

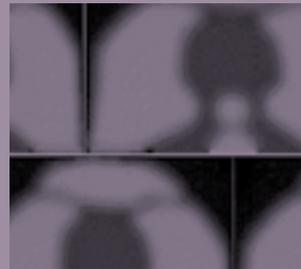
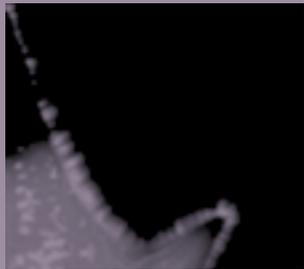
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AURAS IN DISEASE



Months Bar Graph



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Alex Fine

Screening the Body, Screening
the Soul: Aura Photography as
Biometrics of the New Age





Figure 1.

Aura Photo Booth at New Living Expo, San Francisco, April 28, 2013; photo: Alex Fine.



Figure 2.

Aura Photograph, Self, taken via Aura Imaging Services at Psychic Reality, Oakland, California, February 2013.

I sit in a chair facing the camera (fig. 1). A teenage girl, about seventeen, tells me to sit with my back straight and to place my hands, palms down, on temperature-sensitive metal plates. The sensors convert my body's heat into data, which the computer program Aura Imaging translates into colors. These colors make up my aura. Practitioners in aura reading claim that the aura is an electromagnetic field surrounding the human body. Its energy is purported to envelop body, mind, and spirit, and is only made visible through psychical or photographic visualization. The photographer steadies one hand on the camera and uses her other hand, wrist encircled with hemp bracelets, to count. *Three, two, one . . .* I hear the shutter snap. I hear the machine churn, and I watch for the white Polaroid to be expelled from its mouth. I had seen images of aura photographs previously, but I was startled when confronted with my own image (fig. 2).

Bright and translucent reds, purples, and pinks surround my torso and head in the picture. The colors extend from outside the body, or emanate from somewhere within, radiating like a halo. The portrait reveals variations of hue and shade, pockets of milky white, and blurred spaces, as if the texture of each colored layer had been flattened within the two-dimensional photographic medium. Like a fortune cookie's ability to both memorialize a present moment and offer an adage for the future, the mystique of aura photography intimates spiritual wisdom and an objective knowing about one's person.

Aura photography visualizes both a body and the aura—distinct yet related entities. I see myself as a subject whose boundaries are no longer self-contained, a biological entity whose edges are rendered permeable to energetic and magnetic fields pertaining to mind, body, and soul. Investigations into the nature of embodiment have tended to “split biological and physical inquiry (real things) from psychosocial explanation (not real things),” according to scholar and philosopher Teresa Brennan.¹ She explores this tendency in her study of the “transmission of affect,” explaining that psychology and psychoanalysis contend that the healthy person is energetically and affectively self-contained. The aura photograph complicates this notion of self-containment, as it seeks to expose and materialize the aura as an entity that is of the body but also in excess of it.

Aura photography sees and scans the human body to offer the individual a diagnosis for healing. A practice of alternative spirituality's New Age, aura photography circulates a fused scientific, spiritualist, and psychological discourse to offer the individual tools for spiritual transformation and personal betterment. The photographed aura serves as the portal through which the individual may access and objectively² perceive mental state, personality, and emotions. This visualization technology represents, or obscures, human lives to the

1. Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004), 3.

2. See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2007) for a history of scientific objectivity and its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century as a new epistemic virtue and its influence on making pictures and creating representations.

3. Brian Snellgrove, *The Unseen Self: Kirlian Photography Explained* (Saffron Walden: C. W. Daniel, 1996), 11-22. See here for an overview of how the aura was conceived over time.

4. *Ibid.*, 9.

5. John Harvey, *Photography and Spirit* (London: Reaktion, 2007), 76.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Jessica Riskin, "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science," in *The Sixth Sense Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford, U.K.: Berg, 2009). See Riskin's chapter for more on Mesmer and his claims.

8. Harvey, *Photography and Spirit*, #.

9. Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 17.

10. *Ibid.*

extent that the photograph codifies one's present state as undisputed fact, rather than as in-flux process. The photograph records and interprets the body, making its meaning comprehensible with the aid of technological advancements that translate aesthetics into diagnosis.

