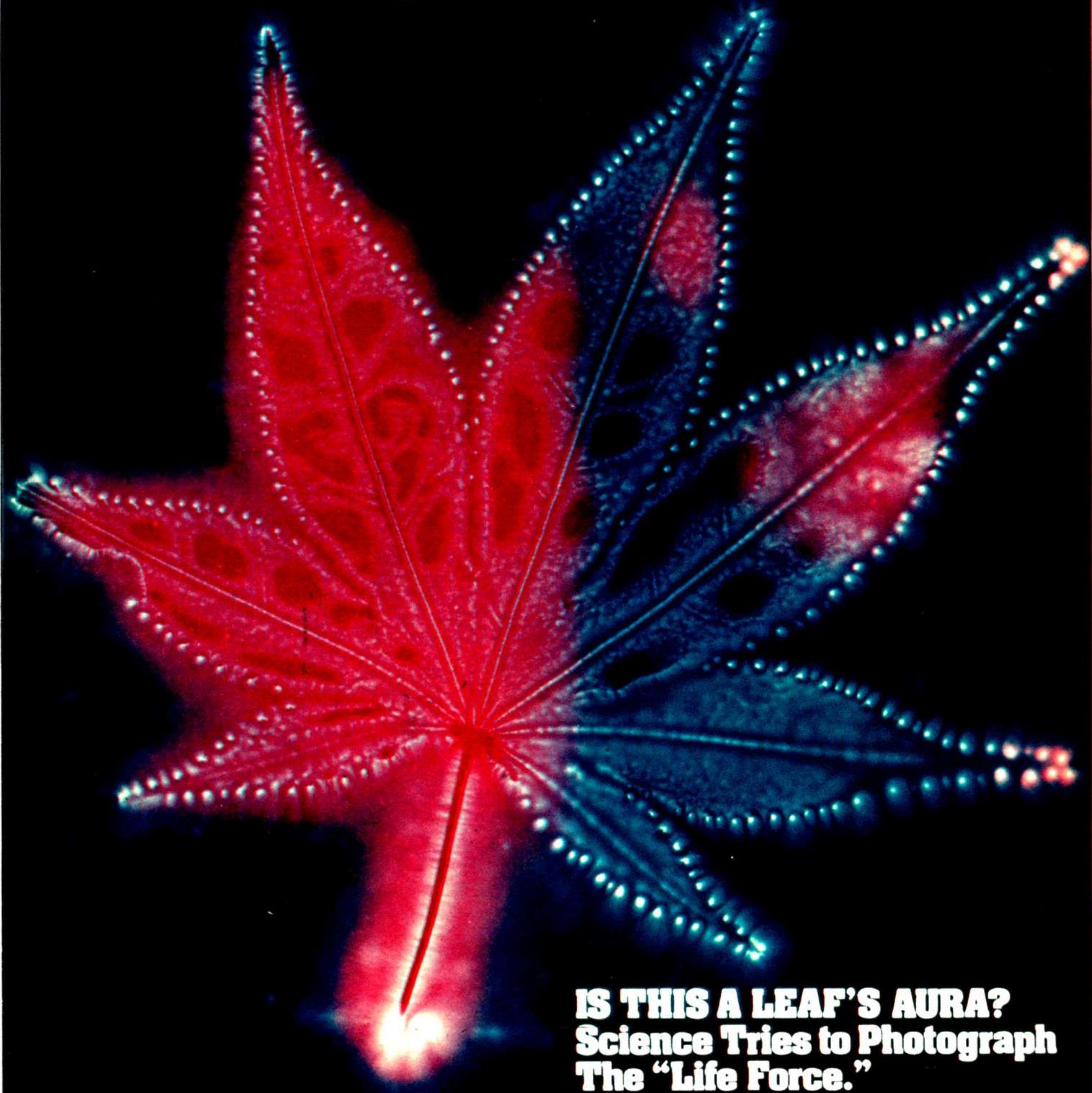


# Today

The Philadelphia Inquirer

September 1, 1974



**IS THIS A LEAF'S AURA?  
Science Tries to Photograph  
The "Life Force."**



# Has Science Photographed the "Life Force"?

*The glowing "something" in Kirlian photographs excites some scientists, but others are afraid to talk about it . . .*

## Text and Photos by HOAG LEVINS

To be perfectly accurate, it all began with a pinch on my wife's left breast. Her hand was resting nervously on an electrically-charged plate in my darkroom—and I was about to turn on the juice. Strung around us was a thicket of wires, transformers, timers, voltage regulating equipment and a high-frequency generator which sent an eerie "BBbbbzzzzzz" through the room. This was all part of a "Kirlian photography" experiment which, supposedly, would enable me to record the human "aura" on photographic film.

