Seeing with Belief: Buddhist Perception, Ghost Photography, and the Ethics of Seeing

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Abstract: This paper examines how photography mediates between the visible and the invisible, arguing that images can function not only as indexical records of reality but also as iconic sites through which ethical, historical, and spiritual truths become perceptible. Drawing on research from my forthcoming book, *Multiple Exposures: Ghost Photography, Buddhism, and Visual Heritage in Early Twentieth-Century China*, I explore the practice of ghost photography among lay Buddhists and spiritualist associations, who employed photographic technologies to visualize spirits, ancestors, and karmic consequences. At a moment when scientific rationalism and anti-superstition campaigns challenged belief in ghosts and gods, Buddhist intellectuals and practitioners reframed photography as a medium capable of revealing dimensions of reality inaccessible to ordinary perception. Rather than treating ghost photographs as evidence of supernatural phenomena, I analyze them as expressions of a Buddhist phenomenology in which seeing is understood as an ethically conditioned act. These images rendered visible the otherwise unseen workings of karma, memory, and consciousness, challenging modern assumptions about photographic objectivity and truth. I argue that Buddhist engagements with photography transformed the medium into a practice of moral cultivation. The paper concludes by tracing resonances between these historical practices and contemporary artistic engagements with absence, displacement, and historical violence, showing how photographs continue to make invisible realities ethically and historically legible.

Keywords: Buddhist perception, ghosts, photography, visual culture, karma

Images surround us daily: in newspapers, on social media, and in historical archives. Some images capture the visible world, while others hint at what is unseen. This essay grew out of my encounters with such images: photographs of ghosts and spirits that prompted me to reflect on how we witness and interpret human experience. Among these are images of deceased ancestors, faintly summoned for ritual cultivation (Figure 1), as well as images of vengeful ghosts appearing as signs of retribution (Figure 2). In both cases, as I discuss below, the ordinarily unseen becomes a site where the ethics of seeing are negotiated—where visibility is never neutral, but bound up with questions of responsibility, belief, and moral interpretation.



Figure 1: The ghost photo of Wang's deceased father, from Sichuan. From the "Photographs of the Immortals and Spirits" album (Xianling zhaoxiang 仙靈照相), 1921.



Figure 2: "An odd ghostly shadow." From Lingxue Congzhi 2, no. 4 (1919).

I draw on research for my forthcoming book, *Multiple Exposures: Ghost Photography, Buddhism, and Visual Heritage in Early Twentieth-Century China,* which explores early twentieth-century Chinese culture and religion, focusing on the ways Buddhist practitioners used visual media to preserve, reproduce, reimagine, and cultivate their beliefs and practices. In particular, the practice of ghost or spirit photography reveals how photographs mediated between the visible and invisible, the historical and emotional, offering not only evidence of what was present but also a record of what was morally and socially significant.

I begin with a brief examination of the ethical and epistemological stakes of ghost photography in early twentieth-century Chinese Buddhist circles, where questions of visibility, presence, and moral responsibility were central to the production and interpretation of images. I then extend these concerns to an analysis of several contemporary artists, showing how similar questions—about what we see, what we attempt not to see, and how the unseen nevertheless returns—continue to shape visual practice. In doing so, I argue that these moral dynamics are not confined to a specific historical or religious context but persist across time, informing broader engagements with images and the ethical demands they place on viewers.

Making Unseen Worlds Visible: Ghost Photography in Early Republican China

The practice of ghost photography (the photographic production or interpretation of faint, superimposed, or translucent figures as spirits of the dead or divine entities) emerged in early Republican China as part of a global effort to reconcile spiritual experience with scientific inquiry. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, spiritualism flourished worldwide, crossing cultural boundaries and attracting interest in Europe, the United States, China, and Japan, particularly during periods of mourning for loved ones lost in wars.[1] Thousands of spirit photographs were produced and circulated, sparking debates among scientists, photographers, and the broader public. Within China, lay Buddhist practitioners and spiritualist associations, such as the Shanghai Society for Psychical Studies (*Shanghai lingxue hui* 上海靈學會, founded in 1917), blended ritual techniques with experimental photography, situating ghost photography at the intersection of devotional practice, technological innovation, and moral inquiry.[2] Participants, often educated elites, approached the act of photographing not as spectacle but as a moral and devotional exercise. Families commissioned photographs of deceased relatives to express filial piety, continue communication with the dead, and materialize invisible bonds of care and remembrance. These sessions were structured as rituals of cultivation: the living prayed, purified themselves, and sought guidance from deities or immortals before summoning a spirit to appear on film. The resulting images, sometimes blurry or faint, were valued precisely for their ambiguity: traces of presence that resisted full visual capture yet made the invisible world perceptible.

