



Witness **A Psychic Collaboration by
Nate Larson &
Marni Shindelman**

Essay and Interview by Leslie K. Brown



Photography, modern Spiritualism, and spirit photography all came into being within a mere twenty-two years, with the canonical birth dates of 1839, 1848, and 1861 respectively. A little more than a decade after the invention of photography, two sisters, Kate and Margaret Fox, claimed to communicate with a murdered peddler buried underneath their house. Using a system of rappings (which one sibling

All images are digital C-prints, 20 x 30 inches, courtesy of the artists.

later explained were their joints cracking), they answered questions in a spiritual version of Morse code. Soon after, the sisters moved to Rochester, New York, and attracted even more believers. Their childhood home was later moved to Lily Dale, a contemporary psychic community in western New York.

Thirteen years later, Boston engraver William Mumler, while alone in a room, took a self-portrait that, after development, showed the likeness of another figure. Although Mumler destroyed his negatives and was eventually brought to court for fraud, this episode launched what would become known as spirit photography. Chicago also gave birth to a psychic photographic figure. As explained in the preface to *The World of Ted Serios: Thoughtographic Studies of an Extraordinary Mind* (1966), Serios was an out-of-work, alcoholic bellhop who could project his thoughts onto film using a Polaroid camera.¹ Serios was usually provided with a "target image," sealed in a manila envelope, and used a rolled piece of paper called a "gizmo" to focus his energy.

More than one hundred years after the genesis of Spiritualism and spirit photography, two photographers, Nate Larson and Marni Shindelman, attempted—psychically and photographically—to bridge a more than 500-mile gap between Rochester and Chicago, and later Boston. Utilizing a methodology inspired by governmental experiments in psychic espionage during the Cold War and outlined in Paul Smith's

book *Reading the Enemy's Mind: Inside Star Gate, America's Psychic Espionage Program* (2005), they created their own artistically arbitrated tests in remote viewing. To prepare, they took a workshop in out-of-body experiences at Lily Dale. This resulted in a project and exhibition titled *Witness: A Psychic Collaboration*.

Recently, Larson and Shindelman asked me, a native of Rochester and curator of the exhibition *Concerning the Spiritual in Photography in Boston*,² to write about their collaborative project. When they emailed me the catalogue of the exhibition, a renegade font caused the entire text to show up as dots. Initially, I thought that this was Morse code,

a creative and inspired approach to a telepathically inspired project. After receiving a cryptic response from Larson/Shindelman to an email asking what the cipher meant, I copied the dots into Word, only then revealing their intended text.

Coincidence? Or providence?

What's Your Status?

As many have noted, Spiritualists clothed themselves in the trappings of technological advances, such as wireless telegraphy and electricity. Inspired by the then-new medium of photography, seers followed the paradigm of the dark chamber accordingly. Indeed, there appears to be a photographic corollary for every clairvoyant component: from performing in the dark to acting as a highly sensitized substrate.

Many paranormal developments—including slate writing, ectoplasm, materializations known as *apports*, and, more recently, Kirlian photography—issue forth into the physical realm. Each new feat is duly captured in photographic form, providing the requisite scientific proof. Such effects bring the photography analogy full circle, as film historian Tom Gunning has observed: "Spirits are not simply captured in pictures; they communicate by some sort of picture language. The medium herself became a sort of camera, her spiritual negativity bodying forth a positive image."³

Turn-of-the-century apologists believed in the powers of the ether; now, they tread in its linguistic and metaphorical corollary, the Ethernet. Certainly, contemporary Spiritualists persist in this use of technology to bridge the gaps between worlds. In



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the *Witness* project, Larson and Shindelman put their own contemporary twist on this unique connection. Their initial research was conducted through emails and text messages, and they also agreed not to discuss their experiments verbally until the project was completed. Ever since they invited me to write this piece, all of our communication has likewise been electronically mediated.