Conceptions of the aura as a human energy field or human atmosphere have persisted for hundreds of years, and predated the visualization of the aura through photography. In ancient India, universal energy was known as *prana*. Medieval saints and mystics used terms like *halo*, *nimbus*, and *aureola*. In the 1800s French physiologist Raphaël DuBois studied the phenomenon as bioluminescence.³ Often described as an emanation or envelope of body, mind, and spirit, the aura's unique composition came to be seen as indicative of the self.⁴ In the late eighteenth century, French physician Michel Augustin Thouret initiated research into auras, explicating the notion of animal magnetism, which assumes that magnetic fluid encases all organisms.⁵ Franz Anton Mesmer later claimed that this fluid could be manipulated to restore one's health and achieve a state of balance.⁶

In 1778 Mesmer arrived in Paris, where he presented his theories on animal magnetism within popular science displays (fig. 3). Parisians involved in "real" science disregarded his claims that the aura played a significant role in healing.⁷ The debates between followers of Mesmer and the established scientists of the time reveal a larger controversy over the legitimacy of what constitutes proper science. For example, phrenology, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century belief that human character was validated by skull shape and size, is now dismissed as pseudoscience by mainstream scientific discourse. Psychoanalytic theory was another discipline that was contested as pseudoscience, especially during its formative period, for making claims that proved largely untestable.

The history of Mesmer provides just one example of the complex history of the aura and its questionable status as a tool for healing—a use long deemed intrinsic to the aura. What he termed "magnetic fluid" finds its representation in today's aura photography; his animal magnetism privileged vision in reading the body's field of emanation. Between the time of Mesmer in the eighteenth century and the use of photography to capture images of the spirit in the nineteenth century,⁸ interest in notions of animal magnetism waned. The invention of photography solidified the centrality of sight as "the first of the senses, and to this day the only sense, to attain objective status," according to Brennan.⁹ She notes, "Sight . . . is the sense that renders us discrete, while transmission broaches individual boundaries."¹⁰ The photograph's visualization centralizes sight to materialize the aura, yet it captures what Brennan would name as a transmission, which exceeds the corporeal.

Figure 3.

Mesmerism: The Operator Inducing a Hypnotic Trance, engraving, 1794. Plate from Ebenezer Sibly's book *A Key to Physic*.



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AURAS IN DISEASE

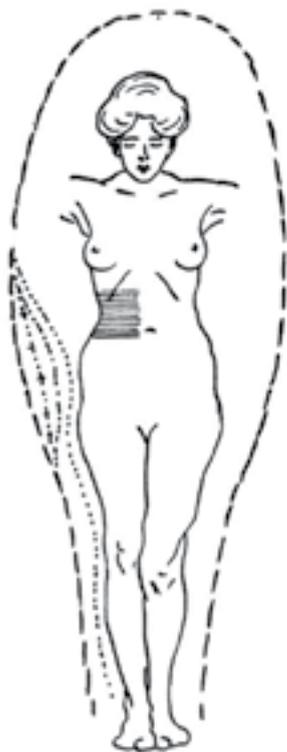


FIG. 23.—Abnormal shape of Aura with gradual recovery. A dark patch on the right side.

Figure 4.

Walter J. Kilner, "List of Illustrations," from *The Human Atmosphere or the Aura Made Visible by the Aid of Chemical Screens* (1911), ix.

Figure 5.

Walter J. Kilner, "Auras in Disease," from *The Human Atmosphere or the Aura Made Visible by the Aid of Chemical Screens* (1911), 205.

11. Harvey, *Photography and Spirit*, 8.

12. *Ibid.*, 75.

13. Snellgrove, *The Unseen Self*, 23-45. See here for an overview of how technologies sought to capture the aura.

14. Harvey, *Photography and Spirit*, 76.

15. *Ibid.*, 77.

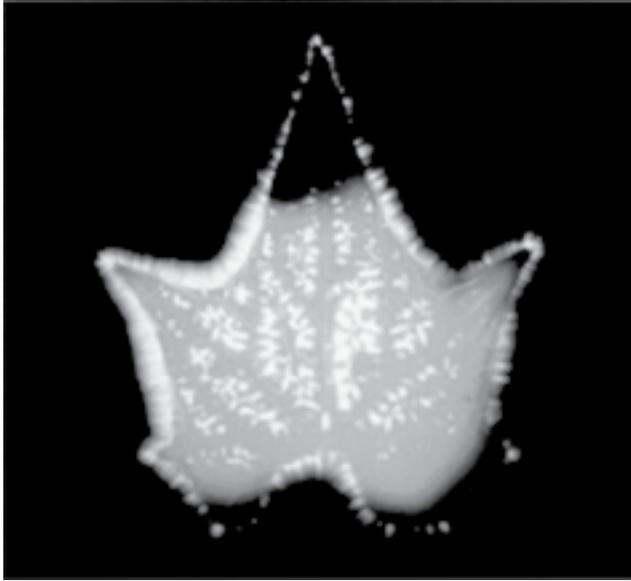
16. Snellgrove, *The Unseen Self*, 45.

