Visual Hysteria: An investigation of the “feminine protolanguage” as an embodied index of trauma in the arts

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VISUAL HYSTERIA: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE “FEMININE PROTOLANGUAGE” AS AN EMBODIED INDEX OF TRAUMA IN THE ARTS

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Over the past year, there have been more than three books published on female anger (including Good and Mad by Rebecca Traister, Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger by Soraya Chemaly, and Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower by Brittney Cooper), exploring the value of anger as a political emotion. Female anger, often directly related to trauma, has been and still is usually repressed by our patriarchal society, along with many other emotions and ways of expression. Public demonstrations of anger by women in history were (and sometimes still are) labeled as hysteria, which in the past was enough to send women to mental institutions, asylums, or in the most misogynous years, to the stake. In this study, I want to investigate repression and release in visual arts, more specifically in the works of female artists such as Louise Bourgeois, through the lens of feminist theory and psychoanalysis.

What can hysteria look like? What does a hysterical painting consist of?

Sigmund Freud, who had quite a problematic understanding of women, came up with the “talk therapy” method (still in use today) as a way to treat women’s hysteria, in the hopes that releasing repressed feelings of angst through talking would make those women feel better. Feminist theory views the concept of hysteria as a “specifically feminine protolanguage, communicating through the body messages that cannot be verbalized. For some writers, hysteria has been claimed as the first step on the road to feminism, a specifically feminine pathology that speaks to and against patriarchy” (Showalter, 286). In that sense, women who had suffered some sort of abuse and had to repress any verbal reaction to their abusers, or to the system they lived
in, or even to their desires, would later show physical symptoms such as fainting, numbness, speech difficulties (hysterical stuttering, as Freud called it), among others. These symptoms could be interpreted, according to Showalter, as the body speaking and expressing feelings and emotions through a visceral language, one that precedes words which she called “feminine protolanguage,” a pre-political manifestation of feminism that could be “functionalized as a space for marking feminist reaction and resistance to the patriarchal oppression it indexed” (Showalter, 333).

How can this concept of “protolanguage” be applied to visual arts? This is one of my main guiding questions when approaching my work. Louise Bourgeois was one artist who was quite vocal about the relationship between her art and her experiences of trauma and anxiety. Her work is constantly referred to in connection with psychoanalysis, especially to Freud, as a good part of her work carries sexual content, which in Freudian terms would be often related to childhood trauma. In 2012 the Freud Museum in London hosted an exhibition of her work called “The Return of the Repressed,” alluding to the psychoanalytic aspect of her work uniquely capable of expressing Oedipal struggle, ominous forces of repression, sexual symbolism and material uncanniness. Sculptures and drawings on display included pieces such as The Dangerous Obsession (2003), the woven fabric text I Am Afraid (2009), and drawings from the 2007 series The Feeding, all shown in dialogue with Freud’s personal belongings. Janus Fleuri (1968), sometimes considered the most significant of all Bourgeois’s works, her self-portrait, also came into Freud’s home, along with Bourgeois’s writings in response to her own psychoanalytic treatment. The bronze sculpture, which is an ambiguous form with connotations of sexuality, metamorphosis, and struggle, was placed strategically hanging above Freud’s
psychoanalytic couch. Swaying above the place where free association was born, *Janus Fleuri* looks both to the past and to the future, and as the curator Laratt-Smith has argued, embodies the artist’s Oedipal deadlock—an unresolvable struggle between Bourgeois, her father and her mother.

