

PREFACE

Pervasive belief in photography's inherent truthfulness allowed "spirit photographers" in the 19th and early 20th centuries to deceive a great many people. Also known as photographic mediums, they "documented" the presence of ghosts, using double exposures and other tricks to manufacture the supernatural encounters. Their patrons, eager to pierce death's veil, believed willingly that a camera couldn't lie. Technological innovations at that time were delivering all sorts of miracles. Anything seemed possible.

Demand for spirit photography soared after the Civil War and again after World War I: one technology nursing the wounds caused by another. This popularity attested to the power of love and loss in people's lives, then as now. The hauntings were real, even if the ghosts were not.

We are haunted still, and not just by love and loss. This book makes visible some of what bedevils us: psychological demons; social distortions; the force and folly of the culture around us.

While photography in its earliest days was held to be objective and accurate, painting was by contrast considered an unreliable document due to its subjective nature. On the other hand, painting was widely appreciated as an artistic, expressive medium, a status that photography wouldn't gain for decades.

The plates in this book were produced using paint, camera, and ultimately ink. Immaterial subjects benefit both from a scientific and an expressive approach, do they not? Like the real world and like the psychologies they are tethered to, the specters herein comprise both fact and fiction, encompassing both the rational and the absurd.

For help identifying specters apparent in the plates, please see the fold-out guide.

COLOPHON

Artwork, text, printing and binding by Sara L. Press.

Gouache paintings (then re-photographed) were based on spirit photographs by Ada Deane, William Hope, Edward Wyllie, and others.

This book was made with generous help and support from the Kala Art Institute, Berkeley, CA. It was printed there on an Epson 9900 printer and a Vandercook letterpress. Thank you to Kala and to the wonderful people there.

Thanks also to Dan Mayer (Berlin) for the font-choosing rule of thumb ("you can't go wrong with two typefaces by the same designer"), to John Rosenthal for his patient notes on the text, and to Joel Savage for holding down the fort.

Fonts: News Gothic (1908) and Century Schoolbook (1918), designed by Morris Fuller Benton (American Type Founders)

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