Since the invention of photography, the medium has always been united with the spiritual, the ghostly, and the not-quite-present.¹¹ At the same time, it was viewed as a medium capable of capturing and recording "the real." Equally connected to both science and spirituality, photography was believed to capture that essence, and evidence, of truth. Scholar John Harvey argues that the aura's "visualization of latent and previously undetermined psychic powers" manifested within photography as spectral presences.¹² Photographers began to seek out these spectral presences within photographs, and they aimed to visualize the aura within the image.

At the turn of the twentieth century, several works were published on the human aura. Some of these texts include A. Marques's *The Human Aura* (1896), William Wilberforce Juvenal Colville's *The Human Aura and the Significance of Color* (1909), and Walter J. Kilner's *The Human Atmosphere or the Aura Made Visible by the Aid of Chemical Screens* (1911). Kilner's text, for example, discusses aura reading explicitly in relation to health, normalcy, and disease, which points to how a diagnostic seeing of the body has always informed the practice, even before the application of photographic methods of visualization (figs. 4, 5).

As visualization technologies became more advanced, notions of the aura became more developed. Research into electric patterns, corona discharge photography, electrophotography, and X-rays concerned a study of the energy field that surrounded animate and inanimate things.¹³ As a technical process, aura photography was developed in 1939 by Russian electrician and inventor Seymon Kirlian, who captured a "halo," by exposing animate and inanimate things to high-voltage, high-frequency, and low-amperage electric currents.¹⁴ After discovering that the photographed aura would emerge as encasement for both whole objects and objects with missing parts, the aura became understood as evidence of a spiritual body, like a chakra, and provided support for the spiritual belief system.¹⁵ One of these studies was designated the "phantom leaf" experiment (much like the concept of the "phantom limb" in medicine). Kirlian and his wife Valentina conducted these experiments by taking a Kirlian photograph of a leaf before and after a portion was cut (fig. 6).

Western researchers did not begin to consider Kirlian photography within scientific studies until after the Kirlians took out their first patent in 1949. In 1970 the phantom leaf images were published in a book, *Psychic Discoveries behind the Iron Curtain*, by journalists Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder. Shortly after, in 1972, the conference "Kirlian Photography, Acupuncture, and the Human Aura" was held in New York City,¹⁶ signifying growing interest in, and



20. Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2008), 34.

21. In assessing the pervasiveness of New Age's healing and therapeutic intent, I also recognize how such rubrics for self-help are evident within popular television, where portrayals of rehabilitation are undertaken by out-of-balance subjects. One place this is evident is in looking at the proliferation of rehabilitative reality television shows, such as *Intervention* (A&E, 2005), *Celebrity Rehab* (VH1, 2008), *Hoarders* (A&E, 2009), *Obsessed* (A&E, 2009), *Addicted* (TLC, 2010), and *My Strange Addiction* (TLC, 2010). Rehabilitation necessitates that individuals assert a desire for transformation into something "more" than what is currently accessible to them within their present.

Figure 6.

John Harvey, "Guy Lyon Playfair. 'A cut leaf, showing how the aura of the section which has been cut off is restored,' Kirlian photograph (1980)," from *Photography and Spirit*, 76.

17. *Ibid.*, 51-54. See here for a discussion on the use of Kirlian photography within acupuncture.

18. *Ibid.*, 55-71. See here for more on the Kirlian apparatus and how it creates an image.

19. Aura Imaging Services, "Welcome to Aura Imaging," accessed December 10, 2013, www.auraphoto.com/index1.shtml.

22. Adam Phillips, *On Balance* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010). See Phillips's book of essays for a psychoanalytic and philosophical consideration of balance and strategies for coping that span literature, art, and various case studies.

23. Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007), 474. See Kripal's discussion of how "New Age" is conceived by leaders of Esalen, a site where much of contemporary New Age thought solidified. Kripal acknowledges the perception that New Age is characterized by "superficiality, flakiness, anti-intellectualism, and social disengagement."

acceptance of, the photographed aura's potential as a tool for healing.¹⁷ As computer technologies developed leading into the 1980s, the Kirlian photographic method was integrated with computer software intended to speed up, solidify, and streamline the process of visualizing the aura.¹⁸ This application of the Kirlian method produced the contemporary aura photograph introduced in the opening paragraphs of this discussion.

