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Muybridge in the Parlor

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Commonly regarded as one of the pioneers of motion-picture technology, Eadweard Muybridge carried out several photographic studies of animal and human movement in the late nineteenth century. One of Muybridge's lesser-known commissions was an album of interior photographs that he created in 1880 for his friends Kate and Robert Johnson. This article offers a close reading of this album and argues that it has more in common with Muybridge's motion studies than historians have previously recognized. Far from being a commercial outlier, the album offered Muybridge an opportunity to experiment with the technological and cultural possibilities of photography in a new way. Through ghosts, mirrors, and other forms of representational excess, these images make visible Muybridge's handiwork as a photographer and the intellectual complexity of his collaboration with Kate and Robert Johnson.

Eadweard Muybridge reached his fiftieth birthday in 1880 with more than a lifetime's share of trouble. Six years earlier, the photographer had been arrested for killing his wife's lover – but managed to secure an acquittal the following year. During the 1870s he had also collaborated with the railroad magnate Leland Stanford in a series of motion studies – at Stanford's racetracks in Sacramento and Palo Alto – to test whether all four legs of a horse are simultaneously off the ground at any point in the gallop. The experiments turned the British-born Muybridge into an international celebrity, with his work promising to open whole new realms of visual phenomena to human measurement. The appeal of the motion studies stemmed, in part, from the aesthetic of positivist rigor cultivated by Muybridge through lectures and other forms of publicity. Advertising cards printed silhouettes of horses against white backgrounds with lines, numbers, and measurements to provide a scientific patina.[1] Before long, however, the aura of disinterested scientific investigation had given way to an acrimonious legal dispute between Muybridge and Stanford over authorship of the images, which Muybridge ultimately lost.

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[1] Advertising cards, 1878 and 1879, Box 3, Folder 4, Eadweard Muybridge Photograph Collection, PC 006, Stanford University Special Collections, Stanford, CA. The cards used a variety of diagrams to explain the motion studies.

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In 1880, in the midst of all this turmoil, Muybridge agreed to photograph the San Francisco and Menlo Park properties of his longtime friends, Robert C. Johnson and Kate Birdsall Johnson.[2] The resulting album was far more than a catalog of conventional Gilded Age interiors.[3] Together with Muybridge, the Johnsons transformed their houses and possessions into stages and props for elaborate photographic performances. These images brought together mirrors, ghosts, human–object blurring, and other visual tricks to create an aesthetic altogether unlike the positivist aura of the motion studies. Although this album would appear to be an anomaly in Muybridge's career, and as a result has received little attention in the scholarship on his work, I argue that the album reveals a more complicated engagement with the visual culture of his time.[4] A close reading of its images reveals a photographer liberated from the scientific pretenses of the motion studies and free to experiment with the cultural and technological dimensions of photography in new ways with trusted friends. These performances opened several avenues of experimentation and play. Perhaps most strikingly in light of Muybridge's reputation for photographic wizardry, several of the images couple optical illusions with elaborate attention to the *mise-en-scène* of the home. Muybridge and the Johnsons carefully rearranged the object matter of the home to produce an album that was as much a subversion of the cultural norms implicit in conventional upper-class interior portraiture as an exploration of human perception.

Within a few years, Muybridge had relocated to the University of Pennsylvania, where he set to work on a new series of motion studies. Eventually he felt secure enough in his professional standing to seek a

[2] Johnson and Muybridge seem to have been acquainted as far back as 1862, when both men were mentioned in an article on San Franciscans in Paris. "Letter from Paris," *Daily Alta California*, 3 Dec. 1862. The author thanks Marta Braun for this source.

[3] Eadweard Muybridge, Kate and Robert Johnson Photograph Album, 1880, A.2.02, Clements Library, University of Michigan. The album includes 84 silver albumen prints. The dating of the album is based on the inscription "Illustrated by Helios 1880." The author thanks Clayton Lewis of the Clements Library for help with identifying the provenance of this album. An alternative version of the album – located at the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco – dates both the Menlo Park and San Francisco sections to 1880, though this version also includes older photographs of the Johnsons' Sonoma County estate.

[4] Prior to its inclusion in the 2010 Corcoran Gallery of Art exhibition, Helios: Eadweard Muybridge in a Time of Change, the album was mentioned only in the occasional article, including Robert Cox, "The Transportation of American Spirits: Gender, Spirit Photography and American Culture, 1861–80," *Ephemera Journal*, 7 (1994), 94–104, 102. The album is omitted from most previous literature on Muybridge, including Rebecca Solnit, *Rivers of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Penguin, 2003); and Phillip Prodger, *Time Stands Still: Muybridge and the Instantaneous Photography Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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return to California. As he wrote to David Starr Jordan, the president of the newly founded Stanford University, in 1892, "I am now happy to say that after several years of privations, and laborious exertions, I have recovered the position – at least in reputation – from which I was displaced … and have completed under the auspices of this University a comparatively exhaustive investigation of animal movements."[5] His letter went on to describe a series of new studies in animal locomotion involving insects, and listed a number of professors who he believed would vouch for his work. Illegible in his scientific resurgence was the man who created photographs of ghosts in the parlor in 1880. Yet the Johnson album remains critical for understanding how Muybridge made the transition from his commercial studio in San Francisco to his laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, where his new motion studies offered a transgressive and ironic mixture of science, humor, and eroticism.

At first glance, the Johnson album seems typical of Gilded Age interior photography, depicting rooms packed with sculptures, paintings, and bric-a-brac. Through such environments, argues Katherine Grier, "a family created a rhetorical representation of itself and a statement about the nature of its relationship to cultural values as well."[6] In this case, the Johnsons tapped into the cosmopolitan pretenses of wealthy Americans by creating a space overflowing with artifacts from around the world.[7] One report noted that Kate Johnson's "greatest pleasure was to collect quaint and artistic curios in Europe and the Orient."[8] To document such a space, photographers often employed a "museum mentality," carefully eliding most traces of everyday life.[9] This was precisely the approach that Muybridge had used in an album of interior photographs for Leland Stanford's Nob Hill mansion a few years earlier. Most of the rooms of the Stanford mansion are depicted in pristine order, with little evidence that people actually lived there.[10] Other California photographers

[5] Eadweard Muybridge to David Starr Jordan, 11 Feb. 1892, Series IA, Box 3, Folder 24, David Starr Jordan Papers, Stanford University Special Collections, Stanford, CA.

