

Too Close for Comfort

Using fainting and surgery as subject matter, Marianna Simnett explores the immediacy of the medicalised body at Copenhagen Contemporary.

By Steven Zultanski 26.02.19 Review Artikel på dansk



Marianna Simnett, *The Needle and the Larynx*, 2016. Still. Courtesy: the artist and Serpentine Galleries, London.

Marianna Simnett is known for work that unflinchingly summons both the fear of sickness and the fear of medicine. Her videos are frequently discussed in terms of their shock value. Featuring close-ups of medical procedures, stories of bodies in transformation, and horror movie aesthetics, it's tempting to read these works as provocations, tests of the audience's squeamishness. Given that reputation, one would expect that an exhibition at the voluminous Copenhagen Contemporary – especially one titled *SEIZURE* – would be an occasion for the artist to push her work's tendency to overwhelm to an extreme.

But despite the enormous space, the two works exhibited conjure intimacy rather horror, empathy rather dread. *Faint with Light* (2016) is both the more severe and the more restrained of the pair. A response to a previous work entitled *Faint* (2012), in which Simnett hyperventilated until she passed out, this installation is an attempt to reconsider that performance, which, in the artist's opinion, perpetuated the trope of a fainting, hysterical woman.

The new version features audio of four fits of hyperventilation, each culminating in a seizure. There is no image of the artist. Instead, the sound is matched to a LED display which functions like a volume meter: the harder Simnett breathes, the higher the light climbs toward the ceiling, until it maxes out, illuminating the room in a flash as she gasps and faints.

While the work is certainly large-scale – it's loud and blinding – it's not simply an exercise in sensory overload, it's also an experiment in proximity: her performance was carefully recorded so that it sounds overly intimate, too near. At times, the air on a microphone audibly whooshes, and when Simnett passes out the sound briefly goes into the red. You can hear how close the artist was to the microphones, so that the distance between person and machine breaks down into a distorted signal. Analogous to that collapse of distance, Simnett is not interested in the anxious thoughts that might lie behind an attack of hyperventilation, but in the moment when anxiety spills over and distorts intellectual understanding, becoming sheerly physical.

The video work *The Needle and the Larynx* (2016) more explicitly narrativises the medicalisation of the body. Filmed in slow motion, it documents Simnett submitting herself to a procedure in which Botox is injected into her larynx to deepen her voice. The procedure is sometimes offered to men whose voices didn't change after puberty. Here, a voiceover narrative overlays the surgery with a fable about a little girl who demands that a surgeon deepen her voice, and when he refuses she threatens him with a swarm of mosquitos until he relents (in the end, the mosquitos suck him dry anyway).

Again, despite the distancing effects (in addition to the slow motion and the voiceover, there's non-synchronous sound throughout and a surprising, charming musical number about Botox), the work seems designed to produce a feeling of proximity: the static camera voyeuristically scrutinises the scene as the surgeon slides the needle into the artist's neck and twists it from side to side. Simnett

maintains a stoic expression, but it's a vulnerable work; not only does one watch her in pain, but one inevitably projects onto her position, imagining what the procedure must feel like. In this way, the formal coldness (the steadiness of the camera, the artist's nearly unchanging expression) becomes a vehicle for empathy.



Marianna Simnett, *The Needle and the Larynx*, 2016. Still. Courtesy: the artist and Serpentine Galleries, London.

But in aiming for immediacy, these pieces sacrifice a relationship to the durational and lived experience of medicine. For example, the light display in *Faint with Lights* suggests medical monitoring equipment, but it's too rapid and startling to evoke the waiting, the boredom, or the anxiety that comes from being attached to such equipment. As anyone who's been sick knows, the experience of being monitored does not consist solely in the physical discomfort (and psychological shock) of being hooked up to machines, but in the dilated time of waiting to be unhooked, of watching the readings for so long that they become ambient, of feeling one's thoughts involuntarily spiral.

Similarly, but in a different key, *The Needle and the Larynx*'s intense focus on the artist's punctured throat emphasises the moment of the surgical act, making it difficult to interpret the video as a commentary on the daily, lived performance of gender roles and expectations. What stands out, rather, is the piece's documentary aspect: it records Simnett's real experience of submitting herself to the procedure. The awareness that one is watching a body in pain blurs potential allegorical interpretations. As with *Faint with Light*'s disembodied breathing, the artist's performance is presented so directly that it slides into abstraction.

This exhibition gambles on an attempt to make present the ways that medicine can bring the body into too much focus, so that it becomes alien and unknowable. *Faint with Light* and *The Needle and the Larynx* were paired for their shared dedication to radical proximity. As such, what's arguably missing from the exhibition is an engagement with the more durational psychic aftereffects of medicine and recovery. But it's precisely by neglecting interiority – and instead presenting physicality as a material recalcitrant to meaning – that Simnett's show produces a different kind of intimacy: the sensation of getting so close to the body that it becomes unrecognisable.