

Chasing Gazes

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“Behold the madwoman who dances by, as she vaguely recalls something. Children chase her with stones, as if she were a blackbird. Men chase her with their gaze.”¹

And traces of this gaze, crystallised in photographs, emerge from forgotten archives. The “madwoman” strikes a pose and on her body is written the “condition” mentioned in the legend below the photograph. She is but an example of this condition, an object, an instrument the doctor uses for the diagnosis and prognosis of hysterical states. The image helps him build his knowledge of hysteria, or, more accurately, feeds his desire to create such knowledge.

Artist Tejal Shah invokes such troubling visual epistemologies, developed by the medical establishment in nineteenth-century Europe, in her multi-media exhibition titled *Pentimento*². Shah’s interest in hysteria first found expression in *Encounter(s)*, a series of collaborative performances she did with the Bangkok-based artist, Varsha Nair, in 2006. During an art residency in Paris in 2007, Shah discovered the archive of the Salpêtrier hospital, which has photographs of hysterical women. These images were seen as providing evidence of hysteria and delineating its various nuances. In actuality, they mapped hysteria on the woman’s body, emphasised its ‘feminine’ nature and claimed to create knowledge about it. The images fascinated and troubled Shah and, eventually, inspired the series of photographic recreations she did with dancer Marion Perrin, which are presented here.

Shah’s continued engagement with the “herstory” of hysteria led her, in 2009, to create *00:00:20:27* and “*When I am bored, all I do is make a red knot and look at it*”, a video installation and a kinetic sculpture that are also part of the show. The two works use a highly abstracted language to critique the archive and offer alternate ways of thinking about women and hysteria. The exhibition’s title, then, becomes a metaphor for the artist’s methodology. *Pentimento* is a term used for changes or adjustments made in a painting, which leave behind traces of figures or objects that have been painted over. Shah’s works, too, reveal traces of a buried history of disturbing iconographic practices, the historical designation of women as the primary ‘carriers’ of hysteria, and the violent treatment meted out to them.

Shah’s theoretically informed oeuvre also reveals a sustained exploration of intertextuality, recitation and performance. While working on *Pentimento* she was inspired by a number of texts: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story ‘*The Yellow Wallpaper*’ (1892), a semi-autobiographical account of a woman confined and prohibited from writing because it is seen as exacerbating her “madness”; Georges Didi-Huberman’s classic of French cultural studies, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (2003); and Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961). In these works, as in previous ones, Shah does what Jacques Derrida has called “citational grafting”,



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or the transplantation of a sign into a new context and the ascription of new meanings to it, irrespective of its author's intentions³. Finally, Shah's consistent use of her body in performance introduces liveness into the white cube and, in her performative images and videos, serves up a new text for reckoning and deconstruction.

Herstories of hysteria

In *Pentimento* Shah responds most directly to the archive created under the aegis of Jean Martin Charcot, popularly known as the founder of neurology, who served at the Salpêtrier from the mid-nineteenth century till his death in 1893. The Salpêtrier of the time has been described by Didi-Huberman as a female inferno in the midst of Paris' Belle Epoque, a mecca of the great confinement. By the late nineteenth century, it housed 4,000 women: paupers, vagabonds, beggars, epileptics, old maids, 'women in second childhood', 'misshapen and malformed innocents', incorrigible women and more⁴. The 'insanity' of these women was attributed to masturbation, scroufula, blows and wounds, debauchery and licentiousness, cholera, erotomania, alcoholism, rape, bad reading habits, nostalgia, misery, etc. Hysteria, which had always been associated with women, was, in previous centuries, thought to have been caused by the uterus. Such theories were later abandoned and the 'seat' of hysteria was thought to lie in the cranial cavity and, further, in female sentimentality.

Charcot is said to have rediscovered hysteria, named it, defined it, tabulated it and studied it with extreme clinical precision. He not only ushered in a new field of knowledge, centred on hysteria and its treatment, but also set up a photographic studio at the Salpêtrier with financial help from the French government. The studio produced four volumes of photographs, titled *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1876, 1877, 1880) and *Nouvelle Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1888), which were widely reproduced and circulated. Charcot had the hysterics photographed extensively: their poses, attacks, passions, spasms, convulsions, blackouts, catalepsies, ecstasies, comas, lethargies and deliria. He wanted to, through the act of photographing these hysterical states, arrive at a carefully calibrated concept of hysteria.

It was not coincidental that Charcot used photography as a tool to arrive at diagnoses of and prognoses for hysteria. By then photography as a medium had made significant technological advancements and was adopted by the scientific, medical, legal and political apparatuses as a technology that recorded and provided 'evidence'. The photograph's perceived ability to tell the truth — as compared with sketches or paintings that could manipulate what was and exaggerate it — contributed to its elevation as irrefutable proof. However, the photograph's entry into the domain of anthropological and scientific certitude cannot be disassociated from its discursive meanings, as John Tagg reminds us⁵. Quoting Foucault, he insists that photography must be understood in the context of the institutions that framed it (in this case, the hospital) and within the relevant power-knowledge nexus. A Foucauldian framing of Charcot's photographic enterprise is particularly befitting, for not only did photographs assist him in his experimental, museological and pedagogical procedures, but they also gave him the power to foresee the hysteric's affectations, to anticipate knowledge.

