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# Seeing Hysteria: A Case, A Study

Ela Przybylo,  
with photographs by  
Ela Przybylo and Michael Holly

**I** COME TO HYSTERIA lost, confused, detached. Hysteria's "disappearance," its current fragmentation, desensationalizes the hysterical body (Micale, 1993). And all those women depicted-invented by the "great optical machine" of the Salpêtrière hospital in late nineteenth-century Paris, by the Salpêtrière's veritable "image factory," become fixed (Didi-Huberman 9, 30). Who were they? What did they say? Where did they go? Much of this information is either lost, as most personal histories are, or occluded by the auteur of hysteria, Doctor Charcot himself, founder of the Salpêtrière's neurology clinic, for he did not like listening, only seeing (Marneffe 75, 77). Described by Sigmund Freud, who was one of his pupils and admirers, as a "*visuel*"—a man who knows through seeing—Jean-Martin Charcot, along with one of his right-wing men, photographer Paul Régnard, ate lives up, processing them through the twin medico-photographic project of the Salpêtrière hospital (Freud, "Charcot" 12).

*Augustine* was one such life. As one famous hysteric who went through the optical machine of the Salpêtrière, Augustine, like many hysterics, was put under hypnosis and under ether and chloroform. The photographs taken of her were calotypes, executed with a large format camera. These photographs were both posed and "photoshopped" using painting

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techniques: the hysterics themselves, the backgrounds, and the final photograph were each in turn regulated by means of paint. In other words, all these elements collaborated to create the hysteria that we can, today, see on paper. These photographs became the very proof of hysteria. As historian Sander Gilman comments writing on hysteria, “[d]isease is only real if it is universal. And it is universal only if it can be seen and the act of seeing reproduced” (379).

But while there was the hypnosis, the ether and chloroform, the photographic staging, flash, and subsequent retouching work, *Augustine* was there as well and she was not mute, and she was not passive (Didi-Huberman 215, Baer, Marneffe 84). It took skill, reflex, and probably cunning to be “the star model for a whole concept of hysteria” (Didi-Huberman 117). And Augustine used her histrionic skills, finally, after the masterful execution of many poses, after at least seventeen snaps of the shutter, to “put an end to her existence as a ‘case,’” to dress up as a man and walk out of Charcot’s “living pathological museum” (Marneffe 79, Didi-Huberman 276, Charcot 3). So, hysteria, and most especially Augustine’s hysteria, was staged, in a very complex way, by the medico-photographic institution of the Salpêtrière: by the lights, the camera, the props, the flash, the photographer, the physician, and Augustine—the hysteric—herself. It was a collusion of all these forces, and probably many more, that led to the invention of Augustine’s hysteria and perhaps hysteria more broadly.

The process of opening the shutter on myself (by way of someone else) is an exercise in patience. I am not Augustine, I do not wish to be, and I do not wish to pretend to be. But Augustine, whom so many see, needed to be placed, visually, in a more intricate web. She never acted in a vacuum; her performance had an entirely different dynamic of agency. The patient and physician spiraled off into hysterical plateaus *together*. They needed one another; they fueled one another’s performance. Elisabeth Bronfen speaks of the “murky enmeshment of mutual consent, mutual deceit, and mutual desire” (174). But that was not all, it was not just physician and patient; the scene was further complicated by the technologies of photography—the lights, the flash, the backdrop, the camera—which were there as well. And then there was the photographer (here—Régnaud), Charcot’s middleman, and who knows what other characters appeared on set. There is no “Augustine, the hysteric” without the others. Speaking of individual agency and individual performance, in the photographic landscapes of hysteria, is insufficient. My *mirror* mimics Augustine’s gaze, it reminds us of the mess of physician, photographer, camera apparatus, ourselves, and, of course, Augustine.

With “Seeing Hysteria: A Case, A Study,” I staged the photographs so that these layers of production are transparent, so that we may remember them, knitted together as they were. Looking at these photographs, so obviously a mimicry of the Salpêtrière photos, I hope that we are made to see the colluding layers which sedimented into the legendary hysteria we know today. Here the mirror looks not inward into Augustine, into the hysteric’s soul, but outward, at the production crew (the photographer’s hand, the photographic apparatus), and through the screen at us. Looking at *this* Augustine, looking at *Charcot’s* Augustine, we need to see ourselves looking. There is no Augustine, anywhere in all these iterations; there is only the production of “Augustine—the hysteric.” Our Augustine, the hysteric. The hysteric: I, me, you. And how can we speak of “Augustine’s performance” if we are all there with her? Where is *her* self?