This photograph was produced by Aura Imaging Services, a company that reports to have "given everyone the ability to see auras" since 1970.¹⁹ Contemporary aura photography still emphasizes the aura as a tool for healing, much like Mesmer's conception, and it employs a corresponding computer-generated Aura Report to assess one's body from the perspective of New Age beliefs on well-being.

New Age practices purport to provide an alternative to Western medicine, aiming to heal a subject described as out of balance. New Age scholar Paul Heelas describes the imbalanced individual as one who is a "victim of those stresses, strains, bad habits, 'blocks,' and negative emotions generated by the rush or isolation of life in the mainstream of society."²⁰ This pursuit of holistic well-being, popular today within the United States and Western culture, emphasizes wellness and being better as forms of progress toward a return to balance.

Ranging from alternative spiritual practice to rehabilitative reality television²¹ to modern psychotherapy, strategies for regaining balance in the body have permeated contemporary visual cultures.²²

Alternative spirituality's pseudoscience is often disregarded by academia as anti-intellectual and superficial,²³ while medical science's presumed objectivity—and psychoanalysis's uncontested authority—merely offers other constructed, and perhaps fictive, belief systems. Yet considering New Age representations of the subject is particularly crucial to a theorizing of the present, when technological visualizations of the body retain such force in constructing and maintaining cultural understanding of the normative subject. In this discussion, I consider New Age's aura photography in relation to cultural figurations of the normative subject as healthy subject. This reframing of alternative spirituality's visual cultures illuminates how such alternative practices of healing, like traditional medical science, participate in processes of normalization that pathologize particular bodies whose identity relegates them to minoritarian subject positions.

Defining *New Age* is difficult, as the term evades a succinct or coherent definition. Much scholarship on New Age alternative spiritualities attempts a definition by emphasizing a specific aspect of the practice, of which there are many, rather than clarifying the meaning of New Age as a collective cultural movement. Emily D. Edwards, a scholar writing on the specific New Age practice of firewalking, describes

Your full body aura with chakras

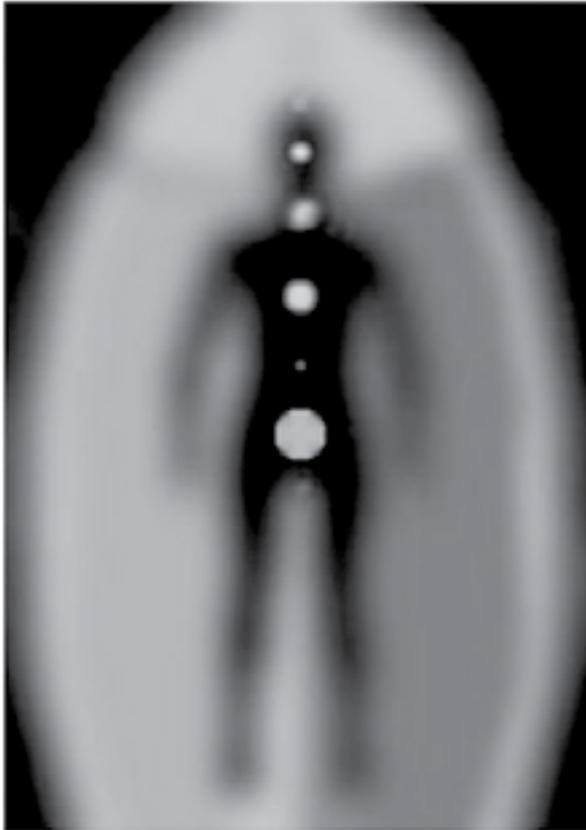


Figure 7.

Aura Imaging Report, "Your Full Body Aura with Chakras."

26. Joseph Pugliese, Biometric Bodies, Technologies, Biopolitics (New York: Routledge, 2010), 8, 42. Biopolitical logics refer to Michel Foucault's notion of biopower, a concept explained as "the set of mechanisms through which basic biological features of the human species become the object of a political strategy" (8). I read aura photography as biometrics, with an attention to the normalizing biopolitical aims embedded in the technology. Biometrics reproduces the logics of particular proto-biometric regulatory sciences (like physiognomy, phrenology, eugenics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), while relying upon the presumed objectivity of science to frame its visualization. Pugliese discusses these regulatory sciences as a "proliferation of disciplines conceptually premised on the measurement of bodies" (42). These regulatory sciences relied upon photographic evidence to assess and classify the body according to cultural standards of normativity. Such systems codified discriminatory and racist beliefs as objective-a scientific fact rather than a social construct.