But I didn't believe it.

Over the past few years, I've written about dozens of Satanists, witches, warlocks, Druids, mind-readers and cavorting weirdos who were trying to turn a quick buck in the burgeoning "ESP" or "occult" movement.

When a lady from Newark, New Jersey, offered to show me how to photograph my "aura," I was equally skeptical. In fact, I thought she was crazy.

But back to that breast. For the first exposure in this seemingly bizarre process it was resting comfortably, along with its mate, while my wife made a conscious effort to relax. Her fingers were resting on a sheet of film on top of a metal plate.

For three seconds, I passed a charge of harmless high-frequency electricity across the plate, film and fingers. Somehow, this was supposed to amplify the body's natural energy "aura" and record it on film. The aura was said to change dramatically under emotional stress.

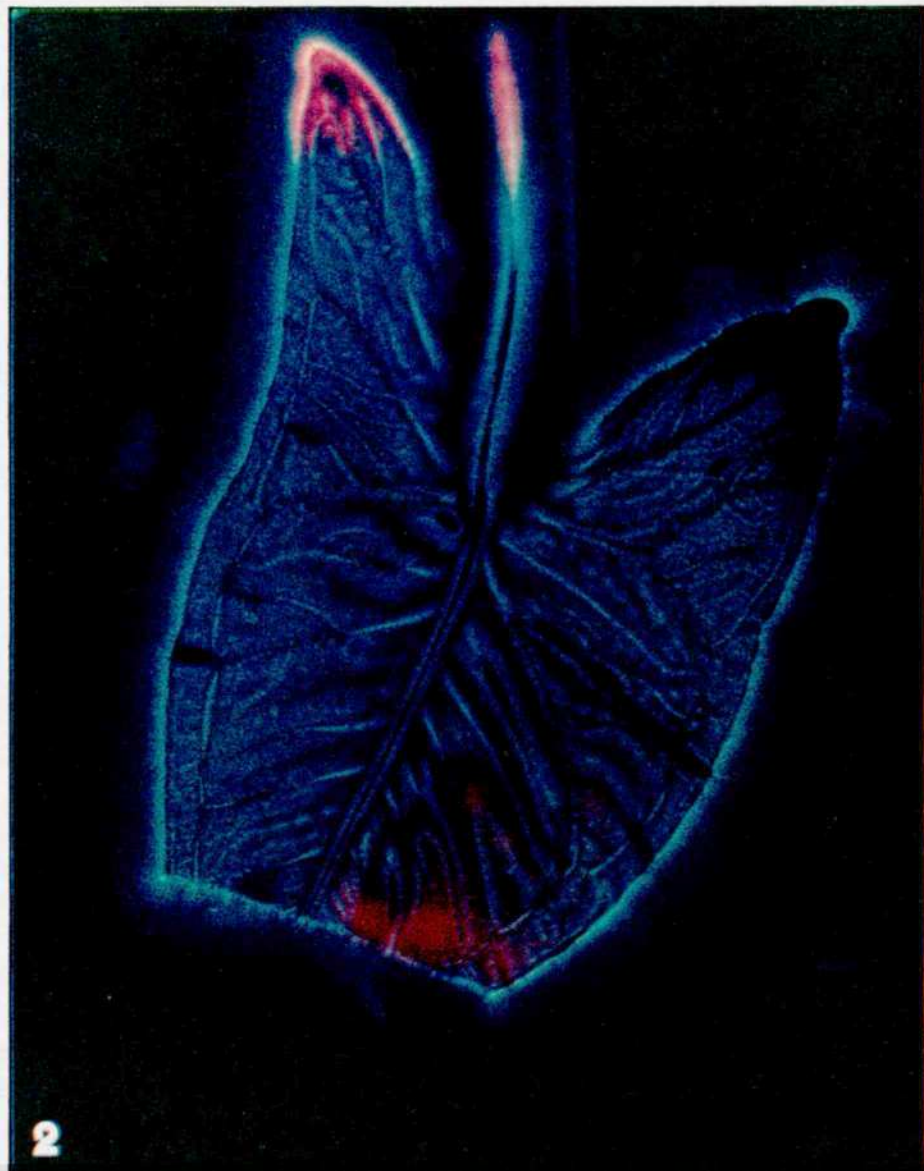
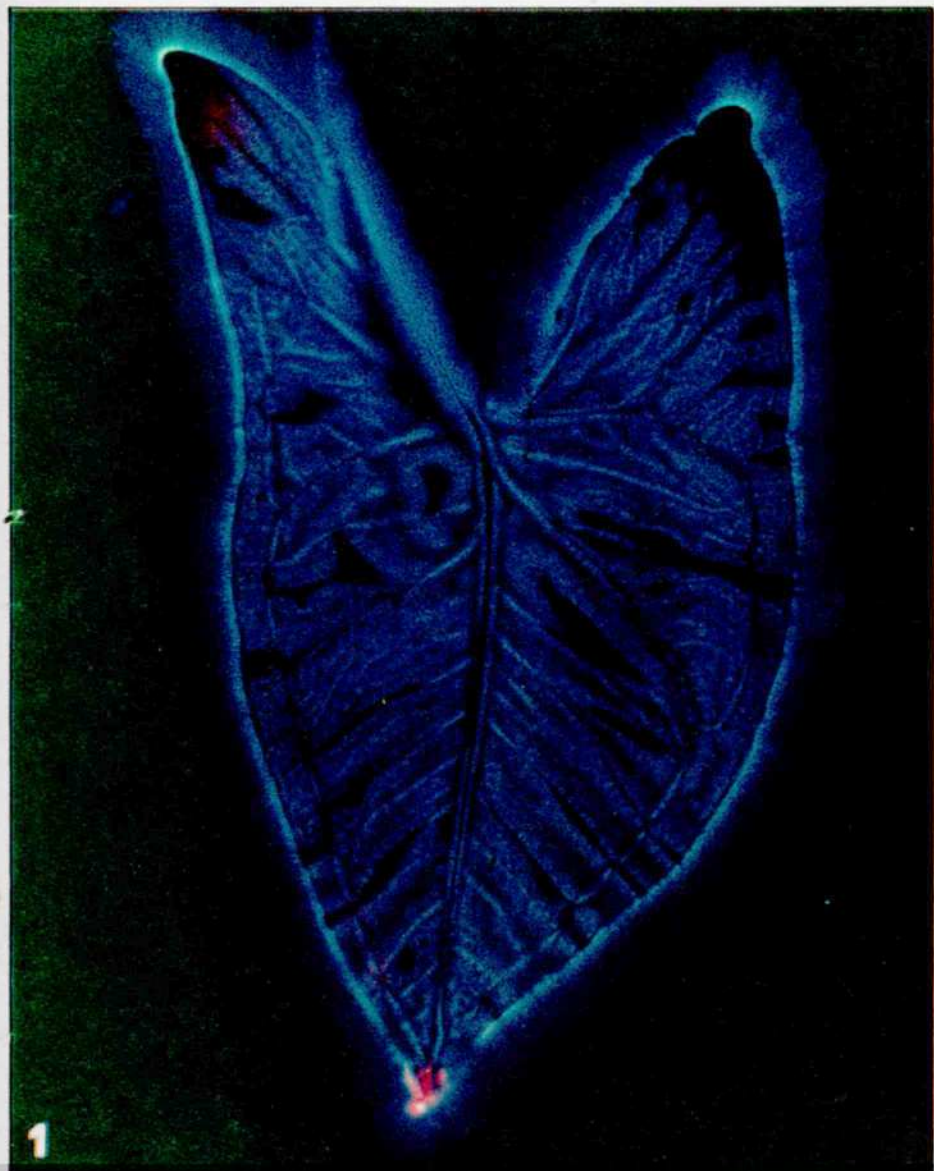
For the second exposure, I induced an emotional trauma in my subject by the quickest, easiest method available: a wickedly twisting, pulling pinch to her unsuspecting breast. While she was still sucking in her breath, I rammed her fingers onto a second piece of film and flipped on the current. Bbbzzzzzzzzzz.

