

## **A Certain Sensibility: Belief in an Age of Technological Doubt**

*"It is not the world out there that is real, nor is the concept within the camera's program – only the photograph is real. The program of the world and the camera are only preconditions for the image, possibilities to be realized."*<sup>1</sup>

### Disclaimer/Prologue

This essay stems from a need to better comprehend how we (the larger world) relate to photographic imagery at a moment when the act of looking is done with a much more skeptical eye than ever before. The format of this document functions twofold; it is a historical outline briefly chronicling the shift in photographic understanding and it is also an elongated artist's statement. It allows me to lay out the foundation of my thinking in relation to my most recent work while simultaneously giving the reader the potential for a fuller viewing of the resultant images (and perhaps widening the gamut for belief on behalf of the viewer/reader).

The notion of the photograph as document as long since been a fragile concept. The medium still plays that role on occasion and for good reason, however, in looking at how many guises photographic depiction can enact, thirty-odd years after the digital revolution the understanding that photography is no longer considered as truth is blatantly evident. With this in mind, the questions I am

currently attempting to resolve within this work are as follows: How does a contemporary audience respond to the photographic images set before them? And how does their mode of looking shift the potential for new understandings and relationships with photography?

These questions in themselves are incredibly large, ungainly, and somewhat vague; that said, if the larger viewership is, as a whole, seeing differently, then perhaps inquires such as these act as a point of entry. To that end, I opted to locate an image "type" that eludes the immediacy of our day-to-day bludgeoning from advertisements and the internet and endeavor to find something that is photographically distinct, aesthetically beautiful, and what I consider to be visually tiered: aura photography.

The aura photograph becomes a site for investigation of both the medium itself, which is currently undergoing close scrutiny, and the image types that force us to engage with them beyond the surface, beyond the thing depicted, deliberately pushing the viewer to respond not only to the image but to raise questions about their position in relation to that particular image type.

### Faithful Reproductions

I began to seriously consider how imagery is perceived when I was conducting provenance research on the Cottingley Fairies while at the Art Institute of Chicago. This series was produced by two British teenagers in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By this time, the

photographic image was already about eighty years old, but its veracity as a purveyor of truth remained unchallenged. Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths claimed that they were in contact with fairies in the woods behind their childhood home. Together, they created a series of five images documenting their interactions with these mythical beings.

Upon presenting the photographs to their parents and their parent's peers the verdict was that, without a doubt, the images were authentic. The Cottingley Fairies created such a stir that a controlled test was authorized by none other than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle after he too confirmed their legitimacy.



Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, *Alice and Leaping Fairy*, August 1920, Silver chloride print, 15.4 x 10.6 cm

To our 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes, the fakery is quite legible; we can easily read the fairy as a paper cutout. But to those contemporaneous with the image makers, three factors play very heavily in to the translation of these photographs: belief in the recording qualities of the photographic image, belief in the ongoing Spiritualist

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<sup>1</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1983), 37.

movement, and belief in the idea that photography can capture what cannot be seen by the human eye. In combination, the definition of truth in relation to the photographic image expands beyond the seeable, making the Cottingley Fairy images a viable recording of a spiritual event.

While most other genres of photography have fallen victim to our growing doubt over the past century, spirit photography remains one in which the viewer's response is still quite variable. The space for belief created through its subjective qualities allows for the possibility of affirmation and/or interpretation. Since the images are not necessarily legible in the traditional sense (many have an abstracted or glitch-like quality to them) the initial viewing does not provide the clarity of more recognizable or digestible compositions. The photographs afford the viewer something to translate that can provide an atypical experience.

#### The Desire for the Tangible

Part of the success (or perhaps a better term might be "longevity") of spirit photography is the need for tangible proof — again photography acting as evidence—but this need extends further outward to other quasi-scientific<sup>2</sup> practices like biofeedback.

Biofeedback is a physical call and response where the participant sees a signal or

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<sup>2</sup> I hesitate to say pseudoscience due to its inherently negative connotation. It presumes that we are entering a dialog in which our understanding of these practices is predefined and without fluctuation.

hears a sound and answers by attempting to control physiological changes in the body. Over time, the ability to alter the state of the body becomes natural and the signal is no longer needed. In conversations with my aura photographer, she has reaffirmed this same desire on the part of her clients. By providing an image of the self in tandem with an image of overarching personality traits, the photograph transforms into a signal. It is then on the part of photographed to respond and to alter or strengthen components of their personality. The images possess both visual and experiential characteristics for those engaging in the process.

#### The potential for belief



Nicole White, *Aura Portrait 1, November 2012*<sup>3</sup>

Aura photographs at their most basic, and like all other photographs, are a recording of light on paper (or film, or sensor). What sets this process apart from typical photomechanical processes is that two exposures take place simultaneously; one capturing

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<sup>3</sup> All aura photographs were taken and translated by Dianne Reddington at Attune Aura Photography.

the visage of the sitter while the other presents the individual's energy via a series of flashing colored lights. The final print, a 4x5" Fujiroid is produced in-camera making it doubly unique: two exposures on a singular print.

So, in some sense, when examined purely as a photochemical reaction on paper, the aura photographs are two very clear renderings of an individual; the murky waters creep in once the subjective nature of participant, the translator, and the viewer assign context to the image, thus affecting its meaning. The tenuous position of photographs as providers of meaning is perhaps best elucidated by Berger, "...unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances... prised away from their meaning."<sup>4</sup> These images offer exactly that, a semblance of the familiar that through translation and tangential relationships acquires context.

The presented aura photographs work as source material for potential meaning, but do not function as concrete locators of meaning. To re-install the notion of a photograph as truth is not the intended goal. They are proof of passage<sup>5</sup> in front of the lens; something not readily dismissible, giving the viewer pause, and possibly within that moment, providing a level of rarified engagement that allows for belief in the medium to rear its head once again.

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<sup>4</sup> John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Promise of Photography* (New York: Prestel, 1998), 19.