Camera Miracula: An Uncomfortable History

Symposium co-organised by Shannon Taggart and Annebella Pollen

University of Brighton, Thursday 3rd September 2026, 10.30-6pm

Sallis Benney Theatre, University of Brighton, 58–67 Grand Parade, Brighton, BN2 0JY

Free, but booking essential:

https://www.ticketsource.com/centre-for-design-history-university-of-brighton/t-glyxnlz

Since photography's announcement in 1839, people have tried to photograph what cannot be seen: ghosts, dreams, prayers, sickness, sin, psychic forces—even the human soul. The images they produced are beautiful, unsettling, and often absurd. The experiments behind them are stranger still. Leading scientists, artists, physicians, and thinkers took these investigations seriously. Yet today this remarkable visual record has been dismissed as a curiosity and largely written out of photography's official history.

What if the strangest photographs ever made are also among the most important?

Camera Miracula: An Uncomfortable History argues that attempts to photograph the invisible reveal something fundamental about photography itself. Photography has never simply recorded reality. It has also functioned as a ritual technology for giving visible form to invisible realities. In this day-long symposium, Emily Hauver, Mark Pilkington, Annebella Pollen, Beth Saunders, and Shannon Taggart return to photography's neglected archive. Through surprising case studies spanning art, science, religion, and the paranormal, they reveal how photography has long imagined, negotiated, and transformed what people and cultures understand to be real. At a moment when AI is reshaping our understanding of photographic truth, the medium's forgotten past may offer insight into its future.

Schedule:
10am Registration opens
10.30-10.40 Welcome by Annebella Pollen
10.40-11 Introduction by Shannon Taggart
11-12 Mark Pilkington:
The Finder and the Moon: UFOs caught on camera
12-1 Lunch break (lunch not provided)
1-2 Beth Saunders:
Lace and Ghosts
2-3 Annebella Pollen**:**
Catholic bricolage and Marian maximalism in *Supernatural Visions of the Madonna*
3-3.30 Break
3.30-4.30 Emily Hauver:
Mind’s Eye: The Psychic Photographs of Ted Serios
4.30-5.30 Shannon Taggart:
SORRAT: Reinterpreting a Paranormal Archive
5.30-6 Closing discussions

Outlines for talks and speaker biographies:

Mark Pilkington
The Finder and the Moon: UFOs caught on camera

Billy Meier's contact group photographed near Bäretswil, Switzerland, 20th April 1975. Courtesy of Mark Pilkington.

Mark Pilkington, author of the UFO meta-conspiracy book 'Mirage Men', presents a curated selection of his favourite photographic artefacts from the flying saucer era and beyond. Against the backdrop of the longest sustained wave of UFO coverage in the United States since the 1940s—culminating in a series of inconclusive congressional hearings—this presentation examines how images shape belief, negate doubt, and reinforce wonder.

Captured by startled witnesses with whatever photographic technology happened to be at hand, these images capturing fleeting moments of ambiguity and awe. Mark will unpack the background to the images, consider mundane, and extra-mundane, interpretations of them, and show how they both reflected, and shaped, expectations of otherworld encounters.

These photographic artefacts occupy a liminal space between evidence and illusion. For viewers, their impact can range from mild ontological unease to life-altering revelation. For believers, UFOs function like dust on celluloid or glitches in digital images: unintended artefacts that rupture the medium's spell and expose the fragility of consensus reality. Paired with a persuasive witness narrative, even the blurriest image can destabilise certainty, provoking a deeper and more unsettling question—if this is real, what else are we not being told?

Mark Pilkington is a writer, musician, occasional curator and co-director of Strange Attractor Press. He is the author of the book and documentary film 'Mirage Men' and 'Far Out: 101 Strange Tales from Science's Outer Edge', and has written internationally for numerous newspapers, magazines, anthologies, journals, film box sets and web sites. He's appeared on TV and film documentaries and speaks regularly on esoteric and fringe culture topics. He also makes electronic music with Teleplasmiste, Luminous Foundation and others, and co-runs the Acid Horse music festival in Wiltshire.

Beth Saunders
Lace and Ghosts

Wedding Veil Ectoplasm, Fodor Plates, Box 9, Eileen J. Garrett Parapsychology Foundation collection, Collection 331, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Baltimore, MD).

