

Rikke Benborg
Hysterics

28.01 – 19.03 2017



Rikke Benborg, *Hysterics*, 2017

The Place of Silent Women
By Louise Steiwer

OVERGADEN.

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Design: Anni's

Delicate, feminine beauty and grotesque, obscene figures unite in a tableau where tortured souls are mirrored in twisted limbs. It is the physical expression of the disorder hysteria that is subject to the treatment of video artist Rikke Benborg in the exhibition *Hysterics*. Based on historical and medical conceptions of the role and gender of women, Benborg explores facets of the conditions for and expression of the female in a patriarchal society where insanity is a sentence, but also holds the potential for liberation.

As its starting point the exhibition *Hysterics* examines hysteria as a unique historical phenomenon based on fundamental dualities like mind and body and normality and insanity, as well as the relationship between doctor and patient. These form an undercurrent running throughout the exhibition which explores the archetypal language of the hysteric, the woman as passive object and performative subject, and also toys with different personifications of the hysteric with a focus on the demonic association with witches and views of the natural connection between the female and the supernatural.

Thematically *Hysterics* addresses the history of hysteria as it unfolded at the Parisian mental asylum Salpêtrière in the 19th century, when a group of women with mysterious, incurable symptoms were treated by the physician and psychiatrist Jean Martin Charcot. Charcot experimented with hypnosis, electroshock, sound and genital manipulation in his attempts to provoke the symptoms of hysteria in order to learn more about the nature and anatomy of the condition. A key part of his research took place during weekly lectures where women under hypnosis performed various stages of their own hysterical fits in front of an audience of doctors, scientists and laymen. The presentation of the disorder at Salpêtrière was thus something between bizarre theatre and reality, a form in which actual symptoms became a performance that simultaneously imitated and represented hysteria as a disorder and reality inhabited by the women at the asylum.

The physicians at Salpêtrière were convinced that only hysterics were susceptible to hypnosis, and that the states that could be called forth under hypnosis directly reflected women's behaviour during spontaneous fits of hysterics. Hypnosis was able to provoke reactions that were characteristic of the disorder, making it possible for the women to start and stop hallucinations and bodily reactions on command. Whilst in her natural state the hysteric was uncontrollable and unpredictable, under hypnosis she became a manifestation of the physician's idea of a medical syndrome that could be

displayed and subject to analysis. The female body was a lump of clay that in the expert hands of the doctor could take an artificial and idealised form in line with the symptoms he wanted to see.

The term 'hysteria' comes from the Greek word *hysterikos*, which means 'of the womb'. That hysteria should come from a dysfunctional female body was entirely in keeping with how women were perceived at the time: as infirm creatures with delicate nerves, incapable of controlling their own urges and sexuality. It was believed that the genitals played a key role in the causes of hysteria, something that resulted in suppressed needs in unmarried women or excessive sexual behaviour in married women. This sexual perversion was in direct opposition to the dominant view of feminine or female behaviour, and therefore had to be controlled and subdued. The French historian Jules Michelet saw the witch as a masculine construction, claiming that the stigmatisation of women as demonic was a way of controlling female rebelliousness and sexuality. And the behaviour and image of the 19th-century hysteric is almost identical to the image of a witch in sexual, demoniacal ecstasy. Her physical posture manifests an inner conflict, a language uniting the inner and outer self. She undermines the natural, religious and patriarchal world order separating body and spirit, good and evil, man and woman, and human and beast, and therefore deserves condemnation and punishment.

Today some of the symptoms that comprised hysteria in the past come under the diagnosis dissociative disorder, a term that implies disconnection or separation, a psychological/inner conflict that in the hysteric provokes a physical/outer action. The hysteric can therefore be seen as an image of the ways we constantly reinvent ourselves and our realities. Charcot's attempt to freeze that state through hypnosis resembles an attempt to bring time to a halt and escape the inevitable change that is the destiny of all human beings.

In Benborg's works the nature of hysteria is expressed through narratives comprised of choreographed behaviour where as a sculptural and performative medium the female body partly mimes the conditions at Salpêtrière and partly explores the duality between the women's silent rebellion and the pacification they were subject to by medical science and society at large. Suspended between erotic urge and demonic possession, between the static and dynamic, the works balance between the feminine, frail and stylised and the horrifying and disturbing.

