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Kathryn McCarthy
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The Posers: Instinctual Simulation Across Time

by

Kathryn McCarthy

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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2017

Thesis Sponsor:

December 14, 2017

Date

Paul Ramirez Jonas

Signature

December 14, 2017

Date

Thomas Weaver

Typed Signature of Second Reader

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to Ryan Cheney, my partner in life and the most ardent and unwavering supporter of my work, in all its autobiographical glory.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Paul Ramirez Jonas and Tom Weaver for their support, close reading, and edits both to this paper and the video itself.

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Introduction: *To Be Real*



The Posers, 2017, HD video with sound, 16:40 min. (video still)

My video, *The Posers*, is about the occlusion of the self in history and in love. Throughout the video I laminate historical moments with my own contemporary experience to consistently address the ongoing marginalization of women. In many scenes, I create fictional tableaux that merge the past with the present as a way of connecting across time. In my video, I merge historical research regarding representation of women in 19th century Paris, France (especially through several paintings) with my own psychological explorations of one's capacity to be one's self and make one's artwork, even in a romantic partnership. The women I seek out from the 19th century are those who have been forgotten; their authentic selves obfuscated through the interference of men. Throughout the video I examine various forms of representation through diverse modes of communication including Circling, video calls, actor's monologues, and a live webcam stream. The question uniting these research pursuits is shared: In order to understand

someone do you need to become them a little bit? Is that an acceptable side effect of a research project? Is that an acceptable consequence of marriage?

The video is divided loosely into three parts, separated by footage of two people biking over the Manhattan Bridge. The footage is in reverse so the bikers appear to be moving backwards up the bridge. When you bike over the Manhattan Bridge at night, your shadow surges out in front of you and then recedes back behind you in regular intervals over and over. Thus, if you space yourself perfectly with a bike rider in front of you, when your shadow is dancing in front of you and theirs is dancing behind them, they merge for a moment. I use this footage as a visual metaphor for the convergence of two people. When the shadows coalesce, you can no longer trace them to their original caster. This indecipherability can be traced to my own fears of losing myself in love.

The video begins with an audition. The actress auditioning says, “It’s sensory work, it’s method acting.” Then, the director’s voice off camera begins to countdown from 5 to 1. Just after she calls “2,” the screen cuts to a quote, which reads, “One common characteristic unifies hysterics: instinctual simulation...”¹ The observation, made by a Dr. Tardeiu and recorded in “*Traite clinique et therapeutique de l’hysterie d’ares l’enseignement de la Salpetriere*” in 1891, sets the tone for what is to follow: a series of simulations. However the level of “reality” or legitimacy to the simulations is left up in the air. Throughout the video “to be real” and “to be not real” are interchanged with “to act”, “to pose”, “to perform”, “to be fictional” and “to be hypnotized.” The