[6] Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850–1930* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1997), 89.

[7] For the domestic performance of cosmopolitanism in the Gilded Age see Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). At one point Muybridge worked in the "Cosmopolitan Gallery of Photographic Art." *Daily Alta California*, 16 Feb. 1868.

[8] "Diamonds of an Empress," unidentified clipping, Kate Johnson Clippings Folder, Archdiocese of San Francisco Archives, St. Patrick's Seminary, Menlo Park, CA.

[9] Arnold Lewis, James Turner, and Steven McQuillin, *The Opulent Interiors of the Gilded Age: All 203 Photographs from Artistic Houses* (New York: Dover, 1987), 27–28.

[10] Eadweard Muybridge, Stanford mansion, San Francisco, *c.*1877, Box 5, PC 006, Eadweard Muybridge Photograph Collection, Stanford Univesrity Special Collections, Stanford, CA.

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Figure 1. Eadweard Muybridge, 1880, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

employed such conventions as well, including Carleton Watkins in his photographs of Thurlow Lodge, the Menlo Park mansion of former California governor Milton Latham. In these images, one could find paintings, statuary, ornate woodwork, and hardly a hint of human life.[11]

On the surface, the Johnson album echoed these conventions. One image of a hallway depicted a dining room sideboard lined with vases, glasses, and other objects (Figure 1). Its density of object matter resembled many other interior images of this period. An American flag hangs above the bed, and at least ten framed photographs are squeezed onto the mantle along with a clock, two specimen jars, and a replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The empty clutter of this photograph would seem to be echoed in another of the album's hallway images (Figure 2). Here four unoccupied chairs are positioned along the hallway – suggesting, at first glance, an absence of people. On closer inspection, however, this impression proves mistaken. The photograph turns out to be a self-portrait, as Muybridge himself can be seen in a mirror above the mantle, sitting in a chair in the room beyond the doorway. Such twists

[11] Carleton Watkins, "Views of Thurlow Lodge," album, *c.* 1873, MSS PHOTO 411, Stanford University Special Collections, Stanford, CA.

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Figure 2. Eadweard Muybridge, 1880, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

can be found in image after image, often hidden among bric-a-brac like a nineteenth-century game of *Where's Waldo?*. In addition to making visible the handiwork of photography as a medium, such images made oblique reference to Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and other examples of artists inserting themselves in their work.[12] In a pattern that can be traced throughout the album, the emphasis is on things obscured and hidden by the camera's usual vectors – things brought to light only with the aid of mirrors, illusion, and other visual technologies. In short, the album offered viewers a chance to practice, as Michael Leja puts it, how to "process visual experiences with some measure of suspicion, caution, and guile."[13] This challenge extended to the spiritual realm in an uncanny and erotic series of spirit images that depicted the still-living Robert and Kate Johnson as ghosts returning from the dead.

[12] Foucault reads Velázquez's 1656 painting as opening new possibilities of representation through its rupture of clean divisions between painter, object, and viewer. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1970).

[13] Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1.

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Far from marking a departure from Muybridge's efforts to secure improved reputational capital as a scientist, the parlor served as a sort of laboratory for an investigation into the ontological boundaries of human and animal, body and spirit, image and reality. These performances were shot through with a sense of play, even whimsy, but such was Muybridge's hallmark even in his later work at the University of Pennsylvania, where his "electro-photographic investigation of consecutive phases of animal movement" included such topics as a woman pouring a bucket of water over another woman and a man attempting a somersault as a pigeon interferes.[14] For Muybridge, the seemingly playful was serious business, both in his motion studies and in the Johnson album.

In a San Francisco directory in 1879, Robert Johnson is identified as a "capitalist" along with 214 others. Although this might bring to mind the robber barons of the Gilded Age, Leland Stanford is listed in the same directory not as a "capitalist" but as president of Central Pacific Railroad, suggesting that the term referred to a specific set of financiers distinct from men like Stanford. Muybridge, for his part, is identified as a "landscape and animal photographer."[15] Although the Johnsons' San Francisco home – located on O'Farrell and Leavenworth in the Upper Tenderloin – was not among the "millionaire's palaces" on Nob Hill, certain formal aspects of the album work to give the impression of such opulence.[16] One exterior image of the San Francisco home at the beginning of the album employs an upward camera angle to give the impression that the house is atop a hill, even though the overall topography of their section of the city (at that time "a district filled by the wooden houses of the moderately well-off") was flatter.[17] The album's only cityscape, taken from the second story of the house, employs a downward camera angle to again mimic the vantage point of a hill.

[14] The phrase "electro-photographic investigation of consecutive phases of animal movement" is included in promotional material for Muybridge's *Animal Locomotion*. See "Subscription Offer," 1887, Box 62, Folder 5, Eadweard Muybridge Collection, University of Pennsylvania Archives, Philadelphia. See also Plate 365, Box OS 4, Folder 2, and Plate 406, Box OS 4, Folder 3, Animal Locomotion Study Collotypes and Publications, Eadweard Muybridge Collection, University of Pennsylvania Archives, Philadelphia.

[15] Henry G. Langley, *The San Francisco Directory for the Year commencing April 1879* (San Francisco, 1879), 468, 820, 954. City directories from the 1860s and 1870s indicate that Robert Johnson had previously worked as an iron and steel importer in partnership with his father, George C. Johnson, a consul-general for Norway and Sweden.

[16] Diana Strazdes, "The Millionaire's Palace: Leland Stanford's Commission for Pottier & Stymus in San Francisco," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 36 (Winter 2001), 213–44.

[17] Henry Anderson Lafler, "My Sixty Sleepless Hours: A Story of the San Francisco Earthquake," *McClure's Magazine*, 27 (July 1906), 275–81, 279. Lafler notes the destruction of this district as well as the Stanford mansion in the earthquake and fire of 1906.

