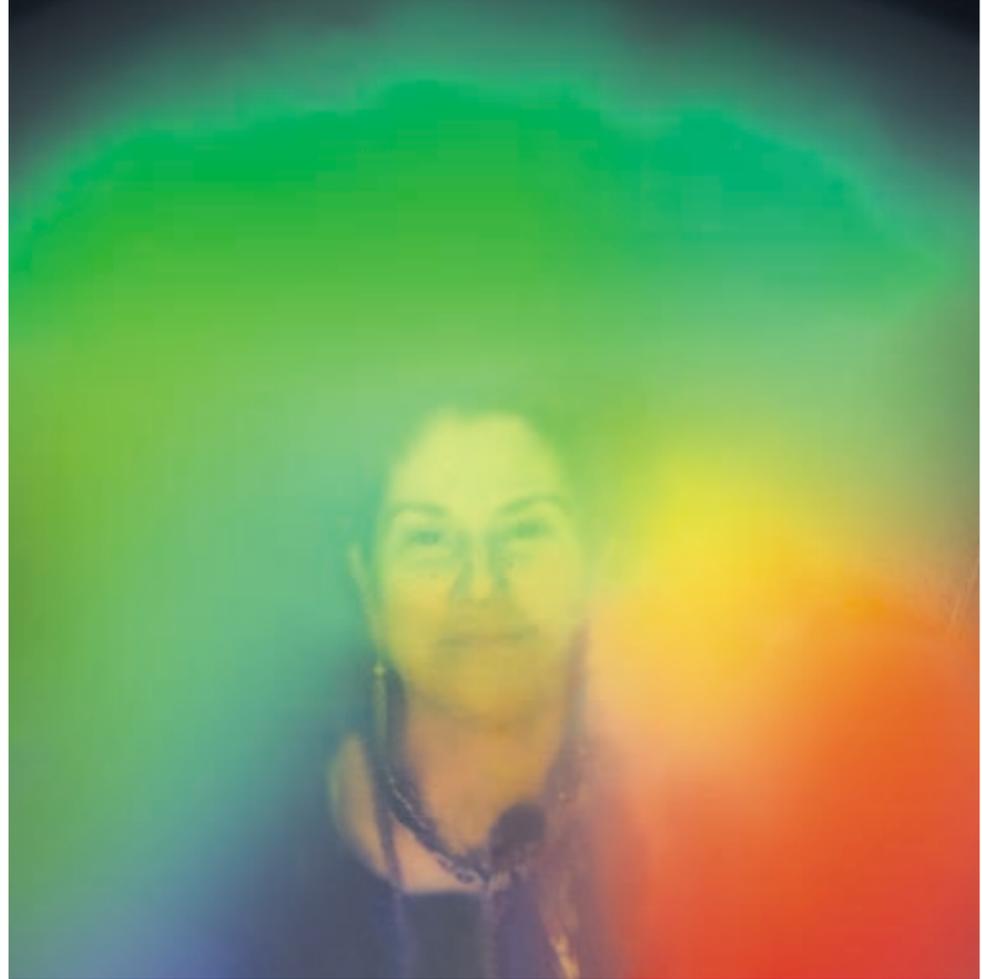


THE QUESTION OF THE AURA IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION



by Clare Ultimo

In a world of faces and sky,

street signs and scientific affirmation, the Aura fails to take everyday shape. How do we "see" a breeze unless we notice that leaves look as though they are moving on their own? How can one "see" the aroma of chocolate? The very criteria for the existence of the Aura is that it is not a solid form, a defined color, a quantitative element. And yet when we think of any kind of explanation for the word, a kind of mystery and magic is evoked, something that we might even think of as compelling. Part of its appeal is that

Me and my Aura – taken with Kirlian Photography in 2000. Colors represent different things about someone's "presence". Kirlian Photography, a recent controversial technology, claims to capture it by imaging the electromagnetic fields that living things create.

we are not sure if it exists, since tracking the Aura is still considered weird science.

I like to imagine it could be some kind of missing link of reality, the "Australopithecus" for the age of mechanical reproduction.

So, if it did exist, what would an Aura look like?

The definition of an Aura being a "subjective sensation of lights" before the attack of "some nervous disorders" is limited to the description of the experience given by the "Aura-Experiencer" (it is subjective, and not objective). Unless you too are in the throws of an such an attack, and can survive sufficiently to draw it or re-create what you saw when you had it (which no one else could see but you), all visual recreations will be limited to word descriptions and your personal experience, which cannot be mechanically reproduced. Very un-scientific.

This is not to say that attempts to depict the Aura visually have not permeated all kinds of cultures. Visual depictions are somewhat simple in illustrative form, albeit a bit unnatural; like "hats of light" on the heads of saintly individuals in the artistic traditions of the Roman Catholic Church; similar "hats" can be seen in modern comic books.

Why don't we care about Auras now?

If the aura actually exists, it escapes our everyday perception; a very good reason why we may not care about it. But when we imagine its existence, or perhaps "sense" its existence, it often means something important. The Aura of a thing exists as a record of origins, the "proof" of originality, a communication of power.



The aura of our imaginations might be some kind of cloud surrounding or coming out from a person, place or thing. Growing up in 20th Century America, I might have gotten that idea from comic books or television, since I have never really seen one "in the flesh". Growing up Catholic gave me a sense that light circles around heads communicated divinity.



Crop the photo any way you like, from any angle and the best reproduction, if you weren't there, the Aura fails to be communicated visually.

An example might be the effect of standing in front of Michaelangelo's David or viewing a photograph of it in your hand. The statue is the original work of art, the first image. It is considered priceless and people will come from all over the world to BE in front of it and "breathe" in its environment. It is a totally different experience to look at a photograph of Michaelangelo's David than to be in its twenty-one foot, imposing presence. The two photos shown can only suggest scale in reference to the people at the foot of the statue. The Aura of the David has not been reproduced in the photography.

The place just got bigger and somebody's got to picture it...

As an overpopulated, industrial world rapidly becomes a virtual one... where the representation of reality rather than the experience of reality is considered quite normal, mechanical reproduction of images happily fill in for the "real thing". If you need to know what David looks like, a photograph of the statue will suffice in almost every case. Unless you happen to live in Florence, the said photograph would give you enough information to describe the statue to someone else. But if a photograph eliminates a fundamental aspect of the work of art in question, how have we adjusted our perception in our modern world? Have we lost our ability to perceive the Aura entirely, or have we simply decided that what cannot be reproduced by our media simply does not exist? In the 21st century, we might have traded the Aura of the work of art for the simplest and speediest proof of its existence: the photograph. Like the Xerces Blue Butterfly in the age of machines and chemicals, the Aura may become extinct at the hands of our media. Before it disappears altogether, I would like to think we have the option of adjusting our "glasses" again to find it.

The age of the Aura-viewing may be upon us...

Our perceptions will continue to transform as we change, develop, regress and progress...as we "move" through time and space in any direction, creating the societies of human life. The reproduction of images which separate them from their source and offer mass accessibility may offer us potentially new possibilities for re-learning what is unique, precious and valuable about the communication of creativity, the observation of reality and the making of art itself, especially if our technology continues to progress at the rapid pace we are experiencing. Human experience has always given science reasons to explore new territory. As science once again becomes a counterpart to human expression, and not a rigid dogma that defines our reality, perhaps we will have a new confidence in the Aura; in its existence as well as its communication as a natural, necessary and fundamental part of our everyday experience. •

Have we lost our ability to perceive the Aura entirely, or have we simply decided that what cannot be reproduced by our media simply does not exist?