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Ghosts
Visualizing the Supernatural

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Curator: Eva Reifert

Ghosts seem to be everywhere. Visual culture teems with specters, from Hollywood blockbusters like *Ghostbusters* (1984) to indie films such as *All of Us Strangers* (2023). They haunt screens, theater stages, and pages: literature, folklore, and myth are saturated with spirits that refuse to leave us in peace.

They have also always haunted art. As entities of the in-between, ghosts are mediators between worlds, between above and below, life and death, horror and humor, good and evil, visible and invisible. Any attempt to depict, record, or communicate with them thus offers a conceptual challenge and an emotional thrill.

This fall and winter, the Kunstmuseum Basel dedicates an extensive exhibition to these unfathomable entities. With over 160 works and objects created during the past 250 years, *Ghosts. Visualizing the Supernatural* explores the rich visual culture associated with ghosts that took shape in the Western hemisphere in the nineteenth century—when science, spiritualism, and popular media began to intersect in new ways, inspiring art and artists ever since.

Today, the nineteenth century is mostly regarded as a golden age of rationality, science, and technology but it was also a high season for the belief in ghosts and apparitions. In the second half of the century, ghosts became a tool for probing the emerging contours of the psyche and helped open new paths into people's inner lives. The Romantic era produced an appetite for spectacles and marvels, and a belief in spirits was flanked by innovations in technology, including in the technologies of illusion (such as the theatrical technique, Pepper's Ghost).

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The invention of photography around 1830 had led to the rise of spirit photography with important proponents such as William H. Mumler in the United States and, later, William Hope in England; their photographs, which seemed to make loved ones reappear, held the promise of a life after death and became a notable influence on what we imagine ghosts to look like, even today. Munich "ghost baron" Albert von Schrenck-Notzing—arguably the most famous parapsychologist—combined the novel technical means of photography with a quasi-scientific approach and intended to document the supernatural apparitions produced in his mediumistic seances. (His seances were attended and witnessed, on several occasions, by none other than the writer Thomas Mann).

While spirit photography is thus a central theme of the show, the writings and pictures created by spiritualist mediums to record their direct contact with the world of ghosts offer a variation on the broader theme of communication. Given the close connection of ghosts and states of psychological distress, the exhibition also takes a close interest in hauntings, when ghosts inhabit spaces. It follows these trails and developments as they originated in Western culture in the nineteenth century and stays largely focused on artists who drew inspiration from the resulting diverse visual traces and ghostly narratives. In doing so, it gleefully branches out into bodies of images beyond fine art, whose influence on artists in the twentieth century is demonstrated in the second half of the exhibition.

The exhibition and accompanying magazine-style publication were prepared in close consultation with two expert advisors—Andreas Fischer of the Freiburg IGPP (Institute for frontier areas of psychology and mental health), a leading authority on spirit photography and materialization phenomena, and British art historian Susan Owens, author of *The Ghost: A Cultural History* (2017), who has aptly called ghosts "humanity's shadows". The project traces this human element, therefore excluding angels, nature spirits, demons, and the like. Instead, it turns a spotlight on the theme's poetic potential, its power to inspire, and the function of ghosts as a metaphor sustaining critical responses to the contemporary world, often addressing things that cannot be repressed.

The fact that such manifestations interact continually with our collective imagination—our cultural unconscious, even—is what makes the ghost such a powerful and enduring figure and the exhibition a surprising, fun, and thought-provoking journey. The scenography, intended to help open the senses to atmospheric changes and liminal experiences, was conceived by Alicja Jelen and Clemens Müller of please don't touch (Dortmund).

Publication

In the accompanying magazine-style publication, there are texts by external authors, including the two advisors to the exhibition, Andreas Fischer and Susan Owens. There are further contributions by British Assyriologist Irving Finkel, author of *The First Ghosts: Most Ancient of Legacies* (2019); American poet Emily Dickinson; German writer Thomas Mann, with his vivid description of attending a seance; contemporary Swiss author Ariane Koch, whose text offers a “ghost song” issued from a ghostwriting session; artists’ statements by Corinne May Botz, Claudia Casarino, Adam Fuss, Tony Oursler, and Cornelia Parker; and some fact-checking provided by the Instagram star, Timur. Illustrations come from the War and Peas-duo, Elizabeth Pich and Jonathan Kunz, whose webcomics show their longstanding interest in everything ghost-related.

