

I'LL READ WHAT SHE'S READING

“Hysterical Literature,” Clayton Cubitt’s online video project, captures women reading while being stimulated by a vibrator. Wanting to take part, the author took *Portrait of a Lady* to Cubitt’s studio

By TONI BENTLEY



TIC-TAC-WHOA
The author (*top left; center; bottom right*) and others in stills from “Hysterical Literature.”

m in the backseat of a car on my way to Brooklyn, on a beautiful spring day to meet two people I have never met to take part in a most unlikely experiment. The e-mails organizing this affair—I had talked to no one in person—had only one specific request: that I wear something with “easy access,” so I slipped on a black, ankle-length mermaid skirt and high-heeled suede boots. And no panties.

I press the buzzer and climb a few steps to meet Clayton Cubitt, a photographer and filmmaker, and his partner of 16 years, Katie James, the “female assistant.” They are both

very attractive—Clayton, dark, chiseled, and tall, and Katie, languid, soft, and beautiful.

Invited to sit down in the spacious living room of the loft, I was offered tea. There were so many books around that they seemed to define the space more than the outer walls. I saw Faulkner, Nietzsche, and Roland Barthes communing in one pile. Cubitt confesses to having “a bit of a problem with books,” likening it to “an addiction.”

“Hysterical Literature,” Cubitt’s online video project, debuted in August of 2012 on YouTube with *Session One*, starring the charming,

VIDEO STILLS BY CLAYTON CUBITT

alt-porn star Stoya. Stylishly dressed, she sits behind a small table and begins reading a book. But soon something goes wrong: her enunciation becomes uneven, and she keeps smiling inappropriately. Less than six minutes later she is unable to continue reading because she is having an orgasm, a massive one, live, on-camera. What is going on under that table?

Stoya's session quickly went viral and has received close to 16,000,000 views, a number that dwarfs by millions those of any of her impressive X-rated clips on free porn sites.

Cubitt has since released nine more sessions on YouTube and on his own elegant site. The participants are acquaintances of Cubitt's: writers, performers, artists, rebels.

Why would I do this? Why *wouldn't* I do it? "Hysterical Literature" combines my two overriding passions—sex and literature. The series juxtaposes the realm of words literally atop the realm of the erotic: each, as it were, finally in true congress with the other. Who would win the inevitable war? Upper body or lower? Logic or lust? Or, perhaps they might actually meld together, literature and sex, Madonna and Whore—for this is the core dichotomy of Cubitt's experiment—fused as never before. For a woman who has eroticized her immutable shame, "Hysterical Literature" offers both public apotheosis and poetic coalescence—with a strong exhibitionism-voeurism folie à deux chaser. This was a ride right up my street—though it was more like merging on the Autobahn.

Katie and Clayton led me to the studio at the back of the loft, and there was that small gray desk—its surface separating the seen from the unseen, the decent from the indecent. The art from the sex.

Eight feet from the front edge of the table was Cubitt's camera on a tripod. It would be Katie who would do the handheld work under the table with what Cubitt calls her "paintbrush," a Hitachi Magic Wand vibrator—also known as "Big Buzzy." "I think she's the actual artist involved," says Cubitt. "I just press Record and stand back."

Centered behind the table is a chair covered with a clean soft towel. I sat down and put my old, dog-eared Penguin edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* on the desk. I had been told that the choice of reading was entirely mine. I wanted something I loved. Really loved. Isabel Archer, James's feisty heroine, with her superb, spirited, and moral-minded nature, quickly chose herself. I had first encountered Isabel when I was 18 and found her magnificent in having a life whose job lay in "affronting her destiny." Would that I could too. Would that I would even have such a thing.

As "a young person of many theories," who was "liable to the sin of self-esteem," Isabel "had an infinite hope that she should never do anything wrong"—but when she did, "she treated herself to a week of passionate

humility." I couldn't help thinking that *Portrait of a Lady* would be an apt subtitle for Cubitt's undertaking: women reading while being discreetly sexually stimulated, until they go, literally, out of their minds.

And so, 134 years after her birth, I took Isabel's "destiny" into Cubitt's cubicle.

Once seated I raised myself up hiking my long skirt all the way up until it pooled gently around my waist. The edges of the table were hung with heavy quilts, fastened to the top of the desk, creating a small cave under the table: Katie's workspace.