According to Julie Nicolletta’s 1992 article “Louise Bourgeois's Femmes-Maisons: Confronting Lacan,” Bourgeois’s work was also tapping into another psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan, as her paintings and drawings of the 1940s seem to parallel Lacan’s early studies of the structure of language as a means to explain sexual difference (gender roles). However, where Lacan sees sexual difference as grounded in a world in which the phallus is the “transcendental signifier”—separating the male from female as well as the real from the imaginary—“Bourgeois seems more interested in overcoming patriarchal dominance through the combination of the sexes and the undermining of language, Lacan’s symbolic order” (Nicoletta, 22). In the sculpture *Fragile Goddess* (1970), for instance, Bourgeois merged the sexes into forms representing both male and female genitalia, going against Lacan’s theories of absolute sexual difference by stating that we are all male-female. This comparison can be further understood when analyzing her painting series *Femmes-Maisons* from 1946-47, which consisted of nude female figures with heads and bodies replaced by architectural forms such as buildings and houses. The paintings, infused with ambiguous meanings, exemplify the difficulties in communication between human beings using images rather than words, which in itself represents a subversion of the symbolic order of patriarchal society that relies on written and spoken language.
When it comes to the series *Femmes-Maisons*, Nicoletta states that the works “explore two major Lacanian themes: sexual difference, in terms of women's role in society, and problems of communication” (Nicoletta, 22). These artworks, she writes, universalize women’s domestic and societal roles and their place in systems of communication, and that by creating them the artist was working towards coming to terms with those issues and/or expunging them from her system (Nicoletta, 22). In the Museum of Modern Art’s book *Louise Bourgeois: an Unfolding Portrait: Prints, Books, and the Creative Process*, Deborah Wye states that “it was emotional struggle that fueled her process. In seeking to understand and cope with painful memories, anger and jealousy, depression and despair, she created sculpture, prints, drawings, and, early on, paintings. Art was her tool of survival, her ‘guaranty of sanity’” (Wye, 35).

This need for expression that emerges specifically from female struggle is also visible in other forms of art. In the book *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), Hélène Cixous advocates for the idea that women need to write. She claims that there is a very close relationship between women's bodies and their writing and that both have been repressed by men for centuries in what she calls a “phallocentric tradition,” a patriarchal connotation imposed by men. For Cixous, when women start to write, they also begin to reclaim their voices and their bodies. She argues that since men have dominated the written word for so long and because they repress and reduce women out of fear, women have been taught to hate themselves and other women. She believes that women have allowed themselves to buy into these male ideologies and have internalized them to their own detriment.

What Cixous was describing in 1975 can later be connected to Kathleen Hanna and the Riot Grrrl feminist punk movement in the '90s. These feminist bands were great examples of the
visceral expression of rage against patriarchal values. Within their lyrics, they explored themes of rape, domestic abuse, sexuality, racism, patriarchy, classism, anarchism and female empowerment. By using punk aesthetics, they created a musical movement in which women could express themselves in the same way men had been doing for years. “Liar” by Bikini Kill focuses on a rape further compounded by the denial of the aggressor, and at a certain point of the song, at the utmost pitch of her anger, Kathleen Hanna is literally screaming into the microphone. There is something about being at a feminist punk concert, sharing this experience of rage, that creates an aftereffect of relief which perhaps is part of a protolanguage type of communication.

As I approach protolanguage through visual arts, I investigate questions such as “What does our mind look like if it could be seen from within?” and “Can the expression of repressed thoughts and emotions become an experience of healing and comfort?,” and I am interested in the responses from the audience: will they capture the same experience as I, confirming thus that I am able to communicate through a language that comes before any language?

The materials I work with are fibers and textiles. There is something about the meditative process of needlework that carries a much deeper resonance than I believe most people can see. For instance, the very act of embroidering, stitching, involves the radical act of stabbing a needle through fabric over and over. What has throughout history been considered an activity typical of a tame, submissive woman could be in fact an act of violence, created through repetition, releasing angst that might even cause hysterical stuttering (verbal repetition) otherwise. One could argue that the feeling of comfort and pleasure that comes from these experiences arises from the release of repressed emotions through the act of punching a surface with a needle.
multiple times. When I started painting with a tufting gun—a rug making machine—I took this process to the next level. I now have in my hands a signifier of violence with which I create soft and colorful paintings with imagery straight out of my unconscious, through a very intuitive and dynamic process. I approach my work with minimal thinking and planning beforehand, to give my instincts and intuition space to flourish. My goal is to be able to tap into my own unconscious and see if I am able to express what is within through a physical, obsessive, and aggressive process that in itself relates to symptoms of hysteria.