24. Emily D. Edwards, "Fire-walking: A Contemporary Ritual and Transformation," in TDR, vol. 42 (Summer 1998): 112-13. See her first footnote.

25. Heelas, Spiritualities of Life, 21.

27. *Ibid.*, 2. Pugliese defines biometrics, "Biometric systems are technologies that scan a subject's physiological, chemical or behavioral characteristics in order to verify or authenticate their identity," or what he describes as a "technology of capture." Some other examples of biometrics include airport body scans and medical imaging's brain scans.

28. *Ibid.*, 24. Referring to Foucault's Discipline and Punish, 138.

29. *Ibid.*, 72.

30. *Ibid.*, 24.

New Age in a footnote as a movement whose parameters are difficult to define, largely because it "accommodates contradictory ideas and practices," while simultaneously recognizing a "universal" religion. Since the 1990s this universalized New Age has been assimilated into mainstream Western culture.²⁴ Heelas quotes Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, explaining that people may turn to "New Age" spiritualities "to deal with the restrictions of the immanent by seeking the transcendent."²⁵ Taylor here acknowledges how alternative spiritual practices have become pervasive as a coping strategy for living in the everyday through actions aimed to heal the body from within. Although New Age practices are diverse, a number of scholars identify common threads that include a commitment to the holistic interrelationship of body, mind, and spirit.

The Aura Report for Aura Imaging Services' pictures translates the snapshot into one main diagnostic image, labeled YOUR FULL BODY AURA WITH CHAKRAS (fig. 7). A figure in black stands amid a colored cloud of oranges, yellows, and reds. Seven circles, representing the chakras, extend from the top of the head to the pelvis. This image translates the information of the aura photograph, interpreting its colors into prescriptive data to convey one's state of health. Like a mannequin, the figure is representative of the human body at a level of generic abstraction, without any markers of the particularities of embodiment. There is no visible indication of the figure's gender, sexuality, race, or age. This flattened rendering of the human form appears like a diagram in an anatomy textbook—oversimplified, sterile, and impersonal.

Aura photography's mechanisms for transmuting data into diagnostic and prescriptive information to aid the subject's healing rely upon both recognition of an individual's identity and a subsuming of that identity into a generalized category representative of a particular type of individual. Such identification mechanisms reinscribe the biopolitical logics²⁶ upon which visualization technologies like aura photography, a biometric technology,²⁷ function—the machine breaks down the body into identifiable "body-bits."²⁸ Vilém Flusser names this as the world of robots, and stresses that photographs "have to be decoded as an expression of the concealed interests of those in power."²⁹ This process of mechanization reproduces and maintains what Michel Foucault describes as a "political anatomy of the body premised on a mechanics of power that splits and fragments the hold between body, subject, and identity," producing what he calls "subjected and practiced bodies."³⁰ Aura photography assesses (and disciplines) the body through its visualization of the aura and its subsequent split into specific colors and areas that signify the chakras and, correspondingly, various aspects of the self. These identifying "aura bits" transmit New Age's diagnostic interpretation of the body.

Scholar and anthropologist Joseph Dumit, in his article “Playing Truths: Logics of Seeking and the Persistence of the New Age,” asks if New Age may be an “anthropological doppelganger” for the fantasy-ridden “Other” of Western culture:

What if the modernist dream of producing an encyclopedic database of cultures is now popularized and lived out in a micro-relativist Disneyland where everyone has the opportunity to design their own personal culture out of fragments of colonialism? Could this explain the New Age fascination with enacting adaptations of Native American rituals and visiting Native American “power spots”? Might this help to explain the desire to leave one’s white Wonderbread™ culture behind and become-Other, an other who is documented as being more in touch with the world, and able to experience magic? What are we up to, and who are we empowering, when we playfully produce our ethnographies?³¹

In investigating the rhetoric of aura photography, Dumit’s questioning supports a rereading of the proprioceptive “good vibes” of New Age’s consumerist and purportedly “universal” practices for spiritual healing and self-help. Dumit’s questions not only speak to the problematic appropriation, concealed as universalism, that is associated with New Age, but he also points to how New Age may be enmeshed within or produced by this “modernist dream.” This dream is structured by neoliberal logics of personal responsibility and successful normativity, a cultural condition that results in many Americans turning to alternative practices of spirituality. New Age is a slippery topic to discuss, as it does not reside within any singular discipline. As Dumit says, “All the fruits of science and technology, religion and psychology, indigenous beliefs and healing systems are available to be selected, combined, sold, and consumed. Capitalism and spirituality both contribute to a celebratory self-making and self-help.”³² Due to its combinatory, postmodern nature, New Age exists “as an excluded Other for more than one discourse,” Dumit explains, and thus confounds the distinctions of what science is real and what is not.³³ The Aura Report’s use of generalized body scans and graphs (fig. 9) makes explicit New Age’s murky status as an “excluded Other” in its fusion of science, spirituality, and self-help psychology.