Evidenced, again

In Shah's suite of ten recreations from the Salpêtrier archive, we encounter solitary bodies at rest, isolated against a solid-coloured backdrop. Some are frozen in dancery poses, others in serene sleep, yet oth-



ers in implausible bodily contortions. Illuminated by a crisp light, these portraits convey a feeling of unease that fills the frame and reaches the viewer. There is a quiet poignancy in these images that is occasionally interrupted by a confrontation with the bizarre or the discomfiture of the figures. If one approaches these images without any knowledge of the historical past to which they allude, one might still walk away disconcerted by their desubjectivised portrayal of women as illustrations of a condition. We are forced to look and look again at the images, which make us, quite suddenly, self-conscious of our gaze. Framed as the figures are by a caption meant to explain them, we look for signs in the image, on the woman's body, that might betray her condition, her deviancy.

By recreating these archival photographs with her own body, Shah articulates her empathy, as a postcolonial subject, not only with the hysterics of the Salpêtrier, but, more generally, with the marginalised. On the one hand, we are made aware of the pathologising gaze of the image, which invites us to occupy it; on the other, we're confronted by violence enacted on 'madwomen', which comes across most forcefully in *Swelling of the Neck in a Hysteric*. By contrast, *Photophobic Hysteric* betrays no signs of overt violence, yet one can clearly see discomfort written on the woman's face. Before entering the photographic studio, a physician had administered electric shock treatment to her, singeing her suborbital nerves. Charcot's photographer, Alberte Londe, used a significant amount of light to capture this image even though it was precisely light that tormented this woman.

Shah's photographs are re-stagings of the originals, which were themselves re-enactments. Many of the symptoms were artificially induced by the use of hypnosis, and theatrically reproduced in the photographic studio under the stage direction of the doctor and with the active participation of the patient. So impressed were doctors by the seemingly prodigious nature of the hysteric's body that it was immaterial whether these reproductions caused the patients any pain. This malleability of the hysteric's 'trigger body' can be seen in *Lethargy*, which, in Charcot's

scheme, displayed “muscular hyperexcitability” and *Lethargy – Triptych*, which demonstrated responsiveness to the slightest touch.

Shah plays both photographer and patient in these images, complicating arguments about the unidirectional exercise of power by the photographer over the patient. Through her own performance, Shah hopes to expose the “triangulation between the photographer, doctor and patient”⁶, the coercive and consenting nature of their relationship. “If you don’t perform your illness,” Shah said to this writer, “you are relegated to a dark corner of the hospital. It was only through performativity that the patients were able to get some attention and have the physician look at them.” Given the low doctor-to-patient ratio at the Salpêtrier, this is not surprising.

The photograph, in this instance, was not the product of ‘direct observation’, in the classical, experimental sense, but provoked observation, which, as illustrated earlier, doctored the conditions pictured as well as the actual contractures shown. Some of Shah’s recreations reveal this fabrication. For example, in the diptych, *Onset of the Attack* and *The Approaching Attack*, Shah’s re-enactments of Genevieve reveal that her demeanour during the attack and before its onset were characterised by calmness. Charcot’s claim that a marked physiological change occurred in the body of the hysteric when she underwent an attack or, more generally, that the body spoke of the inner psychic states of the hysteric, is rebutted here.

Shah’s most self-conscious depiction of madness can be seen in *Group Catalepsy or the Ship of Fools*, an image in which she also directly references Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*. The Ship of Fools appeared as leprosy vanished in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. Though mad people were excluded and enclosed in structures within cities, they were also expelled and forcibly exiled on ships that were let out to sea. Centuries later, in Charcot’s time, the hysteric was seen as someone who could be cured. This image shows hysterics, including two men, hypnotised with a lark mirror⁷. In this image, as in the entire series, Shah does what she loves best: cross-dressing. The artist has said that dressing up as a hyper-feminine woman, as she does in this series, is as much a form of gender drag for her as being in men’s clothes. And Shah’s decision to cast herself as all the women in the scene creates a dream-like scenario that also highlights the depersonalisation of the hysteric in the eyes of science.

Finally, Shah’s recitation of these photographs in the present allows them to function as evidence of the existence of evidentiary photography that attached itself to scientific projects in the nineteenth century. By introducing her own body and that of Perrin’s as additional, contemporary texts, Shah’s images turn the photo-as-evidence on its head, suggesting new, feminist ways of engaging with a troubling archive.

