

ON PHOTOGRAPHY SEEING THINGS

Spirit photography at the Met.

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Spirit photography, which flourished between the late eighteen-sixties and the nineteen-thirties, was an exercise in blind faith and outrageous fraud. The Civil War in the United States and, a few years later, the Franco-Prussian War, in Europe, had decimated most of a generation, and photographers, responding to the desire of survivors to reconnect with the dead, found a way to bring them together on film. With the aid of some simple darkroom trickery, sitters for conventional studio portraits could be made to share the frame with the transparent figure, disembodied head, or smoky silhouette of a dead husband, wife, child, parent, or pet, and by the end of the nineteenth century thousands of these keepsakes had been printed in America and Europe. Spirit photographers, some of whom claimed to be able to capture not only the spirits of the dead but also the thoughts and dreams of the living, were exploiting more than the public's naïveté. As "The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult," an exhibition of more than a hundred and twenty photographs at the Metropolitan Museum, makes clear, within a few decades of the invention of photography its practitioners understood the camera's power as a tool not just for capturing reality but for manipulating it.

Skeptics, including members of the nascent Spiritualist movement, challenged spirit photographers' methods—most of which involved elementary forms of double exposure—and took them to court. Yet some photographers were compelled by a belief in the hereafter, and clients were so comforted by the images that they often refused to accept evidence of fakery, even when the photographer confessed to it. In the eightenseventies, Édouard Isidore Buguet, the first and most successful French spirit photographer, had a studio on the Boulevard Montmartre, where the business of traditional portraiture was supplemented with what one journalist called a "little industry turning out ghosts"—some fifty apparitions a month. Buguet's success attracted the attention of a policeman who, after sitting anonymously for a portrait, arrested him for fraud. Before his trial, in 1875, Buguet admitted to double-exposing his prints and conceded that he had no powers as a medium: "I am just a photographer with more or less skillful tricks." He was sentenced to a year in prison and fled to Belgium, but his clients considered him a martyr for the Spiritualist cause.

Visitors to the Met's show might wonder what the fuss was about, though they will be thoroughly entertained. The nine Buguet photographs mounted together in the exhibition's first gallery are obvious fakes, but so are the other images in the room. Many look like ordinary fleamarket cabinet cards and *cartes de visite*—hand-sized portraits of stolid men and women in waistcoats and crinolines—except that ghostly figures float above the sitters' heads or hold them in a transparent embrace. Yet who could mistake these spectres—which included not just dead relatives but departed celebrities like Napoleon III and Balzac—for anything other than scrapbook cutouts trailing yards of chiffon? In the same gallery are five "anti-spirit" self-portraits, which Buguet made after his trial, satirizing his deceptive techniques and ridiculing his clients' beliefs. In one, he levitates a cane-bottomed chair. In another, he holds the hand of a wraithlike skeleton whose bearded face resembles his own. In the most elaborate image of the series, he sits at a table peering into an open book while a recumbent female apparition floats behind his head holding a medallion that states, "The chosen ghost is guaranteed. . . . Invisible manipulation carried out in front of the client." Buguet's spoofs, like other pointed satires included in the show, are more artful than the work they mock—animated by an evident delight in photography's possibilities for deceit.

After the turn of the century, the photographers who recorded Spiritualist phenomena were more likely to be Spiritualists themselves. Their work, gathered at the Met under the heading "Mediums," has an intimate quality that gives their increasingly audacious hoaxes an aura of authenticity. These photographers, both European and American, also claimed to be able to coax phantoms from the ether, but their primary subjects were the mediums, mostly women, who acted as go-betweens for the spirits. Most mediums preferred to demonstrate their powers by giving their psychic visitations a peculiarly physical form, and in many of these images the camera hovers in a cramped, darkened room inches from a woman's body as ectoplasm—the material manifestation of the spirit or the unconscious—spumes from her mouth, nose, or navel. (One Hungarian medium, whose scrapbook photographs show him vomiting ragged strips of spirit matter, later admitted that the material was cotton wool smeared with goose fat.) A Boston medium known as Margery, who looks like a young Eleanor Roosevelt, is depicted seated at a table as a fibrous mass emerges from her nose and, in a stereo view, an ectoplasmic "hand" (it looks like a shrivelled lettuce leaf) lies on the table before her. But Margery was most famous for being able to materialize a hand from her navel. In a photograph of the event, she appears naked from the waist down, with a small white cloth draped between her thighs just below the outstretched hand, which resembles a segmented, evenly toasted dinner roll. The result is pure Dali, as grotesque as it is erotic. Removed from the context of nineteenth-century belief, much spirit photography looks like avant-garde experimentation, at once sinister, comic, lurid, and alarming. The claustrophobic interiors and tumbling furniture of the show's séance photographs recall the slapstick Surrealism of early silent films: "Fantômas," the French camp-noir serial, crossed with "Un Chien Andalou." The Italian Futurist Anton Giulio Bragaglia produced a series of occult photographs, and the French Surrealist André Breton referred in essays to paranormal experiments conducted by the German spirit photographer and writer Albert von Schrenck-Notzing. One of the exhibition's most astonishing images, taken in 1913, shows a medium's naked torso with a macramé-like web of ectoplasm suspended from her nipples. It wouldn't look out of place in a Man Ray retrospective. And no one would be surprised if Hans Bellmer or Pierre Molinier claimed the nightmarish closeup, circa 1920, and identified as "Birth of an Ectoplasm," which depicts a hairy knob of flesh held firmly in a medium's grasp.

Today, photography is routinely subject to disbelief. Staged fictions masquerade as documents, and whole images are created with pixels. But photographers have always chafed at the limitations of reality. Stuck with the world in front of their camera—a room, a woman, a chair—the spirit photographers realized that if a figure, shrouded in white, were to enter the room briefly and then withdraw while the lens was still open, leaving a ghostly imprint on the film, dumb reality could be altered and the ordinary could be rendered extraordinary. Nearly all the photographers included in “The Perfect Medium” were accused of fakery; some eventually confessed to it. Schrenck-Notzing defended himself rather cleverly, pointing out that “a photograph reproduces only an instant abstracted from the flow of the living event as it occurred during the séances, and that, for this reason, the effect it produced could only be crude and deceptive.” That’s still a fairly accurate description of any photographic event. Photographs lie—they just can’t help it. ♦