Later, when I took the film from the developing tank, I was astound-

ed by the image. In the first "calm" exposure, my wife's hand was surrounded by a corona of energy bursting from her fingers like small lightning bolts in a steady, relatively symmetrical pattern.

On the second exposure, the pattern had gone haywire. The energy bolts shot out erratically, like miniature sunspots exploding from a catastrophe on the solar surface.

The second exposure, I realized with growing excitement, was a "picture" of my wife's pain and shock. The striking difference had nothing to do with a change in electricity or film or any other obvious variable in the process. The only thing that had changed during the 45 seconds between exposures had



This philodendron leaf is alive and well as it was photographed still attached to the plant (1). Healthy, happy leaves register a low-key blue on Kirlian prints. Seconds later, (2) its tip was severed and the leaf photographed. Deep reds develop near the wound. The red increased for a few days and faded as the leaf apparently healed.



been "something" within my wife's body.

I have now photographed that same "something" in a half dozen humans, as well as in plants, fruits and animals. In each case, I recorded a similar aura of energy. In a calm, "resting" state, it was recorded on color film as a low-key blue and white glow spread across the living surface. When pain, shock or other trauma was induced, the aura began to "light up." Blues changed into yellows and brilliant pinks and, in their final stages, into angry reds. With Kirlian photography, I have recorded the "death" of a plant as "something" drained from it. I have seen dramatic changes in the aura of my fingertips induced by music, fasting, the ingestion of alcohol, or yoga exercises. I have photographed the "shock" of plants that have been cut or injured, and the "something" that changes in humans when they are threatened or uptight.

This "something" is the central mystery of the Kirlian photographic process, discovered in Russia in 1968 by a New Jersey woman. Now, more than three dozen universities, medical centers and private scientists have Kirlian labs. Kirlian pho-

tography — at first scorned in America—is a hot scientific topic. While it could be just a fad, some researchers now claim it could be a gateway to major advances in medicine, agriculture, or psychology. Some believe it could revolutionize our concepts of how living organisms work.

"This could be really important . . . if we're able to separate the nuts from the legitimate researchers," says Lester Dust, an electronics engineer who has little patience for talk about the "psychic auras" or "astral bodies" which psychic buffs see in Kirlian photography.

"That stuff is bunk. All bunk," says Dust, chief engineer at Edmund's Scientific Company in Barrington, N.J. "Psychics' claims about Kirlian are just crazy. Make no sense at all."

Strangely enough, the skeptical, hard-nosed Dust is the man who perfected the Kirlian units which Edmund's has been marketing for the last six months. Dust's work has made Edmund's the first scientific equipment company to seriously enter the field of Kirlian photography.

"We got into this a year ago," ex-

plains Dust in his wildly disorganized laboratory. "We heard all the crazy stuff. But, at the same time, we had serious researchers coming to us asking questions about Kirlian equipment. We looked into it and there *was* something to it. We don't claim to know *what* the equipment records. But we do know for certain that something in the process is affecting film in a way we've been totally unaware of in the past. I can't explain it. I know it's for real and has rules by which it works. It can be measured and predicted. Maybe like brain waves and gravity, it's something that's been there all the time but which we haven't been able to see before now."

Last year, Edmund's assembled 50 Kirlian units and advertised them in a tiny ad in its catalog. Within a week it had over three hundred orders.

"It was a surprise," explained Jack Scharff, the company's marketing director. "It wasn't kids or weirdos responding, but doctors and medical centers. We had doctors coming in to buy a kit and asking that their name be kept secret. That's the way it is. A lot of serious research has begun, but people are still afraid to talk about some of it."