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The Exhibition

As an introduction, a video compilation of ghosts in films, produced by Berlin company art/beats, reminds visitors of how frequently we encounter them: be it by telling ghost stories as children, or in stories like *Hamlet, A Christmas Carol,* or *Harry Potter*, or when going to the movies. In the exhibition's first room, one has a first-hand experience of nineteenth-century illusionist practice through a so-called Pepper's Ghost installation that relates the themes of wanting-to-believe and make-believe so characteristic of the subject. The enormous range of emotions that ghosts can provoke, speak to, or touch on is palpable in the violent and majestic *Ghost with a Pool of Blood* by Katharina Fritsch, and in the deeply melancholy yet funny and cute ghosts Angela Deane has painted over old photographs of anonymous, long-dead people.

The first half of the show is dedicated to nineteenth-century depictions of ghosts in painting and photography, from notations that mediums like Georgiana Houghton, Madge Gill, and Augustin Lesage made under ghostly guidance to objects connected to seances that often claimed a scientific basis and were intended to prove the existence of ghosts. Bringing together these images and objects from various contexts—and not just art history—also reveals recurrent visual tropes that serve to represent other planes of existence, such as clouds, smoke, or stairs. Similarly, the iconography of the veil is repurposed as a metaphor for thresholds and to visualize the invisible.

At the center of the exhibition, the focus is on the now century-old question of how much ghosts relate to the inner workings of our psyches: Are they, as German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann suggested, "ghosts or hallucinations"? The central gallery thus not only holds a knife from the home of celebrated analytical psychologist C. G. Jung, which spontaneously shattered into four pieces (even before he developed the concept of the collective unconscious), but also Emily Dickinson's poem, *One Need not be a Chamber — to be haunted* (1891), whispered at the visitor from the museum's walls, which shows how the human psyche can itself become the ultimate site of a haunting.

In the second half, the exhibition weaves together the various thematic threads, bringing together more recent works that investigate how to render the ineffable visible, that take an interest in the communication with a beyond, or that are marked by a particular fascination with ectoplasm (a substance that ghosts were thought to consist of and that today appears to be charged with sexual implications). One room addresses a metaphoric and more conceptual level through carefully selected works that evoke the ghost as a metaphor. The video *Ghost Story* by Northern Irish artist Willie Doherty, for example, is about the past haunting the present, suggesting that the landscapes shown were once the sites of traumatic events. Claudia Casarino's barely visible white-tulle

dresses in *Desvestidos* reference the violence and resulting intergenerational trauma women of her own lineage and community experience up to the present day.

The second-to-last room then offers Corinne May Botz's *Haunted Houses* series with Cornelia Parker's *PsychoBarn (Cut Up)*, two different ways of addressing the feelings of disquiet and anxiety provoked by the idea of living with ghosts. The last room, finally, is empty—or is it? A work by Ryan Gander takes the subject back to where it belongs and exposes the visitor to invisible forces.

Why an exhibition on ghosts?

Hundreds of millions of people all over the world believe in ghosts. Their collective belief has deep historical roots. Although the enormous progress of science and technology would seem to leave no room for ghosts, most people even today retain an attitude of skeptical credence in the supernatural.

To engage a topic like ghosts and spirits is not simply to explore their traditional representations, nor to revisit those thrilling nineteenth-century experiments that sought to rationally pin down the supernatural. This project makes clear that ghosts are metaphors for the return of what reason cannot fully repress, and they remind us that even in an age of technological omniscience, there remain existential blind spots that no science can resolve—chief among them, the great unknown that is death.

But ghosts are not only metaphors for fear or the inexplicable. They are also figures of memory, bearing witness to what some would rather forget. They call attention to absences that still shape the present, to voices that have been silenced but continue to speak in other registers.

Ghosts make us acutely aware that the Enlightenment ideal of a purely rational, controllable world was always something of a dream. Much in life—not only in our private psyches, but also in politics, society, and culture—moves according to forces that escape logic. And sometimes, as we look at the chaos of current events, it feels as though a ghost has taken hold. Our present is haunted by long-past events that refuse to stay buried, by violence that goes unpunished, by traumas that paralyze the mind's ability to act. Think, too, of the "ghosts" of colonial histories that shape contemporary life, or the lingering specters of economic crises that haunt political debates. The list could go on.

But as this exhibition and its companion publication remind us, ghosts are not confined to darkness and dread. In art, as in imagination, ghosts roam across a broad spectrum, from horror to humor, from melancholy to mischief—which is why *Fantasmino*, created

by American artist Tony Oursler, has become the show's emblem. The figure channels the playful strangeness of haunting itself, with melancholy digital eyes peering out from beneath a sagging, white-drenched canvas.

Ghosts also invite us to play, to imagine new presences and to question old certainties. They are reminders of what remains unfinished, unresolved, and open to interpretation. After all, they are also always *zeitgeists*, epitomes of our changing contemporary situations, as Susan Owens writes: "Ghosts are mirrors of the times. They reflect our preoccupations, moving with the tide of cultural trends and matching the mood of each age."