

ANGER



PHOTO
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LAIA
ABRIL

ON MASS HYSTERIA
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Laia Abril (Barcelona, 1986) is a multidisciplinary artist whose works center on themes of women's rights, grief, and bio-politics. Her research-based practice employs photography, text, and sound to explore difficult and hidden realities. Following *On Abortion* (2016) and *On Rape* (2020), *On Mass Hysteria* is the latest chapter in her trilogy, *A History of Misogyny* – a long-term research project that challenges societal tendencies to dismiss women's suffering and undermine their narratives.

In this exhibition, Abril focuses on Mass Psychogenic Illness (MPI) and explores the idea of it being an ancient form of female protest. Widely known as “Mass Hysteria”, this disorder is believed to be triggered by severe traumatic events and typically affects tight-knit communities that are overwhelmed by high-stress situations. With no known physiological cause, sudden symptoms – such as fainting, twitching, unstoppable laughter, and trance-like states – are experienced collectively and can persist for months.

Through an expansive archival installation, the artist demonstrates that this is a far-reaching phenomenon – both temporally and geographically. Abril investigates three specific case studies from Mexico, Cambodia and the U.S., visualizing the different societal interpretations of these outbreaks. Finally, through a video installation she delves into the power of collective pain and transgenerational trauma and establishes a connection between the oppressive state and mass hysteria as a collective physical response of resistance.

In *On Mass Hysteria* Abril explores the intricate dynamics of outbreaks from a feminist perspective. She seeks to answer enduring questions such as what drives the spread of these epidemics, and why they disproportionately impact young women. Firmly rooted in research, her approach intertwines psychology, anthropology, medical history, and women's rights to shift the focus from blaming women for their medically unexplained ailments to examining the influence of societal and political oppression.

ARCHIVAL FILES

Witches were executed in Salem, U.S., during the 1600s, while across Europe, nuns inexplicably meowed and convulsed. In the 19th century, hand-trembling epidemics pervaded Swiss and German all-girls boarding schools; concurrently, female workers suffered from fainting episodes in the U.K. and the U.S. In the 1960s, Tanzanian female pupils were seized by contagious laughter. More recently, fainting waves overcame hundreds of young Afghan women, while nearly 600 Mexican boarding schoolgirls inexplicably lost the ability to walk upright. In the past decade, thousands of Bangladeshi female workers collapsed while U.S. cheerleaders began to display compulsive tics that eventually spread through TikTok, adding another perplexing chapter to the phenomenon.

In this archival installation, Abril systematically depicts the mysterious journey of Mass Psychogenic Illness (MPI) across various historical moments, showcasing society's different interpretations of the experiences of thousands of women – and a few young boys. Sourced from a broad range of disciplines – including anthropology, neurology, psychiatry, and sociology as well as media reports – the piece displays an array of cases that epitomise the ongoing skepticism and uncertainty of experts throughout the ages.

CASE #1

CHALCO, MEXICO 2007

SCHOOL HYSTERIA

PARALYSIS EPIDEMIC IN MEXICAN CATHOLIC BOARDING SCHOOL

In 2007, nearly 600 girls from La Villa de Niñas, a Korean Catholic all female boarding school in Chalco, Mexico, inexplicably lost their ability to walk upright.

From remote, rural regions, the girls had journeyed to this school seeking refuge from potential poverty, abuse, and teen pregnancy, drawn by the promise of education, even the prospect of becoming nuns.

Yet, they underwent severe cultural displacement. Upon arrival, they found themselves amidst a school of 4,000 peers who were made to look homogeneous. They had to adopt Asian-style haircuts, wear self-made identical uniforms, and relinquish all personal belongings. Their indigenous mother-tongues were forbidden, and family contact was limited to only two or three times a year. The strict Catholic regimen involved long hours of kneeling at prayer, obedience and menial work, the same austere meals, the prohibition of physical contact, crying or showing any emotion, with harsh punishments such as exhaustive running.

When the epidemic captured media attention, health authorities pointed to mass psychogenic illness, finding no organic cause. The role of the school's environment was implicitly implicated, though vehemently denied by the director fearing a donation fallout. After a student was expelled following a ouija session, speculations arose that

the ensuing guilt of those who reported her, who were believed to be cursed, subsequently triggered the outbreak. Accusations of nuns administering spoiled food and menstruation-halting powders also surfaced.

Dr. Josefina Ramírez, a Mexican physical anthropologist and an expert on the case, analysed this school as a “total institution”: “A cultural system of morality where emotions are controlled, imposed and redirected towards a single goal: to control the bodies and souls of the inmates”. To honour their indigenous roots and amplify their voices, the audio installation *Voices of Chalco* features the girls’ testimonies in one of their native languages, Tlapaneco.

CASE #2

CAMBODIA 2009–2022

LABOUR HYSTERIA

MASS FAINTINGS IN CAMBODIAN GARMENT FACTORIES

Over the past decade, thousands of women in Cambodia have fainted each year at garment factories. This mass psychogenic epidemic peaked in 2015 and 2016, with an alarming average of two thousand female workers collapsing per year, despite no physiological basis.