One final adjustment: I needed to be seated with my derriere as close to the front edge of the chair as possible. I found a perfect balance by pressing my waist into the edge of the table, and, with my legs extended and elongated far forward and apart, I was firmly wedged, though it was certainly not how I had ever read Henry James before.

Cubitt, 43, whose bread and butter is sleek, sexy commercial, fashion, and celebrity photography, allowed close to 10 years for "Hysterical Literature" to evolve into its current incarnation. With its simple, witty, yet profound conceit, the series presents a rigorous refinement of his two primary interests: subversion—"I like fucking with people"—and "maximizing joy."

An autodidact, Cubitt hails from New Orleans. "I come from trailer-park origins, outsiders, renegades," he says. Cubitt left both home and school at age 16, and he sports two impressive tattoos. His right forearm reads, THIS TOO SHALL PASS, and his left counts his years on earth in tally marks.

"I became interested in subverting people's increasingly sophisticated images of themselves," says Cubitt. "But I didn't want to have any control over anything that happened," he says, so the women select their own hair, makeup, clothes, and texts. "What they read is a proxy for themselves, their aspirations, what is deep to them."

Thus "Hysterical Literature" was born, the title playing on the fact that, while the videos witness and elicit laughter, the name is a sly, throwback reference to what Michel Foucault termed the "hysterization of women's bodies" that was rampant at the turn of the 20th century. The pathology of "hysteria" uncannily paralleled that of frustrated erotic desire. Intervention was necessary, and so the electro-mechanical vibrator, a medical device, was invented in the 1880s and used by a doctor, with excellent curative results, by provoking in his suffering patient a "hysterical paroxysm"—an orgasm. Several decades later, women got vibrators into their own hands, and the rest is history, culminating, one might say, in a very public display of sovereign female pleasure in a male-free zone under Cubitt's table.

With insurrection being Cubitt's middle name, he wanted to make his project available

on YouTube, the world's "most democratic, sharable forum," Cubitt says. Working with YouTube's "Community Guidelines"—no "pornography or sexually explicit content"—the design of the venture came into focus. "I wanted it to look high-end, to be austere and black-and-white, no nudity," says Cubitt. "As far from lurid as I could get it, almost boring, clinical." It is worth noting that the women's orgasms on view in "Hysterical Literature" are bona fide female Money Shots—unlike in all mainstream movies, most porn, and, alas, many a bedroom, where they are faked. It's about time we got something authentic on the public record in our age of female ascension.

The statistics are impressive: the series has been viewed over 45 million times. Include the pirated versions and Cubitt says total views would double, so we are heading for 100 million views in over 200 countries.

Now ready for takeoff, Katie slipped down, disappearing under the quilts. I had told her that I was a Hitachi virgin—I never understood the point of vibrators particularly if there was an able-bodied man around—so she offered to touch the side of my knee with the wand before filming as a preview. Holy Mary Mother of God. Maybe Big Pharma should stop trying to formulate that little pink pill to give women a "desire" and just give it up to Big Buzzy. How could I last long enough to do justice to James?

"Rolling," says Clayton, and everything disappeared except the book in my hands and the words on the page. The world was out and I was on.

By the time I'd read two pages, I was struggling mightily to keep my countenance. "She spent half her time in thinking of beauty, bravery and mag-nan-unn-im-im-ity . . ." The intensity was surging beyond my control, but I battled on. "She had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness"—my own determination was now seriously compromised, and I was reading solely phonetically, sequential meaning had evaporated entirely, and only isolated words resonated—"of free expansion, of irresistible action . . ." And I broke. The world was indeed a place of brightness as I spun open, Katie's paintbrush whirring me into timeless bliss, taking me from myself and thus returning me home. Once I had regained my breath—composure was not an option—I collapsed into a very particular laughter, a deep, rich laughter that is the spontaneous dénouement of every "Hysterical Literature" session: a woman delighted, a woman who cannot believe she did what she just did, felt what she just felt. A woman drenched in joy. Hallelujah.

And now, finally, I know what vibrators are really for: reading. □

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"Hysterical Literature"
VIDEO go to VF.COM/
AUGUST 2015.