While there is no doubt we live in an age of increased surveillance, *Witness* also speaks to agency being taken back. This desire for connectivity could be seen as an antidote to an increasingly virtual and uncertain world. In a recent *Boston Globe* article on a boom in the psychic business since the economic downturn, Alex Palermo, owner of the Original Tremont Tearoom, explained, "But when you need answers you cannot find with your five senses, that's when you go to your sixth sense."⁴ Spirit photography was born during a time of national turmoil and saw spikes in popularity during World War I and II. It should come as no surprise, then, that such matters continue to, pun intended, haunt us today.

Did You Receive It?

During a *Witness* session, one of the artists would psychically "send" a series of objects to the other at a predetermined time; the receiver then attempted to "receive" the items and record their impressions in a sketch. Over the course of four sessions, each collaborator sent on two occasions and received on two occasions. Notes and drawings were collected and the photographs seen here document the objects that were psychically transmitted. Later, when preparing for a gallery showing, Larson and Shindelman noticed correlations between the images



themselves and joined them together in diptychs that suggest an additional psychic layer beyond the original goal of the experiments.

In essence, the artists took turns acting as the film and the camera. Reminiscent of a yin and yang symbol, the background colors also echo photography itself—with black standing in for the camera and darkroom and the white symbolizing light. In a way, the psychic film was pierced several times in their efforts: once during the initial communication, again during the photographic creation, and lastly, in the interpretive interaction asked of the final receiver, the viewer.

Do You See What I See?

Pareidolia is the capacity of people to perceive patterns in random data. Akin to seeing a bunny in a cloud, a face on the moon, or the Virgin Mary in a window, we desperately seek to make something out of nothing. Larson and Shindelman were struck by the many formal and metaphorical similarities between

their objects' photographs. An image of smoke being blown by Larson, for example, shares not only the grey color of a small fuzzy toy rhinoceros, but also, remarkably, a similar anamorphic shape.

Witness also references *synesthesia*, a phenomenon quite prevalent in occult circles. In synesthesia, the senses cross or mix; one claims to see music, for example, or hear color. In one session, Shindelman ate bacon and attempted to transmute that object and experience to Larson, a vegetarian. His response?

Most of my impressions were bursts and flashes, so in this case, I'd maybe have a flash of pork, then a texture of meat, maybe a dash of grease, mixed with a taste of salt. Some were multi-sensory and some were strictly visual. I think that in the end, the bacon emerged from multiple smaller impressions, like pieces fitting into a puzzle.

Is the Medium the Message?

As this is a journal on photographic education, it seems appropriate to conclude with a related anecdote. Early on in our studies, many of us have yielded odd-looking effects on film or paper—usually explained away as a camera strap, light leak, moisture in the air, or incorrect chemical processing. As Professor Mark Alice Durant notes, photography teachers often interpret enigmatic effects created, intentionally or not, by students. “But sometimes I am baffled myself,” he writes. “I may be teaching Beginning Photography, but I feel at times that I am an inept ghost buster, an incompetent debunker of the inherent mysteries of the medium.” A close encounter of the photographic kind, *Witness* can offer us new ways to approach our chosen medium.

Nate Larson and Marni Shindelman have been engaged in ongoing collaboration since the summer of 2007. Their first project, Witness: A Psychic Collaboration, will be exhibited at The New Gallery in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, in November 2009, and has been previously shown at Rochester Institute of Technology and Shawnee State University. Witness was also the subject of an Imagemaker presentation at the 2009 SPE National Conference in Dallas. More information and a free PDF catalogue can be found at telepathicwitness.com.

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Leslie K. Brown: Could you speak about how you met, including your friendship and artistic relationship, and how you came to do this project? Also, how do you think your own personal style or approach contributed to the project, or changed as a result?

Marni Shindelman: Nate and I met officially at the SPE National Conference in Chicago in 2006, although we both have stories of meeting earlier. Nate loved my lecture at a previous SPE conference and I sent him a small book piece I had. Nate does not remember receiving this. I fear it may have been sent on the psychic plane.

At the time, I was working on a series based on Internet chain emails and rumors. I looked at the Internet as a means of touch, and how people believed in virtual communities, virtual sex, and even virtual pregnancies. Working across distances with someone else seemed a natural progression.

