laughlin, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Duane Michals, and Francesca Woodman, all of whom depict the ghost in a manner that evokes the same pathos Roland Barthes finds in photography—an indexical imprint of a "that-has-been" emerging from the presence of something that is no longer present. John Baldessari, Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, and Mike Kelley each have created works that directly quote, sometimes ironically, the history of spirit photography. Bill Viola, Tracey Moffatt, and Sally Mann grapple with what modern history has rendered ghostly. They employ or suggest historic photographic and film techniques to intimate that history, like a ghost, haunts our present. Glenn Ligon, Christian Boltanski, and Michal Rovner similarly depict haunted histories, but their works refer explicitly to suppressed histories that, nevertheless, refuse to be eradicated. Others, such as

Anna Gaskell. *Untitled #90 (half-life)*, 2002. C-print. 49¹³⁄₁₆ x 48⅛ in. (126.5 x 122.2 cm). Courtesy of Anthony Podesta and Heather Miller; image courtesy of Casey Kaplan, New York.

Ann Hamilton, Cornelia Parker, and Nancy Burson, use the suggestion or metaphor of spirits to explore how art can breach fantasy and materiality, the psychic and the physical.

The exhibition also includes a small selection of American and British spirit photography, a form of photography practiced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that claimed to capture on film evidence of the afterlife. During the photographic sessions themselves, paying sitters were posed as they would be in standard photographic portraits of the time. While no spirits were

visually evident to the sitters when the photographs were made, mysterious "extras" appear in the final prints: disembodied heads hover in the air above them, transparent faces glow on the sleeves of a jacket, ethereal figures gently place a hand on the shoulder of an unknowing sitter. The works gathered in *The Disembodied Spirit* suggest links between spirit photography and contemporary works deploying the representation of ghosts, though it does not propose a linear historic progression. Rather, the collection of works suggests how an understanding of spirit photography can inform and perhaps complicate our interpretations of those many latter-day ghosts with which we began.

Artists' recourse to the ghostly often functions as a by-product of technological advances—primarily photography and the telegraph in the nineteenth century and the computer in the late twentieth century. Like ghosts themselves, these dematerializing technological innovations produced both anxiety and optimism in their times, while simultaneously altering, quite dramatically, received notions of representation and vision. For example, in the nineteenth century, spiritualism suggested that the human soul or consciousness could exist independently from its material form—a fantasy that found vivid and uncanny expression in new technologies such as photography (the unveiling of the first daguerreotype was in 1839) and the telegraph (the invention of Morse Code in 1837 made the telegraph widely accessible). Today, in a manner that recalls spiritualism, cybernetics and virtual reality offer the fantasy of an ecstatically fragmented subjectivity, one that promises liberation, within fantastic worlds, from the material body and its constraints. Spirit photography and a number of the contemporary works of art mentioned above intimate that it is no coincidence that ideals of a disembodied self in both the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries evolved directly from radical technological innovations, in as much as these utopian visions offered new possibilities for life and experience within a drastically changing world. These works also suggest, however, that such utopian ideals are shot through with anxiety, disturbance, and a kind of melancholy. In all, neither early spirit photography nor this contemporary work inveighs against an encroaching technological alienation; rather, they embrace technology, if somewhat warily, and derive from it vocabularies of fantasy and imagination— seen especially in representations of the ghost—with which to analyze "reality" and the transforming human experience.

The fact that ghosts have haunted cultures around the world and across history poses an interesting challenge to considerations of the ghostly. Nearly every discipline in the humanities is faced with ghosts and their metaphors and examines them according to its own particular methods and practices. *The Disembodied Spirit* investigates ghosts from a Western perspective, primarily through the lens of photography. Many of the works mentioned above make use of media-based technology—photography, film, video, audio—to represent ghosts and haunting in their art, a fact that at first might seem insignificant given that media-based work is so prevalent today. However, that artists are using film-based media to create representations of ghosts at this turn of the century is of great consequence. In what follows, I want to very briefly suggest that even when contemporary artists do not rely on photographic media to evoke the ghostly, their works can be and often are inflected conceptually by the photographic and specifically by elements of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century spirit photography.

