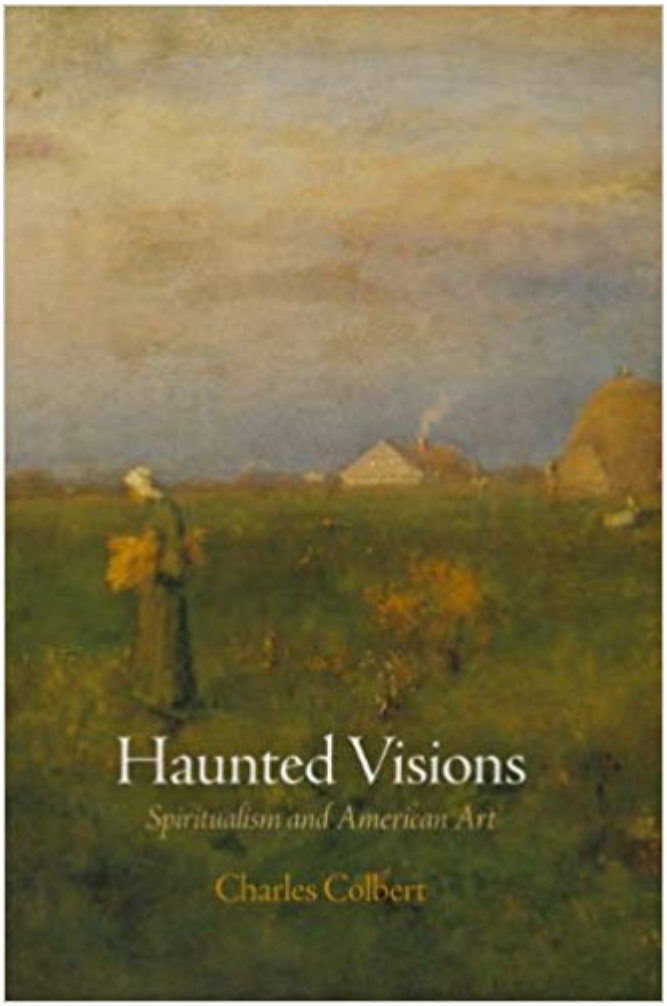
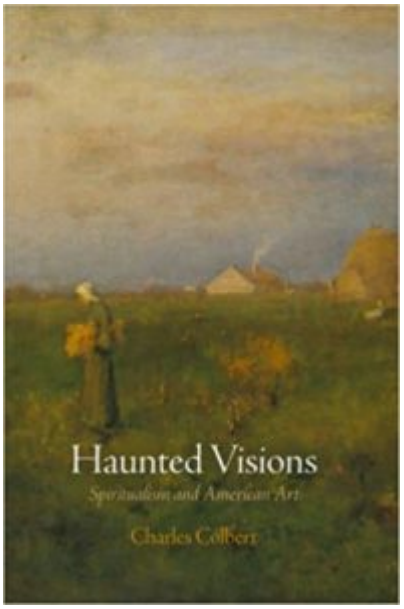
White light (goin’ messin’ up my mind)



Imagine yourself seated around the table at a séance. Imagine having already committed to an ethereal mechanics of sympathy and spirit communication. Imagine the promise of darkness and the desire to sense something beyond the shadow play of candlelight. Imagine an artist like James McNeil Whistler breathing in the scene in which silence, concentration, and spirit-seeing were requisite for success, a scene he sought to recreate in the experience of his own portraits, most strikingly in his *Arrangement in Black* series. In the shimmering spaces between light and dark there is, for a lack of a better

phrase, a profound depth. 

Artistic creation as a form of mediumship.

Now imagine standing in front of Jackson Pollack's *White Light* (1954). Standing *in*rather than *at* attention. Longing to see beyond the buoyed splats and hardened rivulets of paint, into the dense measures of Pollack's being and the very rhythm of his mid-century milieu.

The work of art as mystic portal.

Colbert seeks to illuminate an invisible depth for his readers.

There is a relationship between these experiences, argues Charles Colbert in *Haunted Visions*—between a century of American art, between artistic creation, spectatorship, and a tradition of appreciation in which the critic becomes a kind of psychic interpreter, expert in discerning the hidden lines of influence.