Towards interiority

In *Encounter(s)*, a series of photographs based on Shah’s collaborative performance with Varsha Nair, two bodies are connected by a white, embroidered exoskeleton and seen lying on the floor, wrapped around walls or draped over stairwells. There is a clear disjuncture here between the desires of the inner self and the limitations of the outer body, between wanting to touch and not being able to. This straight-jacket, used in the homes of the mentally ill to restrict movement, is here a bridge that connects. While it can be seen as a metonym for the history



of violence, of visuality, that connects the artist Tejal Shah to the madwomen of Salpêtrier's past, it is also reflective of our modern, mediated condition. It symbolises the paradox of feeling virtually connected to others, as we often do with our friends on Facebook or Orkut, while being simultaneously disconnected from them in a corporeal, hear-and-now sense.

Shah's critique of the externality of the Salpêtrier photographs emerges from the other works in the show, such as *00:00:20:27*, which is projected as an elliptical image at the end of a 25-foot black tunnel, through which one must enter and exit the exhibition. Given the installation's spatial configuration within the gallery space, visitors have no choice but to submit. At the end of the tunnel is a video that appears at first to be a still image. Linger a while and you realise it is a feigned simulation, as movement has been slowed down almost 50 times. This deception is significant; it is a critique of the fabrication of the Salpêtrier images, and photography's 'truth-telling' as well.

The installation seems to recreate the experience of looking through a telescope, a pinhole camera or, most obviously, what Foucault has called panopticism⁸. The architecture of the installation is reminiscent of the surveillance mechanisms of the asylum and, more generally, the gaze directed at the mentally ill, in the nineteenth century as much as today. Yet there is something seductive and shining at the end of the tunnel, a quality that draws us in. We are invited to be voyeurs — and we comply. Close-up, we realise that what shines is the reflection of light off two pieces of metal gauze carelessly hung on the wall. The metal netting, which make the video gilded and attractive, symbolically also represents the bars that separate the prisoner from the world outside, or, in this case, us from the inner psychic states of the hysteric.

The repetitive, percussive sound creates a feeling of anticipation, of our hunger for knowledge and power. The body here is not a signifier of the hysteric's inner, psychic states, not a blackboard on which are written symptoms of a condition. Rather, it becomes coterminous with a distressed interior whose turmoil expresses itself through the body. It is not the disciplined body that must accurately and publicly project a condition; it is the body caught in duress, in privacy. Neither the doctor nor the viewer can impose on it control through the modalities of vision. We can only submit.

"When I am bored, all I do is make a red knot and look at it" gives form, motion and sound to an inner, unutterable torsion experienced by the hysteric, using a minimal, abstracted language. The title of the sculpture is a quote from the diary of Augustine, who entered the Salpêtrier at the age of 15, became the most photographed model of the Iconographie (because of her prodigious body), and eventually escaped from the hospital dressed as a man. Ropes of varying lengths fall out, tendril-like, from a wall. Red paint slowly leaks into them and they rotate along their individual axes. Slowly the tension builds up, then gets released unexpectedly and the rope slaps against the floor, making a 'thwack' sound. While red's associations with pain, violence, romance and eroticism are obvious, red knots could also signify knots of menstrual blood, and red ropes could be arteries twisting and turning on the inside. As the ropes form coils on the wall, they also uncoil at the edges, becoming untethered, giving the hysteric's interiority an uninhibited, unframed, disembodied expression.

While the sculpture grows from being colourless to becoming red, its form does not change drastically over the course of this colouration. In fact, it echoes Indian conceptions of time as cyclical, alluding perhaps to the changing conceptions of madness that only altered slightly from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. As Foucault says in *Madness and Civilization*, Freud's psychiatry demystified most of the structures of the asylum, but invested the doctor with all its powers, of observation, science and judgement. The sculpture, seen in this light,

might be a silent comment on the continuation of certain ways of thinking about madness. Of all the works in the show, this is most successful in giving Shah's critique of hysteria a degree of contemporariness.

¹ Didi-Huberman, Georges. 1982. *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*. Translated by Alisa Hartz. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, pp 67.

² *Pentimento* is on display at Kashi Art Gallery, Kochi, Kerala, from November 15 to December 10, 2009.

³ Derrida, Jacques. 1972. 'Signature, Event, Context'. *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. Edited by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, pp 80-111.

⁴ Didi-Huberman, pp. 13.

⁵ Tagg, John. 1999. 'Evidence, Truth and Order: A Means of Surveillance.' *Visual Culture: A Reader*. Edited by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall. UK: Sage Publications Ltd, pp 244-273.

⁶ The artist expressed this opinion in an interview with this writer.

⁷ This photograph is a recreation of an image taken under the aegis of Dr Jules Luys at the Charité hospital in Paris. Luys (1828–1897) was a neurologist and contemporary of Charcot.

⁸ Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. NY: Vintage Books, 1995, pp 195-228.

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