The Aura Report claims to enable one to “see personal potentials, character types, but also problems and disturbances.”³⁴

31. Joseph Dumit, “Playing Truths: Logics of Seeking and the Persistence of the New Age,” in *Focaal*, no. 37 (2001): 73.

32. *Ibid.*, 64.

33. *Ibid.*, 66.

34. Aura Report, taken at *Psychic Reality*, Oakland, California, February 2013.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

Presenting an analysis of both *potentials* and *problems*, the report situates its diagnostics as unbiased and objective, offering both positive and negative feedback. A scientific aesthetic frames its diagnosis with an authority and credibility that instructs the reader to perceive its information as truth. Despite this framing, the Aura Report acknowledges, somewhat paradoxically, how its information is distinct from medical science. The report notes:

This software and printout is only intended for your personal insight and for entertainment purposes. It is NOT medical software or intended for therapeutic diagnosis and treatment. Please consult your doctor or therapist for medical diagnosis and treatment.³⁵

Perhaps this functions more pragmatically as a means to excuse the makers from liability, yet the distinction is notable to think of how New Age participates in its own self-surveillance in relegating itself to being a pursuit existing outside legitimate medical science. This self-surveillance suggests that although New Age purports to provide an alternative to medicine, the discourse exists neither outside of structures of power nor outside of the institutionalization of knowledge.

“Aura reading is not difficult,” the report states, extending an invitation for participants to engage in aura reading on their own. This definition of the aura is crucial in situating how the report conceives of the aura:

An aura is an extension of the human body. It is the corona discharge we emanate as a field of light and colors. This corona is as excitable, reactionary and alive as we are. If we change drastically, it changes drastically. If we are rooted and balanced, the aura reflects this balance in its shape and colors.³⁶

The text suggests that the aura is not just a phenomenon surrounding the exterior of the body, but an *extension of* and *emanation from* the body. It further suggests that the aura becomes animated, just as bodies become animated, by both external and internal stimuli. Articulating a reciprocal relationship between aura and body, the text indicates connectivity between the corporeal and the psychical—between body, mind, and spirit. *Extension* and *emanation* convey different meanings; extension suggests that the aura is *part* of the body, and emanation suggests that the aura emerges as discharge, an emission that

is a product. From this language, it is unclear whether the aura is part of the body or a discrete entity upon which it is contingent. The full body image, and subsequent view of the aura field, mechanizes and quantifies this excess of the corporeal (fig. 8).

The Four Levels graph, just one of six main graphs in the report, exemplifies the attempt at quantification of the self (see fig. 9). The graph asserts that there are four core aspects to self—body, emotions, mind, and spirit—implying that these aspects are coherent entities that do not intersect or overlap. Is the mind part of the body or separate? Are emotions sometimes synonymous with the spirit, as its manifestation or expression? Exemplifying the algorithmic process by which the report interprets an aura photograph, this graph also presents a seemingly preposterous assessment of embodiment in which technology apparently *knows* the status of the bodily interior through processes of quantification. The graph's corresponding text asks a series of questions:

Is it more the material and physical plane which is represented by the body? Or are emotional matters most important to you? Are you a thinker or a mind person who leads a life mainly by ratio and logic and likes to control? Or are you mainly the spiritual oriented type of person?³⁷

These questions are supposedly answered for the consumer through a visual representation of aspects of the self that, objectively, one cannot independently realize. Did that hug feel better than meditation would have? When you held my hand, was that more comforting than prayer? This assessment feels superficial and rudimentary, yet also sparks personal reflection that is not necessarily *truth*, but that accesses a different mode of thinking. The report describes this as “enabling awareness,” which occurs through the software’s processing and analysis of personal biofeedback so as to illuminate the levels of one’s spiritual energy. Aura Imaging’s website explains the value of this:

As you become aware of your aura and the energy of other living beings and situations around you, you can go beyond the unconscious. You enter into a new reality of awareness and make better choices in your life.³⁸