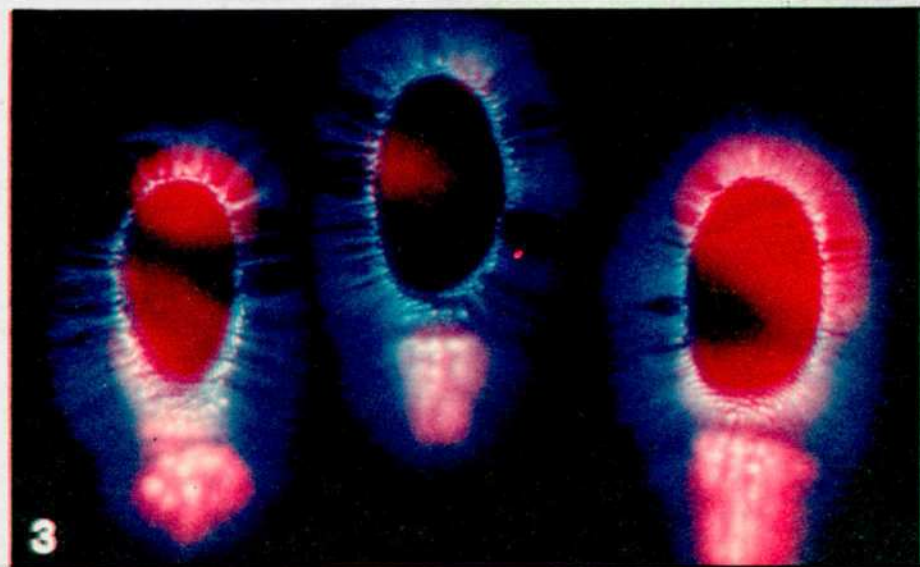
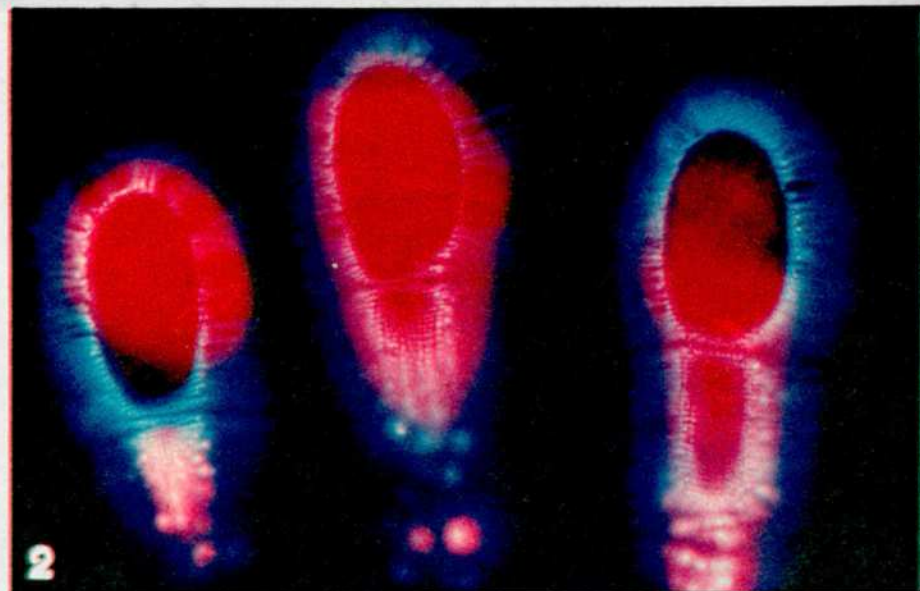
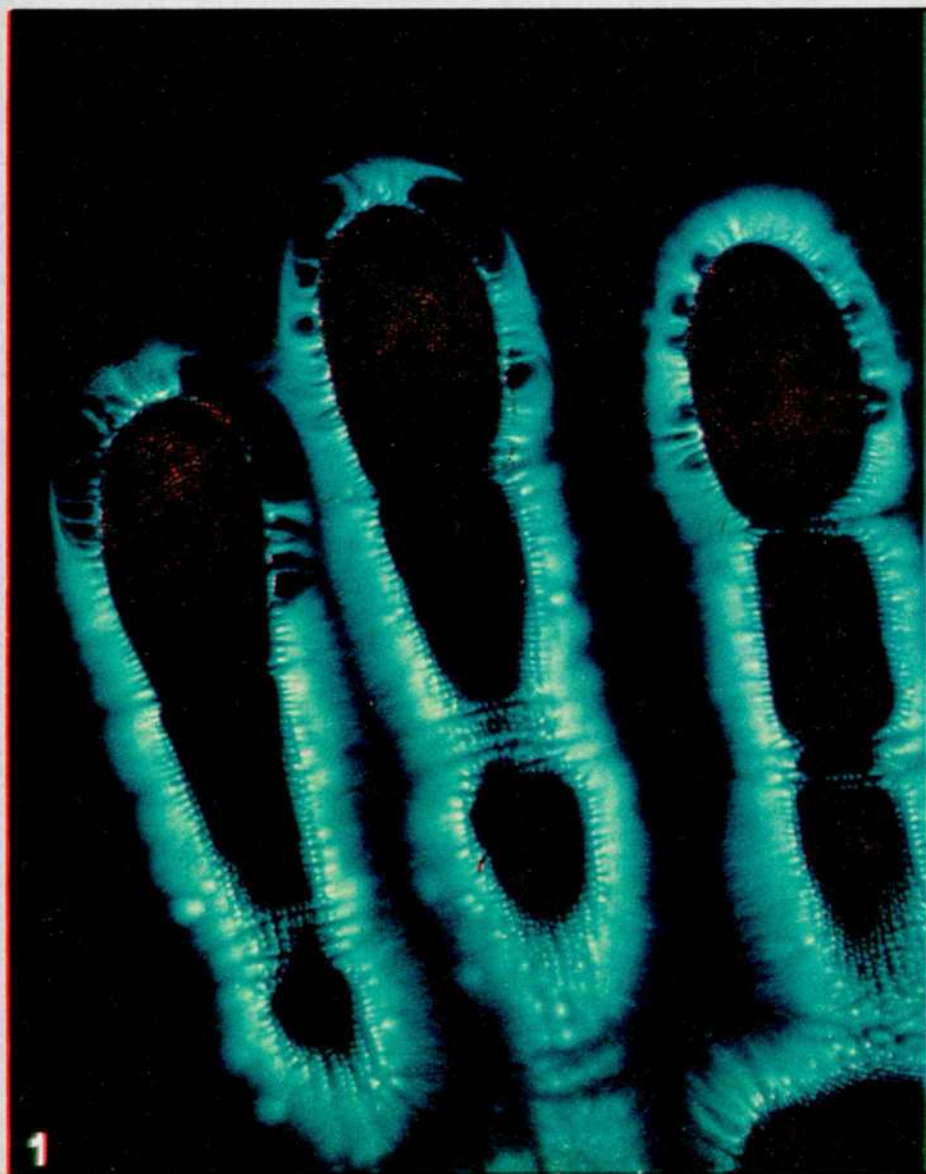
One of Edmund's recent sales was to the Eastman Kodak Company, which is interested in exploring the photographic potential of the process.