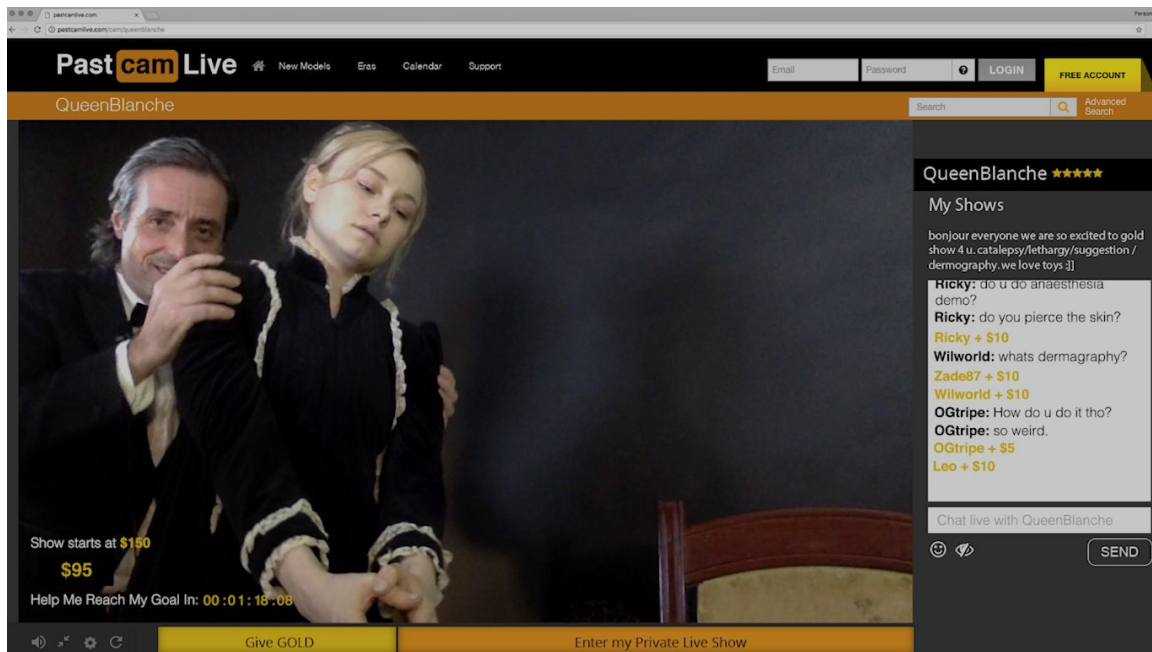
¹ Asti Hustvedt, *Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2011), 36.

video moves through these states of simulation to explore the immutability of my own selfhood in the face of being recently engaged.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes, "Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact."² In my video there is slippage between what is fictional and what is real. It combines events based on my life, such as getting engaged in Paris and feeling conflicted, as well as fictional scenarios, such as skyping with an actress playing the Parisienne Nina De Villard and telling her about the engagement. Fiction enables me to create confluences across time and video enables me to realize these confluences in a fantastic way. This hybridization is favored in the work of Tacita Dean, particularly *Event for a Stage* in which an actor delivers a monologue about his family that feels true, while also donning heavy theatrical makeup and wigs to remind the audience that it is a performance. I include my own personal stories in my videos because I believe in creating a connection with my audience through shared sentimental profundities. However, I use an actress as a persona for myself. My stories, told through the medium of an actor, become shaded with her own experience. My use of fiction is self-reflexive in that I ruminate more on the circumstances of actors performing than on the historical stories those performances are inspired by.

² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989), 4.

PastCamLive: *To Be Hypnotized*



The Posers, 2017, HD video with sound, 16:40 min. (video still)

Being moldable is a through-line in the video which I explore explicitly in the PastCamLive scenes. The scene opens with a woman hypnotized in a cataleptic state and totally under the control of a doctor. The doctor stands the woman up and moves her limbs into a pose of fear with her arms up in self-defense. Not only does she hold the pose, but slowly her facial expression changes to match it. In this case moving from a vacant stare to a look of terror. This “trick” pleases the doctor, who praises her:

DOCTOR:
So impressionable! In catalepsy, our lovely patient here becomes a perfectly docile automaton. We can mold her completely to your liking, guys. Like soft wax.

The historical referent for this scene is the relationship between Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot and his patient Marie “Blanche” Wittman during her stay at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, in the

1870s. As the chief physician at the hospital, Dr. Charcot dedicated the majority of his time to working closely with women diagnosed with hysteria. His background was in neurology, and his study sought to locate a specific lesion on the spine or other physical interference with the nervous system that would cause the hysteria.³ He failed to find any referring illness, lesion or agent that would cause the hysteria, and subsequently focused on the prospects that medical hypnosis offered his hysterical patients. Looking at case studies of what occurred when the women were hypnotized, it becomes unclear whether the treatment was helpful or harmful. Blanche became Dr. Charcot's star patient. In newspapers from the time she was deemed the "Queen of the Hysterics."⁴ At the hospital, Dr. Charcot would put on hypnosis demonstrations with Blanche that were open to the general public. Under the trance, he could convince her to murder someone (a prank involving fake poison), to steal something, or to remove her blouse and kiss one of the resident doctors.⁵

You are introduced to Blanche and the doctor through a screen capture for a fictional website called PastCamLive.Com. The design is appropriated from an actual site that offers live sex cam shows. The Doctor is in the foreground wearing a bowtie and a suit. Blanche is in the background, seated on a Victorian couch staring blankly ahead.