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In some sense, therefore, the album can be understood as a performance of wealth and class status – an attempt to mimic, perhaps, the album that Muybridge had created for Stanford a few years earlier. But the complicated aesthetics of the Johnson album cannot be explained through class alone. Even if the Johnsons saw the album as a way of one-upping Stanford by hiring "his" photographer and portraying their home as a mansion, they were clearly comfortable with Muybridge's unconventional photographic experimentation, and most likely enthusiastic participants in the day's affair, given the elaborate staging necessary for many of the images. Moreover, the Johnsons seem to have actually lived in their home whereas the Stanford family spent most of their time in Palo Alto or abroad, particularly after the death of their son in 1884 and Leland's election to the Senate. "The press," writes Diana Strazdes, "noted how Senator Stanford's 'magnificent dwelling' lay deserted, like the adjacent mansions of Hopkins, Colton, Flood, and Crocker."[18] Thus while the Stanford mansion could function as a landmark, the Johnsons likely felt the simultaneous pull of middle-class expectations of what an appropriate domestic lifestyle looked like. This pressure, in turn, left its mark on the album, influencing the representation of individuals as well as objects.

Although Muybridge seems to have met Robert Johnson as early as 1862, they had cemented their friendship in the early 1870s, when Muybridge created images of the Buena Vista Vineyards, which the Johnsons later purchased.[19] They had additional opportunities to interact during Muybridge's time in Palo Alto. Maps indicate that Robert Johnson owned land immediately adjacent to the north border of the Stanford Stock Farm, where Muybridge carried out many of his early motion studies.[20] Despite the proximity of the Johnson and Stanford estates, however, no trace of Kate or Robert Johnson can be found in the Stanford family archives – an absence that suggests that these neighbors did not get along.[21] Accordingly, when

[18] Strazdes, 239.

[19] Five silver album prints depicting Buena Vista Winery (all created by Muybridge in 1871) appear in the version of the Johnson album held by the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

[20] MAP 203 (Map of the Leland Stanford Jr. University and Surroundings at Palo Alto, Cal, 1891), MAP 150 (Palo Alto Residence and Stock Farm of Leland Stanford, 1880), and MAP 011 (Villa Lands along the San Jose Rail Road between Redwood City and Mountain View, 1869), Stanford University Special Collections, Stanford, CA.

[21] One of the few connecting threads between the two families can be found in an article, "Water for Stanford University," *Daily Alta California*, 21 May 1890, on the transfer of the Johnson estate's San Francisquito Creek water rights to the Manzanita Water Company, which supplied water to the new university. However, this sale occurred after Robert Johnson's death in 1889.

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Muybridge and Stanford became embroiled in their legal dispute over authorship of the motion studies, Robert Johnson stepped in to support Muybridge. In a letter to Etienne-Jules Marey on 17 July 1882, Muybridge explained that Robert – "an old friend" – had offered to finance publication of "an elaborate work" based on the motion studies. The letter intimated that Robert Johnson shared his contempt for Stanford:

> He was willing to enter into this, not only from his desire to contribute to science but also from his friendship for me and his wish to thwart the contemptible tricks of a man whom I thought was a generous friend, but whose liberality turns out to have been an instrument for his own glorification.[22]

The letter's allusion to scientific advancement is a reminder that the album was part and parcel of Muybridge's aspirations for status as a man of science. Like other turn-of-the-century amateur "photo-scientists" like Edward S. Curtis, validation from professional scientists was a powerful motivation for Muybridge. Thus it is notable that, even as he began laying the groundwork for his later motion studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Muybridge revived his old pseudonym, "Helios," in a print that served as a title page of sorts for the section of the album depicting the Johnsons' estate in Menlo Park.[23] The print was a throwback in more ways than one, as Muybridge used older images of clouds and a moon-like sun to turn the print into a collage of old and new, image and script.[24] A reference to the ancient Greek god of the sun, the pseudonym was a relic of Muybridge's earlier days as an entrepreneurial photographer of the outdoors, complete with a mobile darkroom that he called the "Helios Flying Studio."[25] One

[22] Eadweard Muybridge to Etienne-Jules Marey, 17 July 1882, Muybridge Biographical File, California State Library, Sacramento (photocopy). Cited in Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey, 1830–1904* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 231. See also Gordon Hendricks, *Eadweard Muybridge: The Father of the Motion Picture* (New York: Dover, 1975), 141.

[23] The Helios print matches a copy located at Stanford University Special Collections. The Stanford version is a working print that does not include the clouds, and its inscription states "Helios 1880" rather than "Illustrated by Helios 1880." Muybridge Photograph Collection, 1869–1929, Box 3, Folder 8, PC006, Stanford University Special Collections, Stanford, CA. Note that several other images in the Clements Library album include clouds from older negatives.

[24] Muybridge was praised for his cloud photographs of the 1860s, though many writers knew him simply as "Helios." One article lauded his ability to produce "cloud effects as we see in nature or oil-painting, but almost never in a photograph." He is identified in the article as "an artist who conceals his real name under the signature of 'Helios.'" *Daily Alta California*, 17 Feb. 1868.

[25] As Philip Brookman has noted, "By attaching this mythic symbolism to his photographs, Muybridge was metaphorically connecting his art to photography's source, its photochemical trigger." Philip Brookman, "Helios: Eadweard Muybridge in a Time of Change," in

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advertisement from 1868 hinted at the wide range of Muybridge's activities in his days of obscurity: "Helios is prepared to accept commissions to photograph Private Residences, Views, Animals, Ships, etc., anywhere in the city, or any portion of the Pacific Coast."[26] Although there is no record of how much money Muybridge received for creating the Johnson album, its revival of photographic and economic strategies suggests that Muybridge never completely abandoned his older persona.

Among the more striking features of the Johnson album is the sheer quantity of decorative objects that filled the couple's San Francisco home and Menlo Park estate. Like many other families in the period, the Johnsons were avid collectors of bric-a-brac. After Kate Johnson's death in 1893, local newspaper articles marveled at the artifacts that her executors posted for auction.[27] The catalogs for these auctions tellingly describe "every conceivable variety of furniture, oil paintings, engravings, etchings, etc., rich draperies, books, grand piano, bronzes, bric-a-brac, art, glass and china ware."[28] Kate's avid collecting seems to have been motivated by a deep fascination with art. According to one report, Kate Johnson "possessed a fine perception of art, especially as expressed in paintings," and at one point planned "to endow an art gallery."[29] Her artistic interests included some formal training with William Keith, a well-known California landscape artist.[30]

Brookman, ed., *Helios: Eadweard Muybridge in a Time of Change* (Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2010), 23–110, 40.