That's how I got interested in the Kirlian process. Originally, it was a novelty, something to play with in my color darkroom. But soon I found that I'd become involved with something very serious indeed.

After losing my wife as a willing darkroom test subject, I turned to the trees outside my home. One of the first leaves I photographed on the Kirlian unit came from a red maple tree. The finished picture looked like a psychedelic poster.

The leaf surface was an explosion of vivid pinks and blues. Veins and internal leaf structures were clearly outlined, but superimposed over them was a seething, swirling "something" not normally visible to the human eye. At the edges, the seven-pointed red maple leaf was outlined with tiny bursts of white light, as evenly placed as the rows of airport runway lights.

I photographed a leaf from a hibiscus bush immediately after picking and then once every ten hours for two days. After being



(1) The blue surrounding each of the author's fingers in a relatively even halo indicates a calm state of mind. (2) Then, during a one-day fast, the blue changes into pink and then to vivid crimson at night. Red indicates pain or discomfort. (3) Two minutes after ingesting two shots of gin, the aura had changed dramatically in the Kirlian print.



plucked, its internal lights glowed brightly and then, in progressive stages, began to fade. The colors receded from the leaf's edges toward the stem. In two days time—during which the leaf had not begun to visibly dry out or change its normal crisp, green character—it had completely blacked-out and failed to register on the Kirlian equipment. From all appearances, "something" inside the leaf had flared wildly after it was picked and then faded and finally ceased as the leaf died.

Using a potted philodendron, I took a picture of a healthy, living leaf and it came out a normal blue. Then I sliced off the tip of the leaf with a razor knife and took a Kirlian picture again. Near the cut, an angry blob of red appeared and grew to encompass half of the leaf. After four days, the angry blobs began to fade; ten days later the leaf had returned to its normal blue color except for a bit of pink along the injured edge.