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1 There is a substantial body of scholarship on spiritualism worldwide, including studies that trace its transnational dimensions. Among them is *The Spiritualist Movement: Speaking with the Dead in America and Around the World*, edited by Christopher M. Moreman, which examines the movement in both American and global contexts.

2 For more on the foundation of the society, its founders, and their *Shengde* Altar (盛德壇), see Schumann, "Science and Spirit-Writing: The Shanghai Lingxuehui 靈學會 and the Changing Fate of Spiritualism in Republican China."

Figure 1, for example, presents what was understood to be the summoned image of an ancestor: a purported photograph of Wang's deceased father, taken on August 30, 1918, in his Shanghai apartment and later included in a collection of spirit photographs by the Shanghai Society for Psychical Studies (*Photographs of the Immortals and Spirits album*). Wang turned to the society to carry out the process, which was conducted at its altar through a coordinated sequence that combined ritual practice with technical procedure, beginning with spirit communication to obtain authorization and instruction. The session was then staged in a domestic interior with controlled lighting and a prepared backdrop, during which the invited spirit was believed to manifest within the photographic field, producing a faint or delayed image upon development.[3]

If Figure 1 illustrates a case in which ghost photography was intentionally produced through ritual mediation and controlled procedures, Figure 2 demonstrates how similar visual effects could emerge outside any deliberate spiritual practice. The image presents a wedding scene in which ghostly figures—identified in the accompanying account as the angry previous husbands of the bride—appear behind the bride and guests, suggesting that ghost photography in China was not limited to staged encounters with the dead. While photographs of ghosts were often seen as evidence of the supernatural, they were equally conceptualized as evidence of moral values and emotional states, in which karma and ethical consequence become visually legible. In this framework, the figures that appear in the background are not simply spectral intrusions but manifestations of unresolved violence, emotional disturbance, and moral disorder. The image thus extends the logic of spirit photography beyond intentional ritual practice, implying that photographic space itself could register the moral and karmic structure of human relations.[4]

Such understandings of photography challenged prevailing epistemologies of seeing. They complicated the assumption that photography's indexical power—that is, the camera's capacity to register a physical trace of what once stood before

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3 Shahaf, "Multiple Exposures: Ghosts, Buddhism, and Visual Heritage in Early Twentieth–Century China," 212–218.

4 Shahaf, "Multiple Exposures," 241–261.

it—guaranteed truth. By contrast, iconicity refers to resemblance or likeness, in which meaning emerges not from direct physical contact with reality but through visual similarity, symbolic association, or interpretive recognition. Practitioners in China interpreted the photograph not merely as an imprint of reality but as an image animated by spiritual luminosity (*lingguang* 靈光) perceptible only through practice and ethical vision.[5] In this sense, these images operated iconically rather than indexically: they were not mechanical reproductions but material mediations of sincerity and cultivation. Photography thus became both a technology of witnessing and a practice of moral transformation. By seeing and believing in what the camera revealed, practitioners redefined what it meant to behold truth, positioning the act of seeing itself as a path toward ethical and spiritual insight.

These photographic experiments unfolded within global debates over the existence of spirits and, in China, amid reformist and anti-superstition campaigns that dismissed belief in ghosts and gods as "Buddhist nonsense."[6] Yet prominent Buddhist intellectuals, such as Di Baoxian (狄葆賢 1873–1941), Ding Fubao (丁福保 1874–1952), and Yan Fu (嚴復 1854–1921), turned this skepticism into an opportunity to rethink the nature of vision itself.[7] In Buddhist thought, perception is not a passive recording of external reality but an active process shaped by mind and karma: all phenomena are projections of consciousness. Within this

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5 Shahaf, "Multiple Exposures," 212–270.

6 Di Baoxian, "Pingdeng ge Zaji", 1–4. For more on the anti-superstition campaigns, see Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity*.

7 Di Baoxian was an influential Buddhist publisher, who wrote about ghost photography and Buddhist mediation. Both Ding Fubao and Yan Fu were members of the Shanghai Society for Psychical Studies, who contributed to the publication of its periodical. Their involvement provides a firsthand account of photographers and other participants, who shared their knowledge and experiences. Ding Fubao was a notable Buddhist scholar and lay practitioner, known for his compendium works such as *Synopsis of Buddhism* (*Foxue cuoyao* 佛學撮要) and the *Dictionary of Buddhism* (*Foxue Da Cidian* 佛學大辭典). Yan Fu, by contrast, was a scholar and translator who played a significant role in introducing Western political and social thought to China. He is best known for his Chinese translations of works by figures such as Thomas Henry Huxley, John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer. On Di Baoxian and Ding Fubao see Shahaf, "Multiple Exposures," and on Yan Fu, see Shengqing Wu, *Photo Poetics: Chinese Lyricism and Modern Media Culture*.

framework, ghost photography offered not evidence of illusion but proof of the interdependence between the visible and the invisible. The light captured on film was not merely optical; it indexed the radiance of mind, the luminosity inherent in all beings, understood as their buddha nature. Hence, Buddhist thinkers reframed seeing as an ethical and meditative act: to see clearly was to recognize the moral and karmic conditions that make perception possible. Against modern claims that separated science from belief, they proposed a more capacious vision, one in which the camera could register not only material traces but also the workings of consciousness itself.

