Ghost Photography

Discussing the relationship that photography has to the dead is a well trodden path. We have all encountered the image of a person long since dead through their photographs. No doubt for most people today the vast majority of photographic images we have encountered are digital rather than physical. How does the shift from analogue towards digital photography alter or accentuate the ghostly qualities of the photographic image? We have all, almost certainly, also seen many more photographs of artworks than we will ever hope to encounter 'in the flesh'. How does this change the encounter?

Philomene Pirecki is an artist whose work can be sited at the point where these questions intersect. I want to introduce three starting points which should provide us with some groundwork for examining these questions, and make for an interesting reading of Pirecki's *Reflecting 1* (2008) and *Image Persistence* series (2013 - ongoing).

Starting Point 1: Animism

Anselm Franke's *Animism* is a project that spans across four iterations of an exhibition that took place around Europe (at Mukha and Extra City, Antwerp, Kunsthalle Bern, Generali Foundation, Vienna and Haus der Kultern de Welt, Berlin) and then in New York between 2010 and 2012, the book; Animism Vol 1, and a guest-edited edition of the e-flux online journal.

The book gathers together a collection of essays that approach the subject of animism from a wide range of angles and approaches, taking in critical theory, anthropology, music, the occult and art-writing. It opens with 'Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls or: The Sudden Disorganization of Boundaries' – a text by Franke himself, laying out the rationale of his project.

In the essay he charts the history of 'animism' as an anthropological term attributed to people who apparently granted agency and lifelike subjective qualities to objects. Franke draws heavily on Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991). In that book Latour characterises modernity as a practice of boundary-making, proceeding by setting up binaries and oppositions such as subject and object, life and non-life, and most importantly, nature and culture. Through distinguishing what occurs naturally and that can be objectively studied from what is subjective and determined by culture, scientific knowledge can be set on a solid footing, and through this a colonial project that enables civilised rational Europeans to go out into the world and study the uncivilised primitives of other lands is established. Latour shows how these apparently well-defined

boundaries never really stand up to much scrutiny; the middle-grounds and grey areas that are supposedly done away with remain. Animist thinking has never really been fully left behind, even in our supposedly advanced culture.

The term 'animism' arises within the European colonial project. Coined by Edward Tylor, a nineteenth century anthropologist, it is always applied to the other: 'animist primitives' ascribing subjective qualities to objects. *We* understand the difference between subjects and objects but *they* don't. Animism, for Franke, is the mirror in which modernity is able to see itself, and through his project he wants to trouble the apparent boundaries, and like Latour, show that we have never really been 'modern'.

The program of modernity outlined by Franke and Latour shuns the midpoints between what should be clearly defined opposites – the hybrid points as he puts it – seeking to categorise clearly whether something is one thing or another. Things should be living or not living, subject or object, etc.

The spectre exists at one such hybrid point; between life and death, presence and absence. Ghosts dwell between this world and another, carrying the image of a living person and yet not being alive. Being present but not material. For Franke museums and photography are both haunted zones of the modern imaginary zones of conservation, preservation and mummification; forms of objectification that seek to defy the life/death binary.

Franke points to the uncanny status of the photograph as it transcends death, time and space, confusing absence and presence, life and non-life. To quote Franke: "Museums and photography, as two examples of modern dispositifs of the conservation of "life", are haunted, afflicted by the spectres of objectifications, by the return of animism, which here takes the form of the "uncanny" return of a repressed life turned into a spectacle. This "hauntedness" is a key to the ways in which media and institutions built the modern social imaginary, in circumscribed confines, giving way to the desires to overcome alienation, the desires for the re-animations of de-animated, de-mobilized worlds, thus re-populating the deadened, disenchanted, objectified world with its monstrous images of hybrids and phantasies of returns and speed-deliriums."[1]

Furthermore, the photograph also seems to trouble the boundary between the subjective and the objective. It claims to be the neutral bearer of factual evidence – a direct index of real world events – while it also retains the subjective edge of the creation of the individual who selected, framed, snapped, developed and cropped the image. This troubled aspect of the status of photography is

accentuated and accelerated in digital image production. The vast majority of 'photographs' that we encounter in the media and advertising today are retouched, composited or just plain fabricated. Facticity is a somewhat scarce commodity in contemporary photography. Photography today is always questionable.

Starting Point 2: Ghost Light

In his talk, 'Ignis Fatuus', delivered at the 'Haunters and Haunted' event as part Tate Britain's Speculative Tate series in January 2015, Luke Pendrell attempted to examine our contemporary digitised condition from the point of view of its spectral nature.[2]

Digital media have long been critiqued through various explorations of their apparent immateriality. Pendrell made the interesting observation that digital code is composed of a rapid switch between opposing binary 0s and 1s: on/off, positive/negative, presence/absence. This binary's rapid vacillation creates a third state; the presence/non-presence of the haunting digital.

