

# ACTS OF LOOKING: AT THE INTERSECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND MEDICINE

Sara K. MacLellan

Since its invention in the early nineteenth century, photography has had a long and complex relationship with medicine. Whereas medicine had traditionally relied on artists to depict the body's unseen interior and record visual signs of disease, the advent of photography—with its apparent elimination of artistic mediation—seemed to have offered medical practitioners the ability to achieve “direct” and “truthful” representation. The camera quickly became the perfect scientific tool, far exceeding the artist's hand at accurately recording the look of bodily structure and disease. As a seemingly indexical medium tied directly to the reality it represents, photography promised to fulfil medicine's goal of visual objectivity.

One of the most striking historical uses of photography in medicine was by the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893). Professing to be “nothing more than a photographer” who inscribed what he saw, Charcot famously produced exhaustive photographic studies of hysterical female patients at the Salpêtrière, an asylum for insane and incurable women in late nineteenth-century Paris.<sup>1</sup> Hysteria—now widely recognized as a socially constructed disease invented out of both professional and sexual desire—had long been used to pathologize a diverse range of conditions and deviant behaviours in women. But physicians were unable to locate an anatomical or corporeal basis for the mystifying affliction. Charcot sought to uncover its “truth” by photographing female patients in various stages of hysterical fits—often provoking the spectacular symptoms he sought to record.

By using photography to bring the otherwise invisible disease into representation, Charcot secured the hysterical body as an object of medical study—but also one of public spectacle. In its heyday, with its in-house photography studios pumping out pictures and its female patients performing live for audiences during Charcot's famous Tuesday lectures, the Salpêtrière was a “living museum of pathology” in which both doctor and patient had starring roles. And Charcot was its *visuel*—a man who sees, and thus knows.<sup>2</sup> Yet far from merely observing hysteria, Charcot and his team of photographers played an active role in its construction as a highly sexualized and characteristically female disease.

The nineteenth-century invention of hysteria by way of its visual representation serves as a cautionary tale about the role of photography in the construction of medical ideas and scientific claims to objectivity. Interrogating medicine's representational practices, contemporary artists have taken up the visual iconography produced by Charcot and other men of positivist science, inserting a politics of subjectivity into medicine's regimes of knowledge about the body to offer expanded accounts of embodied experience. Their work presents critical reflections on how the human body is understood and represented, and is often unforgiving. But in some instances, the contemporary intersection between photography and medicine is seemingly more benign, and much more familiar than we might realize.

Celebrated Vancouver photographer Fred Herzog—best known for his mid twentieth-century street photography using Kodachrome

<sup>1</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria*, 26 and 17.

Sara K. MacLellan is an art historian, writer, and artist-maker based in Port Moody, BC.