Nate's and my photographic style is somewhat similar, in that we both work in studio with objects and solid colored backgrounds. The most obvious change in my work from this project is it was my first venture into digital printing, which I now use exclusively.

Nate Larson: My first encounter with Marni was at the Midwest SPE conference in 2004 in Columbus. I've long been fasci-

nated by the myriad types of connections facilitated by the Internet, so when I saw the abstract for her talk, I knew that it would be on my conference agenda. I remember shyly approaching Marni afterwards, but felt awkward. We spoke only a few words; I don't think that she remembers this meeting. We reconnected a couple of years later and became fast friends.

Our collaboration began with mail art, sending lots of small objects, prose, books, and collages back and forth. At the time, I thought of it as an amusing diversion, but then Marni sent a postcard that confessed her obsessive notation of small events that might be evidence of a crime. She had her car stolen a few years earlier and was not able to identify the culprit in court, despite her confidence that she could. **I loved the failure of memory despite hyper-preparation.** I kept the postcard in my art journal for a long time afterwards. It eventually became the genesis of *Witness*.

I'm interested in the similar conceptual manner in which we work. Our past work was often about longing—mine for an epiphany or moment of clarity, and Marni's for connection. From this perspective, the collaboration seemed like a natural synthesis of our individual practices.

LKB: Elsewhere, you address your varying levels of belief. Can you elaborate on your experiences and beliefs before and after your [out-of-body workshop] training as well as how you negotiated this during your preparation?

MS: I have had psychic dreams since I was a child, but dismissed them until about ten years ago. In graduate school, I worked with patients waiting for heart transplants. One night I dreamt that two patients had gotten a heart, an extremely rare occurrence, and it happened the next day. After that, I hesitantly began to believe. *Witness* for me became about our levels of belief, and what type of proof each of us requires to believe.

NL: I'm a skeptic that desperately wants to believe, but cannot find the proof necessary to embrace it. The world is a strange and confusing place and it gives me comfort to think that there is some underlying structure or overarching plan. Science can tell us a lot about the world, but it can't satisfactorily answer the bigger questions. Religion likewise purports to hold the answers, but for the most part, speaks in generalities and assigns the unknown to a higher power.

Having psychic abilities would make it that much easier to navigate life's ambiguities, to know that one is on the correct course. Do I think that I have these abilities? Possibly, but what would definitively prove it? Many psychic practitioners have undergone extensive and controlled testing but are still relegated to the fringes of society.

Examining our project, there are overlaps between Marni's projections and my reception drawings and vice versa. **How many overlaps would it take to convince you, the viewer, that we have psychic abilities? One? Four? Ten?** And what about the near-misses? Marni sent a rhino. I drew a Schnauzer. They have similar body shapes and language. Did I fail? Or did I receive the visual outline and just miss the species? It's hard to know where the threshold is or should be.

LKB: What inspired you to choose the objects that you did and how did you approach photographing them? What life did the objects have before and after the experiments?

NL: The pre-established parameters of *Witness* were that, for each session, we would choose five objects to stimulate the senses. For the first session, I chose objects that revolved around a sky theme, including water, smoke, a tarot card of the sun, a book about the space race, and cotton balls that reminded me of clouds. For the second session, I selected objects that were loosely inspired by Fluxus performances, such as Alison Knowles's *Nivea Cream Piece* and George Brecht's work with dice.

MS: Scavenging for objects is part of both Nate's and my photographic practice, so I chose items that resonated with me visually and conceptually. Only one object has really had a life post-project for me. The texture of the fuzzy rhino inspired a current series of work where I flock or velvetize things. Otherwise the objects were either eaten, molded over, or are sitting in my studio (I can't bear to throw them out). Many of our pieces of ephemera are part of the exhibition.

LKB: Could you speak a little about how you prepared for the project, in particular, what you did at Lily Dale? How was it being an outsider immersed in such a unique community?