In asking how spiritualism influences a visual romanticism in nineteenth-century America, Colbert explores the precursors to a distinctly American modernism. Colbert's understanding of spiritualism is sufficiently broad to include a host of other metaphysical schemes that inflected how a wide range of Americans assumed their position at a trance lecture or séance table—mesmerism, psychometry, phrenology, psychical research, and the radical empiricism of William James that would seek to explain such schemes or situations. There is, of course, a transcendentalist hue to all of this, but Colbert succeeds in distinguishing a tradition of nineteenth-century aesthetics from an Emersonian orbit and its afterglow.

Colbert offers a compelling catalogue of odd American artists who "advocate[d] the virtues of enchantment" (61). With an emphasis on the ideological impact of Andrew Jackson Davis and Emanuel Swedenborg, *Haunted Visions* offers a breezy yet fine-grained portrait of the myriad artists and critics swept up in the

metaphysical flowerings of the nineteenth century. Colbert is at his best when he writes of the way in which orientations to psychic energies and magnetic powers make their way into stone, marble, and canvas.

The narrative is roughly chronological. It begins with a consideration of the "spiritualist theme" in the work of four sculptors (Hiram Powers, William Wetmore Story, Henry Dexter, and Harriet Hosmer, the latter drawing upon the principles of perpetual spirit motion for the design of a Ferris wheel that would expose riders to the possibilities of interplanetary travel). After looking into how painters William Sidney Mount and Fitz Henry Lane strove to paint the metaphysics of light in the antebellum era, Colbert moves onto postbellum tonalism and the tendency among its practitioners (James McNeil Whistler and George Inness among others) to aggressively paint the auratic energies that pervaded the natural world. The book concludes with discussions of the critic and collector James Jackson Jarves and the early twentieth-century artist Robert Henri, whose interest in clairvoyance, Colbert argues, was part of a long nineteenth-century run-up to the revolution that was American Modernism.

The gist of Colbert's argument is that this limned tradition was integral in setting the stage for the emergence of modernist art and spectatorship. Modernist works were self-consciously dependent upon and invested in promoting higher levels of consciousness. The surfaces of these works were intended as portals to somewhere else precisely because they had captured the depth that clings to all surfaces—a macrocosmic economy of forces that was ever present but visible only to the properly initiated. "The psychic content of late nineteenth-century art," writes Colbert, "resides beneath the surface and implies an existence that usually operates beyond the threshold of the senses. An observer attuned to the possibility enters a meditative state at the behest of these intimations and resonates sympathetically with them" (19).

Interestingly, Colbert adopts such a critical gaze when explicating the spiritualist content that underlies the works he surveys. In other words, Colbert seeks to illuminate an invisible depth for his readers, which is tantamount to his argument that spiritualism mattered, intensely mattered, for artists and audience alike.

In Colbert's telling, spiritualism comes across as primarily about beliefs, principles, what might be called doctrine-effects. Questions of artistic practice are engaged pointedly at times and there is much to be admired in such a line of inquiry, for it reveals the presence of spiritualist proclivities in arenas not often seen as wrapped up in occult sympathies. Yet in Colbert's rendering of spiritualism as largely a reaction against the anti-intellectualism and sensational excess of evangelical revivalism, the non-ideological life-world of spiritualism (i.e., the bat-shit crazy wonder of it all) does not often come to the fore.

Given the discursive reach of spiritualism, it would have been helpful if

Colbert attended to questions of desire, affect, and how individual historical figures theorized their interiority. This would have allowed him to broach how people live *out* and *through* a metaphysics of correspondence in addition to living *by* it. For example, what else is going on with George Inness's "desire to impress himself unequivocally into his compositions" other than his "belief" in the occult? What to make of how his paintings actively deny the inevitability of urbanization? How does the occult revival relate to other kinds of revival and other political registers beyond questions of religious freedom, belief, and cognition (166)?

Colbert argues that the significance of spiritualism, in general, and of spiritualist art in particular, is that both call into question theses of secularization. The persistence of spiritualism in the nineteenth century and beyond, then, demonstrates that religion, and by extension, enchantment, did not recede within the frame of modernity but existed alongside all manner of profanations. Colbert maintains that the presence of religion he unearths should surprise theorists of secularization, challenge the "secularizing bias of historians" (15), and upend Max Weber's lament over iron-clad disenchantment.