In three case studies, this presentation examines the metaphorical uses of lace in photography to show how the medium visualized the ineffable from Spiritualism through Surrealism. I argue that photographs of lace synthesized seemingly contradictory characteristics of photography, such as automatic/ handmade, visible/ invisible, material/ immaterial, light/ shadow, reality/ illusion.

The first case study explores Victor Hugo's concurrent experiments in table turning, photography, and automatic drawing while exiled on the Channel Islands. These mutually informed pursuits both channeled Hugo's creativity and sublimated his role as author, making his works appear as direct communiques from the spirit realm, filtered through his consciousness. This case study

demonstrates how the “automatic” process of photography became an ideal conduit for artistic creation, a possibility later explored by the Surrealists.

Within spirit photography, lace gave physical form to the metaphorical notion of a porous veil between the material and spirit worlds. Analyzing images and texts from the Eileen J. Garrett Parapsychology Foundation collection at UMBC, I show how ectoplasm often appeared as gauze, netting, or lace excreting from the bodies of female mediums and was described as bodily, scatological, or sexual. As a material understood as inherently feminine, lace linked women’s procreative forces to physical mediumship, and photography validated its symbolic force.

Blending inspirations from European Surrealism, Catholicism, and indigenous textile traditions, the veil was a central conceit of modernist photography in Mexico. Engaging Erica Sagre’s seminal text “The Hermeneutics of the Veil in Mexican Photography” (2005), I argue that lace is made strange through photography, transforming a mundane textile into a potent metaphor for female labor, autonomy, and authority, and challenging dominant narratives of the history of the medium.

Beth Saunders is Associate Director and Curator of Special Collections and Gallery at the Albin O. Kuhn Library and Gallery, University of Maryland Baltimore County. She is co-author of the exhibition catalogue *Apollo's Muse: The Moon in the Age of Photography* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019) and co-editor of *Amos Badertscher: Images and Stories* (Monacelli, 2025). Beth previously held positions at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Sotheby’s, New York and has taught at Baruch College, Rhode Island College, and the Rhode Island School of Design. She holds a PhD and MPhil in Art History from The CUNY Graduate Center and a BFA in Studio Art from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Emily Hauver
Mind's Eye: The Psychic Photographs of Ted Serios

Ted Serios, "Normal," 16 February 1966. Black and white diffusion transfer (Polaroid) print, Coll23_11.1_0010, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Baltimore, MD).

Our thoughts are known to us, and us alone. But in the 1960s, the otherwise unremarkable American Ted Serios demonstrated the rather remarkable ability to ostensibly transfer mental images onto undeveloped Polaroid instant film in a process called 'thoughtography'.
Under the supervision of psychiatrist Dr. Jule Eisenbud, Serios participated in numerous experiments over the course of four years in an attempt to prove that his inner reality could be manifested. This research produced a vast body of evidence including data logs, diagnostic test results, film footage, and thousands of photographs now held in the Special Collections at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Considered by many to be one of the most well documented cases of the paranormal, Serios's thoughtographs have never been fully dismissed or verified. This presentation will explore the high strangeness of the Serios phenomenon and the many unexplainable aspects of the case.

Emily Hauver is Curator of Exhibitions in the Library Gallery at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She holds a MS in Museum Studies from Johns Hopkins University and a BA in Visual Arts from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She has curated two exhibitions exploring the

paranormal output of Ted Serios: *Mind's Eye: The Psychic Photographs of Ted Serios* presented at The Image Centre at Toronto Metropolitan University in 2023; and *Psychic Projections/Photographic Impressions* presented at UMBC's Library Gallery in 2011. She contributed an essay to the publication *Ted Serios: The Mind's Eye* (Atelier Éditions, 2023). Her other curatorial projects are often situated at the intersection of contemporary photography and important social issues of the day, including *Louie Palu: Distant Early Warning* (2022) and *Tom Kiefer: El Sueño Americano/The American Dream* (2019).

Annebella Pollen

Catholic bricolage and Marian maximalism in Supernatural Visions of the Madonna

Trimmed prayer card featuring a depiction of the Immaculate Conception, after the painting by Murillo, 1665, positioned on top of a colour postcard of the Houses of Parliament, London. Cover, *Supernatural Visions of the Madonna (1981-1991)* by Sofia Marie Gabriel (1993).