He claims that, "the ghost, rather than the supernatural relic of a primitive age, is an increasingly prevalent aspect of the modern world. Immateriality and spectrality are axiomatic to the digital realms we inhabit. Life has become an immense accumulation of ghosts. Everything that was once directly lived is now haunted by itself."[3] Pendrell explores the increasingly simulated nature of our digital lives through the lens of digital spectrality. We find ourselves always several steps removed from our interactions and experiences when mediated through the screens of our digital devices. The most immediate experiences become steadily distanced, and we become more and more distracted from what is at hand. We can think here of numerous obvious examples – being with friends while simultaneously being in touch with other friends via social media on our smartphones, the experience of the concert-goer posting video clips to social media or the percentage of communication that now takes place in writing instead of speech.

Pendrell, drawing on Jacques Derrida's *Spectres Of Marx* (1993), states that each era creates it's own ghosts. Derrida's title refers to the opening of the *Communist Manifesto* where Marx and Engels asserted that "a spectre is haunting Europe - the spectre of communism".[4] In this text Derrida, in order to engage in a discussion of the increased relevance of Marx after the fall of the Berlin wall, gives us the concept of *hauntology*; a portmanteau of haunt and ontology, that draws on the curious state of not-quite-being that the spectre occupies.

The concept has proved fertile. Contemporary writers and music journalists, notably Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds, have taken up the term

to address strains in music and popular culture more broadly, that critically adopt and reuse half-remembered elements of the past to explore the ennui of contemporary capitalism. Fisher extends this to consider the residual haunting of cancelled futures, promised and never delivered, that continue to haunt the contemporary psyche.[5]

Pendrell argues that rather than eliminating the haunting presence of ghosts, our hyper-technological hyper-rationalised present has actually increased their presence. We are increasingly unable to erase or surpass the past, nothing is forgotten and we have a feeling of immense cultural lag, a kind of perpetual present. The digital world, to quote Pendrell, "promised a limitless future but has actually delivered a perpetually unfolding past wrapped in continual presents".[6]

The digital realm maps over the physical world so completely that we feel a near-constant virtual presence of the actually absent. In particular our social relations: we occupy a vast co-joined dematerialised spectral space of being and non-being. Plugged in in front of our devices we are alone and yet always together.

And we also have the explosion of digital photography; a continually updated archive of photographs that we amass; more than we could ever look at. We share hundreds if not thousands of photographs with friends, peers, colleagues, vague associates and anonymous strangers. The photographic spectre has become so commonplace that we hardly notice its strange nature.

As an aside I just want to state that I don't wish this to sound overly melancholy. There's a tendency to paint this very negatively, but it doesn't have to be a forlorn cry for something more essential and real. My point is more that it's different in nature than what has gone before. We have been mediating their relationship to the world with technology since we first used tools. Think of the opening scenes of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In this sense alienation from the natural world is our natural condition.

Mark Leckey's account of the cultural transformation of culture through the birth and rise of the Internet in his performance lecture *In The Long Tail* (2008), offers a more affirmative account of the flattening effect of peer-to-peer distribution and many-to-many cultural production. Again, though, Leckey grants almost mystical power and presence to the digital spectre that is produced as culture transitions from the material to the digital. Culture, flattens, the digital realm gains consistency, "as above, so below".[7]

Starting Point 3 – Kill Switch

Kill Switch (1998), Season 5, Episode 11 of The X Files, was co-written by cyberpunk writers, William Gibson and Tom Maddox, predating the Matrix by a year and social media by more than five years.

The episode's story focuses on a rogue Artificial Intelligence lurking online while a tech-genius gone AWOL tries to take it down using a digital *Kill Switch* burned onto a CD ROM. The AI has other ideas and is trying to defend itself by any means it can, manipulating events in real-life in order to take out threats to its virtual existence. The episode starts with a murder elaborately engineered by the AI. Agents Mulder and Scully enter the scene in its aftermath and end up in contact with a cybergoth hacker who goes by the name of Invisigoth. It emerges that the AI requires a real life base of sorts in order to sustain its digital survival. Invisigoth posits that the AI could be stopped either by locating this physical base or by uploading one's consciousness to the web in order to confront the AI there. Her lover David, it emerges, has already done this and the episode ends with the hacker uploading her consciousness onto the web to join him as her physical body is destroyed in a dramatic explosion. Her essence, character and personality form a kind of digitised soul that is able to continue in perpetuity after her physical self is gone. A digital spectre that haunts the web, dwelling in circuits and on hard drives.

Notions of online identity are commonplace today - the idea of an online life that runs in parallel to real life has become banal, but what would it mean to destroy your IRL existence and transfer your consciousness to the online realm? The idea that there could be a digitised remainder after the death of a physical body points us further in the direction of the digital as spectral; the idea that there could be a ghostly residuum that carries at least the essence and personality of the person, and maybe even their physical resemblance points towards an afterlife for the digital age.

It seems today that we all have digital ghosts, created from the archived traces of ourselves that we leave around as we interact and live online. We create archived elements that we can't erase; elements that will remain long after we go. A persistent online identity that gains consistency as it unfolds. Once 'shared', data and images no longer belong to us and cannot be taken back under our control. Edward Snowden's revelations revealed the extent of the archiving that was being carried out by secret services in the US and UK, while programs such as iPhoto and websites like Facebook get to know you through your photographs and can recognise you, and a look at Google Analytics lets you glimpse a little of what your Chrome browser knows about you. Whether you like it or not, you are being

profiled and your next move is being predicted. Google almost certainly knows your age, gender, location and interests, without you explicitly telling it.

Your spectral self is a lot like you.

Image Persistence

While we can consider digital video and digital photography as media in their own right, they always bare relationships to the analogue media that they sought to reflect and have come to surpass in many ways. There are always questions about just how much of 'new media' is actually new, and how much just emulates 'old media.'

When we think along the lines of the discourse that I've outlined here, we start to think about degrees of removal from a physical, tangible, 'real' thing towards a simulation, or copy, that loses a sense of physical consistency. It's not a complete removal to the degree of total disappearance but a partial erasure leaving behind some essential and fundamental traces of the originating thing. What remains manages to move between the points of the absence and presence, disrupting the authority of these absolute points of definition.

It's interesting to observe that in the face of the digital, analogue photography seems to have gained a sense of direct connection with the physical world that previously it was thought to lack. Whereas in the past the photograph was mere image without depth, today the photographic print seems to be granted the status of a 'real' physical object by comparison to its digital version.

Thinking through this we can articulate the photograph as existing at an unstable ontological point. This uncertain ontological status seems to permeate the photographic work of the artist Philomene Pirecki.

Reflecting 1 (2008) presents a series of photographs that result from the artist re-photographing the previous image in the series each time the work is shown. The images produced become a document of their own progressive removal from their initial index in the world. Highly formalised in their presentation, the prints seem haunted by the appearance of their own gradual disappearance, the work seeming to document its own distancing from itself. Not self-contradictory as such, but self-effacing and self-erasing, the prints bare the mark of their own non-presence.

In her *Image Persistence*, series (2013 - ongoing) Pirecki photographs paintings she has made but no longer owns. These digitised photographs are then re-photographed on her computer screen, and then re-photographed, and so on. This process creates layering effects and ghostly impressions of the artist beneath the smoky glaze of flashes and flared screens. Prints of these digital images then appear in the gallery.

These works seem to address the role of traditional/'old' media in the face of the new. Ideas of circulation, re-presentation and authenticity run through the work. The absence of the original work and the presentation in its place of a deliberately altered copy seems to run at odds with what we expect to find in a gallery space. Painted surfaces have a tactility and haptic quality that other media rarely have; a certain immediacy of connection to their moment of creation. While we so often encounter images of paintings in place of the actual thing, the gallery is supposed to be the site at which we experience the painted image directly, not mediated through the lens of digital media.

As a student I was told not to write about artwork that I hadn't seen 'in the flesh'; there's a primacy of experience in seeing the artwork first hand. Reproductions are to be treated with caution. Try Google-searching any well known artwork and see the range of tones, formats and colours that appear. My favourite example is Yves Klein's monochromes, rendered in *International Klein Blue*, a colour patented by the artist, a range of tones and variations of this patented-colour-as-artwork appear. For Pirecki this process of in-authentication is embraced, rejecting the authority of the original and recreating the work as a ghost-like impression of its former self. These are steps of removal from the physical, creating a new version that is not the former work but not entirely not-it either: it is its ghost.

In doing this, Pirecki is echoing a broader cultural phenomenon that sees artworks, images and individuals alike circulate ethereally and ghost-like. Pirecki affects distance from a direct experience of a work of art, self-consciously standing what appears to be a copy in its place.

If photography has always existed at a hybrid point between life and death, presence and absence, then this is accentuated and accelerated in digital photography. In fact we find it in all forms of digital media and digitised interaction. Digital photography then finds itself twice removed; as spectral photograph image / as spectral digital medium. As artists seek to reflect aesthetically on our contemporary condition the digital photograph seems to

offer itself up as an exemplar medium through which to explore the status of the artwork today.

Notes
All links accessed February 27th 2016

[1]. *Animism Volume 1*, Ed. Anselm Franke, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010) p.34

[2]. A different version of the talk delivered at Tate can be found here: https://stephsmith.bandcamp.com/track/luke-pendrell-ignis-fatuus-ghost-light-i Details of the Tate event: http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/talks-and-lectures/haunters-and-haunted

[3]. Ibid.

[4]. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, PDF at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf p.14

[5]. Extract from Fisher, Mark, *Ghosts of My Life*, (Zero Books, 2013) http://thequietus.com/articles/13004-mark-fisher-ghosts-of-my-life-extract

[6]. Pendrell, op. cit.

[7]. Leckey, Mark, *Script for In The Long Tail* in On Pleasure Bent, eds. Patrizia Dander and Elena Filipovic, (2014, Köln: Verlag der Buchandlung Walther König), p.113

Philomene Pirecki ~ *Reflecting 1 (1st - 13th Generations)* 2008 - 2014, including on p.109 *Image Persistence (Reflecting 1 Generation 4)* 2014