Conceptual artist Mary Kelly answered this question or, at least, unsettled it. Drawing on Charcot’s enigmatic labeling of hysteria’s phases, she took up the *attitudes passionnelles* (the third of Charcot’s four phases of hysteria) in the first part of her multi-textual *Interim* project—*Corpus* (1984–1985).<sup>1</sup> Kelly gave us not the body but the trappings of femininity: handbags, a shirt, a leather jacket, shoes. She refused to rehearse the woman’s body, so as not to fetishize it or foster male scopophilia (Jones 21–52). Where is “Augustine”? Where is “woman”? Perhaps, more accurately, where is “femininity”? And, in order to understand this, Kelly insisted that we must “distance the spectator [distance ourselves] from the anxious proximity of the body” because “[u]ntil now the woman as spectator has been pinned to the surface of the picture” (*Interim* 55; Kelly quoted in Iversen 143). Art historian Griselda Pollock applauds Kelly for absenting the body, but art historian Amelia Jones argues against this dismissal of body art on the presumption of how spectators will engage or relate (24–25). The image of a body, a female body ill at ease, may draw us toward different types of looking, such as *interrupted looking*, where the pleasure of seeing another body is balanced with the impossibility of being absorbed by the image, of being escorted by the gaze.

Nonetheless, following Mary Kelly, and building upon this feminist fascination with hysteria, I want to complicate the parameters of the body.

1 See photographs of Mary Kelly’s *Interim* exhibit from the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, in 1990, online at [www.brianprince.com/file\\_cabinet/marykelly/SCRIPT/interim.html](http://www.brianprince.com/file_cabinet/marykelly/SCRIPT/interim.html). The four parts of *Interim* were *Corpus*, *Pecunia*, *Historia*, *Potestas*. Note especially the *Corpus* portion of the project, which consisted of thirty images paired with text panels. *Corpus* was divided into five sections (with three image/text couplets in each), each named after Charcot’s *attitudes passionnelles*.

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I implicate the other, the physician, the photographic machine, and ourselves through an interruption of the body—the mirror. The body extends beyond the limits of skin to include the hardware of hysteria’s production. “Why the face? Because in the face the corporeal *surface* makes visible something of the movements of the soul, ideally” (Didi-Huberman 49). The movements reflected in the mirror are those of the photographing hand, the camera-machine, or, alternately, a blankness, a void. I mime the hysterical body. The mirror extends the body, the hysterical body past itself, into its complicated performance-troupe (which includes both photographer and physician, and also us, the viewers). We are part of the hysterical body for as long as we read it, see into it, see into ourselves looking.

I mime also Kelly’s *Corpus*, her dynamic play of image and text. Alongside each of my photographs appears a text panel with the “chatter” of Augustine the hysteric and the chatter too of Charcot and Didi-Huberman. So many voices are necessary to “knot” the tale (Bronfen). And we really need to hear Augustine, whatever snippets there are, despite Charcot’s dismissal of the hysteric’s speech as “chatter” and her screams as “much ado about nothing” (quoted in Didi-Huberman 262). I mimic Kelly’s image/text couplets because they speak of layers and tensions: photography and writing, Charcot’s visual language and Freud’s listening manoeuvres, and also: the complicated relationships within the text itself between the commanding voice of Charcot and the muted but persistent chatter of Augustine.

The handwriting is a struggle to read, and it iterates at times some aspect of “Augustine’s real language of trauma” (Bronfen 195). It is imperfect, reminding us of the impossibility of perfect miming or iteration. The writing “is obviously more than what is said [although this too is important]. It’s also a means of invoking the texture of speaking, listening, touching [...] a way of visualizing, not valorizing, what is assumed to be outside of seeing” (Kelly, *Interim* 55).

So, in this project I undertake the work of miming. I mime Mary Kelly’s textuality, the hysteric, the “image factory.” Luce Irigaray (1993) writes, “[w]oman ought to be able to find herself, among other things, through the images of herself already deposited in history and the conditions of production of the work of man” (11). In miming, as in all iteration, is thus the power to reference *and* alter. Jacques Derrida, writing on writing, also reminds us that pure origin of intention is unlikely: “[e]very sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), as a small or large unity, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks” (320). To mime is thus to create, not to replicate. Again, Irigaray links hysteria’s miming to a potential “caricaturing” or “deforming” of the “masculine

language” (*This Sex Which is Not One* 137). Hence, *productive mimesis*—“play with mimesis [...] so as to make ‘visible’ [...] what was supposed to remain invisible” (Chisholm 302, Robinson 39, Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* 76).

But play or not, the photographs I have mimed are more or less uncomfortable to look at. Less—because there is a normatively gendered body, thin and white, in a state of undress. More—because the body is lost in a bed without a face, until the final scene, *fugue*, when she escapes stylishly in drag. We might enjoy the body, but without a “beautiful” face—with a void, a disk for a face—this viewing is interrupted. Our scopophilia is tapered. Our focus is transferred to struggle. I think it is all too easy to love Augustine, and to love the hysteric, because she functions as an archetype, almost. But there were real bodies, were there not? Augustine cross-dressed, Dora dismissed Freud, Geneviève cut off her nipple. How can we not love them, not love the heroine-hysterics who slipped away? So the miming, the mirror, is also, for us, interrupting our reverie.

### Some Notes on Technique

All photographs are *calotypes* shot by way of a large-format, four-by-five-inch camera. Scenes were artificially lit using hot lamps and quite obviously staged to mime the photographs taken of Augustine by Paul Régnard at the Salpêtrière as part of the second volume of the *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière*, 1878. The photographs, as well as the type panels, were subsequently developed using standard black-and-white printing procedures. Any imperfections visible in the photographs are present also in their original negatives.

### Exhibit Information

This project was on display in the small gallery space on the garden level of Assiniboia Hall at the University of Alberta, thanks to the support of Michelle Meagher and the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Alberta. The photographs were displayed alongside the text panels, both of which were mounted in simple black frames (see figure 1 for a photograph of the exhibit).

How can we  
not love them,  
not love the  
heroine-  
hysterics who  
slipped away?



Figure 1. *Seeing Hysteria: A Case, A Study* on display in the Women's Studies space in Assiniboia Hall, at the University of Alberta in Winter 2011. Photograph by Michael Holly.

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**HYSTÉRO-ÉPILEPSIE**

ÉTAT NORMAL

The lady you see here—did her half-smile heal the ill cast by her gaze? Here, gentlemen, is Augustine, your favorite case. And here is the portrait of what is called her 'normal' and 'actual state.' Here, 'our subject' is posing, with a motionless bust, a side-long glance, a stiff arm. A body taking on a pose. And what curiosity could possibly be satisfied by a face that is so very neutral? What subjective drama could be borne by such neutrality? In this image, plate 14 of the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, Augustine looks more or less like anyone. She is a blond, tall and broad for her age, and in all respects gives the impression of a pubescent girl. She is active, intelligent, affectionate and impressionable, but also capricious, and quite enjoys attracting attention. She was admitted for paralysis of sensation in the right arm and attacks of severe hysteria.



*appel*

Mr. C. told me that he would kill me.  
What he showed me, I didn't know what it meant.  
He spread my legs... I didn't know that  
it was an animal that was going to bite me...  
I'm going to go out every night because he  
wants to go to bed with me. He told me that  
he would kill me. He hunts me... He says  
that later on it will make me feel good...  
But it's a sin... I will be forced to tell Papa...  
That's how people make children. What!  
a baby! If Mr. C. were to make me a baby...  
And mother claimed that she was putting  
me in a safe house!



*érotisme*

A hysterogenic point has just been pressed again  
and the epileptic attack is now being reproduced.  
(The patient suddenly cries: "Mama, I'm afraid!")  
Now come the attitudes passionnelles; if  
we allow things to continue, we will encounter  
the epileptiform attack again. There is a kind  
of resolution, followed by a sort of contracture.  
This is occasionally an auxiliary phenomenon  
of the attacks. (The patient cries, "Ah, Mama!")  
You can see how hysterics scream.  
One might say that it's much ado about  
nothing.



*supplication*

*C. after making her all sorts of dazzling promises and giving her pretty dresses, etc., seeing that she would not give in, threatened her with a razor. Taking advantage of her fright, he forced her to drink some liquor, undressed her, threw her on the bed and consummated relations. Then the attacks broke out...*



*extase*

*Simulation... is met with at every step in the history of hysteria. One finds oneself acknowledging the amazing craft, sagacity, and perseverance which women... especially under the influence of this great neurosis... especially when a physician is to be the victim.*



*menacé*

*What do you know about medicine? I don't want to feel you near me! Oh! You really did hurt me. No, you won't manage! Help! Camel! Loud! Good-for-nothing! Pardon me! Pardon me, Monsieur! Leave me alone. It's impossible! You don't want to anymore? Again! Get rid of that snake you have in your pants! You wanted me to sin before you, but you had already sinned.*



*fugue*

*But the hysterical body extravagates any concept of the 'real body.' Even Augustine, breaking with classical poses, ridiculed to 'extravagant acts'; Augustine jumped out of windows, climbed trees, scaled up the roof of the Salpêtrière. She had to be brought back inside by force and have a straightjacket put on, which she ripped apart, she threw everything in her reach at people's heads. This movement, this weaving of charm into refusal and hatred, insidious or explosive, can be described as the musical figure of the fugue, from the Latin for flight. Augustine's story ends with such a drama. So she herself put an end to her existence as a 'case'; she disguised herself as a man, and fled the Salpêtrière. Her guardians, though attentive, fell for it. Fugue: the end of nonreceiving.*