On its face, this argument is convincing enough. Indeed, within histories of American religion, spiritualism has often been figured as a formation of rebellion—against religio-political orthodoxies, against gender hierarchies, against death itself. And while traffic in ghost-stories may always signal epistemic eccentricity, I am still left wondering what, exactly, is surprising about the cultivation of a reasoned attention that trades in concepts of creativity and genius and eternal value? What is necessarily surprising about Jarves's notion of the "special gift" of art-seeing (rather than spirit-seeing) in which the "mysterious test of feeling . . . takes cognizance of the sentiment of the artist, his absolute individuality, by which he is himself, and none other; that which cannot be exchanged or imitated" (217)?

Colbert emphasizes the creative individualism of spiritualist practice rather than viewing it in light of cultural consolidations and incorporation. He does not ignore themes of industrialization and urbanization. Nor does he overlook artistic responses to demographic forces. But the reader yearns for a fuller discussion of how and why the artists Colbert surveys were generative of and complicit in the culture at-large. Might the kind of authentic self that Jarves celebrates become less authentic, or better yet, something else entirely, when considered in light of market directives, technological incentives, conceptual conflations of religion and freedom, and other forces that exceed the frames of cognition and intentionality? How might the language of magnetism, for example, be bound up in an encounter with an increasingly capitalized and networked society—one that allows for a robust recognition of self precisely by occluding its powers of ontological diffusion? How does one come to picture (literally and figuratively) a vibrant aura or diagnose the process of re-enchantment? What categories feed into such activities? What are the mechanics? Is enchantment merely a cognitive matter?

In my reading of *Haunted Visions* there is a lament coursing between the lines of Colbert's narrative—the decline of what he calls the "tempular museum." This lament is precipitated by the golden-age-quality of the era Colbert considers and culminates in the "awed reverence" demanded by the auratics of Mark Rothko's *No. 14* (1960) or Pollack's *White Light*. There is an implicit figuration of decline in Colbert's narrative—the spiritualist flowering of the long nineteenth century followed by an increasing numbness to spiritual depth. After Pollack and Rothko the deluge of pop art. Andy Warhol as the cynical embrace of the secular surface of things.

But I am not entirely convinced that enchantments lie only behind the screens of history and/or canvas. Indeed, surface and depth may be entirely inadequate for understanding enchantment or anything at all for that matter (the depth ever there to domesticate the unruliness above, to give some semblance of order). For in facing *White Light* one may hear the sounds of Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* (1961), its gatefold album cover so perfectly capturing the synaesthetic promise of *White Light* and Pollock's method of spontaneous composition. Harmonies converge ever so intensely as Pollack's world bleeds into the Warhol world of irony and so-called detachment and, of course, into the sonic space of the Velvet Underground's *White Light/White Heat* (1968), inspired, in part, by Coleman's extended riffs and asymmetrical phrasing in *Free Jazz*. There is a density and compulsion to all this signal static. The surface becoming the depth and vice versa in a continuous shimmering implosion—the audience at home, longing to clarify, to collect, to own a copy (paintings being long out of reach, original vinyl pressings now do the trick).

It is this contemporary experience of vibrant matter that Colbert addresses through his pre-history of an American art. As Colbert writes of the spiritualist will to domesticate—"By taking possession of paintings, one raised the prospect of being possessed by those same paintings" (227). Indeed, this central claim is spot-on. The shadow play of spiritualism persists in our contemporary moment, suffusing our desire for objects that are really real, things anchored, forever, in a world that goes beyond, so far beyond, those flat schemes of representation. Such schemes must, to their detriment, still the circulation and distinguish art from experience, life from death. The end result, one surmises, is the contemporary art market with its blend of bourgeois frivolity, Victorian fetishism, and bewilderment in the face of such a dense cultural ecology. So that when you walk into a room in which *White Light* hangs, you may be peppered with a palpable spirit of the age—burnt metal circulations of money and sex, feedback, and all manner of spectral splatter.

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