Driven by the pressures of neoliberalism, Cambodian women are forced to migrate from rural residences to urban centres, satisfying the Western demand for consumer goods. The garment industry, dominated by Chinese-owned factories, manufactures for top-selling brands like H&M, Levi Strauss & Co., Puma, and Nike. Despite enduring inhumane working conditions — extended hours, insufficient ventilation, unsafe environments, unequal pay, and sexual harassment — female workers in these factories are often blamed for fainting, with incidents attributed to their poor diet.

Maurice Eisenbruch, a Khmer-speaking medical anthropologist and transcultural psychiatrist, discovered that fainting could be understood not only as an unconscious bodily reaction and a form of protest against oppression but also as a response to cultural beliefs and transgenerational trauma. Eisenbruch posits that during mass fainting episodes triggered by factory tensions, the women who faint symbolically “die”, briefly re-enacting the horrors of the killing fields.

Poignantly, many factories infamous for fainting incidents are built atop mass graves from the Khmer Rouge era, a grim fact, which is captured in the *Case Study #2 Cambodia* Lightbox installation, underscoring the country's ongoing trauma of its tragic past, caused by land reform.

Spirits of people killed in that era, and women who died in hazardous factory conditions, spark fear in the workforce, inciting further outbreaks. The audio piece *Voices of Cambodia* is based on the testimonies of workers and the *Mind Series* visualises their fears and prophetic dreams, revealing that fainting, beyond political and physical responses, might also embody a profound spiritual element.

CASE #3

LE ROY, U.S. 2011–2012

ONLINE HYSTERIA

TWITCHING AND TICS IN AN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL

In 2012, over a dozen teenage girls from Le Roy, New York, became the focus of national media as they began exhibiting uncontrollable muscle spasms and tics, symptoms reminiscent of Tourette syndrome.

As the media spotlight fell on this working-class town, health officials stepped in attributing the outbreak to mass psychogenic illness, a diagnosis that sparked community controversy. The families vehemently rejected the idea that the symptoms were purely psychological, stemming from trauma-related triggers.

Many of the affected students engaged in very competitive sports such as cheerleading and softball, were under the care of neurologist Dr. Jennifer McVige. She observed that some were grappling with potent stressors or traumas —from academic anxieties and future uncertainties to caring for sick parents, enduring abuse, teenage pregnancies, and grief.

Unsatisfied with the official explanations and persistent symptoms, families took their concerns to social media and prime time talk shows, often featuring dramatic images of the affected teens. Rumours circulated about a 1970 toxic spill as a possible cause, but extensive testing found no environmental evidence. Instead, medical experts proposed that media and online exposure likely exacerbated symptoms —an aspect conceptualised in the *Case Study #3 Le Roy*

lightbox artwork. The *News Series* piece further delves into these tensions, using text and imagery to underline the disbelief expressed by the community and media.

Medical sociologist Robert Bartholomew analysed this as the first disputed case of mass psychogenic illness in the “Social Networking Era”, hinting at broader implications. Today, this prediction is unfolding with the emergence of the *TikTok* tics epidemic, a new form of mass psychogenic illness, also disproportionately affecting female teens.

MASS PROTEST

In her video piece “Mass Protest” Abril, explores women’s collective resistance. By intentionally abstracting geographical locations, she creates a narrative linked by protest motivations and forms of female protest.

The issues addressed span continents: from abortion rights – in Poland, Argentina, and Ireland; femicides – in Puerto Rico, El Salvador, and Uganda; sexual violence – in Mexico, India, and Spain; educational rights – in Afghanistan; Transgender rights – in Pakistan and the U.S.; and rights of sex workers – in Italy and France. The video also examines additional forms of social injustice, such as the environmental crisis – in the Netherlands and Germany, and police brutality – in Nigeria and Iran.

The video conceptualizes the theory of medical historian Robert Woolsey and Mexican physical anthropologist Dr. Josefina Ramírez, who proposed that Mass Hysteria functions as a ‘protolanguage’ – an unverbilized, collective physical response symbolizing young women’s struggle against societal oppression.

Through the juxtaposition of various voices, chants, and noises, the sound composition incites cognitive dissonance. The inclusion of white noise is inspired from the frequencies of a Blood fMRI scan results — a diagnostic test that measures brain activity through blood flow changes. These specific test results form part of a study that investigates the neurological roots of conversion disorder – also referred to as hysteria – in three women.

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LES FILLES
DU CALVAIRE

In parallel to this exhibition, L'Appartement, Images Vevey's exhibition space is presenting *Laia Abril. Menstruation Myths* from June 28 to November 5, 2023. In this project, Laia Abril denounces the difficulties faced by menstruating women in societies that scorn this biological mechanism.

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Laia Abril, *Anger, Mind series, Case #3*
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