When I present this research, I am often asked whether people truly believed in these images, what actually happened in the darkroom, or whether the photographs were manipulated. My response is that such questions, while understandable, risk reducing the practice to a binary of truth versus fraud. What interests me instead are the meanings and functions of these practices; the ways they shaped ethical life, mediated emotion, and materialized belief. Rather than treating ghost photography as evidence of credulity or deception, I approach it as a form of what D. E. Osto has called Buddhist phenomenology; that is, an effort to describe and understand experiences of the extraordinary within the lived realities of Buddhist practitioners.[8] Through this lens, photographing ghosts becomes less about proving the supernatural and more about exploring how technologies of vision made unseen worlds visible, even if momentarily.

More broadly, we should appreciate the role of visual media as agents of preservation and transformation. Rather than treating reproduction as a neutral act, technologies of replication—such as photography, photomechanical printing, and other mechanical media—actively reshape what they preserve. *Multiple Exposures* includes case studies of photomechanical reproduction of Chinese art and ghost photography that show how preservation in early twentieth-century China was inseparable from intervention: each act of copying or dissemination redefined the cultural, visual, and moral dimensions of art, literature, and religion.

That said, intervention, distortion, manipulation, and skepticism were also intrinsic to the discourse on spirit photography. The practice always operated on

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[8] Osto, *Paranormal States: Psychic Abilities in Buddhist Convert Communities.*

the edge of credibility. William H. Mumler, the American photographer often credited as the first to capture spirits on film, was famously put on trial for fraud in 1869.[9] His case drew global attention, was reported widely by outlets such as *The New York Times*, and the spirit photographs themselves were publicly circulated, analyzed, and debated. These controversies underscored photography's double status as both evidence and illusion. Across my book, I trace how mediation opened new possibilities for cultural participation while also provoking anxiety about authenticity and manipulation. Ghost photography, in particular, made these tensions visible: it exposed the thin line between revelation and fabrication. But even when its practitioners were accused of deceit, the emotional and ethical force of the images remained intact, reminding us that "manipulation" is itself part of the medium's expressive and interpretive power.

Ghost Photography Beyond Buddhism: Spectral Traces of Injustice and Erasure

These debates surrounding spirit photography—its possibilities for revealing the unseen, its potential for manipulation, and its moral and emotional stakes—resonate far beyond Buddhist circles in early twentieth-century China. The underlying questions about what can be seen, what can be believed, and how the medium itself intervenes are not confined to a particular time or place. In fact, these historical practices resonate with contemporary moments of injustice and erasure, where images—whether of conflict, displacement, or everyday life—carry traces of invisible lives and unseen histories.[10] This resonance made me reflect on how

[9] A 1925 article in the pictorial of the Chinese Photography Society (*Zhongguo shying xuehui huabao* 中國攝影學會畫報), draws on reports from *The New York Times* (April 22, 1869), and recounts Mumler's trial for fraud while emphasizing the lack of conclusive evidence against him. Although some images were acknowledged as fabrications, the author insisted that the phenomenon itself warranted systematic investigation. Sida 四達, "Linghun Zhaoxiang Zhi Faming Zhe."

[10] On the resurgence of spiritual and occult frameworks in contemporary art, see, for example, Heartney, "How Spirituality Went from Taboo to Trendy in the Art World," Art in America

photography in its many forms, before and after the age of photoshop, does not simply document the world but actively intervenes in it, shaping perception, memory, and moral understanding.

For example, building on these historical insights, we see similar concerns—debating the camera's ability to authenticate the imperceptible or serve as evidence for it—within both mainstream media and among contemporary artists. In a July 2021 article published in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, for instance, the journalist Odeh Bisharat recounted how a particular photograph had shaken him to the core. He stated that he initially believed he was imagining things but then realized there were two ghosts concealed within the picture. The photo—which was featured in a previous Haaretz article on a documentary film "Blue Box"[11] about Yosef Weitz (1890–1972), the architect of the "transfer" policy[12]—prompted Bisharat to respond with the following description:[13]

> As I was looking at this image, again and again, I started questioning my own eyesight: could it be deceiving me? I looked at the image once more, and it became evident that there is an additional figure present that cannot be ignored. In the center of the picture, there is a cane, but whose hand is holding it? And, why is the hand hazy while the rest of the details are clearly visible? Is it possible that this is the result of the play of light at dusk, light

(ArtNews), which discusses the increasing visibility of mystical and non-rational modes of knowledge in recent exhibitions.