[26] William Hively, ed., *Nine Classic California Photographers* (Berkeley: Friends of the Bancroft Library, 1980), 28.

[27] See, for example, "Patrons of Art," *San Francisco Call*, 11 Nov. 1894; and "Bidding Was Lively," *San Francisco Call*, 19 Dec. 1894.

[28] "Catalogue of the Art Collection of the Late Mrs. Kate Johnson, (Collected at a Cost of over 250,000 Dollars) Sold by Order of the Executors of Said Estate and Directors of the Mary's Help Hospital," November 8–15, 1894, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and "Catalogue of Personal Effects in the Residence of the Late Mrs. Kate Johnson, S. W. Corner O'Farrell and Leavenworth Sts., San Francisco, Sold by Order of the Executors of Said Estate," 18–21 Dec. 1894, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

[29] "Mrs. R. C. Johnson's Noble Bequest," *San Francisco Call*, 9 Dec. 1893.

[30] Citing an interview as one of its sources, an entry in a biographical index of California artists states that Kate Johnson "married wealthy Robert Johnson and settled in San Francisco about 1863. An amateur painter, she studied locally with William Keith. The Johnsons also built a lavish estate in Sonoma on the property now owned by the Buena Vista Winery. She died there of pneumonia on Dec. 2, 1893. Wm Keith was one of her pallbearers." Edan Milton Hughes, *Artists in California, 1786–1940* (Sacramento, CA: Crocker Art Museum, 2002), 591. Keith's status as a pallbearer is noted an unidentified newspaper clipping, "Grief Displayed: Funeral of Mrs. Robert C. Johnson This Morning," in the Kate Johnson Clippings Folder, Archdiocese of San Francisco Archives, St. Patrick's Seminary, Menlo Park, CA.

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Kate Johnson's artistic inclinations raise questions about her role in the creation of the Muybridge album. Clearly she was no passive client. Whether in the arrangement of the home, or in the aesthetic quirks of the images, Kate Johnson took the staging and performance of the album's images seriously – at least as much so as did Muybridge himself. Indeed, Kate seems to have purchased additional versions of the album to present as gifts. One variation held by the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts in San Francisco includes an inscription from Kate: "To my dear friend Harry / from K. Johnson / Paris – Oct. 1st 1884." The identity of "Harry" is unknown, but the inscription affirms that she took enough pride in the album to bring it to Paris and offer it as a gift. The Achenbach Foundation album includes the word "Home" in gilt lettering on the cover – a hint that Kate used it as a representation of her life in San Francisco for a friend in Europe.[31]

Whatever its purposes, this was no ordinary domestic album. While the sheer quantity of bric-a-brac in the Johnson house would not have appeared unusual in the context of Gilded Age middle-class parlor aesthetics, the album includes several choices that blur the lines between animate and inanimate, materiality and illusion, and on a deeper level suggest that Muybridge and the Johnsons were treating the parlor as a laboratory for visual experimentation. For example, one small caryatid table stand (depicting a bare-breasted, primitivistic figure with a necklace of bones) seems to have been carried from room to room in order to appear in multiple images. Its childlike face and presence in multiple pictures alongside Robert and Kate give it a strange sort of hybridity between cherubic domesticity and colonial eroticism. Present in portraits as well as images without people, the table functions as both a child and a servant, moving from room to room to either complete the domestic scene or carry assorted objects for display. Its ability to transform a portrait into a signifier of domesticity – complete with husband, wife, child, and pet – can be seen in an image of Kate sitting in a wicker chair (Figure 3). Although she appears to be alone, a picture of her husband Robert is carefully placed over her left shoulder, and the caryatid child-servant stands to her left with a small animal – in this case a figurine of a bird.

Even more arresting are four spirit images that depict, in turn, both Robert and Kate hovering over each other as ghosts.[32] Spirit images, which were fairly

[31] Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. This album includes many more images than the Clements Library version (120 silver albumen prints as opposed to 84), including five older images of the Buena Vista Vineyards in Sonoma County. The album at the Clements Library seems to have been purchased in London and filled with prints. Its provenance is apparent from a small stamp with the words "Sold by Partridge & Cooper, 192 Fleet Street" on the inside cover of the album.

[32] The album's spirit images are discussed in Marta Braun, *Eadweard Muybridge* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 164–66.

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Figure 3. Eadweard Muybridge, 1880, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

common in the United States at the time, involved a double-exposure in which an image of an individual is faintly burned atop a second image. Typically the "spirit" would be inserted in a portrait over the shoulder of the sitter and blurred in order to convince gullible customers that it was the ghost of a loved one. In the case of the Johnson album, however, the complicity of Kate and Robert in Muybridge's representational trickery is evident. The photographs bring to mind the "amateur theatricals" that were popular in middle-class parlors in the 1850s and 1860s. As Karen Haltunnen has explained, such domestic entertainments were replete with masks, scenarios, and the imitation of religious ritual.[33] In addition to spiritualist role-playing, the images include numerous photographs, paintings, books, and albums – representations within a representation – that suggest a great deal of self-reflexivity. In this respect, the spirit images do not simply point to the future deaths of Robert and Kate, but also gesture to the manifold uses of the album as an artifact for domestic viewing, a performance of upper-class values for friends near and far, and a meditation on the limits of visual

[33] Karen Haltunnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1831–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 174–82.

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representation that had potential to captivate an array of viewers for years to come.

Although there is no evidence that either Muybridge or the Johnsons subscribed to spiritualist beliefs, the séance was far from a fringe practice in Gilded Age California, with skeptics and believers drawn from across the class spectrum. Rumors swirled that Stanford University had been founded as a result of a visitation, and local newspapers were filled with advertisements for mediums of all stripes.[34] For example, the *San Francisco Chronicle* of 10 November 1879 included eighteen advertisements for spiritualists interspersed with notices for dentists, notaries, and a wax florist. Mm. C. Antonia, a "business and medical" medium, offered services in English, French, or German. Mrs. Crindle in the Mission district similarly advertised "correct information on stocks," and a medium by the name of Mrs. Ryder – located four blocks from the Johnsons on O'Farrell Street – promised "minerals psychometrized."[35] One particularly telling example of the cultural valences of spiritualism in California at the time is an 1866 sketch by Mark Twain, "The Spiritual Séance," which describes a German immigrant who attempts to prove the fraudulence of the medium by requesting visitation from a man who is still alive – a move not altogether unlike that of the Johnsons, who were clearly still alive when they created the images.[36]

In the first image, Kate reclines on a fainting couch as a spirit of Robert appears behind her. Her pose was fraught with meanings. In the early republic, the image of "Venus on the sofa" bespoke the decline of republicanism, whereas for Gilded Age society women like Kate Johnson such a pose could signify racial and economic status – much like the dozens of neoclassical artifacts that filled the Johnsons' home.[37] This was also a space overflowing with

[34] David Starr Jordan to H. C. Nash, 27 July 1901, Box 2, Folder 6, Leland Stanford Collection, SC512, Stanford University Special Collections, Stanford, CA.

[35] *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 Nov. 1879. This day's paper was chosen at random, as nearly every issue of the *Chronicle* included such notices in the 1870s and 1880s.

[36] Mark Twain, "The Spiritualist Séance," in Twain, *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays, 1852–1890* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 199–204, 200. Muybridge and the Johnsons attempted neither to pass the images as authentic nor to debunk the possibility of such a scene occurring in the future. This would place them on the "ironic believers" side of Michael Saler's distinction between the "naïve" and "ironic" believers in various forms of "modern enchantment." Michael Saler, "'Clap if You Believe in Sherlock Holmes': Mass Culture and the Re-enchantment of Modernity, c.1890–c.1940," *Historical Journal*, 46 (2003), 599–622.

[37] As historian Caroline Winterer puts it, "the sofa both meant something and did something, reflected and created fears and desires, enabled and discouraged certain postures and activities." Caroline Winterer, "Venus on the Sofa: Women, Neoclassicism, and the Early American Republic," *Modern Intellectual History*, 2 (2005), 29–60, 41. For a discussion of the racial valences of photographs of Gilded Age women on the fainting couch see

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Figure 4. Eadweard Muybridge, 1880, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

pictures, books, and other representational technologies. At Kate Johnson's feet rests a thick album, and she is holding what appears to be a folded photograph. In the background, a portrait of a woman – possibly Kate herself – looks upward at precisely the spot where the ghost's head is located. Paintings adorn the wall. The caryatid child-servant has been placed between the couch and the bed. Together with the other spirit photographs, this image sets the stage for a complex series of decisions as to the arrangement of the room and representation of the Johnsons' domestic life. Far from simply hiring Muybridge, the Johnsons seem to have turned their entire house into a space of photographic performance.

In the second image, Kate again reclines on the fainting couch in the center of the room as the ghost of Robert stands over her (Figure 4). The portrait in the background is moved closer to the couch so that it again looks directly at Robert's spirit. A small feline bust has been placed on the caryatid table, and one of Kate's actual cats rests on an armchair to the right (the cat is identifiable

Rayna Green, "Rosebuds of the Plateau: Frank Matsura and the Fainting Couch Aesthetic," in Lucy Lippard, ed., *Partial Recall* (New York: The New Press, 1992), 47–54.

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due to a portrait of the same cat later in the album). In the background a crucifix hangs on the wall, signaling Kate's recent conversion to Catholicism and eventual donation of her property to the Archdiocese of San Francisco.[38] At the foot of the fainting couch is a photograph of Robert, carefully positioned to have dropped from Kate's hand. It is as if the act of examining the image summoned Robert's ghost, startling Kate and causing her to drop the photograph. The faintly erotic aura of the photograph is evident not only in Kate's position, but in the movement of Robert's ghost toward the bed. In a reminder that only one of these bodies has corporeality, the back of Kate's head (but not Robert's body) is visible in a mirror above the mantle. Such depth of field is the very opposite of Muybridge's early motion studies, which were practically silhouettes. Here the light ricochets off the mirror and back to the camera in a long, drawn-out path. Like the album as a whole, the image is marked by representational excess: the ghost of Robert, the painting of Kate, Kate herself on the fainting couch, Kate's reflection in the mirror, the living cat on the chair, the feline bust on the caryatid table, and the photograph of Robert at the foot of the couch.

The third spirit image of Robert is similar to the image described above, with a few subtle changes. Kate's body is positioned further back in the fainting couch as if taken aback by the ghost. Robert's spirit is more clearly defined in this image, and it is again intersecting with Kate's body. The couch has been shifted slightly forward so that it is directly in line with the bed, giving the image a stronger sense of movement toward the bed. Kate's left hand reaches forward to touch the ghost at his waist. The palpable eroticism of this image makes the fourth spirit image – this one with Kate as the ghost – all the more unexpected (Figure 5). An unknown woman has replaced Kate on the fainting couch as Kate's spirit stands overhead, watching. Robert sits in profile on a small ottoman that has been placed between the fainting couch and the bed, and his hands rest between his legs holding a furry object of some sort. That the unknown woman was playing the role of Robert's lover in the event of Kate's death is suggested by a variation of the image in the Achenbach Foundation album, which depicts Robert leaning over the woman's shoulder, resting his elbows on the couch with his head gazing toward the woman and away from Kate's spirit.

[38] For a listing of Kate Johnson's donations see Kate Johnson, last will and testament, Archdiocese of San Francisco Archives, St. Patrick's Seminary, Menlo Park, CA. One biographical sketch dates her conversion to 1878. Kate Johnson Subject File, Menlo Park Historical Association, Menlo Park, CA.

