

# Optical Unconscious\*

Luise Vormittag, 2021

There is a crackling sound on the line. My screen goes dark. Now I see the word 'guest' appear in front of me. A guest? A ghost? This is of course the perfect entrance for [Leanne Shapton](#). Her recent book *Guest book: Ghost stories* is lying on the table next to me, brimming with post-its on which I have recorded my thoughts while reading: "uncanny atmosphere, curated ephemera" says one. "Absent images" another. "Visual conventions, Victorian gothic?" the third. The last post-it just says "the dark".

The dark.

The dark indeed. The 33 short stories collected in this volume lead you further and further into a world of obscurity, uncertainty and trepidation. Shapton has both written and illustrated them with a mixture of watercolours, photography, diagrams, and other fragments of visual matter. Each story is a thoughtful assemblage of words, pictures, layout, wait – is "story" even the right word? Some of the pieces could more accurately be described as a narrative evocation, perhaps a summoning of an atmosphere, a lurking dread. Taken together these pieces push at the boundaries of the conventional understanding

*Pages from [Guest book: Ghost stories](#) by Leanne Shapton:  
from the story 'Natura Morta'*



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of the ghost story, conjuring new spectral possibilities in the vicissitudes of visual culture. “Ghosts are restless” says one of my post-it notes. I underline those word.

Some of the imagery in the book is obviously found material, such as wrapping paper with old-fashioned Christmas motifs, oddly cropped pages from a sales catalogue for mirrors; other images are clearly crafted by Shapton herself, such as the watercolour paintings of flowers in the penultimate story. With many of the images you can't be quite sure – are these photos staged, are they found? Where are they from? Why were they originally made? Can I trust them? In *Guest book* we have clearly long departed from the conventional idea of illustration as illumination, the subservient image that sheds light on the authoritative text. Here we encounter much more complicated relationships between text and image, right?

“Absolutely! As readers of images, readers of photography, readers of illustration – we have become just as sophisticated as readers of texts. I wanted to take advantage of our collective knowledge of how to read images.” Shapton is right, of course. I know \*ALL\* these images. I've seen them all before. I've seen the photos of supposedly famous people I don't quite recognise in gossip magazines. I've seen the architectural blueprints. I've seen the Instagram feeds with their carefully curated 'spontaneous' selfies. I've seen the

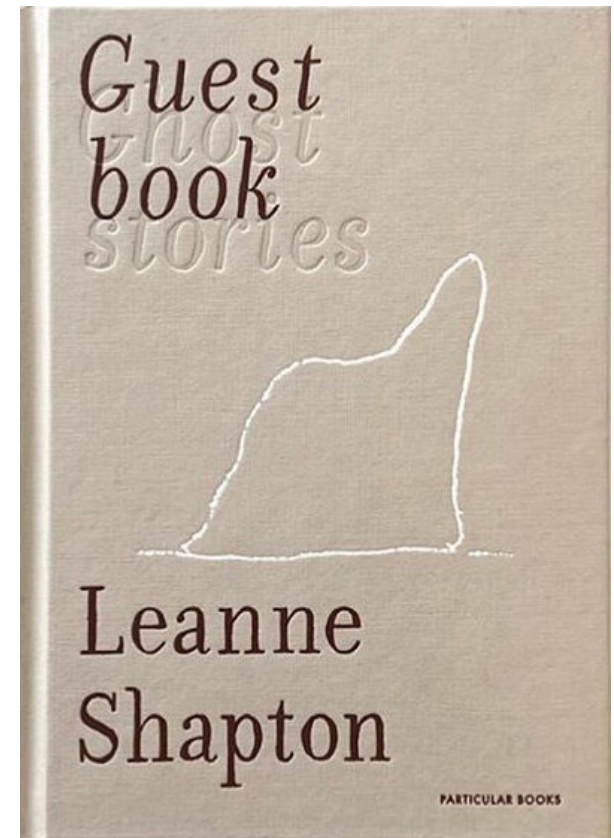
family photos of people, now long dead, staring out at me from beyond the gulf of time.

“It started with the story ‘Peel House,’” explains Shapton. “I was looking at biographies – how they tend to have a section with all the pictures – ‘Here is so-and-so as a baby’. I always look at those first and love that out-of-context read of images that I know will matter later. So I wrote ‘Peel House’ and then I tried to plot it with pictures using that assumptive tone of photo-signatures. The more I did it the more I became tired of my own conceit. I thought ‘Yes, I can do this, but do I really want to keep this up for 300 pages?’ There are so many other conventions of reading that I wanted to explore.”