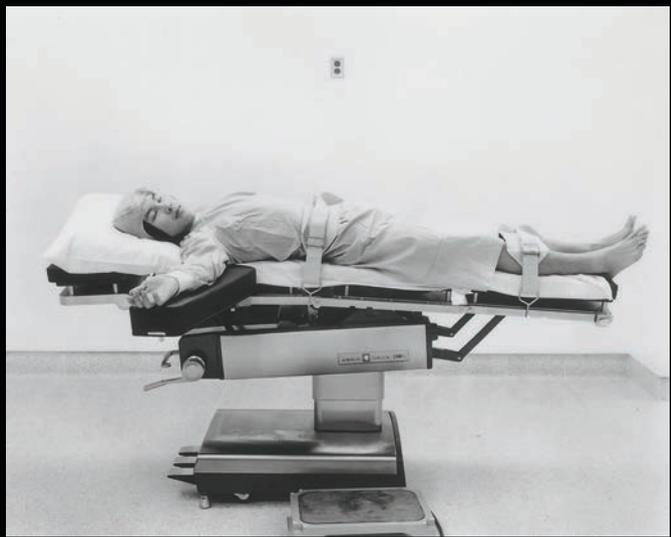


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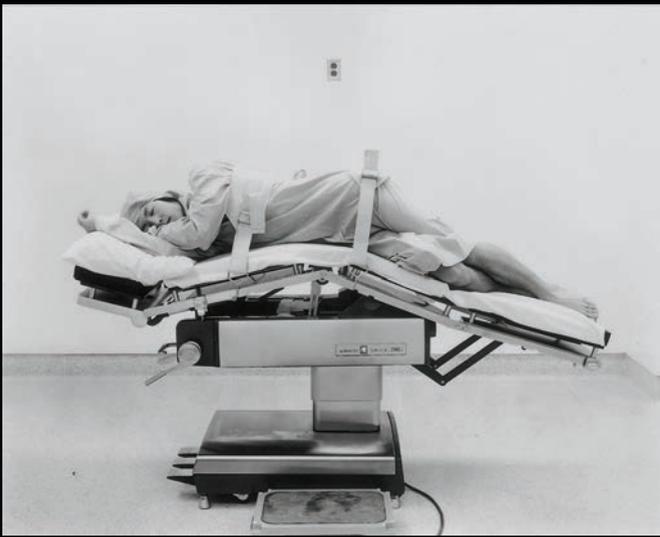


colour slide film—worked as a medical photographer by day. Surely the impact of his clinical training to document medical procedures, devices, and specimens with exacting detail was not lost on his artistic work. Documenting daily urban life in Vancouver as he observed it in the 1950s and '60s, his vibrant and masterfully executed photographs have a pared-down aesthetic. They speak of a certain kind of truth, a desire to see things as they are—not unlike the medical photographer, whose role is to present “facts” objectively according to the visual codes of medical illustration.

After training with Herzog as an undergraduate student at the University of British Columbia, the photoconceptualist Theodore Wan produced a complex series of medical photographs exploring the body and its subjection to medicine’s disciplinary procedures between 1977 and 1979. These large-format, technically precise black-and-white photographs mimic the visual language of medical illustration, staging diagnostic and preparatory procedures with the artist himself as the “patient.” Produced while he was a graduate student at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, the images were born of a partnership between art and medicine. As a trained medical photographer, Wan gained access to the operating facilities at the Dalhousie Medical School in exchange for contributing a set of prints for teaching purposes. The resulting self-portrait photographic series plays on the ambivalent status of the medical photograph as both document and art object, as well as on the patient as both the object and the subject of the medical gaze.

In 1989, Montreal artist Nicole Jolicoeur exhibited *La Vérité Folle* at the Presentation House Gallery (now The Polygon Gallery) in North Vancouver, a photo-based body of work that is part of an ongoing investigation into Charcot’s theories of female hysteria. Developed largely in response to a concurrent exhibition, *Masterpieces of Medical Photography*, which presented selections from the Burns Archive of early medical photographs, the series seeks to destabilize the effects of “truth” and “objectivity” associated with medical photography. Jolicoeur appropriates and reconfigures archival photographs of Charcot’s famous female hysterics, unveiling the ideologies embedded in early photographic renderings of the body and illustrating how theories of hysteria—like any medical condition—are based on the act of looking.

Contemporary photo-based investigations into the history of medicine’s representational practices shift the focus from the



Exhibitions exploring the body through photography in *Capture 2019* include Dan Jackson's *What It Is* (p. 102), Josema Zamorano's *Encounters* (p. 86), and Cindy Baker's *Crash Pad and Trucker Bombs* (p. 75), as well as Elizabeth Milton's performance *A Guided Meditation with VHS Eyelashes* (p. 52) and Birthe Piontek's public art installation *Lacuna* (p. 32). See Fred Herzog's street photography at Equinox Gallery (p. 97).

content of the photographic image to its making. They remind us that photographs are never disembodied views from nowhere, but are objects created from a particular position in a particular time and place. That is, there is no such thing as an unmediated photograph or a disinterested viewer, but only highly specific visual possibilities and partial perspectives based on who is looking and from where. This shift in focus also demands that we look deeper into the photographic image to the ideas, ideologies, and institutions behind its production.

Of course, this self-consciously critical act of looking is not always easy or comfortable to perform. But the invitation for us to do so shows that contemporary photography is rife with possibilities for opening new modes of understanding and visualizing our bodies outside of any historically or objectively fixed representation—ones that allow for, and even invite, different and multiple points of view.

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Theodore Wan, *Basic Surgical Positions*, 1977, 2 of 11 silver gelatin prints, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Acquisition Fund