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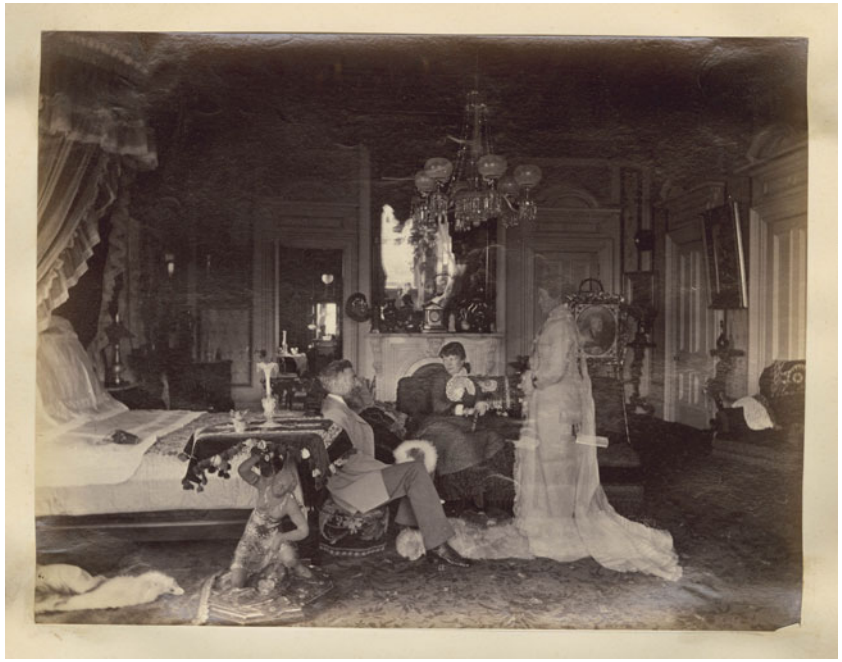


Figure 5. Eadweard Muybridge, 1880, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

If these images were intended as a pageant of life after death, their placement in the midst of dozens of more conventional parlor photographs seems to defy any narrative order. Moreover, several clues throughout the album suggest that the images were not created in the same sequence in which they appear.[39] This would seem to contrast with Muybridge's motion studies, which offered the image sequence as a basic unit of presentation. But despite the positivistic aesthetic of the motion studies, Muybridge actually rearranged the order of the images in many of the motion studies in order to maximize the reality effect.[40] Although he made no pretense of actually capturing spirits with his camera – both Robert and Kate were obviously alive when the images of their "ghosts" were created – the spirit photographs shared with the motion

[39] The order of images in the Clements Library album differs from the alternate version at the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, suggesting that at least one of them cannot possibly match the sequence in which the photographs were created. Other clues include Kate Johnson's clothing, which changed from one image to another, and then back again.

[40] Although Muybridge's motion studies were far from scientific – particularly after 1883 when he turned to human subjects – they were "a treasure trove of figurative imagery as well as a compendium of social history and erotic fantasy." Marta Braun, "Muybridge's Scientific Fictions," *Studies in Visual Communication*, 10 (Summer 1984), 2–21, 15.

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studies an emphasis on knowledge through viewing. This calls to mind the words of Roland Barthes, who wrote, "What Marey and Muybridge have done as operators I myself want to do as spectator: I decompose, I enlarge, and, so to speak, I retard, in order to have time to know at last."[41] For the Barthes of *Camera Lucida*, this meant time to understand his mother through old photographs in a way that no longer seemed possible after her death. Likewise Muybridge's spirit photographs look ahead to a future viewing experience.

Consider the photograph of Robert that Kate has dropped to the ground, struck with the appearance of his ghost. Here the haptic experience of holding the photograph slips away, but the loss of touch is accompanied by the auratic immediacy of a spirit returned. So too with the act of viewing. Instead of indexing the image to a single point in time, the scenario stages a future in which Robert is dead and the album has acquired new layers of meaning, not simply as memory of past playfulness but as hope for present and future spiritual possibility. Such was the appeal of spiritualism for some scientists and intellectuals involved with groups such as the Society for Psychical Research; for figures such as William James and the writer Arthur Conan Doyle, spiritualism promised to make visible whole new worlds of human experience through technologies of observation such as photography. What is unclear is whether Muybridge and the Johnsons earnestly believed in the possibilities of spiritualism, or whether these images were a way of mocking spiritualists like Jane Stanford through imitation. The latter would put them in line with several other artists and writers in the San Francisco Bay Area, including Gelett Burgess, an instructor of drafting at the University of California and author of the novel *The Heart Line* (1907). The plot of the novel is centered around a group of local bohemians who, with little else to do but claim allegiance to modern science, stage an elaborate sting operation of two spirit mediums – Professor Vixley and Madam Spoil – during a séance.[42]

Either way, the album might be understood as symptomatic of what Miles Orvell has called the "culture of imitation" of Gilded Age America. Nineteenth-century Americans, Orvell argues, were fascinated by reproductions of all sorts: "replicas of furniture, architecture, art works, replicas of

[41] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 99.

[42] Gelett Burgess, *The Heart Line* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1907), 136. Discussing *The Heart Line* in his unpublished autobiography, Burgess wrote that the premises of spiritualism seemed "idiotic" to him. Gelett Burgess, "Escape from Reality – Autobiography," n.d., Carton 3, Folder 2, Gelett Burgess Papers, MSS C-H 52, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, CA.

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the real thing in any shape or form imaginable."[43] In the Johnson album, the process of imitation is twisted in such a way as to draw attention to the creative power of its technologies, from mirrors to cameras to séances to sculptures. One photograph, for example, depicts the bedroom of the spirit images from the opposite direction. The objects previously visible only through the mirror over the mantle – an armchair, windows, and a standing mirror – are here pictured directly. Here the fainting couch is visible only as a reflection. The caryatid table appears twice: in the room itself and in the mirror.[44] As it appears again and again, the table takes on a life of its own, acquiring an ontological intensity (particularly in the spirit images) that is almost more tangible than Kate and Robert themselves. From a technical perspective, the contrast with the motion studies could not be more clear. Light manifests not in an instantaneous flash but rather along a dramatically stretched-out route among mirrors. Breaking the illusion of the image as the real thing, such performances of the unknowable disrupt the notion of Muybridge as a positivist, placing both the motion studies and interior album in a larger project of exploring the problems – both cultural and technological – of visual representation.

At the same time, the album was a collaborative project, and Muybridge had more in common with the Johnsons than an interest in experimental photography. Barely five years before creating the album, Muybridge was acquitted of murdering Harry Larkyns, his wife's lover. This sordid tale – along with his persona on the lecture circuit as a wizard of "spectacular" modern wonders – gave the photographer a whiff of disrepute.[45] Likewise Kate Johnson was subject to whispers of eccentricity despite her considerable sway in philanthropic and art circles in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 1863, she had left behind a child in Michigan and moved to California, where she met Robert Johnson. Shortly after her death in 1893, a profile in the *San Francisco Call* described "a mild quandary" facing her executors – the fact that she made no provision for the care of her many pets. "Not one word," marveled the reporter in regard to Kate's will,

[43] Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), xv.