“What do you think these conventions offer you?” I ask.

“It's the trust I have in the reader that we've all seen and read in this way. And me telling the story through these conventions means I am offering different content in these familiar shapes and maybe a better understanding about how these conventions are actually very good at telling stories. We can all read this way, so why not tell stories this way?”

She is right of course. But how does this work actually get made? Do the pictures come first, or the writing, – and –



where do all these images come from? It turns out that each story has its own little anecdote attached to it. ‘Natura Morta’ for example is a piece in the format of an Instagram feed. “But this is found imagery, isn't it? This looks old, or actually hang on, some of it is, but some of it... is that actually you, Leanne?”

“Yes, this is a little story about Instagram and self-portraiture. My aunt had a bunch of photos of her stepmother Shirley. She was going to throw them away. And I thought no – I'm going to do something with that. Shirley was a beauty queen, if she were alive today she would have this presence on Instagram. In these pictures [I took of

myself] I tried to be Shirley, I tried to inhabit her – make a possession of a photographed image, and perhaps use those kinds of photos that I would usually not post on my own feed... me in a bikini?! NEVER! I'd be too ashamed of my own vanity.”

In the case of ‘Natura Morta’, the identity of the woman in the found photographs was known to Shapton, but in other cases she just buys bags of old pictures second hand. She is leafing through the book, “I have no idea who this boy is, absolutely no clue who these people are!” she says pointing to pictures that form part of the ‘Billy Bryson’ story, a tale of a tennis prodigy with a phantasmal companion. Shapton uses these unmoored fragments of archival material, the detritus of visual culture, as building blocks to create new stories.

Photography is in its very nature quite ghost-ly: The physical absence of the referent, and yet – the apparition of their image. The absence of life, but the continuation of lifelike appearance. The present absence and the absent presence. This spectral quality of photography is amplified with found imagery, their origin obliterated beyond the possibility of retrieval: In all likelihood we will never know who these people were. Shapton combines these images with her narrative fragments, leaving gaps, creating collisions, making space for the reader to wander in and fill these openings with their own imagination. Illustration here does not illuminate – it might be a counterpoint, perhaps a tangent, sometimes a guide, at other times a distorted reverberation that gets thrown back at you, like an echo resounding in a dark tunnel. Instead of illumination we have darkness. In the penultimate story – ‘Chrysanthemum, Carnation, Anemone, Foxglove’ – Shapton writes: “Think about what you don’t get to see. It’s there in the dark.”

“Oh, this is a story about deceit, of being lied to and wanting to believe the lie...” Shapton tells me. “It’s about being lied to, literally, but also about the lies that photography tells us.” Yes, the lies of photography, the frighteningly unstable nature of representation. How do we know whether what we are shown is true? And what lies beyond? Beyond the limits of depiction, beyond representation?

Many of the stories direct your attention towards what cannot be seen: images are blurry, damaged, badly lit or awkwardly cropped, others are implied, but missing all together. Many of these eerie voids nevertheless are described as physically close: ‘Alcatraz’ tells of the spirit of a prisoner attaching themselves to a visitor. ‘Sirena di Galli’ consists of a catalogue of second-hand clothes, purportedly on sale via an Italian online vintage store, all of which are noted to have ominous staining and “damage to the back”. These spectral intimacies in the stories are echoed by the intimacy of the reading experience itself: the private encounter with a book and one’s almost otherworldly connection to its author, that transcends time and space. During our conversation Shapton often refers to this intimate space between writer and reader, where we can bypass those many layers of social convention, politeness and distance. Like the ghosts in the stories, books can gradually, creepily make a possession of you.

I thank Shapton for our conversation and close down the video call. There are various open windows on my screen, my desktop is cluttered with screenshots and reference imagery, on my actual desk are books, an illustrated thank-you card, a magazine. I think about how all these modes of picturing, representing, visualising, showing, suggesting, explaining form a billowing network, an undulating ebb and flow of visual conventions and codes. Too unstable to be conclusively defined they are akin to a hallucinatory accumulation, a flow of unconscious, latent images. I look down at my notebook, where I had diligently written out the questions I prepared for the interview in black ink. I only made one note during the entire conversation, scrawled in pink colour pencil over the top: “Images are our ghosts.”

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