Incorporating textiles into my practice has allowed me to expand my work's tactile and textural capacities while also creating a conceptual tension between binary oppositions: repression (themes explored) vs. comfort (materiality present in fibers). I can bring three-dimensionality to my work while also making possible a physical interaction with the audience, transcending barriers imposed by the art world throughout history (hopefully post-COVID pandemic).

The paintings I create are actually rugs, which, in Brazilian culture, serve as signifiers of home. My father says that in order to transform a house into a home you need rugs; I grew up watching my mother make rugs for each and every room of our house and I want to bring the comfort present in rugs to my paintings. In order to enhance the textural possibilities of what I'm creating, I use manual techniques such as rug hooking, punch needle, and latch hooking, in addition to the tufting gun.

The pieces I am showing in my thesis show are the four latest pieces I have created. They’re all entitled histérica which is Portuguese for hysterical, followed by the number referring to its place in the series timeline. Histérica #8 started off as lines that could resemble a
flower and/or vulvar forms. It is the biggest piece I have ever created and it was at first a challenge to myself: what would happen if I take this cathartic process to its utmost. It took me months of labor (and callused hands) to come to a finished piece. However, in the middle of the process I felt the work had a mystical presence, and I added an eye to its center, and now the work is displayed in the horizontal, not so related to a vulva symbology anymore, but more a garden. Staring at it is like peeking at the wilderness within.

*histérica #8, Jardim Secreto, 2021. Yarn on monk’s cloth. 40.5 x 63.5”*

Something important to mention is that I went to Brazil (where I am from) in the middle of this project, and I feel it greatly influenced the way the artworks came out. I was surrounded by native fauna and flora and I felt connected to it, to my roots. I then saw forms of leaves and
flowers showing up in this primarily abstract piece, and decided to go with it; after all, those are living in my subconscious whether as an experience or a memory of an experience.

At that time, I felt the urge to bring the symbology and fierceness of snakes into this series. This was another challenge, the first figurative imagery I would create. In various cultures, snakes represent healing and wisdom. I was also thinking of the myth of Medusa, a woman who was raped and cursed for it, turned into a monster: her head full of phallic snakes whose gaze turns men to stone. I tried to imagine the rage and frustration Medusa would have gone through and materialize those sentiments as two cosmic serpents, one that holds the universe and one that carries its emotions.

histéris #9, 2021. Yarn on linen. 47 x 32"
These serpents (histérica #9) feel very symbolic to me, and so I decided to create two mirrored pieces that are going to stand on each side of it, like altarpieces, giving it support. In these, I played with color and form and weight, experimenting with negative and positive spaces within the piece. I brought in some elements that relate to #8, in addition to new colors and textures I achieved with a pneumatic tufting gun (one that uses compressed air to increase the pile height), in the same painterly style I have been exploring.

histérica #10, 2021. Yarn on linen. 51 x 32”
Painting, “with the potential sensuality implicit in its medium,” as Mira Schor writes, “has become a metaphor for woman” (Schor, 7), and it is through this medium that I feel most free to be intuitive, instinctive. With my previous paintings, most specifically the ones that I created coming from an emotional, personal space, I received feedback from—not surprisingly—other women, who approached me to share that my work resonated with them, sometimes without even being aware of the content I was working with. Interestingly enough, some of this work was inspired by the writings of Clarice Lispector, an author that Hélène Cixous herself admired and considered as the major influence on her work. These very special
exchanges made me want to explore that moment in which abstraction becomes a protolanguage (maybe the very protolanguage hysteria was about) that goes beyond consciousness, a pre-symbolic stage of awareness. What does hysteria look like? If hysteria is a bodily reaction resulting from repression, and the cure is found through releasing what was repressed, can the engagement with an artwork exploring hysteria as a protolanguage create an experience of comfort? Or discomfort? What if I created a piece that could be worn? Would the weight of this visual hysteria bring comfort to the one wearing it? Or discomfort? These are among the questions I will continue to explore in the work going forward.