[44] An alternative version of the image is almost identical, but the camera has been shifted slightly to the left, revealing Kate Johnson in the mirror's reflection. Eadweard Muybridge, Kate and Robert Johnson Photograph Album, 1880, 2003.70.29, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

[45] Muybridge's persona as an entertainer is described in Corey Keller, "Magnificent Entertainment: The Spectacular Eadweard Muybridge," Philip Brookman, ed., *Helios: Eadweard Muybridge in a Time of Change* (Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2010), 217–28, 217.

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was said in the whole carefully considered document regarding the disposal or care of the beautiful Electioneer horses, the valuable Holstein and Jersey cattle, the prize-winning dogs, the cockatoos, paroquets and canaries that the loving-hearted woman of wealth had gathered around her in her lovely home in Sonoma County.[46]

An article the following year detailed the fate of Kate's thirty-two Angora cats, who found a "happy home" with Helen Shellard, a friend of the family: "There are cats in the parlor, cats up stairs, cats down stairs, cats outside, cats everywhere, presenting in their entirety a collection of felines never before seen in a private residence anywhere."[47] The article also includes Shellard's description of Kate's favorite cat, Dandy: "She bought him in Italy when he was a kitten, about eleven years ago, and he has been in the family ever since." Kate's extreme enthusiasm for animals spilled over into other creative projects that she commissioned. The *San Francisco Chronicle* noted that the artist Carl Kahler had "painted her cats, of which she had a large and notable lot. These cats, which were of the best breeds, were sold for the benefit of the prospective hospital."[48] Of course the cats themselves were not sold; the reporter was referring to the paintings. But the ambiguity is telling, given the representational playfulness of the Muybridge album, where the lines between humans, objects, and animals blurred with ease.

Such playfulness underscores the pitfalls of reading the album as a straightforward performance of class status. Whereas some images seem designed to accentuate stately affluence, others depict the residence as a chaotic and messy lived environment. In one image of Robert Johnson's study, for example, papers and books are stacked on the desk, floor, and nearby writing table (Figure 6). Exemplifying the album's reliance on available lighting, a band of sunlight streams in through the window and vividly illuminates the items on the desk, including Robert's hat. Meanwhile Robert reclines in a chair, either feigning a nap or pondering the papers in his lap. The space is dominated by the desk, and the abundance of chairs in the room – there are ten visible in addition to a couch – gives the impression of a recently completed meeting. At this point in his career, Robert had left his father's importing business and established himself as an independent capitalist with an office on Sutter Street. This image gives the impression that he worked from home as well, and the hat is a vivid reminder that, after his nap, this is a space he will have to leave. On the wall to the right is a large painting of Saint Peter's Square

[46] "A Feline Family," *San Francisco Call*, 31 Dec. 1893.

[47] "A Colony of Cats," unidentified clipping, Kate Johnson Clippings Folder, Archdiocese of San Francisco Archives, St. Patrick's Seminary, Menlo Park, CA.

[48] "Mrs. Johnson's Gems," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 Nov. 1894. When auctioned again over a century later, in 2002, Kahler's painting was described as "the largest cat painting in the world." See Linda Shrieves, "Meow Mix," *Orlando Sentinel*, 13 Sept. 2002.

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Figure 6. Eadweard Muybridge, 1880, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

in Vatican City, a souvenir, perhaps, from one of the Johnsons' trips to Italy – as well as a sign of Kate's conversion to Catholicism.[49] Stacked along the wall behind Robert are several paintings yet to be mounted, further suggesting that this is a space in flux.

Such markers of activity – both work and leisure – can be found in images throughout the album. A photograph of the deck of the Menlo Park home includes a painting on an easel and a Southern Pacific Railroad schedule nailed to a post for reference. This image is followed, a few pages later, by the front lawn, which includes a quiver of arrows, fishing poles, and two croquet mallets leaning against a large planter as if recently in use. This was not necessarily a simulation, as one image in the Menlo Park portion of the album depicts five people – two of whom appear to be Kate and Robert Johnson – actually playing croquet. To the side, a young girl with a thick white shroud of some sort sits on a bench with an unknown woman, possibly

[49] Robert Johnson's religious affiliations are unknown. He was active in the local Masonic lodge, however, and left 25,000 dollars in trust for the upkeep of his grave at the local Masonic cemetery, "where my father and mother are buried." Last will and testament of Robert C. Johnson, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, CA.

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Figure 7. Eadweard Muybridge, 1880, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

her governess. Although Robert and Kate did not have any biological children together, they accepted guardianship of a girl, Rosalind Johnson, a few years before the album was created. In his last will and testament, created in 1878, Robert Johnson identified her as "an infant now about five years old, under the care of my wife."[50] Evidently Rosalind was quite sickly, as indicated by an 1890 article in the *Daily Alta California* that describes her death of heart disease at age sixteen.[51] This suggests that Rosalind might well have been the girl on the bench in the croquet image, her shroud a way of protecting her from the sun.

Among the more striking examples of the house as a lived environment is an image of a child's playroom, likely Rosalind's (Figure 7). The room includes toys, books, and other objects arranged in such a way as to indicate – or simulate – recent use. A music box has been opened, suggesting that music is playing as the picture is being taken, and an evergreen tree in the corner

[50] Last will and testament of Robert C. Johnson. A biographical sketch of Kate Johnson states that Rosalind was adopted at five years of age. Kate Johnson Subject File, Menlo Park Historical Association, Menlo Park, CA.

[51] *Daily Alta California*, 3 Sept. 1890.

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calls to mind Christmas morning. Though this is anything but a motion study, the room's atmosphere of activity relies on several wheeled or moveable objects: a rocking chair, a cradle, two strollers, a rocking horse, a paddle-wheel steamboat, and a sheep in profile that appears to have wheels. The chaos on the floor includes an overturned elephant, a dropped doll with its head on a step, three opened books, two stray stockings, an instrument, a small purse, and a page torn out of a picture book. But in a sign that this scene may have been orchestrated for the camera, the foreground of the floor is completely empty, giving the rest of the image a stage-like quality. The only hints of sleep in the room are two small dolls tucked into a miniature bed in the background.

