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Tony Oursler

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PORTFOLIO

IN THE MID-1990S, when I was researching the camera obscura in relation to an installation I was planning, I began to discover some forgotten intersections in the histories of optics and architecture, which I felt had a particular relevance to multimedia art. While stringing together these various historical gems into a time line, I fell in love with a wide-ranging cast of characters and technologies, including the chemist and physicist William Crookes, the French scientist Étienne-Jules Marey, the mystic Katie King, and Athanasius Kircher's magic lantern. Little did I know that I had fallen down a rabbit hole, one that would propel my passion for collecting for some time to come.

Twenty years and twenty-five hundred images and objects later, I have started the process of figuring out how to present the resulting archive to the public. This has been a strange undertaking, because my collecting so far has been private and personal. Part of the enjoyment is that the trove was a nebulous blob of information that needed not be defined; some aspects of it are clear to me and others foggy. I could certainly list most of the categories and sketch a rough scaffolding of how they may relate. Cryptozoology connects to Japanese printmaking of the 1700s. The black light of physicist Robert Williams Wood affected the lighting of séances in the '20s. UFO photographs most certainly relate to nineteenth-century occult photography. Pareidolia and apparitions link not only to '60s drug culture but to religious cults. And new patterns or associations may form each time I look at the material. In fact, I count on this: Affinities arise among oracles, Giovanni Aldini, Rorschach tests, horror films, quantum physics, effigies, radioactivity, L. Ron Hubbard, ESP.

Not surprisingly, learning about something new can inspire an obsessive, even delusional, need to acquire it. This was the case when I heard about a set of photos by Howard Menger. In the ’50s, he went on a journey to the moon with some aliens; amazingly, they allowed him to bring his camera along to document the trip, and he snapped some haunting and spectacular images of the moon’s surface and of Earth from space.

Much of the material in the archive is so obscure that it can be bewildering to some and even polarizing. Whenever I explain that thought photography was perhaps inadvertently the first photographic production of abstract imagery, I receive blank stares. First, one must understand what thought photography is. Around the time of the invention of the X-ray it was believed that thoughts, dreams, the soul, or even the life force itself could leave trace images directly on photographic plates or paper. I am completely captivated by the romantic logic behind these chthonic images, but have come to understand that the convictions associated with their production can be disturbing. One way of reading the archive is as an index of conflicting systems of belief.

Tom Eccles and Beatrix Ruf of the LUMA Foundation commissioned a two-fold exploration of the archive: a book and a film. The film gives voice to the archive, focusing on a small group of important images involving a very personal family story with very public characters. The plot involves stage magicians, religious figures, and scientists aligning themselves against mediums, con men, and pseudoscientists.

THE CONDITIONS that prevailed between the two world wars gave rise to an efflorescence of psychic research practices—the ’20s, in particular, saw the emergence of a unique mix of science, pseudoscience, psychology, cults, the occult, and naive surrealist theater. It was against this background that my grandparents Grace and Fulton Oursler came into their own. Fulton, an impoverished auto-didact and nephew to a mystic, became a magician and writer at an early age, first claiming fame in 1926 with a magic-themed hit Broadway play, *The Spider*, which he coauthored with Lowell Brentano.

While Fulton was writing and researching the book *A Skeptic in the Holy Land* (1936), the seeds were planted for his conversion to Catholicism: In 1949, he published *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, an everyman's version of the Bible, which became a major best seller.
One of Fulton's idols was Arthur Conan Doyle. Though Doyle is best known for bringing us detective Sherlock Holmes, our most enduring pop-cultural ambassador of rationalist deduction, he was also interested in some of the strangest pseudoscientific events. Doyle was not only a die-hard Spiritualist; he also researched many unusual phenomena, promoting them in books, magazines, lectures, and displays. Eventually, he and my grandfather struck up a correspondence. Doyle sent my grandfather a number of photographs, including evidentiary images of fairies and elves, spirit manifestations, ectoplasms, and microscopic octopi that spontaneously came to life via blood-salt crystals. Fulton loved Doyle but was not susceptible to any of this material: He claimed he had attended more than five hundred séances in his life and never witnessed something he could not explain.

In the late '90s, my parents gave me a small group of these pictures, which they had kept in an old metal filing cabinet in the basement, next to my chemistry set. One was a fake spirit photo that Fulton had published in his pseudonymous 1930 book, *Spirit Mediums Exposed*, with the intention of debunking Doyle. (I had lent the book to Mike Kelley in the late '70s, and he used it as a reference for his famed 1979 work *The Poltergeist*.)

Another friend of my grandfather's, Harry Houdini, would often debunk mediumistic practices in his shows. And Fulton himself exposed numerous mediums around New York, some of whom were arrested. It's important to keep in mind that many, but not all, mediums preyed on grieving widows and family members who had suffered great losses in the carnage of World War I. Of course, I have a great fascination with and sympathy for the mediums of this period. Mediums were, more often than not, women, who seemed to be struggling for a place of expression—indeed, psychic research seems to me to be inextricably connected to the women's suffrage movement. They were the rock stars of their time, bad girls pushing the ectoplasmic edge of culture. Their sophisticated use of performance, light, sound, language, and props has many connections to the Surrealists, and in

my mind continues to resonate with activities today. One of my favorite figures is Margery Crandon, known as the Witch of Beacon Hill. She performed in a dark room with luminous, phosphorescent green material covering her breasts, proceeding to materialize a mysterious hand that protruded from her crotch during séances. She stands out as a radical feminist, engaging in transgressive performances well before women got the vote.

These are the characters are at the core of my film and, strangely, my family history. They are propelled by both conflicting ideologies and their fascination with the imponderable.

"Imponderable: The Archives of Tony Oursler," curated by Beatrix Ruf and Tom Eccles, will be on view at the LUMA Foundation, Parc des Ateliers, Arles, France, July 6–Sept. 20. A publication with twelve hundred images from the artist's archive accompanies the show.