It appeared as if "something" had reacted to the injuries (see photos, page 18), and then surrounded the injured area, remaining there as the healing progressed. Perhaps the "something" was the healing process itself.

My hand's aura was a glowing blue when I was calm, each finger surrounded by a halo of bluish-white flares. After some experimentation, I found that some dramatic changes in my aura could be triggered by music.

Normally, classical music gives me a sense of rest and well-being. On film it registers as a strong, wide aura with blues and some flecks of pink. After yoga exercises and deep breathing, my aura changed again. This time the pinks were glowing strongly. Some yellow had come through and was glowing in the middle of my fingers.

For musical contrast, I immediately put on a wildly discordant rock and roll record which I hate. I took a picture of my fingers after three minutes of the discordant music and, to my amazement, my aura pattern was now blotchy and irregular and parts had begun to black-out where the "something" had been brightest before.

Although this luminous "something" glowing on my photographic plates is new to me, I can recall seeing it somewhere before.

I remember pictures on the walls of the grammar school I once attended: Jesus looked down on the classroom with a halo encircling his head. Saints pictured in our books were always surrounded by luminous auras. Since then, I've seen countless pictures of holy men from

dozens of cultures—all surrounded by translucent fields of "something." Hindu gods have halos; carved Buddhas are surrounded by sculpted flames. Holy men, mystics, gods and seers—all seem surrounded by the same halos that have flashed across sheets of film in my darkroom.

\* \* \*

The Kirlian process—like X-rays and other great scientific finds—was discovered by accident. Thirty-five years ago, Semyon Kirlian, a professional electrician and amateur photographer in the Soviet city of Krasnodar, was toying in his workshop. While attempting to photograph spark patterns made by high frequency electrical impulses, he inadvertently recorded his hand's aura.

By the early 1960s, the Soviet government was plowing over \$20 million a year into projects exploring his process. The Russians now routinely use Kirlian photography in a number of practical agriculture applications and in cancer research.

Their research remained secret until 1968, when a free lance writer from New Jersey and her Canadian companion visited the USSR and discovered the Kirlian process. Lynn Schroeder returned to her Newark home in 1969 and, along with Sheila Ostrander, wrote a book, "Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain." When published in 1970, the book's revelations enraged the Soviet authorities, who promptly banned both women.

Back in the States, nobody wanted to believe them or their book. Book sales lagged at first while the two women trekked across the country trying to entice researchers into building a Kirlian apparatus.

"You can't imagine how frustrating it was at first," said Lynn Schroeder. "We had come back, almost dizzy with the implications of what we had seen. Everywhere we went in Russia; scientists were doing these incredible experiments with forces that people in America didn't want to tinker with, or even admit existed."

"What was so maddening was that we didn't want to debate the issue. Why intellectualize over it? Take it into the lab and monitor it, measure it, then make your decision. No one would even listen."

Among those listening to the claims were skeptics like Donald Leavitt, a photographic engineer and consultant to the Polaroid Corp. and NASA. He thinks the process might be a complicated result of "magnetic-wave physics and particle acoustics." The energy "aura," he thinks, might be a recording of the changing moisture content of body tissues.

Despite that skepticism, Kirlian



The halos depicted in artwork through the ages, top left, bear a resemblance to "auras." The photo at top right shows the reaction of the author's wife after he pinched her; the "aura" shatters wildly. Lester Dust, lower photo, of Edmund Scientific Co., demonstrates a simple Kirlian unit. When a charge of high-frequency electricity is passed through the plate, film and hand, the undulating and colorful aura can be recorded as it spreads along the fingers. The process must be done in total darkness. A finished print (under the hand) has been substituted for the piece of film.

units were built quietly in various research labs. A psychologist at the University of California Los Angeles Neuro-Psychiatric Institute, Dr. Thelma Moss, built a unit and began some wide-ranging experiments. She now says that Kirlian photography "reveals enormous differences in energy states in individuals and may have practical applications in treating diseases, alcoholism, and for studying people's interactions."