11 Blue Box, directed by Michal Weits (Israel/Canada: Norma Productions, 2021), documentary, 82 min.

12 The transfer policy, also known as the population transfer or displacement policy, was a controversial policy proposed by Yosef Weitz, a senior official in the Jewish Agency for Israel, in the 1940s. The policy advocated for the forced transfer of the Arab population living in the British Mandate of Palestine to neighboring Arab countries in order to create a Jewish majority in the region. Weitz believed that the presence of the Arab population in Palestine posed a threat to the creation of a Jewish state and argued that their transfer would be necessary for the success of the Zionist project. The policy was met with strong opposition from both Jewish and international sources, who viewed it as a violation of human rights and international law. For a review of the film that also discusses the historical context see Andrew Montiveo, "Blue Box."

13 It is important to note that Bisharat's response is based solely on the image, without having seen the film or read the accompanying article that includes a review of the film in which the photograph appears. The featured photograph, taken by Aryeh Pak, can be found in the online collection "Bitmuna" (מאוספי ביתמונה, צילום: אריה פק). https://www.bitmuna.com

that has been obstructed by clouds, creating the illusion of an inhuman hand, a hand that is not a hand? Or is this a clever deception?[14]



Figure 3: Yosef Weitz, father of the "transfer" plan and the director of the Land and Afforestation Department of the Jewish National Fund while purchasing land in the 1940s. Photographed by Aryeh Pak from the collections of "Bitmuna."

Bisharat further directs the reader's attention to the figure in the picture who appears behind Weitz's assistant on the right side. Though the face is obscured, the cap (*keffiyeh* كُوفِيَّة) is distinctly Arab, he writes, and he continues describing the image: in the middle of the picture, there is a cane, but it is unclear whose hand is holding it. It is definitely not Weitz's hand, as Weitz is pointing with one hand while holding a map with the other. The figure with the *keffiyeh* is holding the cane, creating another illusion. Upon closer inspection, Bisharat continues, there seems to be a woman, possibly Arab, hiding behind Weitz. Her coat is darker than his, and it ends above his knee. Bisharat wonders what is she doing there, asking "are they goat herders, and the cane is just a shepherd's stick? Or were they invited by Weitz's men to explain the village borders, and they willingly complied, following the rule of hospitality?"[15]

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[14] My translation of Bisharat, "חשבתי שאני מדמיין. ואז הבחנתי ברוח הרפאים שמסתתרת בתמונה." For an English version, see Bisharat, "What Yosef Weitz Didn't See While Surveying the Palestinian Villages He Would Destroy."

[15] Bisharat, "I Thought I was Imagining."

Bisharat concludes that the photographer must have implanted Levantine figures in the photo to expose the conflict, and the eerie image suggests that the victims are in the background. He writes that the ghosts of those dispossessed will continue to walk the land, with the photograph conveying a message: a "superior" force, embodied in the figure of Weitz, is driven by obsession and is capable of destroying the lives of many people without ever encountering or even seeing them. Bisharat further emphasizes that, "for Weitz, the scene appears as a spectacle containing land, rocks, plants, animals, and human beings; all may remain except the human figures. Their misfortune lies in having been born into a different race, not that of the one who looks down from above."[16]

Crucially, Bisharat does not believe the ghosts are real. To him, even if created through manipulation, this image remains a valid historical record in which the ghostly figures symbolize the wronged people whose land was stolen. These people remain inextricably linked to the land depicted in the image, even if invisible to those who took it from them.

Saliently, Bisharat's response recalls the early reception of ghost photography in China, where the manifestation of ghosts also served as evidence of moral values, emotional states, and unfinished business. These images (such as Figure 2) appeared in Chinese newspapers and magazines in the early twentieth century, depicting the ghostly return of deceased generals or wronged husbands, often accompanied by stories of karma, retribution, and moral obligation.[17] In these cases, as in Bisharat's reading, regardless of whether the photographs were manipulated, they functioned to mediate and manifest invisible realities, thereby rendering unseen moral, social, and historical truths visible. This capacity emerged through their publication and circulation within print and interpretive networks, where captions, editorial commentary, and reader response activated the images as evidentiary surfaces upon which such meanings could be read. Visibility, in this sense, is not a purely optical effect but a form of moral legibility produced through circulation, as photographic meaning takes shape within discursive and affective

16 Bisharat, "I Thought I was Imagining."
17 Shahaf, "Multiple Exposures," 212–270.

economies that render karma, ethical consequence, and historical violence perceptible.