Just as Dr. Charcot gave shows to the Parisian public during his tenure at the Salpêtrière, the doctor in my scene is attempting to raise \$150 dollars to start a "Gold Show." In a sex cam show,

³ Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (California: University of California Press, 1992), 35.

⁴ Asti Hustvedt, 79.

⁵ IBID, 84-86.

a performer typically raises a certain amount of money in order to start the private “Gold Show” where he or she will masturbate him or herself using various sex toys, often moaning the name of the highest tipper. In my video, the doctor’s “Gold Show” involves hypnotizing and running a number of demonstrations on Blanche. One of the events often included in Nineteenth century hysteria demonstrations was dermographism, in which doctors would put a hysterical woman into a cataleptic state and lightly touch her skin with a finger or rod. This light touch would result in a raised, almost wound-like mark on her flesh that would remain for hours or days. The doctors wrote any number of things on their patients: their names, the name of the hospital, and their various illnesses.

The scene ends with the video freezing and a text banner popping up that reads “This performer is now in a private show.” I deprive my audience of the spectacle of hypnosis and suggestion, deviating from the historical record.

In this scene, I examine the power dynamics of male/female relationships, especially in terms of sexuality and psychology. The scene satirizes the history of Dr. Charcot’s demonstrations by turning it into an internet sideshow, speaking to a specific history in a discomfoting but humorous way. Blanche has no lines in this scene. She is essentially a zombie, a worst-case scenario for a romantic relationship. She is a nightmarish example of losing yourself to love.

Skyping with Nina de Villard: *To Pose*



The Posers, 2017, HD video with sound, 16:40 min. (video still)

Nina de Villard was a pianist, poet, courtesan, salon host, and socialite in Paris, France during the 1860s.⁶ Villard is most remembered today for being the subject of the painting *La Dame aux Éventails* [*Woman with Fans*] by Edouard Manet, as well as the subject of several poems and other pieces of art by male friends and companions. The first book of her poetry was published the year that she died, in 1884. Writing about Nina de Villard, Dr. Sandrine Harismendy, notes that Nina de Villard's over-visibility (in poems and paintings by men) caused her to disappear from view (in terms of her own artistic practice).⁷

⁶ Gretchen Schultz, *Gendered Lyric: Subjectivity and Difference in Nineteenth-Century French Poetry*, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed September 12, 2017).

⁷ Sandrine Harismendy, Ph.D in discussion with the author September, 2017.

In my video, an actress plays a camgirl performing as Nina de Villard (hereafter referred to as Nina) in a Skype call with The Actor Representing Me (hereafter referred to as T.A.R.M.) At one point, T.A.R.M compliments Nina on what a good job she is doing at being historically accurate. This offends Nina, who says, “it really doesn’t make me feel like I’m doing a good job when you reference the construct!” As a camgirl and performer, Nina seeks to hide a private self that reveals her as someone pretending to be someone else. By adding this additional layer of performativity to the character, I can be freer in my interpretation of Nina De Villard. I eliminate the demand for perfect historical accuracy in favor of interpretation.