Today, even the U.S. government has jumped on the Kirlian bandwagon and is funding research. As usual, the Pentagon wants to figure out ways to kill people with it; the CIA wants to use it as a new method of lie detection and the FBI has found ways to use it in criminal investigations.

Such uses pale in comparison to Kirlian projects involving living subjects.

Last year, for instance, Rockland State Hospital in New York began the first Kirlian hospital program. Patients in the hospital's out-patient psychiatric clinic were photographed when they first checked-in and

then re-photographed during their treatment. Dr. David Sheinkin found that photographs of the most severely disturbed patients' fingertips consistently showed disjointed blotches of light. As the treatment progressed, however, the random lights appeared to consolidate as a recognizable aura pattern formed around the fingertips. As further treatment continued and patients became emotionally stabilized, their auras became stronger and more unified.

Sheinkin isn't the first American doctor attempting to make a connection between the Kirlian aura and emotional or physiological states. Other scientists think that the Kirlian process, properly developed, could provide a powerful diagnostic tool.

In both Russia and America, researchers have found that plant diseases show up vividly in Kirlian photographs, some a full three weeks before visual signs of the disease appeared in the plant. In some cases, it appears that diseases show up in, or perhaps begin with, subtle disturbances in the plant's energy aura.



What if the human energy field registers ailments the same way? What if sophisticated Kirlian equipment could detect the early stages of diseases such as cancer?

That possibility now concerns a number of researchers. In the June issue of the prestigious "American Laboratory" magazine, Drs. Keith Brewer and Richard Passwater described their research into the bio-luminescence of human cells and explained their recognition of Kirlian photography as a legitimate diagnostic tool. Their work leads them to conclude that "conditions exist in cancer cells which should make them particularly sensitive to Kirlian photography."

Research along similar lines is also being done:

• Gerald G. Jamopolsky, staff psychiatrist at the Child Center in Kentfield, California, who is using Kirlian to explore the mechanics of concentration and the learning process in Children.

He has found that hypnosis dramatically alters the Kirlian aura. He also investigated changing auras in children suffering terminal diseases.

• Dr. Zabov V. Harvalik, former professor at Arkansas University, has now developed a Xerox method of producing Kirlian images, and is studying the "language" of concentric rings of luminescence which appear in the auras of healthy human beings.

• James and Larry Amos, of Sonoma State College in New Mexico, are using Kirlian to compare the

auras of psychiatric patients in state mental hospitals.

• In a number of departments at New Mexico State University, physics students are using Kirlian methods to explore emotional changes caused by artistic and musical activities.

Kirlian photography is being used with equally interesting results to investigate acupuncture. The centuries-old Chinese technique of using needles to treat various body ailments and pains has recently been popularized in the U.S. Acupuncture is based on a theory that the body is criss-crossed by a grid of energy-carrying "tubes" or "meridians."

Along these meridians are 800 points which are used for needle insertions and which affect various organs or areas.

What does this all have to do with Kirlian photography?

Russian researchers have used Kirlian photography to chart the body and have found about 800 points on the skin where extra-strong bursts or "fountains" of luminous energy are evident. Those spots correspond directly to the ancient Chinese acupuncture charts.

"We're not ready to explain how it all ties together, but we know that there is a direct connection involved," explained Dr. Carl Schleicher, head of Mankind Research Unlimited of Washington, D.C., which has been carrying on government-funded research in the fields of acupuncture and Kirlian

photography since 1972. Last year the firm used Kirlian photography to monitor persons before and after receiving acupuncture treatments.

"We're not sure what we're working with here," explained Schleicher. The Russians call it a 'bio-plasma body.' Whatever, it appears that there is a life energy field that operates between the circulatory and nervous systems. By measuring the speed of acupuncture reactions — the time it takes for a part of the body to actually respond to the inserted needles — we found that the reaction time is slower than the responses of the circulatory system.

"We know for a fact that acupuncture works. We don't know why. We

know that Kirlian records something that is dramatically affected by acupuncture. But we don't know what it is. What we are trying to do is to take it back into the lab and attempt to prove or disprove various theories," said Schleicher. "What we have here is no longer a bizarre item of the 'occult.' We're dealing with a very real level of energy. It's only a matter of time before researchers will know the exact mechanics of how it works." □

HOAG LEVINS is a freelance writer and photographer. He is a frequent contributor to Today Magazine.

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