

PHOTO BOOTH

# THE TRICKS AND TREATS OF OCCULT PHOTOGRAPHY



By The New Yorker

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8 / 11



Courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Dee, New York

*Miranda Lichtenstein, "Shaman," 2005.*

A few days ago, the *Times* reported that many people in Norway—atheists, Lutherans, a princess—believe in the existence of ghosts. On Halloween, even Americans with no taste for lutefisk may find themselves feeling a little Norwegian. The classic ghost costume is a simple affair: take a bed sheet, add scissors, cut holes. This year, it's joined by a new D.I.Y. phantom, based on a Snapchat filter. (Is it overkill to point out that the messaging app's icon is itself a ghost?) If the view-count on this YouTube makeup tutorial is any index of costume popularity, expect more than seven and a half million Halloween revelers to sport rainbow-puke painted faces.

This makeover suggests nothing so much as a Bonnaroo spin on the late-nineteenth- through mid-twentieth-century phenomenon known as “spirit photography,” for which cameramen in cahoots with con-artist spiritualists doctored pictures to prove the presence of ectoplasm and apparitions. Ten years ago, the Metropolitan Museum mounted a superb show on the subject, “The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult.” While the museum has a cache of spirit photographs in its collection, the fragile albums, glass slides, and stereograph cards are less compelling online than in person. (The catalogue, on the other hand, is fascinating.)

But trick photography has more contemporary treats as well, like the above selection of works by three contemporary photographers who have taken cues from the genre. Laura Larson's 2007 series, “Electric Girls and the Invisible World,” is perhaps the most literal, as it purports to document a secret club of (fictional) teen-age girls who become fascinated, with eerie results, by the (actual) nineteenth-century medium Eusapia Palladino. (Larson also made a related video.) Between 2002 and 2004, Anne Collier, whose mid-career survey is up through January 10th at the Art Gallery of Ontario, took portraits of artists (including herself) using a modified Polaroid camera, which its inventors claimed had the capacity to capture auras. Around the same time, Miranda Lichtenstein developed an interest in altered states of consciousness and personal transformation, which led her to photograph an urban shaman, an anechoic chamber, an isolation tank, and even a Pilates adept. (Note her pale blond hair. Is it possible that she's Norwegian?)