The construct is consistently referred to and revealed through the different types of the footage I use: screen captures from computers and high-definition digital video. This allows for two different versions of “reality” to emerge: that which is created through the computer screen, and that which exists outside of that frame. Inside the frame we see only Nina’s top half dressed in a period-style blouse and wig. In a later scene, I reveal that on her lower half she is wearing pajama pants and slippers. When T.A.R.M requests that Nina play something on the piano for her (Nina de Villard composed her own music and was an accomplished concert pianist⁸), Nina demures. When T.A.R.M keeps pushing, she complies, puts Wagner on through her Spotify, and plays an invisible set of keys. I edit the scene to move back and forth between screengrabs and the video camera. Inside the frame of the Skype world, it looks to T.A.R.M and the audience as if Nina is playing a piano that is just out of the frame. In the video camera footage world, we see her hands playing across nothing but empty space.

⁸ Sandrine Harismendy, Ph.D in conversation with the author.

The artist Suzanne Bocanegra has an ongoing performance project where she hires actors to deliver her own “artist talks.” During the performance, Bocanegra sits in the audience or off to the side of the stage and delivers the lines through a microphone to the actor on stage who wears an earpiece. While the stories are Bocanegra’s, the movement of the story through her to the actor on stage highlights the separation and collaboration between Bocanegra’s text and the actor’s performance.⁹ In an interview in BOMB magazine, Bocanegra states:

There’s one thing in all my pieces that is “made up,” and that is me. The actor is presenting him or herself as me, faking it, and the audience is in on it. Ever since I watched Paul perform as me, I’ve been interested in understanding that dynamic—how an actor creates an illusion of another person. The actor professionally pretends, using someone else’s words and someone else’s story.

In the same way, I employ T.A.R.M to tell my own story and I use Nina as a foil for T.A.R.M to explore her fear of losing herself or being forgotten to history. I reference Nina’s poems and the events of her life to reflect on my own. In one scene, T.A.R.M describes getting engaged in Paris, and the roller coaster of emotion she felt after accepting, given the overwhelming idea of being with someone forever:

NINA:

What happened when you thought about the foreverness?

TARM:

I had to shit, desperately. We were eating this big breakfast by Montmartre cemetery, we were sitting in the sun, and I was trying to eat a bite of my waffle, but I had zero appetite and all the sudden I felt my stomach drop in this ominous way and I ran downstairs to the bathroom and I looked at the ring he’d given me and I just shit my brains out.

⁹ Bocanegra, Suzanne. “Suzanne Bocanegra by John Haskell.” By John Haskell. BOMB Magazine, September 26, 2017

NINA:

Mmm. I was buried in the Montmartre cemetery. And many years later, whoever was in charge of our plot stopped paying and my body was disinterred and taken away, to who knows where. Forever is not something you can get used to.

I'm interested in the problems of representation, both from a historical standpoint and from a filmmaking perspective. When is it appropriate to invent a character based on a real person?

Nina's character was based on interviews with Sandrine Harismendy, who admitted that it had been decades since she had researched Nina. Additionally, all of Sandrine's essays on Nina were written in French and badly translated by me through Google translate. Thus, the conversation with Nina is less about giving airtime to a forgotten artist and more about the construct.

Additionally, I'm interested in elements of representation that lie beyond the visible. To be truly seen involves more than just being looked at. Verstehen, which means "to understand" in German, is a concept originally developed by Max Weber that advocated using empathy in the sociological or historical understanding of human action and behavior. Verstehen emphasized understanding actions through the subject's point of view, as opposed to understanding one's research subjects solely through one's observations. I relate the slippage between characters to this form of research. I see people becoming other people across time as a sort of extreme Verstehen.

Circling: *To Act*



The Posers, 2017, HD video with sound, 16:40 min. (video still)

In Ingmar Bergman's film *Persona*, a nurse cares for an actress who has suffered a nervous breakdown and is now mute. As the women become closer, the nurse seems to lose her sense of self. In their dress, behavior, and mental states, they start to become one another. Susan Sontag wrote about the film, "*Persona* is not just a representation of transactions between the two characters... but a meditation on the film which is 'about' them."¹⁰ The doubling of the characters is emphasized through the cinematography, which puts the women's faces close or overlapping in tight shots with a shallow depth of field. Some of my cinematography, blocking, and style is inspired by *Persona*, particularly during the Circling scenes, to better emphasize the leitmotif of people turning into one another.