In the exhibition we encounter Charcot's patients in

the form of five dancers performing hysterical and demonic fits in an abandoned chapel at Denmark's oldest psychiatric hospital Sankt Hans. Alternating between obsessive every day gestures and modernistic dancing the body is turned into a performative tool that manifests an inner urge or conflict. With insanity written all over their faces, the women writhe in simulated physical ecstasy that liberates them from expectations, censorship and oppression. This embodies the ambiguity of the state of hysteria, containing as it does its own antithesis and climaxing at the point of juxtaposition between beauty and extreme angst.

In another work we see the same women sniggering in a parodic fashion. Their giggling slowly builds up to laughter, which turns into layers of weeping, screaming and fright. The lament which the work is referring to is one of the eldest music genres where female relatives or professional mourners loudly bemoan the loss of a deceased. Grief is at the same time threatening and ephemeral, mannered and authentic, and embodies something which lies outside the boundaries of verbal language.

Characteristically the filmic characters in Benborg's work usually appear as marionettes. No distinction is made between performing bodies, costumes and the scenographic structure of the work, erasing the dividing line between body and object. The women become catalysts of a story that is carried forward by their physical actions and the filmic structure. The body becomes a material that can be shaped and modelled as needed, in the same way that Charcot used hypnosis to create postures capable of demonstrating the nature of the hysteric for his audience. Benborg thus underlines how the relationship between the (male) doctor and his (female) patient mimes the classical relationship between artist and model throughout art history.

Hysterics opens with a performance in which a static tableau vivant presents a number of women dressed in sculptural costumes consisting of drawers and cupboard parts and other interior. Reminiscent of abstract modernist sculptures, here disrupted and feminised by fabric elements and fragments of mirrors, the costumes restrict the possibility of bodily expression and seal the women's fate of constantly staying indoors. The home as their sphere and prison traps them inside boredom and superfluity, and their feelings, desires and dreams are confined to stereotypes and ideals of how women should and may express themselves.

Benborg's narratives of women are not stories of victims but rather an investigation of the mystique and

mythology surrounding the female gender and its nature. This is a story of female identities that might be framed and told by men, but that Benborg presents through a female gaze. The works in the exhibition challenge the elastic boundary between a 'normal' and an 'extreme' state by suspending the prevailing rules and either replace them with wildness and antistructure or stage them in simple tableaux. Here the surreal, the abstract, the stylised and the expressive are mixed, and stories about the position of women in both a construed and physical world are created. Taking femininity as point of departure the works suggest what happens when people are oppressed or repress or censor their own feelings, desires and need to be themselves.

Louise Steiwer is a Danish art critic with an MA in Art History from the University Copenhagen.

CV

Rikke Benborg is educated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art in 2006 and has among others exhibited at KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art, Nikolaj Kunsthal, Kunsthal Aarhus and Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art.

EVENTS

Thursday 9 February 6-7.30pm: WALK & TALK AND SCREENING. The audience is invited on a walk-through of *Hysterics* where Rikke Benborg in conversation with Marie Dufresne, curator at Vejle Kunstmuseum, will elaborate on the thematics of the exhibition.

Thursday 2 March 6-8pm: HAPPENING. Overgaden welcomes you to an evening concert with musician Marie Eline Hansen. During the concert the sculptural costumes in *Hysterics* are activated by invited performers.

THANK YOU

Rikke Benborg would like to thank Christian Alkjær, Majken Schultz, Fie Norsker, Marie Dufresne, Louise Steiwer, Marie Plum, Lærke Sødring, Peer Mørk, Stefan Rotvit, Agnete Bertram, KIKshh og Betty Nansen Teatret.

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 7 April 2017 Overgaden presents exhibitions by Ismar Cirknagic and Christian Schmidt-Rasmussen with J&K, Ulla Hvejsel, claus ejnar and Kristian Byskov.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: overgaden.org

The exhibition is supported by:



Overgaden is supported by the Danish Arts Foundation's Committee for Visual Arts and the Obel Family Foundation.