The scene is punctuated by a tea party. Two of the dolls sit in chairs by the table and a third is positioned in the nearby stroller. In a representation of the life cycle that eerily parallels the intimations of death in the spirit images (particularly given that Rosalind ended up dying three years before Kate herself), these dolls form a coming-of-age triptych, with the doll in the stroller dressed as an infant, the middle doll dressed as a young girl, and the doll on the right dressed as an adult woman with cinched waist. The grown-up doll has a parasol propped on the chair to shield herself from the imaginary sun. Seemingly posing for the camera, the three dolls stand in for the children that are noticeably absent from the scene. Indeed, although Rosalind may have been the young girl in the Menlo Park portion of the album, her absence in any pictures of the San Francisco residence gives the playroom and its dolls a mood of simulated life not unlike that of the spirit images and caryatid stand.

A similar scene – this time a *tableau vivant* of actual people – unfolds in a second-story conservatory filled with potted plants, ivy, and assorted bric-a-brac (Figure 8). The room is filled with greenery, and on the wall to the left is a large painting of a nature scene. In one of the few manipulations of the mansion's natural lighting, a large sheet has been draped against the windows to avoid backlighting, creating a stage-like background for the tableau. In the foreground, an overturned picture frame hints at the representational evasiveness to come. The room is long and narrow, and Muybridge positions the camera as far from Robert and the others as possible. The dominant spatial dimension, therefore, is depth, creating a tunnel effect and exaggerating the size of the room. Muybridge's formal choices, in this case, seem to be influenced by the conventions of stereography, which, as Rosalind Krauss has explained, distributed objects throughout the foreground, middle ground, and background to create the effect of deep space via multiple flat planes.[52] Muybridge made thousands of stereographs over the course of his

[52] Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal*, 42 (Winter 1982), 311–19, 314.

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Figure 8. Eadweard Muybridge, 1880, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

career, so he was familiar the nuances of the medium. Although this image was not itself a stereograph, the use of stereographic conventions achieved representational effects that reinforced the overall strangeness of the album.

Most importantly, the positioning of the tableau so far from the camera exaggerates the importance of the objects that fill the room and throws into question the hierarchy of people and things. The humans in the image are interspersed with busts and statues, and the viewer must look closely to read the scene's visual clues. On the left, Robert Johnson is seated alongside two unknown women. The arrangement emphasizes Robert's patriarchal status, as one of the women stands behind him while the other sits on a small bench, reading. The positioning is mirrored on Robert's right side by two sculptures – one black statue behind him and two white putti in front of his right arm. The middle of the tableau is populated by two busts, and in the background on the right is another black statue that mirrors the one behind Robert. An unknown man on the right is partially hidden and, at first glance, might easily be mistaken for an inanimate object. Like the seated women by Robert, he, too, is reading. The object that obscures him is none other than the caryatid table from the bedroom, this time carrying a small angelic sculpture on its tabletop. On closer inspection, the man appears to be Muybridge himself, suggesting that this image may well be

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another self-portrait, and Kate's absence from the scene suggests that she may have served as photographer.[53]

Whether or not the man is indeed Muybridge, it remains the case that his only appearances in the album are concealed within the object matter of the house. Muybridge, in such pictures, beckons, as Tom Gunning writes of Muybridge's other work, "from the space between things, the interstices and gaps that appear, unexpectedly, within actions and between instants."[54] Whether through a mirror that reveals a hidden room (Figure 2), or behind a sculpture far from the camera (Figure 8), Muybridge relied on the house's own geographies to resist simple self-portraiture and instead merge his image inextricably with the project of documenting the Johnson residence and the visual experiments this entailed.

In contrast to the motion studies, this decision downplayed the momentary flash and instead stressed the long process of accumulating objects, managing space, and developing patterns of habitation. More aggressively than most parlor photographs of the period, the album drew attention to representational practice and, by extension, made visible the traces of the photographer's handiwork. In this respect, the album underscores one of the central dilemmas facing Muybridge and other cultural producers on the margins of science in the American West. Without the professional security of credentials or institutional affiliation, Muybridge had to rely on more unconventional networks to build his career. Muybridge created the album in the wake of what he perceived to be the outright theft of his motion studies by Leland Stanford and J. B. D. Stillman, an experience that made him aware of the tenuous role of authorship in scientific photography, particularly when carried out through private commissions. He responded by creating an album that literally inserted himself into the frame, buried so deeply within the object matter of the images that his authorship could not be excised.

By allowing him to experiment with the possibilities of the medium in this manner, the album seems to have had a cathartic and transitional role for Muybridge, who before long had cut his ties with Leland Stanford and found a new home at the University of Pennsylvania. Not only did the Johnsons offer to finance "an elaborate work" based on the motion studies – suggesting that they clearly encouraged Muybridge's scientific aspirations – but also the

[53] Muybridge had created other self-portraits in the past, including one of himself reading a book in 1870 at San Francisco's Woodward's Gardens. Eadweard Muybridge, "Views in Woodward's Gardens," Series 2, PIC 1971.055:560, Lone Mountain College Collection of Stereographs, the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, CA.

[54] Tom Gunning, "Never Seen This Picture before: Muybridge in Multiplicity," in Phillip Prodger, *Time Stands Still: Muybridge and the Instantaneous Photography Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 222–72, 224.

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playful quality of the album seems to have carried over into the staging and execution of his work in Philadelphia. Indeed, the outlandish scenarios that he asked his models to perform had more in common with his spirit photographs than any coherent research agenda. Topics included, for example, a woman crossing an artificial brook on stepping-stones while holding a fishing pole and bucket, a man lying on a couch and turning over on his side, and a naked baseball player trying and failing to catch a ball thrown at him.[55] As with the Johnson album, these studies suggest that, between the lines, Muybridge's deeper interest lay with the open-ended and performative nature of photography itself, both imaginative and scientific.

[55] Eadweard Muybridge, Plate 175, Box OS 21; Plate 259, Box OS 28; and Plate 288, Box OS 31, Animal Locomotion Study Collotypes and Publications, Eadweard Muybridge Collection, University of Pennsylvania Archives, Philadelphia.

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