¹⁰ Susan Sontag, "Bergman's *Persona*",
<https://thomas-hersey.wiki.uml.edu/file/view/Sontag+on+Persona.pdf>

Circling is a modality for separating what is factual from the complicated and often inaccurate stories we spontaneously create about people. Circling is a group connection activity that, according to Circling Europe, first developed at the Burning Man festival in 1998. The premise was to create a safe space to relate with other people and understand the “deep structures” and contexts that inform someone’s perspective and understanding.¹¹ According to the Circling Institute in Berkeley, CA., one of the things that Circling does well is:

gives you the experience of “being seen” and known for who you really are. Many people have never felt truly seen, which can be very isolating and painful. When you’re deeply seen for both your unique gifts and beauty – AND the shadow parts you usually keep hidden – you effortlessly become comfortable in your own skin.¹²

Circling aims at bettering participants’ understanding of how they are perceived by others as well as understanding the stories people infer about others based on their physical presence. It takes a close look at the triangle of self-perception, perception by others and interpretation by the other and yourself. In researching Circling, I attended a group class in which we engaged in a series of partnered activities designed to highlight the relationship between sense of self, sense of the other person, and a third thing created by being together with someone.

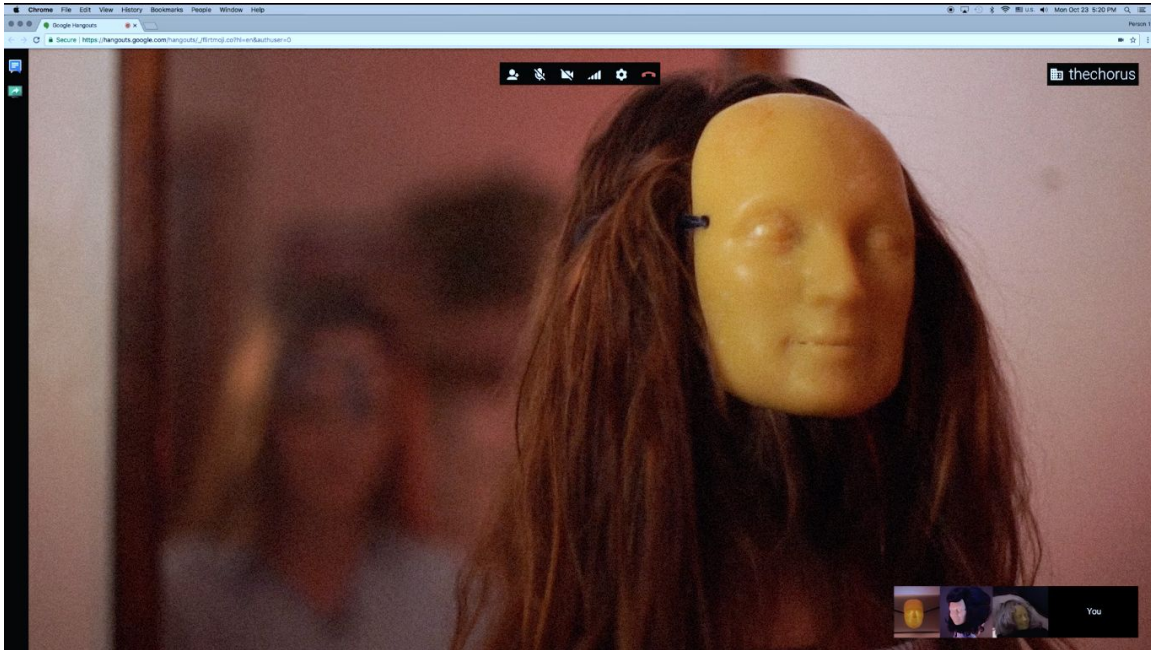
The Circling scene opens in a dark and dreamy room. Sitting in a circle we see Blanche, Nina, T.A.R.M, and Sandrine Harismendy, Ph.D via skype. In the corner of the frame, you see me, explaining Circling to the group.