The impulse to investigate how spirit photography might inform our understanding of contemporary representations of ghosts was prompted, for me, by "Tracing Nadar," an essay written by Rosalind Krauss in 1978. Krauss was among the first to suggest the importance to contemporary critics of an investigation of spirit photography and the other unusual ways in which early photography was put to use. She wrote that "at this point, in our turn, we are realizing the immense impact of photography, the way it has shaped our sensibilities without our quite knowing it, the way, for example, the whole of the visual arts is now engaged in strategies that are deeply structured by the photographic."[1] My investigation of spirit photography relies as well on Tom Gunning's 1995 groundbreaking essay "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," in which he brought the most sophisticated tools of contemporary critical analysis to bear on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century spirit photography. Here I want to review the way that spirit photography functions within the history of photography and then highlight a number of points by Krauss and Gunning that seem pertinent for our understanding of art produced today. Following that, I will look briefly at Rachel Whiteread's 1989 sculpture Ghost, as a kind of case study, to show how a knowledge of spirit photography can expand the ways we understand contemporary works that employ the metaphor of the ghost.

Anonymous spirit photograph, no date. Gelatin silver print. 5¼ x 3½ in. (13.3 x 8.9 cm). Courtesy of the Estate of Dame Jean Conan Doyle, Photography Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Nadar (born Gaspar-Félix Tournachon) writes in his autobiography that the invention of photography was greeted with much astonishment in the 1830s, more so than many of the other radical technologies that came into being in the nineteenth century. In his memoir, quoted by Krauss, he writes "But do not all these miracles pale . . . when compared to the most astonishing and disturbing one of all, that one which seems finally to endow man himself with the divine power of creation: the power to give physical form to the insubstantial image that vanishes as soon as it is perceived, leaving no shadow in the mirror, no ripple on the surface of water?"[2] Acknowledging that this is how photographs were understood in the nineteenth century explains, in part, the temptation to put the young technology to the service of making visible something that of its very nature cannot be seen and does not exist in visible form. Proceeding according

1. Rosalind Krauss, "Tracing Nadar," October 5 (summer 1978): 30.
2. Ibid.

to this basic insight, Julia Margaret Cameron, using her signature, messy, physical photographic process, produced powerful images of ethereal young women as angels in *The Angel at the Sepulchre* (1869) and *The Angel at the Tomb* (1870). James VanDerZee's spectral composite photographs from the 1920s exemplified, too, how photographic technology, even after its novelty and mystification had worn off, could continue to make visible the invisible or, as in VanDerZee's 1926 *Future Expectations* (*Wedding Day*), could bend the parameters of time and make visible an anticipated future.

But even before Cameron began creating photographic fictions of angels, a Boston photographer by the name of William Mumler claimed in 1861 that when developing a self-portrait—a photograph he had taken of himself alone in a friend's studio—a second figure appeared on the print. At first, Mumler dismissed the occurrence, explaining that perhaps the photographic plate he used to make the photograph was not clean. But by then, twenty or so years after the invention of photography, Krauss explains, themes of spiritualism had already been folded into popular discourse and photography. "For photography," Krauss reminds us, "was the first available demonstration that light could indeed exert an action . . . sufficient to cause changes in material bodies."[3] Though not a spiritualist himself, Mumler was convinced by adamant believers that this "extra" appeared from the spirit world. After he was repeatedly able to produce photographs of sitters accompanied by spirits, Mumler opened his own studio in Boston. By 1869 he was so successful that he moved to New York City, and his studio there, according to a number of accounts, came to be frequented by some of the most eminent people in the country. Originally an American phenomenon, the practice of spirit photography, like spiritualism itself, quickly spread to Europe, where it was practiced in multiple variations until the 1930s, as it was in the United States.

In "Tracing Nadar," Krauss is intent on establishing the notion that the operation of the photograph is that of "the imprint, the register, the trace." Krauss substantiates her twentieth-century argument, influenced as it is by semiology, by laying out the historical underpinnings of the photograph as "trace" through the writing and photographic practices of Nadar. She writes that in the nineteenth century, the photograph was understood as a "material object become intelligible." The inherent intelligibility of the photographic trace shared equally in "the positivist's absolutism of matter and the metaphysician's order of pure intelligibility, itself resistant to a materialist analysis." This understanding, she argues, was based in part on the belief in "the power of light to transmit the invisible and imprint it on phenomena," a belief that turned on "the marriage of science and spiritualism."[4] So, for Krauss, the semiotics of spiritualism and early photography, both invested heavily in the physical realization of the trace, coincided powerfully in the nineteenth century.