NL: We visited Lily Dale during the summer of 2007 while I was an artist-in-residence at Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester. We took a workshop titled "Understanding Out-of-Body Experiences" with Carol Gasber for a donation of \$15 each.

When we registered, my hope was that it would instruct us as to how to have such an experience and I approached it earnestly with this intention. The workshop was four hours long, and involved a lot of lecture, discussion, and two guided meditations. During my sessions, I experienced visual hallucinations of dancing beams of light on a distant horizon line. The instructor informed me that this was very good and that my visual perceptions were the first stage of separating my psychic being from my physical body. The instructor regaled us with stories of her astral travels accompanied by spirit guides, and spoke of endless overlapping planes of existence. Both of us were slightly confused by her theories and explanations.

MS: At Lily Dale, I began to realize that *Witness* for me would become about two people communicating different beliefs to one another. We each reacted to the place in two very different ways—I was a bit disappointed in the overall ambience of the place, and Nate was a bit disturbed by the potential of it. I wanted someone to open their door, invite me in and recognize me as "one of them," but that didn't happen.

LKB: Working collaboratively in photography is not that common. Do you have any thoughts on why this might be and is there any advice you could share for those interested in such ventures?

NL: For me, I don't really think of myself as a photographer any longer, at least not in the strictest sense. My thinking is much more influenced by process-based conceptual work and performative video art.

Both of us approach a project in a very cerebral way; we start with a simple observation and then gather research, prepare notes, or build a set before ever picking up a camera. This lends itself naturally to cooperation, and we're able to discuss, analyze, and bounce our energy off one another. To others interested in collaboration, being able to use each other as sounding boards is tremendous. Photography for me in the past was a very solitary, even lonely, undertaking.

MS: This is my second collaboration. I think a successful one is when you look at the piece and can't remember what idea was yours, and what was the other person's. The part we didn't expect came during the final exhibition. The pairings you see here came about from this process of looking at our visual data and seeing the connections.

On a technical note, when working together you have to give up partial control and separate your friendship from the work. Nate and I set up business meetings, where we come to the breakfast table with notes and laptops. There is something incredible about being able to expose and explore your thinking and imagemaking process with someone else at this level. The first postcard I sent Nate, which has become increasingly important to both of us (the witnessing accidents card), includes some of my obsessive thoughts. I never thought he would save it, or it would become a framed piece in the show.

LKB: Has your "psychic connection" continued after this series?

MS: Surprisingly yes. Had you asked this four weeks ago, my response would have been "No, but luckily our friendship has." Recently, we sat down for a meeting and Nate pulled out some notes on our next project. Surprised, I immediately asked him if he had gotten the images from a book up in my studio.



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When I was an undergraduate, Stan Strembicki told me that sometimes you make work years ahead of when you'll understand it. Since so much of my art making is about collecting, I often live with objects and ideas for years before doing anything with them. This was one of only four books I've had sitting in my studio and Nate pulled up images from that exact same volume without our ever speaking. Coincidence?

NL: Marni continually surprises me with little bursts of insight. I find that she provides a reflection of my own thoughts and challenges me to extend my thinking. Our next project will likely involve codes and signaling systems; it is surprising to me how parallel our thought process is on this new departure point.

1. Mark Alice Durant, "The Blur of the Otherworldly," *Art Journal* 62, no. 3 (fall 2003), 7–15. Dr. Jule Eisenbud's archives are now housed in the special collections of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

2. Broadly interpreting the idea of the "photographic," *Concerning the Spiritual in Photography* investigated how artists exploited inherent mechanics of light-sensitive media to achieve spiritual effects and allusions. Shown at the Photographic Resource Center at Boston University in 2004, this group show of contemporary responses was complemented by a small section of historical photographs from the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Spirit Photography Collection housed at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Historical portions of this essay are adapted from the exhibition's text.

3. Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," ed. Patrice Petro, *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 58.

4. Brian MacQuarrie, "For psychics, financial future in the cards," *Boston Globe*, Sunday, 1 March 2009, Front page, 1(A) and 13(A).