¹¹ “The Lineage of Circling” *Circling Europe*, 2017, <http://circlingeurope.com/what-is-circling/the-lineage-of-circling/>

¹² “What is Circling?” *Circling Institute*, 2017, <http://www.circlinginstitute.com/circling/what-is-circling/>

Although Circling appears to consist of the act of making observations about someone else, often these observations reveal as much or more about how the speaker feels about him or herself. For example, when T.A.R.M and Nina are Circling and T.A.R.M observes that Nina is wearing pajamas but also a fancy blouse, she says, “my story about that is that for a long time you made things harder for yourself than they needed to be but now you’ve figured out some systems to get things done, even on a tight budget?” I wrote this to reflect more on T.A.R.M’s life and experience playing me, than on Nina’s. Nina’s response digs further into this territory, when she states, “Something I’m observing is that a lot of your observations feel self-conscious and defensive, like you’re totally uncomfortable in your role as director and you’re just as afraid of controlling us as you are that we’ll get out of control.” The dialogue reflects on my own fears of directing actors and not doing justice to the women their roles are based on. Thus, I use Circling to bring to the fore misconceptions about ourselves that we often fail to see or understand. I am interested in the elusiveness of the self to oneself and the kinds of internal divisions one experiences when trying to understand what one wants (like marriage, for example).

The Chorus: To Be Two-Faced



The Posers, 2017, HD video with sound, 16:40 min. (video still)

The Chorus is a group video call inspired by a classic Greek chorus. It features all the characters in the movie wearing wax masks on the backs of their heads delivering monologues that are intended to provide a more didactic narrative. I collect these voices in a group video call window as another way of reinterpreting elements of antiquity through a contemporary filter.

The wax masks were created from plaster molds bought at a wax museum auction in Gettysburg. Their material refers to their origins and further contributes to and complicates the recurring theme of moldability and impressionability through the metaphor of wax.

Most of the lines spoken by the Chorus are modified excerpts from my thesis and relate directly to how I understand each character and their role. The monologue delivered by the character playing the camgirl playing Nina de Villard reflects on her proximity to her role, and to history itself:

NINA:

I like to get too close to the historical record. To press up against it and leave it smudged with the grease from my forehead and hands. My private face, smashed up against the public record. I know that there is a boundary, a way to have safe interactions with history, but I don't like that as much.

The experience she is referring to, of getting too close or wanting to dangerously embody someone else's story from history, is mine. The camgirls, posing as occluded women from history, are expressions of my desire or fear of getting too close too and being left off of the historical record. For example, I read about de Villard's transition from popular salon host and poet to divorced alcoholic, and I am dangerously capable of seeing overlap between her life and mine. I lean into that fear as a tactic for telling stories in a way that is personally revealing. I am not just attempting to relay the stories of Nina and Blanche; I am divulging the specific and personal ways in which I relate to their lives. The chorus indirectly announces this relationship.

Two of my earlier video works relied heavily on a voiceover narrative to explain what was going on and why it was important to me. For "The Posers" I chose to distribute the role of the narrator amongst all of the characters. They deliver the lines with their backs turned to the camera. We see the mask on the back of their head, which speaks to the divide between the vocal, knowing face and the face that is quiet. Throughout the movie, I come back to moments of public versus

private: the private show, the public record. The masks offer a direct connotation with the phrase “two-faced” and tie back into the theme of “posing.”

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Image List: Thesis Show Installation Images

Thesis exhibition installation view (*The Posers*) p. 23

Thesis exhibition installation view (*The Posers*) p. 24



Thesis Exhibition (installation view)



Thesis Exhibition (installation view)

To view *The Posers* please go to the following link:
<https://vimeo.com/243920935>