Gunning, influenced by Krauss's "Tracing Nadar," takes her arguments

Anonymous spirit photograph, no date. Gelatin silver print. 3⅜ x 2⅞ in. (8.6 x 7.3 cm). Courtesy of the Estate of Dame Jean Conan Doyle, Photography Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
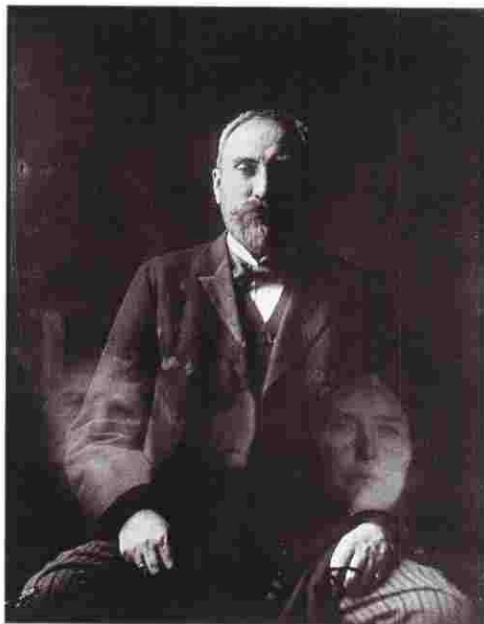
3. Krauss, 39.
4. Krauss, 34, 35, 35, 42.

further. He agrees with Krauss, observing that "Certainly all claims of spirit photography as evidence of an afterlife rest on this indexical claim: that ghosts invisible to the human eye are nonetheless picked up by the more sensitive capacity of the photograph." But Gunning emphasizes that, while photography functioned to support nineteenth-century positivism, it was simultaneously experienced as an uncanny phenomenon, "one which seemed to undermine the unique identity of objects and people, endlessly reproducing the appearances of objects, creating a parallel world of phantasmatic doubles alongside the concrete world of the senses verified by positivism." He continues, "While the process of photography could be thoroughly explained by chemical and physical operations, the cultural reception of the process frequently associated it with the occult and supernatural."[5]

According to Gunning there was a constant debate within spiritualist, theosophical, and occult circles throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about what supernatural forces actually produced the apparitions in spirit photography. Gunning explains that while spirit photography at first functioned as proof, as record of the appearance of invisible spirits, soon thereafter—reacting in large part to accusations of fraud—spirit photographs were explained as "products of unknown spiritual forces who used images of the dead as a way of communicating their existence to the living." Spiritualists believed that because the deceased were so dramatically transformed after death, the spirits needed, essentially, to consult existing photographs in order to re-create their worldly selves before they could communicate affectively with the living. As Gunning observes, "We see here that a photograph, rather than providing indexical evidence of the appearance of the spirit, becomes a model for reduplication and the basis of recognition." In this, he writes, "Photography becomes independent of its ordinary indexical references, since supernatural forces use it primarily as a process of reproduction and communication." Spirit photography, according to Gunning, therefore disrupts the notion of the photograph as strictly an index, that is, something that can be traced back to its original. Instead, he writes, spirit photography "reveals the uncanny aspect of this technological process, as one is confronted with doubles that can be endlessly scrutinized for their recognizable features, but whose origins remain obscure." As a result, what is haunting about these images is "their very lack of tangible reference, serving even within Spiritualist metaphysics simply as a nostalgic reminder of how things once appeared, a symbolon passed between the living and the dead as a token of recognition."[6] That the photographs were fake is beside the point—what we see rather is the vanishing of the secure and stable index of the authentic, the "real."

Rachel Whiteread's *Ghost*

Rachel Whiteread's *Ghost* is the cast of a parlor in a typical Victorian middle- or working-class home, a row house in north London, one of many like it that was slated to be demolished. The exterior of the sculpture displays the negative imprints of the room's most prominent features, such as its door, window, fireplace, and moldings. The residue of soot and ashes left from the fireplace is apparent on the surface. It also reveals some of the room's details, such as the texture of the room's wallpaper, but like all the room's other details, they are partially obscured by the sculpture's sepulchral, monochrome, white exterior.

5. Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 64, 42–43, 43.
6. Gunning, 65, 65–66 , 66 , 67, 67–68.

Rachel Whiteread. *Ghost*, 1989. Plaster
on steel frame. 8 ft. 10 in. x 10 ft. 5 in. x
11 ft. 8 in. (269.2 x 317.5 x 355.6 cm).
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring
Augustine, New York.