Based on this claim, the purpose is to enable an individual’s “awareness” of beyond the unconscious to better one’s reality. Becoming aware here does not seem to differ from neoliberalist assertions of self-reliance, although awareness is not synonymous with personal

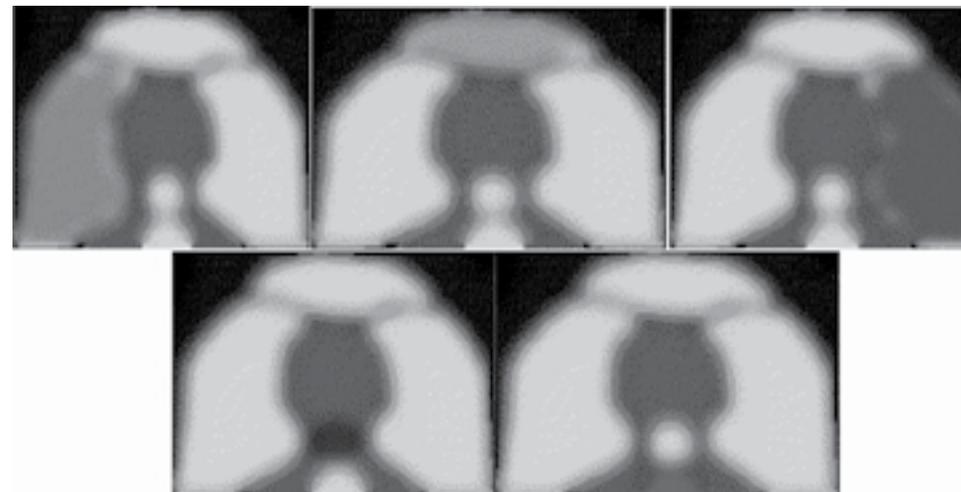


Figure 8.

Aura Imaging Report, “Your Aura Report Interpretation.”
 Top row, left to right: Right Side Color (seen opposite), Center Color (Communication), Left Side Color.
 Bottom row, left to right: Color of Communication, Color of Empathy.

37. Ibid.

38. Aura Imaging website, www.auraphoto.com/index1.shtml.

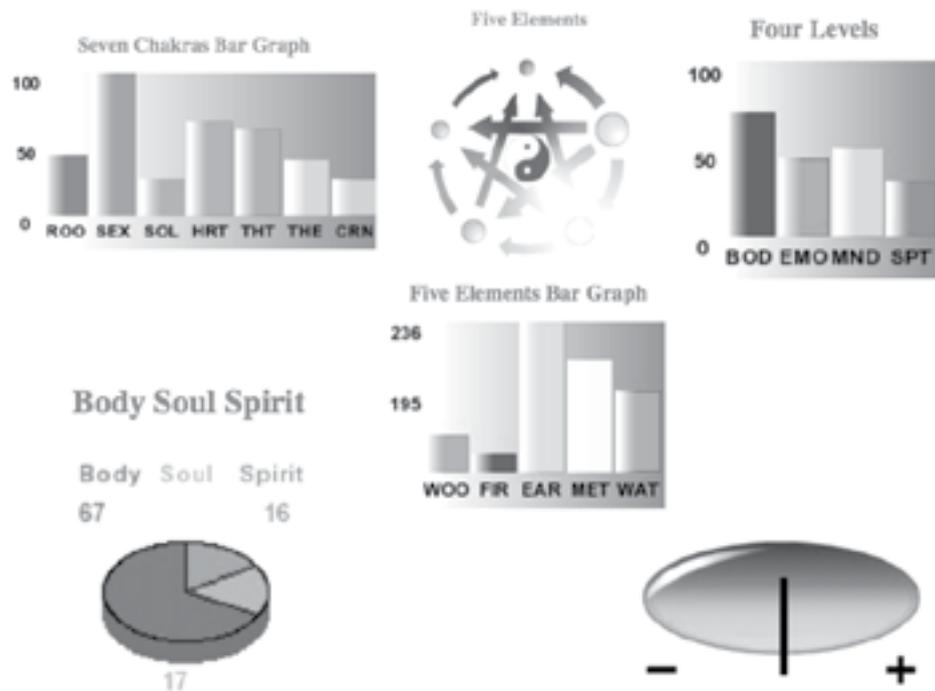


Figure 9.

Aura Imaging Report, six main graphs.

Top row, left to right: Seven Chakras Bar Graph, Five Elements Wheel, Four Levels Graph.

Bottom row, left to right: Body Soul Spirit Pie Chart, Five Elements Graph, and Relaxation Meter.

40. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 7, 192. Berlant suggests that this spreading precarity provides the dominant structure and experience of the present moment, a precarious present described as "an economic and political condition suffered by a population or by the subjects of capitalism generally; or a way of life; or an affective atmosphere; or an existential truth about contingencies of living, namely, that there are no guarantees and that the life one intends can or will be built" (192).

41. *Ibid.*, 9.

42. *Ibid.*, 8.

43. Susan Braedley and Meg Luxton, *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 10, 12. The authors describe neoliberalism as being "hegemonic political thought," rather than being just the alternative to hegemonic political thought, as it was perceived in the mid-twentieth century (10). Neoliberalism promotes personal responsibility and self-reliance (12).

39. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Martin Heidegger," <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/>.

44. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 27-28. Berlant explains cruel optimism as that which "attends to practices of self-interruption, self-suspension, and self-abeyance that indicate people's struggles to change, but not traumatically, the terms of value in which their life-making activity has been cast," and she frames cruel optimism as an analytic tool that becomes an incitement to inhabit and track the affective attachment to what we call "the good life." The good life is described to have specific implications for thinking about the "ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the 'technologies of patience' that enable a concept of the later to suspend questions about the cruelty of the now."

responsibility, or with being held accountable to a situation or condition of life. Awareness has its own hybrid epistemology, one rooted both in spirituality and philosophy. For example, Buddhist philosophies call for the development and practice of mindfulness as an embodied awareness and attentiveness to the present moment, and the Official Church of Scientology advocates an increased spiritual awareness to wake up the individual to self and environment. In Western philosophical tradition, Martin Heidegger's twentieth-century investigations into the nature of being forward the concept of *Dasein*, meaning existence, presence, and a being-in-the-world, wherein the activity of existence is reinterpreted as the relation between self and world.³⁹ By acknowledging the complex rhetoric repackaged by New Age, one may interpret the Aura Report from a more sympathetic perspective, in which any text offering a directed hermeneutics enhances awareness and increases exposure to new knowledges.

In remaining sympathetic to the reparative potential of New Age rhetoric circulated by aura photography, one cannot overlook its overtly neoliberal interpretive framing. Scholar Lauren Berlant's notion of precarity and "cruel optimism" is useful in attending to the cultural context of neoliberalism from an affective lens. This lens recognizes the optimistic and future-oriented context that aura photography perpetuates in stressing one's participation in rehabilitative practices framed as coping mechanism. Berlant names precarity as a rubric of extended crisis in the ordinary,⁴⁰ and points to terms like *neoliberal* and *transnational* that become indicative of delocalized processes⁴¹ and capitalism's disorganization of the everyday.⁴² According to scholars Susan Braedley and Meg Luxton, who write on the topic, neoliberalism is a penetrative logic of the everyday that aims to "free human beings from excessive state control in order to pursue their own lives through market competition."⁴³ Aura photography's circulation of self-help discourses extends neoliberalist logics in promoting rehabilitative processes that purport to assist one in maintaining a successful livelihood. Cruel optimism may be understood as the hope to elicit the "good life," a fictionalized conception of normativity demanding that individuals constantly seek their own remaking.⁴⁴ This remaking, a culturally embedded rehabilitative logic, produces a dependent condition in which a subject's total control over his own life is evasive. Such condition makes self-help practices of healing, like aura photography, seem particularly appealing and necessary as they assist individuals in regaining control over their own bodies through actions geared toward feeling more embodied and more connected to others.

Within these practices of healing, there exists a strong through line of optimism particular to the American Dream. Within

New Age's optimism, there exists a sense that these self-involved practices and beliefs may act as a form of distraction from more serious problems, such as the economy, unequal access to education, and issues of addiction and suicide. Perhaps this distraction more specifically acts as a form of psychological protection, or as adaption, for those privileged individuals who are able to access this universalized New Age as a coping mechanism. Aura photography visualizes the body in order to present the client with a vision of a healed and rehabilitated embodiment.

As aura photography gains legitimacy through its visualization technology, neoliberal conceptions of normative subjecthood are reified. Attentiveness to the ways in which health and well-being are figured around the subject is crucial in ensuring that our methods of healing actually succeed in enhancing, and not diminishing, possibilities for one to achieve happiness and success. Finding balance between accountability to one's participation and perpetuation of problematic discourses of well-being, with a sympathy to the reparative potentials of alternative practices beyond the medical model, may be the start of a pragmatic and realistic strategy for coping in the everyday.