In 1993, 51-year-old Sofia Richmond, self-styled as a 'plain-clothed' 'secular nun' and 'London mystic', published *Supernatural Visions of the Madonna (1981-1991)*. Comprising a decade of messages received by the author at her home, on the sixth floor of a council-owned tower block in Kilburn, from Jesus Christ, St. Michael the Archangel and, most centrally, the Virgin Mary, the large-format book ran to nearly 800 pages and was intended to be the first of five volumes. Richmond, writing under the name Sister Marie Gabriel, described it as 'the most important book in the whole world' as it included apocalyptic prophecies of the violent destruction of the British government and the revelation of secrets imparted during the 1917 Marian apparition at Fatima.

Supernatural Visions of the Madonna is indeed an extraordinary publication, not least for its achievements as a photobook. Its 'story in pictures' utilises multiple portraits of unexplained light taken by Richmond's father, John K. Sagatis, at a Willesden replica of the Lourdes shrine, alongside arresting juxtapositions of mass-produced prayer cards, embellished family photographs, picture postcards and newspaper headlines collaged into an insistent visual cacophony. Images of saints are festooned with faces of young models with peroxide perms cut from women's magazines; Princess

Diana and the Pope feature, as do Ken Livingstone and Andrew Lloyd Webber; cosmic scenes of comets abut domestic depictions of the author's cat. Miniature icons of Madonna Ciccone, peppered throughout, communicate the publication's 'emergency' purpose: 'to counteract the shocking book [*Sex*] by the American pop singer with a similar name'.

This presentation introduces the book, its author, reception and afterlife. It considers its visual production among 'imaginal' spirit photography (Harvey, 2007) and what artists Shapiro and Meyer (1977) call femmage. It contextualises its contribution in mystical Catholic iconography and parallel 1980s apparitions. Finally, it frames the book in the political and economic conditions of post-industrial visionaries, as described by anthropologists Turner and Turner (1978), and 'militant Marianism' (Perry and Echeverría, 1988) as an ideology unexpectedly aligned with Thatcher's Britain.

Annebella Pollen is Professor of Visual and Material Culture at University of Brighton, where she researches undervalued archives and untold stories in art and design history. Her latest book, out September 2026, is *Whippersnappers: How Children Became Photographers*. Pollen's previous books include *Mass Photography: Collective Histories of Everyday Life* (2015); *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* (2015); *Nudism in a Cold Climate: The Visual Culture of Naturists in Mid-20th-Century Britain* (2021); *More Than a Snapshot: A Visual History of Photo Wallets* (2023) and *Art Without Frontiers: The Story of the British Council, Visual Arts and a Changing World* (2024).

Shannon Taggart
SORRAT: Reinterpreting a Paranormal Archive

SORRAT member in a trance, Skyrim, Columbia, MO, April 29, 1966.

In 1961, the American poet John G. Neihardt began directing students from the University of Missouri in experiments exploring the scientific study of the paranormal. The Society for Research on Rapport and Telekinesis (SORRAT) would continue for more than fifty years, becoming one of the most unusual episodes in the history of psychical research.

The group's extraordinary claims generated an equally extraordinary archive. Assembled by founding member John Thomas Richards, it includes thousands of photographs, experimental records, and 8mm films, which may be the earliest purported example of spirit cinema. Following its recovery and preservation by presenter Shannon Taggart, this talk offers one of the first public examinations of SORRAT through its surviving media collection.

Photography was central to SORRAT's investigations into paranormal phenomena. Until now, examinations of the group have focused on whether the reported events were genuine or fraudulent. This presentation instead examines its photographic testimony, asking how the images

complicate questions of evidence, narrative, authorship, and creativity. In doing so, it reinterprets SORRAT as part of photography's neglected history, expanding our understanding of how the medium has given visible form to contested realities.

Shannon Taggart is a photographer and writer whose research-driven practice explores photography's relationship to the invisible. Her book *Séance*, named one of *TIME* Magazine's Best Photobooks of 2019, has been exhibited internationally and featured by *Aperture*, CNN, *The New York Times Style Magazine, Le Monde, The Washington Post*, and *The Paris Review*. Taggart has lectured at venues including the Science Museum, Peabody Essex Museum, and Walker Art Center. She was Artist-in-Residence at Harvard Divinity School's Center for the Study of World Religions and a Visiting Artist at Edinburgh College of Art and Yale School of Art. In 2026, she is Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Design History, University of Brighton, hosted by Annebella Pollen.

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