Bisharat's reading of the Haaretz image ultimately illustrates how a single photograph can carry layers of meaning beyond its literal content: the "ghosts" of the dispossessed appear as traces of historical injustice, indexed through composition and juxtaposition rather than captured in real time. The photograph becomes a site where absence and presence, visibility and invisibility, intersect.

From Representation to Relational Truth: Photographic Mediation Across Time and Bodies

Extending this inquiry into the photographer's own role, contemporary artists who are using photography have come to view manipulation or intervention as a mode of mediation and even cultivation; as a means of engaging with photography's capacity to construct, rather than merely capture, truth.

For example, contemporary artist Michal Heiman (b. 1955) describes how her self-portrait series *I Was There* originated through her experimentation with photography in front of a mirror, leading her to reflect on how the camera might see her differently than she sees herself.[18] In an exhibition review by critic Galia Yahav, Yahav discusses one work in the series that incorporates a montage of surrealist photographer Claude Cahun's 1928 self-portrait in front of a mirror

[18] Michal Heiman's series *I Was There* assembles images from diverse sources, ranging from nineteenth-century paintings to contemporary press photographs, which she reworks by layering text and her own portrait. These composites thereby collapse temporal boundaries and bring image and language into dialogue, while addressing questions of identity, memory, and representation. The series has been exhibited widely in different iterations (see, for example, Andrea Meislin Gallery "Www.Likeyou.Com - Michal Heiman - I Was There - Andrea Meislin Gallery, New York, NY," https://old.likeyou.com/archives/michal_heiman_meislin_05.htm.). I originally accessed the series in 2023 on Heiman's website, where it appeared under the title *I Was There: Digitally Manipulated Readymades with Stamps, 2001–2006*, a title that alludes to the work's mode of production and its engagement with appropriation, digital manipulation, and the readymade as a compositional strategy. I later had the opportunity to discuss the series with the artist herself.

(Figure 4).[19] In Heiman's composition, Heiman appears reflected in the mirror holding a camera, positioned over Cahun's original reflection, who is shown with short hair standing before a mirror. The two figures are visually aligned through matching patterned clothing, creating a layered dialogue between self-representation, doubling, and photographic mediation.



Figure 4: Michal Heiman, I Was There #3 (Claude Cahun), 2001–2005.

Yahav describes Heiman's explanation that photography allowed her to enter the world of artists and art history in her own way—through the mirror. She further observes that, in this work, Heiman acts as an intruder in Cahun's frame, inserting herself into the mirrored scene and obscuring the camera's initial focal point—Cahun's reflection—with her own face. Through this disruption, "Cahun looks back, Heiman looks forward, both supposedly on the same plane of reality and representation." [20] Yahav analyzes Heiman's text, "I WAS THERE," as a

[19] This portrait was included in the exhibition "Double Exposure" (Shpilman Institute of Photography, August 2014), in which artists presented their work alongside interpretive frameworks proposed by commentators, curators, and researchers. The exhibition, curated by Aya Luria, Orit Bulgaro, and Anat Asher, drew on works from the Shpilman Photography Institute's collection.

[20] My translation of Yahav, "כאשר מיכל היימן פולשת לפריים של קלוד קאהון - ביקורת אמנות."

declaration, "a kind of photographic contract that something happened and that objective reality was captured and recorded."[21]

From this perspective, photography is indexical. Yet, as Yahav argues, this promise is immediately disrupted in Heiman's work, where Cahun's photograph is used as a readymade and the emphasis shifts from representational certainty to a historical and affective partnership. "I WAS THERE" becomes, in Yahav's reading, a code for sisterhood and shared destiny, perhaps as female photographers within a male-dominated field, or as a metaphysical conception of photography as super-temporal, enabling continuous encounter and repeated intrusion across time. As Heiman explains, this phrase signals not simply presence but participation across temporal boundaries. [22] She also described sewing her own outfit for the photograph, much as Claude Cahun had fashioned and staged her own appearance, thereby extending this sense of shared experience and identification into the material construction of the image itself.[23]

Yahav further notes that, in commenting on Cahun's original image (prior to Heiman's intervention), Michal Ben Naftali describes how the photograph turns the subject into an object. To this, Heiman adds three elements: her own face, the camera, and the caption, thereby performing what Roland Barthes termed "embalming": participating in the morbid gesture of photography, yet creating a sisterhood in the act of witnessing and instilling life.[24] In other words, as Yahav concludes, Heiman's work offers a response to Barthes's famous theory of photography as indexical, while also critiquing it.[25]

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21 Yahav, "When Michal Heiman Invades Claude Cahun's Frame."

22 Yahav, "When Michal Heiman Invades Claude Cahun's Frame." This perception of time and communal space is evident throughout Heiman's work as a whole, as I discuss below, and is also reflected in her exhibition titles, such as "A New Community of Women," and "Traversing Time and Space." https://www.heimanmichal.com/exhibitions-1

23 In my conversation with the artist.

24 Barthes does not use the term "embalming" himself—this formulation derives more directly from André Bazin, and is taken up in this context by Yahav—but he characterizes photography as inherently morbid insofar as it attests to what "has been" and thus to a subject already lost to the present. The photograph, in this sense, fixes a living moment as something past and therefore implicitly bound up with death. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 76–77.

25 Yahav, "When Michal Heiman Invades Claude Cahun's Frame."

Heiman's more recent project, *Radical Link: A New Community of Women, 1855–2020*, involves a deeper investigation of mediation across different times, places, and bodies.[26] In *I Was There*, Heiman inserted herself as a visual apparition into a fabricated visual reality. In *Radical Link*, she uses the phrase "it was me" to acknowledge her physical presence in a given historical reality—namely, in photographs of which she was not the subject. In *Plate 34, My Self* Heiman identified her younger self in an 1855 photograph taken by Dr. Hugh Welch Diamond of a woman in the Surrey County Asylum (Figure 5).[27] In *Plate 15*, *My Gaze*, she identified her own gaze in an 1880s photograph taken by Oreste Bertani of Maria Dominica D'Alberto at the San Servolo Asylum (Figure 6).[28]



PLATE 34

[26] This exhibition is a participatory project of Heiman that brings together archival materials, photographic works, and collective practices to explore forms of feminist affiliation and shared historical consciousness across time and space. See https://www.heimanmichal.com/exhibitions-1.

[27] Image from Heiman, *Michal Heiman: Radical Link: A New Community of Women, 1855–2020: I Encountered My Gaze in Venice, 1880–2020*, 16.

[28] Image from Heiman, *Michal Heiman: Radical Link: A New Community of Women, 1855–2020: I Encountered My Gaze in Venice, 1880–2020, 20.* See this book as a whole for further discussion of *Radical Link*. The volume accompanies the exhibition and includes essays by curator Sara Gordon alongside contributions from art historians and scholars.

Figure 5: Michal Heiman, "Plate 34 My Self," 2013, digitally manipulated readymade and stamp on a photograph by Dr. Hugh W. Diamond, Surrey County Lunatic Asylum, London, 1855.



Figure 6: Michal Heiman, "Plate 15 My Gaze," 2017, digitally manipulated readymade and stamp on a photograph by Oreste Bertani.

These images, which Heiman encountered mostly in Sander Gilman's treatise, *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography*,[29] sparked a project that explores different ways of reentering the nineteenth-century and its mental asylums. This is an experiment in traversing time, as Heiman describes it, meant to provoke social and cultural change in the present.[30]

In this project, Heiman used photography as a tool to penetrate the nineteenth-century world. When she first saw the original *Plate 34* in *The Face of Madness*, she was stunned. She described feeling as though she were looking at her sixteen-year-old self. The 1855 black-and-white image depicts a young woman with long hair parted in the middle and draped over her slightly curved shoulders. Her mouth is unsmiling, and her gaze is direct. This photograph inspired Heiman to create a series of still and video portraits of individuals reflecting the same expression that captivated her. Seeking to photograph people in the guise of women

[29] Gilman, ed., *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography*.

[30] Heiman, "A New Community of Women 1855–2019," 455. See also the project description on Heiman's website, https://www.heimanmichal.com/exhibitions-1#/radical-link/.

institutionalized in nineteenth-century mental asylums, Heiman recreated the checked dress worn by the subject in the original *Plate 34* and invited people from different backgrounds to her studio (Figure 7). Through these images, she prompts viewers to consider questions of time, gender, race, space, and the politics of psychological institutionalization and asylum-seeking.[31]



Figure 7: Michal Heiman, "Radical Link: A New Community of Women, 1855-2020."

Interestingly, Diamond's and Bertani's images represent a time when the developing field of psychoanalysis used early photographic technology to identify, categorize, diagnose, and justify the institutionalization of those deemed mentally ill. Heiman noticed that in later drawings based on these photographs, painters often altered the subjects' demeanor. Direct gazes were adjusted downward, hands were contorted, necklaces transformed into crosses, and captions were added declaring diagnoses such as "religious melancholy."[32] For Heiman, these distortions revealed the mediated construction of pathology itself. Comparing these nineteenth-century images to contemporary tracking of political asylum seekers,

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31 Heiman, "A New Community of Women 1855–2019." Lisa Traiger, "Asylum Inmates and Asylum Seekers in Israeli Photographer's AU Exhibit," *Washington Jewish Week* (blog), November 11, 2019.

32 Heiman, "A New Community of Women 1855–2019," 454. Also see the exhibition book Heiman, *Michal Heiman: Radical Link: A New Community of Women, 1855–2020.*

she reflects on how photography has long served as both an instrument of control and a tool for reimagining subjectivity. In this historical investigation, Heiman sees photography as a tactic for time travel, enabling her to envision a new community for the twenty-first century. There are no visible ghosts in this work. Rather, the women's spirits are visually reproduced and preserved through the images Heiman directs, their ghosts mediated through living bodies. In Heiman's work, photography, even when used for virtual time travel, documents a kind of visual historical truth—and since beginning this project, Heiman has even listed her birth year as 1855. As she explained to me, "I know it wasn't me that was photographed 150 years ago, but it was certainly a photo of me. In plate 34, the photograph is me; in plate 15, it is my gaze. Even though these are not my eyes, the gaze is mine." The photograph thus becomes simultaneously indexical and dislocated: materially tied to another historical body, yet affectively and psychically inhabited by Heiman herself.

As we have seen, Chinese ghost photography permitted a slippage from indexicality to iconicity—and, often, a combination of both—and, similarly, Heiman's work inhabits this spectrum. Her projects reveal the internal work of the artist, which is deeply aware of the representational technologies that create visual realities and connections. For Heiman, indexicality becomes a personal moment which is less about likeness than about a deep identification with the subject. Through elements such as clothing, facial expression, and mirror reflection, she fuses indexicality and iconicity, creating a visual practice of mediation across time, space, and people imbued with moral and social value. By defying the painters who altered these photographs to fit diagnostic conventions like "religious melancholy," Heiman not only rejects their authority but elevates photography as a medium capable of transforming indexicality into iconicity; moving, through similarity, beyond representation toward relational truth.

In this sense, Heiman's work also reframes photography as a medium of return—not in the sense of recovering an original presence, but as a mediated re-entry into histories, bodies, and forms of belonging. Her invocation of a "right to return," as noted in discussions of *Radical Link*, explicitly echoes both Israel's Law of Return and the ongoing claims of Palestinian refugees, situating photographic

identification within a charged political vocabulary of displacement and belonging.[33]

If, in Heiman's practice, return is enacted through identification across time and bodies, in Bisharat's reading of the image it emerges through absence and displacement and takes a material form that exceeds simple indexical representation. Bisharat examines a photograph and argues that the ghostly figures are not actual apparitions but the result of a juxtaposition of two indexical representations. It is precisely this superimposition that transforms the represented subjects into ghosts. This technical explanation is a scientific approach to understanding photographic realism, placing two Palestinian peasants—a man and a woman—behind the Zionist leaders in the image. Though the ghostly figures were absent at the specific historical moment when the photo of Weitz, pointing toward soon-to-be-expropriated lands, was taken, the final photographic image indexes a broader historical truth, rendering visible those excluded from the scene. It considers another perspective: that of the invisible.

Ghosts of History: Visual Intervention and Ethical Inheritance

Both Bisharat and Heiman use photographed "ghosts" to investigate historical interactions, foregrounding the importance of visual intervention. Similarly, Yael Bartana's exhibition *Rehearsal for Redemption* (at the Wannsee Contemporary in Berlin in 2023)[34] explored the political and social upheavals of 1920s Germany through video works, photographs, and collages (Figures 8–9).

[33] Heiman, "A New Community of Women 1855–2019," 453. Naylor, "In AU Museum Exhibit, Israeli Artist Uses Photography to Span Centuries While Confronting Questions of Belonging."

[34] Yael Bartana, *Rehearsal for Redemption,* Wannsee Contemporary in Berlin, 03.02.2023–22.04.2023. https://wannsee-contemporary.com/exhibition/yael-bartana-rehearsal-for-redemption/



Figures 8: Yael Bartana, Gravity (III), at the Wannsee Contemporary https://wannsee-contemporary.com/exhibition/yael-bartana-rehearsal-for-redemption/



Figure 9: Yael Bartana, Gravity (I, II, III), as installed at the Wannsee Contemporary. Photo by Jens Ziehe. From "Photography in Berlin" https://www.photography-in.berlin/wannsee-contemporary-yael-bartana-rehearsal-for-redemption/.

Drawing on the work of Rudolf von Laban (1879–1958)—the Hungarian choreographer who established his institute in Grunewald in 1927—Bartana captures the "ghosts" of Laban's dancers through her photographs, refining their movements and merging them into a collective memory of the site where they once performed. Laban was associated with Nazi cultural politics, having collaborated with the regime before being eventually marginalized by it, and Bartana's work

confronts this troubled legacy directly. The exhibition juxtaposes the traumatic and utopian histories of Wannsee, where both Laban's institute and the planning of the Holocaust once took place. Bartana not only reproduces historical dance and dancers but also engages with how Laban used photography as a tool to analyze and document movement. Laban's kinetography, a system for recording and analyzing human movement rooted in the *Lebensreform* movement's ideals of physical, social, and ritual reform, becomes in Bartana's work a question of ethical inheritance.[35] As the exhibition's artistic advisor Shelley Harten notes, Bartana questions whether the principles of the *Lebensreform* movement, which were later entangled with fascist and nazi ideology, could be repurposed toward a different and more redemptive future.[36] In doing so, Bartana shifts photography from a merely indexical trace of past presence toward a more unstable interplay between indexicality and iconicity: the photographed body no longer simply records what once was, but becomes a mediated and symbolic site through which historical memory is reanimated, re-performed, and made newly visible.

Bartana's continued engagement with these questions is also evident in her recent large-scale installation *Farewell*, currently on view in Times Square.[37] Drawing once again on practices of collective choreography and reenactment, the work incorporates movement inspired by Labanotation. Yet here, the emphasis shifts toward departure, mourning, and transformation. The notion of farewell becomes both an acknowledgment of grief and historical loss and an opening toward other modes of collectivity, mediation, and futurity. Rather than resolving the tensions embedded in Laban's legacy, Bartana stages movement itself as a fragile form of transmission—one capable of carrying historical trauma while still imagining the possibility of redemption through altered forms of visibility. In this

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35 The *Lebensreform* movement was a movement in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries that sought to promote a healthier and more natural way of living. It emphasized physical fitness, a vegetarian diet, and alternative medicine, and rejected industrialization, urbanization, and other aspects of modern society. The movement also had ties to nationalism and antisemitism, and some of its ideas were later adopted by the Nazi regime. For additional reading on Lebensreform see, for example, Cara Emily. "Life as a Dance: Lebensreform and the Promise of an Alternative Modernity."

36 Harten, "Wannsee Contemporary: Yael Bartana, Rehearsal for Redemption."

37 https://www.timessquarenyc.org/tsq-arts-projects/farewell.

sense, redemption does not appear as historical closure or reconciliation, but as the tentative reworking of inherited images, gestures, and collective rituals into new symbolic forms—an understanding of historical transmission closer to karmic return than historical resolution, where gestures and images persist, reappear, and demand continual ethical negotiation. Bodies emerge less as stable documentary evidence than as spectral figures oscillating between presence and disappearance, index and icon, archive and projection. Through this instability, Bartana transforms photography and choreography alike into mediating practices that do not erase historical violence, but attempt to render it visible otherwise—opening the possibility of ethical and perceptual renewal.

Conclusion: Indexicality, Iconicity, and the Moral Life of Images

Across these examples—from early twentieth-century Chinese ghost photography to Bisharat's reading of Haaretz, to Heiman's interventions and Bartana's archival reconstructions—photography emerges as a practice that negotiates between indexicality and iconicity. It can record, assemble, and re-present reality, yet in doing so it produces new layers of meaning, rendering visible what might otherwise remain unseen. Just as Chinese practitioners of ghost photography engaged with ethical and ritualistic concerns, contemporary photographers and audiences continue to encounter the medium as both evidence and interpretation, tracing the unseen dimensions of social, historical, and emotional life.

Through their art and interpretation of images, Bisharat, Heiman and Bartana demonstrate how photography can move beyond mere indexing to become an indexical icon. They all engage with periods when photography was still emerging and being explored as a form of science (including spiritual science), and they employ the rhetoric and imagery of ghosts and spirits for political, ethical, and aesthetic purposes. Even though they work with photographic technologies now taken for granted, they read the images to reveal invisible truths and to investigate how photography functioned as a visual medium in the eras they revisit, whether

for diagnosing mental health, analyzing movement, or tracing the haunting remains of history.

In a world where violence, displacement, and erasure are often mediated through images, the question of what—or who—we see becomes urgent. Tragic events compel us to confront the ways that the humanity of the most vulnerable are often rendered invisible, even as their images circulate widely. Photography, in its various forms, offers both a means of witnessing and a challenge to our assumptions about presence, absence, and truth. It reminds us that what is often unseen is not unimportant, and that historical and contemporary injustices often leave traces demanding careful attention, interpretation, and ethical engagement.

Early twentieth-century Chinese Buddhist culture, media, and photographic practices teach us that visual media have historically functioned not merely to record and preserve but also to reinterpret and confer ethical and moral significance on cultural and spiritual life. Although rooted in Buddhist studies and the history of photographic reproduction, these insights extend beyond academic contexts and invite us to consider how images—even when altered, mediated, or reassembled—can illuminate invisible histories and reveal moral and social truths. By tracing these visual practices—from ghost photography in early Republican China to contemporary artistic interventions—we are reminded of the ethical responsibility inherent in seeing and called to acknowledge the often hidden human realities that images can both obscure and reveal.

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