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Invisible Culture

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Introduction: Casting Doubt

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Doubters. . . tend to be more interested in what they have found than in what they have lost. These figures are not howling in the abyss of the night; they re out there measuring the stars.[1](#)

The essays in this issue of *InVisible Culture* come out of a conference hosted by the graduate program in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester in the spring of 2003. The conference, Casting Doubt, invited responses from across North America, and in fact, saw its theme interpreted more widely than we could have imagined. The papers revisited doubtful situations, explored how doubt has been visualized, and reflected upon how we might re-theorize doubt in the current cultural climate. The essays which appear here not only testify to the conference s success, but more importantly, to the significance of doubt as a subject worthy of sustained inquiry, as a mode of analysis, and as a keystone of visual studies.

Doubt s inherency to visual studies suggests that intellectual work founded on doubt, on uncertainty and skepticism, may in fact provide for more fertile ground than is suggested by a critical, reflexive mode alone. Indeed, James Elkins recent introduction to visual studies boldly concludes that doubt may originate the most insightful work in the field and offer visual studies scholarship a bridge to practices outside of the university: What matters is uncertainty in what history, whose history, history to what purpose, and for me that uncertainty is deepest in the theoretical ground on which the field is built.[2](#) As many of us move outside of disciplines, question boundaries and forge spaces between, we not only find ourselves provoked by doubt, we confront it directly. Though its presence may be sustained, doubt is more than a phantasm. It is, as Jennifer Michael Hecht suggests at the beginning of this introduction, a position of generative action and

not merely a passive form of resistance or reservation.

In the last few years, we have witnessed how quickly and thoroughly a culture may mobilize resources when confronted with circumstances of indeterminate or incomprehensible meaning. We have become increasingly aware of how doubtful moments and images are exploited in order to perpetuate fear. We have seen firsthand how the residue and remains of doubtful encounters may be cast off, smoothed over, or swept away -- and the shocking speed and awesome force with which this occurs. This issue reclaims the positive productivity of the fleeting, dispersed, and frequently isolating experiences of doubt by drawing together a range of work that interrogates its manifestations. Some provocative questions these articles raise are: What is the relationship of the experience of aporia to ethics and to aesthetics? How is uncertainty ushered forth, projected (and often projected onto others), and expelled, and with what repercussions? How might doubt be cast, registered, and recognized? Where have coalitions of doubters and doubtful cultures existed and how do they continue to exist? And finally, how might the violent reactions doubting too often unleashes be turned, channeled, and renegotiated to produce creative futures rather than lead to destructive ends? This issue of *InVisible Culture* seeks to bring these questions into focus, casting doubt by arranging the prevalent, often unspoken and invisible phenomena of doubting into a meaningful and previously unimagined constellation.

The first two essays interrogate doubt with regard to subjectivity and psychoanalysis. Using his own baby picture as an illustrative entry point to Lacan's mirror stage, Peter Hobbs positions doubt as central to Lacanian subjectivity, and as effectively unbalancing the Cartesian certitude of static being. *The Image Before Me* demonstrates how an intervening Subject and Consciousness, in Lacan's example, are rendered meaningless in the face of a camera able to register, store, and develop information on its own. Hobbs' essay ingeniously displays how Lacanian psychoanalysis itself withholds a complete knowing of self in a maneuver that compels self-doubt and demands the assumption of an ethical attitude. In *The Automatic Hand: Spiritualism, Psychoanalysis, and Surrealism*, Rachel Leah Thompson discusses American Spiritualists' automatic writing, casting doubt on the narrative that seats such practices as evidence of hysteria; rather, she seats Spiritualist activities in the formation of psychoanalysis. Considering three moments when automatic writing, or text without a source, traverses the volatile female body, Thompson exposes how the productive instability of the automatic hand has generated discourses capable of overwriting female agency.

Corey Keller and Elizabeth Mangini offer compelling evidence that photography and its discourse continue to be suffused by doubt. In *The Naked Truth or the*

Shadow of Doubt? X-Rays and the Problematic of Transparency, Keller looks at the epistemic possibilities suggested by the advent of the X-ray in late-Victorian England, at once buoyed by photography's authority and undermined by its appointment of the knowable world as visible and empirical. Tracing how the anxious popular, scientific, and legal debates that ensued over the status of the X-ray's information radically challenged a model of vision premised on objective observation, Keller's account casts doubt upon the accepted modernist narrative of photography's development. Elizabeth Mangini confronts photography's fictions directly in her essay, *Real Lies, True Fakes, and Supermodels*. In a discussion of the work of contemporary German artists Oliver Boberg and Thomas Demand, Mangini demonstrates how each employs the special credibility of architectural photography to interrogate and collapse Roland Barthes' distinct categories of photographic function, denotation and connotation.

Carolina Gabriela Jauregui addresses satire and the mockumentary genre in *Eat it alive and swallow it whole!: Resavoring *Cannibal Holocaust* as a Mockumentary*, with a close reading of the 1979 film and a study of its critical reception. Utilizing Gilles Deleuze's notion of the "power of the false" as an interpretative framework to understand the structure of the film, Jauregui illustrates how the film unveils the spectator's own uneasy position as visual cannibal. Linking the film to models of anthropology and a cultural backdrop of Mondo films, Jauregui questions how the film's audiences hold doubt at bay.

The issue concludes with the importance of doubt reaching a critical apex in Jennifer Gabrys' essay, *Leaflet Drop: The Paper Landscape of War*. Gabrys shows how lies tend to proliferate as language takes flight, allowing for the reconfiguration of both conceptual and physical space, ideologies and territories. Positioning doubt as a tactical weapon effected by the Allied Forces in their use of leaflet drops in the war in Iraq, Gabrys demonstrates how such "information" attacks are susceptible to redirection by the Iraqi forces themselves. Gabrys' facility with language -- its concerted use -- offers a metonymical foil to her subject, suggesting a further layer of psychological warfare.

1. Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), xvii.
2. James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 200. What history, whose history, and history to what purpose, is lifted by Elkins from Douglas Crimp s essay, Getting the Warhol We Deserve, *Social Text* 59, no. 17 (1999): 49-66, quotation on p. 60.

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