In an examination of Whiteread's work, Krauss links *Ghost* as well as Whiteread's other sculptures to the photographic trace. Beyond the fact that the methods of photography and casting are similar—both begin with negatives to make the positive—Krauss observes that the processes overlap in their history of depicting the dead. The death mask—a cast of the deceased face—and the photograph both were used to commemorate death by invoking the lost physical presence and thereby preserving memory. In a turn that now should be familiar to us, Krauss writes that the photograph and the death mask are both "indexically produced forms" that "resonate with the sense that they have been cast (whether physically or optically) from life."[7]

Whiteread's *Ghost* makes use of indexical references in creating meaning, but, unlike ordinary photographs, the associations and meanings around *Ghost* are not limited. Krauss herself has something of this in mind when she observes that Whiteread's sculptural work is "caught at the heel by the object from which it is cast."[8] Along these lines, *Ghost* is frequently described as appearing uncanny. Though the cast of the room looks familiar, it is disorienting and hard to make sense of because it is the negative of the exterior of an interior room of a house. Cautioning that it oversimplifies *Ghost* to stop simply at the description that the room is reversed or inside out, critic Mark Cousins writes about *Ghost* that "perception wants to travel in the opposite direction from the intellectual knowledge of what is being represented, of what has been cast."[9] The cast promises a kind of legibility, but by reversing notions of positives and negatives it unsettles that promise.

In this sense, *Ghost* can be understood as a sophisticated relative of spirit photography, enjoying a similarly entangled visual relationship to the index. For instance, the "extra" in spirit photography, which remains invisible while the photograph of the sitter is made, becomes visible only after the photograph is printed. However, even then, the spirit image does not necessarily represent the person who embodies it but rather, as Gunning suggests, an image the spirit uses to communicate with the living. In a similar manner, whereas Whiteread's cast appears to have the potential to replicate the original room, she is manifestly less interested in duplicating the original for posterity than in refiguring it into a new form, simultaneously solidified and enigmatic. The cast that makes up *Ghost*, then, is less a specific room than an abstraction of lost specificity. Gunning observes that what is haunting about the apparitions in spirit photography is their very lack of tangible reference, and the uncanny characteristic of *Ghost* can be explained in much the same way. Like spirit photography, *Ghost* does not present visual completeness but instead functions as a pointedly oblique reminder of how things appeared. The direct link between the object and the representation of the object is disrupted and obscured, and each is made to operate instead through the fuzzier and inexact lens of "recognition." In *Ghost* and spirit photography, recognition takes place where the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present overlap and are momentarily integrated. In this sense, Whiteread offers *Ghost* as a token of recognition, at once specific and abstract, solid and fantastic, to be passed like the spirit photograph between the viewer and the lost, commemorated past, the living and the dead.

"What is characteristic about ghosts," writes Cousins, "is not that they are seen or not seen but that they transform the relation between what is normally

7. Rosalind Krauss, "X Marks the Spot," in *Rachel Whiteread: Shedding Life*, ed. Fiona Bradley (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 76.
8. Krauss, 81.
9. Mark Cousins, "Rachel Whiteread: Inside Outcast," *Tate: The Art Magazine* 10 (winter 1996): 37.

seen and what is not seen."[10] This is true in spirit photography of the nineteenth century, and it is no less true of art produced in this contemporary moment. Whiteread's aptly titled sculpture instigates a complex notion of visibility, one somewhat akin to that described by Laura Kipnis, who writes of visibility as "a complex system of permission and prohibition, of presence and absence, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness."[11] The appearance of ghosts can be viewed as a symptom of the dominant regimes of the "real," and as symptoms they direct us to social, cultural, and psychological phenomena that are otherwise obscured. Not simply dead or absent people, ghosts are the return of the repressed, symbolic manifestations of a past that will not stay dead. Through metaphors and representations of ghosts, Whiteread and other contemporary artists suggest that we examine the way we look at our histories and culture, especially before we attempt to bury them. If we don't, these artists show us, they will indeed come back to haunt us.

Alison Ferris is curator at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Maine. *The Disembodied Spirit* is on view at Bowdoin September 26–December 7, 2003, and will travel to the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City (March 5–May 23, 2004) and the Austin Museum of Art (September 11–November 28, 2004).

10. Cousins, 40.
11. Laura Kipnis, "Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism?" in *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*, ed. Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 158.

Gregory Crewdson. *Untitled (Beer Dream)*, 1998. C-print. 50 x 60 in. (127 x 152.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Oliver Wasow. Untitled #148, 1986. Color photograph. 26 x 14 in. (66 x 35.6 cm). Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc.