

ILIT AZOULAY

Mousework

Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv

March 19th - May 6th, 2021

“The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project.”

— Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949

In his 1887 famous group tableau painting entitled, *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière*, French painter Andre Brouillet imagines a scene of a contemporary scientific demonstration, based on real life, and depicting the eminent French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot delivering a clinical lecture and demonstration at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. The painting illustrates an assembly composed of about thirty men — scientists, philosophers, writers, and artists who intensely observe Charcot performing a demonstration of hypnosis on a female patient diagnosed as suffering from hysteria. The body of the patient is convulsing and assuming the “arc-in-circle” position — the hysteric’s classic posture.

Hired in 1862 as the head of the Salpêtrière Hospital, where close to 5,000 female patients were interned, Charcot was interested in mapping and documenting all of his patients’ expressions and gestures. To do so, he organized weekly “Tuesday sessions” of live hypnosis where the high Parisian society of bourgeois, artists and writers would gather to witness Charcot’s performances on his female patients. In 1878, he also created the photographic department of La Salpêtrière, the world’s very first medical photography laboratory, headed by a professional photographer, Albert Londe, who documented the patients and their behaviors through hundreds of photographs published between 1878 and 1893.

Concerned with reassembling dislocated images, desegregating narratives and undermined representations into a comprehensive, sensitive and protean body of works, Ilit Azoulay (b. 1972, lives and works in Berlin) reconstructs histories and rethinks how we narrate them outside of the dominant context and mainstream discourse. In her photographs, collages and installations, she brings to light forgotten or undermined objects and captures their ambiguity and detachment from their original purpose. Such was in her substantial project realized in 2017 for the Jerusalem’s Israeli Museum, for which she documented hundreds of items from the collection that, for political reasons, were never

exhibited. For her latest project, presented at Braveman Gallery in Tel Aviv, Azoulay has conducted an extended research on hysteria. On the one hand, she studied the notion of hysteria as invented and depicted by Charcot in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and, on the other hand, she used the keyword hysteria for an online search that resulted in over 3,000 images of women under panic attacks, most which are either used by pharmaceutical and insurance companies.

In his classic of French cultural studies, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, [1] Georges Didi-Huberman traces the intimate and reciprocal relationship between the disciplines of psychiatry and photography in the late 19th century. Focusing on the photographic output of the Salpêtrière hospital, he shows the crucial role played by photography in the invention of the category of hysteria. Under the direction of Jean-Martin Charcot, the inmates of Salpêtrière identified as hysterics were methodically photographed, providing skeptical colleagues with visual proof of hysteria's specific form. As a continuation of this reflection, in Azoulay's process the works presented in the exhibition appear as a visual experimentation and exploration of the notion of hysteria, depicted then through the lens of Charcot as a voyeuristic and subjective representation, and today on the internet as a stereotyped female characteristic that has infused society and women's representations as such.

The 35 photographic triptychs, presented in vacuum formed trompe-l'oeil frames created by Ilit Azoulay and partner Jonathan Touitou, are all composed of three images. The left oval images come from the Salpêtrière's photography archives, taken by Londe and mainly representing hands of the hospital's patients. The middle images are collages made of stock images that the artist found online and in which we recognize for instance Brouillet's painting, a gargoyle from Notre-Dame Cathedral, convulsed Greek sculptures or photographs of terrified women, frightening animals (a vulture, a snake, an owl) or destroyed objects and buildings. The right images show found objects collected by Azoulay in forests outside of Berlin, captured under a magnifying glass and examined just like Charcot used to classify female bodies. In order to bring their identities back to the women of Salpêtrière, the artist has named each of these 35 objects presented in the exhibition with a typical French female name.

Let us go back to the representation and the role of the hand in these works. What we see is a fixed moment of contortion or convulsion of the hysterical body in an attack – a statue of living pain. In the above-mentioned book, Didi-Huberman evokes the practice of *mortmain*, French for “dead hand”, a practice you may think of as out-of-date: the right of a master to dispose of the goods of his vassal upon the latter's death. The photography studio was, in this way, instrumental of a kind of right of figurative *mortmain* on the bodies of hysterics and clearly embodied a process of control upon the female body in order to utilize it towards modern medical means. This relationship of power between the authority of the oppressor — a representative of the State defined by his influence and recognition — and the body of the oppressed — a woman, often alone, powerless and defenseless — this relation is a typical pattern for patriarchal societies to assert a system of non-reversible male power. In her sociological essay titled “Witches, the Undefeated Power of Women”, (2) Swiss writer and journalist Mona Chollet accurately describes how women accused of witchcraft since the 15th century were in fact the victims of the Moderns, not of the Ancients. The more sophisticated the political power or the Church was, the more afraid it would become of the potential strength of the female presence and its body, mainly because women were never part of a women's community, or any community at all.

In a second gallery space, Ilit Azoulay has installed a projection of an excerpt of a 1962 archival film documenting the healing dance Taranta, or “spider dance”. Originating from the Salento region in the south of Italy, the Taranta was a popular ritual during which women suffering from mental crisis would cure themselves in an impressive pagan dance of expiation, taking the form of a joyful ceremony. This ecstatic, trance-like performance was invented by women who had the intent to express their desire to be liberated from the oppression of a strict patriarchal culture. The phenomenon largely affected those who had been abused or forced to marry men they didn’t love, who had lost their husbands, or found themselves at the margins of society in other ways. Tarantism was an expression of this marginality, a way for these women to manifest their social suffering and have that suffering recognized. Finally, it was a way for the women to relocate themselves within a community and gaining empowerment through supporting each other. The footage chosen by Azoulay to enrich her project reveals that hysteria was caused by women's oppressed social roles, rather than by their bodies or psyches — on the contrary of Charcot’s argumentation throughout his years of practice at the Salpêtrière — and that its sources lay in cultural myths of femininity and in a reality of male domination. In this video we can observe the importance of a ritual that recalls an ecstatic sufi performance, as the dancers turn around themselves endlessly and seem to lose control over their bodies. The climax allows emotions and memories of a trauma invisible to the society to come out of a repressed body.

Through her elegant and poetic digital cabinets of curiosity, recalling family photographic frames perched on a dusty shelf, and possibly evoking the iconography of black magic through the form of witchcraft-related grimoires or books of spell, Ilit Azoulay has created an uncanny and softly disturbing series of works that convey a contemporary reflection on technologies, the internet and its clichéd algorithms associated to it, and combined with a deep feeling of female gaze and intimacy.

Martha Kirszenbaum

[1] Georges Did-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, MIT Press, 2004.

[2] Mona Chollet, *Sorcières, la puissance invaincue des femmes*, Zones, 2018.

About Ilit Azoulay:

Ilit Azoulay, b. 1972, Tel Aviv. Lives and works in Berlin.

Azoulay's work has been exhibited extensively and internationally in galleries and museums including solo exhibitions at Blue Rider Gallery (2019, Tai Pei), Center for Contemporary Art Tel Aviv (2019), The Israel Museum (2017, Jerusalem), Braverman Gallery (2013, Tel-Aviv), Kunst Werke (2014, Berlin), Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art (2014, Herzliya), and Andrea Meislin Gallery (2011, 2013, New York). In 2014 she was nominated by Quentin Bajac and received the Rencontres d'Arles Discovery Award (2014, Arles). The artist has taken part in group exhibitions in established galleries as well as museums such as Bauhaus Dessau (2019), Ashdod Art Museum (2019), The Israel Museum (2017, 2011, Jerusalem), Pinakothek der Modern (2016, Munich), The Museum of Modern Art (2015, New York), Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris (2015, Paris), Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (2015, Melbourne), Braverman Gallery (2013, Tel-Aviv), Andrea Meislin Gallery (2013, New York), and Daimler Art Collection (2012, Berlin) among others. Azoulay is the recipient of several awards among them the Constantiner Photography Award for an Israeli Artist, Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2011), the Israeli Culture and Sports ministry prize (2011), Mifal ha-Pais Foundation Grant (2013) and was among the finalist of the Pictet prize for contemporary Photography (2015). Her works appear in numerous worldwide museums and private collections including The Museum of Modern Art in New York and Centre Pompidou Paris. Recent publications include *No Thing Dies* (Mousse Publishing), *Finally Without End*, an artist monograph (Sternberg Press, Berlin), and *Shifting Degrees of Certainty* which was published following her exhibition at KW (Spector Books, Leipzig). Ilit holds a BFA (1998) and MFA (2010) from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem.