

**Therapist: Why did you come to me?**

**Patient: Because I feel that I am a dog.**

**Therapist: How long have you felt like that?**

**Patient: Since I was a puppy.**

## **LIFE AS AN ANIMAL EXPERIMENT OR THE FLORENCE SYNDROM**

**Yair Garbuz**

Imagine standing in a museum in front of a photograph, which shows a seated man. Let's say the name of the photograph is ***Man sitting in his room***. I provide more information: the photograph is 60X40 cm, shot and printed in black-and-white. And now I might ask: what do you think about this photograph? You will probably answer: there is not enough information to form an opinion. First, we must look at the photograph. You would be representing the view that a visual artwork must first be experienced and judged by the eye. With a little persuasion, I might be able to extract from you vague, trivial guesses: perhaps he is at rest... or expecting something... or posing... or pretending. If you are very assertive, you might ascribe the sitting man attributes and emotional states. However, if I showed you the same photograph (sight unseen) under a

different title, such as “John (not his real name) sat down on that chair four months ago and did not move since,” and add a subtitle saying “John has not spoken, eaten, slept, responded, or acknowledged his family for 120 days now.” Surely, with this text, the polite answer “we need to see the photograph first” would be insufficient. We would now think of catatonia, self-punishment, autosuggestion, and perhaps of how absurdly strong and resilient the human body is in the face of mental illness. After we have considered the miserable, anonymous sitting man, or the miserable and pretending man, it is likely that the need to look at the photograph itself would be diminished.

A conceptual title stimulates us intellectually and directs us to think not of the photograph as an art object but rather of the agonies of the human body and spirit. That was the nature and distinction of conceptual art of the 1970s, allocating the least importance to the art object and the most value to the intellectual directive. Post conceptual contemporary art returns visual representation to its significant and central place without relinquishing the depth and quality of the title, text, and the context. Today you might encounter works in which the relationship between form and content is not a picture–title one in the illustrative sense, but an interaction between languages that try to make each other redundant, failing deeply and gloriously. The many simulations that might be experienced in the passages between form and content are at the heart of Keren Gueller’s amused, brilliant, and biting experiment, which she presents in her show “the Florence Syndrome.”

Both words and forms have advantages and limitations. Possibilities available only to each language separately open up when words and forms point to each other. The picture cannot show facts that are contrary to what the eye sees. Words may say, “John decided to sit in the chair and not move,” but in a

“silent” picture this is impossible. Decision has no image; it is pure information. You can say, “John looks healthy but in fact, he is very sick,” but there is no way to show it. “But” doesn’t know how to become a form. The title does John justice because the image by itself would show him as perfectly healthy.

Plenty of manipulations are involved in the joining of visuals and words, full of humor, absurdity and sorrow, doubt and arbitrariness, invention and failure. Keren Gueller anticipates the errors and the failures and she is willing to become entangled in them, to come under suspicion, to fail. How pleasing and fascinating it is to think that she, who has made several funny, witty, and heartwarming works about family, transfers her focus to animals for the moment, as in Gerald Durrell’s excellent book, *My Family and Other Animals*.

**“One fine day, when we woke Quasimodo, we realized he has fooled us all. A bright white egg lay among the pillows. He was never the same again. He became sullen, brooding and silent, and started to peck irritably when you tried to pick him up. Then he, or rather she, laid another egg, and her nature changed completely. She became wilder and wilder, and treated us like her worst enemies.”<sup>[1]</sup>**

Apparently, or if we choose to see it, animals too have gender issues, and they are preoccupied with questions of sexual identity and acceptance of the “other.” No matter where we begin, at the end of the road awaits a joke.

Animals are excellent material for considering the power of words versus pictures and their mutual pollination, including the forcing of the form on the text and vice versa. Virtually all reference to animals is manipulative. We anthropomorphize, appropriate, and represent them. We take full advantage of the fact that they do not speak our language nor share our knowledge, fears, and the rest of our undertakings, including

the strange need to give artistic expression to our experiences and to interpret them in every language available to us. The relentless and absurd attempt to project our world image on the animals is in itself more fabulous than any animal fable we have ever invented. Conferring human attributes on animals shows that we cannot bear their world image without our human subtitles, just as we would struggle to bear our world image without the hope of rationality. So far, so good, especially when it comes to jokes. The good thing about jokes is, it is not at all clear what we want: should they – the animals – be like us, or are we becoming like them?

In the foreword to the *Red Book of Jokes* Danny Kerman, its editor, gatherer, and illustrator, says: **“It is ironic that when you say about someone that he’s a Mensch, it is meant as a compliment but when you say he’s an animal it’s derogatory.”**<sup>[2]</sup> When we say that an animal is disturbed or egocentric, it has no way of denying it. On the contrary, anything it does belidcomes solid proof of the Humans’ arbitrary and anthropocentric proclamation. Zoos post signs saying that casting food to the animals is forbidden, but nowhere does it say that you cannot cast other things, such as emotions, betrayals, love, alcoholism, and other complexes we have decided to cast away and transfer to the helpless animals. In reality, animals are classified as either pets or “others.” In pictures and texts, we know how to make predators endearing and lay complexes on pets. We experiment with them and use them as a mirror. Keren Guellar does not experiment with animals – only with their images.

**A baby camel asks his father, “Why do we have humps?”  
His father replies, “We save water in our humps, to help us stride for weeks in the desert.”  
“And why do we have such huge feet,” the son continues.**

**“So we can move freely on the desert’s sands,” says the father.**

**The son wants to know, “Why do we have such thick fur?”  
And the father replies, “To protect our bodies from the heat of the day and from the chill of the desert night.”**

**“But Daddy,” asks the baby camel, “Why do we need all these things? We live in a zoo!”**<sup>[3]</sup>

If animals possessed a sense of humor and self-irony, they would have laughed at this joke. If they possess humor, then they must have complexes. Freud has pointed out the non-incident connection between jokes and other disorders. The error, the incident, the mistake, the dream – they all tell us about ourselves. The playwright August Strindberg said, **“I hate people who keep dogs. They are too cowardly to bite people themselves.”**<sup>[4]</sup> You might say that mental disorders enhance their sufferers’ individuality and dynamism. The joke is a kind of malfunction in normative thinking, and so is the disorder. We don’t know what the animals’ norms are, or when they are broken or disturbed. It drives us mad. So we project all we’ve got upon them. We don’t know much about the things we project either. Keren Gueller loves these moments when the surprises and the mistakes and the deceptions and the doubts are replaced by expectations and knowledge and habits. She is interested in that moment when we do not have enough information or direction but still we have something to say. That is because she has a sense of humor and she is sympathetic to malfunctions. She watches them, and us, from the bushes, like a hunter. She knows that humor is perceived by the solemn as a defect and that possibly the viewer will be more compassionate towards her than towards the animals she’s showing. There is no creation without the willingness to be misunderstood; there is no subversion without sacrifice.

**“We were discussing how easily we commit the sin of personifying of animals and projecting upon them inappropriate feelings and views. We simply have no idea what it’s like to be a giant lizard, as is the lizard, who is unaware of being a giant lizard but simply is one. When we were repelled by its behavior we made the mistake of using human standards. Each of us adapts to the world and learns to survive in it in his own way. What we consider successful behavior is invalid for the lizard and vice versa.”<sup>[5]</sup>**

The Florence Syndrome, after which the show is named, is a mental disorder. It causes various physical phenomena and behavior changes in its sufferers when they are exposed to works of art or even spaces like museums and galleries. People who suffer from the syndrome (the humorist would say, people who enjoy the syndrome or are addicted to it) function normally in daily life, but when they spend time around works of art they might experience accelerated heartbeats, dizziness, confusion, disorientation, and sometimes delusions, fainting, and even death. (See Florence and die... I’m crazy for art... Caravaggio is to die for...) In extreme cases, these delusions may cause he afflicted them to act violently toward the artworks or the people around them. **“The only difference between a crazy person and me is that I’m not crazy.”<sup>[6]</sup>** The history of art is filled with bipolar phenomena ranging from “...the prophet is a fool, the spiritual man is mad,” through the torment and seduction and glory of inspiration, to the artist as a court jester or the village fool.

The installation comprises several videos, each showing an animal performing a series of actions and repetitive, disturbing, enigmatic movements. They evoke feeling of compassion, embarrassment, curiosity, recoil, and shame. These are unscripted situations, but the focus on them, the manipulative

editing, and the text that confers meaning on them, all suggest that the animals are suffering from neurotic or psychotic mental disorders. The videos run simultaneously, all in loops, and alongside each one a label describes the animal and its mental condition, or rather its projected mental disorder, meaning the material by which the viewer will entangle himself in delusions and a fertile imagination. Clearly, the animal is used as a vehicle for raising questions about who is normal and who is not, and what is the norm. What is lost and what is gained in madness, or in sanity. Gueller does not allow a single conclusion; she makes us go from one thought to the next with the discomfort of those who are being manipulated. And so we meander from “dog’s life” to “humans’ advantage over the animals” to “people who are as beasts” to the animals that resemble the mentally ill. Do delusions even exist?

I found an especially simple and lovely sentence in a book I’m reading as I write this: **“Psychologically, just opening your eyes places you in front of a mirror.”<sup>[7]</sup>** There’s something very entertaining in using an animal as our mental complexes’ ventriloquist. When the texts describing the disorders are projected on non-human entities, they lose most of their tragic aspect and come close to the joke. It has occurred to me that we give animals food we no longer need. Can we also hand down our expired mental disorders or those that no longer interest us? There’s poetic justice in handing psychology and psychiatry over to the animals: take them, play with them, unravel them, pee on them. Or pass them on to the plants. Captured animals, as well as people who cannot control their urges or are dangerous to themselves or their environment, live behind bars; only the signs and the definitions change somewhat. Possibly Keren Gueller performs voodoo with the animals, for the betterment of the soul.

**An inspector enters the closed ward in a mental hospital. Several patients immediately surround him.**

**“Who are you?” the inspector asks a patient who is lying on the floor and flailing his limbs.**

**“I’m an orange, can’t you see that?”**

**Another, standing on one foot, claims to be an avocado.**

**A third patient stands on his head and introduces himself:**

**“Onion, pleased to meet you.”**

**One patient is sitting in the corner, reading a book, and does not join in the festivities. When the inspector approaches, he nods and continues reading.**

**“You are the only one who seems normal around here,” says the inspector. “Who are you?”**

**“I’m a watermelon,” says the sane guy, “but it’s the wrong season now.”<sup>(8)</sup>**

What’s great about this joke is that it builds a sophisticated model of a mental hospital, one that even has a vegetable ward. Gueller knows that when a man on a horse arrives at a bar, dismounts, ties the horse, and goes in to have a drink, eventually the horse would get there too, alone or with a friend, and order a beer. And if this would be accompanied by instructions for taking notes, it would be possible to write that the horse is drinking to forget, or to overcome inhibitions, or to woo his beloved, or because he has trouble forgetting that bloody battle. And when the horse becomes an alcoholic, would he find a support group with enough horses who would say to him, “We love you. We are the Equine Alcoholics Anonymous...?” That is a question from a different joke.

I am interested in words and texts; I define myself as a steadfast student of nonsense. I encourage mistakes, and I am convinced that the low level is just fine, unless I discover a lower one. I once wrote in one of my paintings, “The horse has a long-

time wish to be a statue.” This is anthropomorphic too. There are no monuments to horses, only to the leaders and generals who rode them. The horse may think that the bronze horses in city squares are monuments to horseness, and thus wish to end his life quickly and become a statue. Meaning, this is about commemoration and its pointlessness, and about people who prefer the dead to the living.

What is the role of humor? It is everything. It collects where there is sickness and suffering and despair; it turns black in battle or illness; it is invasive and destructive. And the best part is, it beats political correctness. I repeat: How can a thought be delusional?

Let us borrow a few psychiatric terms, and examine what is being projected on our inner screen when we hear words like baseless suspicion, an uncontrollably recurring disorder, obsessive thoughts, dissociation, adapting issues, anxiety, overstimulation, racing pulse, high blood pressure, tics, flashbacks, inability to fall asleep or to wake up, submission to others, low self-esteem, deriving gratification from humiliation, disorientation, chronic sadness, protracted stress, fear of genitalia, and more. Now let us jot down a few of the illnesses: Paranoia, masochism, acute PTSD, agoraphobia, derealization disorder, dysthymia – this small sample will do. And now, some animals: Elephant. Whale. Turtle. Lion. Crow. Sea. Octopus. Bear. All that is left to do is draw a line and connect an animal to your favorite symptom. Success is guaranteed. If you’re short on animals, add a few, and if you need more symptoms, invent them. Anyone who says these are random combinations suffers from a case of donkey-like obstinacy, characterized by insubordination and protracted disagreements with randomness.

**“The Komodo dragon lay motionless. The hind part of the chicken poked out from her jaws, the skinny legs silently**

kicking the air. [...] But whatever malicious feelings we were trying to stick to the lizard, we knew they were our feelings, not hers. The lizard was just going on her lizardy business in her simple and direct lizardy way. She knew nothing of the dread, guilt, shame, and disgust that we, the only animals capable of feeling guilt and shame, were trying to ascribe to her. It all came back to us, as if reflected in the mirror of her single eye, free of hesitation or interest. [...] We followed them, meeting one gorilla after the other, until finally we met another silverback, lying on his side under a bush, scratching his ear and aimlessly contemplating two leaves. I knew immediately what he has been doing: he was contemplating the meaning of life, theorizing. It was absolutely clear. Or, rather, the temptation to think that it was so clear was enormous. They seem like humans, they move like humans, and the changing expressions in their faces and their eyes, which are so similar to human eyes, are instinctively recognizable to us as human expressions.”<sup>[9]</sup>

We should consider the borrowed terms for a moment. Illness presentation. Illness colors. Illness movements. Illness sounds. Illness time. Gueller pretends to be some medical clown. She breaks down taboo systems and shatters the momentousness that adds weight to the heaviness of the disorders. She knows how to play innocent and how to use that innocence to gain access to clandestine sites. She knows how to smuggle messages inside gift-wrap. If we, the humans, sometimes behave like animals, and they sometimes behave like humans, perhaps “like” is the subject of this show.

After studying and, when necessary, researching the disorders and the behaviors, Gueller has decided to pair them. She says, **“A mental disorder is a clinically significant psychological or behavior pattern that causes stress or impairs functioning and**

normal development. Psychology classified a wide range of behaviors as deviant from the norm. The study of this charged topic has significance in a variety of fields, as well as political, moral, religious, and other implications. Deviation from the norm holds deep mysteries and unresolved questions. I try to point out the prevalent tendency to create simple visual images for complex problems and thus disrupt the possibility of delving deeper into these issues.”

A lot of information regarding mental disorders remains vague, providing fertile ground for the blossoming of myths, fears, and prejudice. Labeling the moving animal, trapped here inside the screen, as mentally ill effectively marks it.

Two stigmas compete: the behavior and the illness stigmas. Regardless of the presuppositions and of the possibility that some of them are wrong, or false, or staged, the show seeks to prove and to demonstrate the way in which the viewer projects on what he is seeing. The titles describing the mental illness directly affect the viewing and the interpretation.

The act of cataloguing in these works is crucial. Ways of thinking, the ability to comprehend the world, and the organization of knowledge operate by classifying, comparing, concluding, and summarizing. Ironically, the research that preceded the project has also created a kind of archive of knowledge that became more and more complex with multiple possibilities and meanings. Apparently, animal disorders can be catalogued according to various categories, and each decision regarding the nature of the illness refers to a different aspect of the culture, with social, moral, medical, and behavioral implications.

Gueller is dealing visually and aurally, seriously and humorously with illnesses that have forever been among the most mysterious and difficult to treat.

Do animals have souls? Do they experience mental anguish? Does the manipulation that allocates them this suffering reveal some unknown truth? If they have a soul and it can be damaged, what can we learn from this about us humans? Millions of people suffer from phobias and irrational, paralyzing fears when they find themselves in certain situations or are forced to perform some act? These video works explore the behavioral aspects of the individual and society.

Some of the damaged animals were photographed in man-made captivity: a zoo, an aquarium, a cage. The idea that captivity is the source of the disturbing behaviors in the animals raises questions about the connection between exceptions, deviations, and agony and the frameworks and living conditions that affect our mental lives.

The use of experimental video, as a research lab with its own rules, sharpens the gap between the deceptive certainty of science and that that emerges from a grotesque, moving show of images of mental illness.

We should note the surprising fact that when viewers realize that it is their brain that is making the connection between the mental disorder and the behavior of the animal, they relax and switch to amusement mode. They forget that the elephant indeed suffers and that her behavior has been modified by real abuse at the circus, and that a different animal suffers because it cannot adapt to captivity and to being limited by its cage, and a third is distressed because it is used for the amusement of people who objectify it. Gueller suggests, subtly and cunningly, to replace the poetic compassion for the mental disorders with real and direct compassion about the conditions of captivity by humans and the loss of identity related to loss of freedom.

Let us go back to the beginning, to that seated man and to the title telling us that this is a prolonged sitting. Back to the

catatonia, with its unknown end. We will discover that this man has a great advantage over any old 'seated man,' one who can rise at any moment and conduct his life as he pleases. Therefore, we must speak not of a seated man, but of a man who cannot or doesn't want to rise from his chair. The thought would accompany us as an illustration to many other thoughts. We no longer require the actual picture. Not so with Keren Gueller. She goes beyond stimulating the mind or sending the viewer on his own researches. She seduces us to observe and think, to think and look, to enjoy and be alarmed, to explore and laugh, to worry and hope. These are projected images, so we cannot bite the animals. Gueller is not a conceptual artist; she is a conceptual-sensual artist. She wants color and sound and matter and structure together with thought, humor, pain, and many open questions.

**"The truth is a wonderful thing. Let us use it sparingly."**

Mark Twain.

[1] Gerald Durrell, *My Family and Other Animals*. Paraphrased by translator.

[2] [3] [4] [6] [8] Danny Kerman, *The Red Book of Jokes*. Mapa, Tel Aviv

[5] [9] Douglas Adams and Mark Carwardine, *Last Chance to see*. Paraphrased by translator.

[7] Nell Zink. *The Wallcreeper*. Dorothy, a publishing project (2014)

**“THE FLORENCE SYNDROME”  
OR “UNTITLED?”**

**Rivka Warshawsky**

**“A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you,  
the less you know.”<sup>[1]</sup> (Diane Arbus)**

Trying to compose a text that purports to be accurate about Keren Gueller’s show “The Florence Syndrome” is challenging and disturbing. The viewer must take great care not to fall into the seductive trap facing him – the idea that the show is essentially simple or light, that it is jokey. The show does have a humorous aspect, and it is very pleasing indeed, but if we settle for a first glance we might miss the more complex delight and interest and the brilliant abstraction of the show. “The Florence Syndrome” is, in fact, a highly abstract work, difficult to comprehend, and thus, in a way, an “Untitled” work. May we regard a titled work as a kind of “Untitled”? This question and the paradox at its heart is the starting point that has led to this essay.

## I THE INSTALLATION

**“You don’t take a photograph; you make it.”** (Ansel Adams)

Over four years Gueller has been shooting un-staged videos of animals around the world. Some of the recorded animals are strange, some are beautiful, but all are fascinating. The behaviour of the animals is very expressive and yet incomprehensible, as only the observation of animals can be incomprehensible to human intelligence.

Freud has observed that animals, especially the large predators, can represent the remnants of our primeval, omnipotent narcissism, the “ideal ego” from the original egocentric self-love of the infant, free of inhibition and embarrassment, of which we have been weaned by cruel reality, so that we may mature in a more socialized way.<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, animals, especially large predators, have the power to fascinate us (as do babies, divas, and femmes fatales). (Recall the most frequently watched clips on YouTube, and the dominating function of our forefathers’ totem animals.)

Gueller performed an additional intervention on the recorded images (photography was the first intervention to create from “nature” a “reality more real than reality itself” – see Part V). Gueller attached a text to each video, containing the name and definition of a mental disorder. The effect is like a psychiatric diagnosis of the animal and its observed behaviour, whether random or normal.

Till this point the realism of the video is of a maximal degree, so it seems to run true for an art project of a figurative, representational kind. Furthermore, the psychiatric nomenclature is correct and authentic and therefore the titles also reinforce the realistic, documentary effect of the installation, making it is easy to attach titles. So how can any justification be

found for the proposition that we can see this project as a highly abstracted, untitled work?

Let us recall that Theo Van Doesburg has created an abstract painting comprised of coloured squares and rectangles out of a picture of a cow grazing in a field.<sup>[3]</sup> Van Doesburg simply gradually abstracted the cow’s image till it became a cluster of lines and geometrical forms. However, that was a transparent, straightforward project, intended to reduce a natural image to simple forms and colours visually. Gueller’s project is a much less obvious intervention that calls for close observation. All the original, supposed realism has been distorted and subverted by other force fields: first, the video recording itself – by photography. Secondly, the humorous element seduces our ego-censor to be off guard. Lastly, we enter into a powerful, highly anxiogenic field, which no human subject can ignore or be indifferent toward – that of human psychopathology, mental illness, madness. Unawares, the spectator gets pulled in or is violently ejected out, by the reactions that are called up by the potent combination of animality and madness. By means of her Symbolic treatment (attaching texts with diagnoses) of the Imaginary recorded images of animals, Gueller engenders a new, Real object, an Other visualization of the two “factual” documentations she provides, where the Gaze object is suddenly looking out at you, the so-called spectator. (I overheard one visitor to the exhibition asking “How come these videos are all about me?”)

## II NOW THESE ARE THE NAMES

The diagnostic names Gueller has chosen mostly came from the classic literature of psychiatry, a corpus of complex

conceptualizations and daring discoveries about the human soul. Now these are names of some of the discoverers: Freud, Kraepelin, Bleuler, Janet, Charcot, Kraft-Ebbing, Gaetan de Clérambault, and others. And these are a few of the diagnoses they have given us: hysterical neurosis, dementia praecox, hebephrenia, schizophrenia simplex, paranoia vera, manic-depressive disorder, and erotomania. The infinitely strange configurations of psychopathology, named and catalogued by a single specialist who was first struck and fascinated by a certain new pattern of mental illness, who identified its characteristics and its existence separately from another accepted psychopathology (a careful separateness that makes differential diagnosis possible). We could, therefore, envisage the above-mentioned psychiatrists as a different kind of "photographer," one who makes us "see" something new within existing reality? Some aspects of the history of psychopathology may seem to be a strange mixture of rigorous scientific mysticism and moments of secular inspiration, but all the classical maladies were closely connected to the name of a particular researcher; his signature and fingerprints are to be found near the name of the pathology that fascinated him and caused him to work on it for an entire lifetime, even when he did not actually create its name (e.g. Freud and hysteria). The authors' names once served as auras, in Walter Benjamin's sense, adding a certain aesthetic mystique to the serious human malady.

Some illnesses are indeed completely eponymous, named after a person or a place associated with its first identification, e.g., *the Florence Syndrome*, or *Cotard's Syndrome*. Regarding eponymy, to which we will return later: it is a curious fact that the name Frankenstein, for one example, usually evokes in our minds an image of the monster (who is nameless), rather than the doctor who created it (whose name was indeed Dr

Frankenstein). Like Frankenstein's creation, the classic psychiatric diagnoses are strange and timeless and always "named," even when they do not overtly appear to bear the name of their originator, while contemporary diagnostic definitions tend to lack that kind of complex conceptualization but are instead all heavily "evidence-based." Thus, we have here, in the named creations, an echo to the "titling" of a new artwork.

These new, catalogued definitions of mental illness are products of market forces, doomed to constant renewal, not unlike the catalogues of IKEA. The diagnostic glossaries of mental illnesses try to group us all into large, standardized blocks of potential consumers of the available medical goods. They do it through the use of a universal language devoid of inspiration or poetry,<sup>[4]</sup> a user-friendly language, requiring not even minimal mental effort on the part of the physician who uses it. The descriptions of the symptoms appear in lists out of which five or six items suffice to diagnose a specific mental illness. What could be easier? A physician or a psychologist seeking to diagnose the mental illness of a subject need only activate the automatic navigation on a diagnostic GPS.

It seems that Gueller's choice of the classics is intuitive since it is likely that, as an artist, she is not conversant with the radical difference between contemporary guides and classic nosology from the golden age of the science of psychiatry, which offers complex, challenging conceptualization and theory. This intuitive choice, of the classic over the modern, is also evident in her images from "nature". That is to say, the use of "naturalistic" animal videos – a well-known visual technique, however, they are treated "unnaturally" by the artist by means of digital editing and display technologies (looped video on screens in the gallery).

### Animals and the secret names of jouissance

Sometimes certain names of animals emerge during the psychoanalytic process. They are to be interpreted as a kind of totem or in the light of "the deep and inscrutable name" that every cat possesses in T.S. Eliot's poem.<sup>[5]</sup> Analysts' ears prick up when a patient mentions an animal. The animal signifier is very capable of preserving the name of the unique secret jouissance of a specific subject, a jouissance unknown to itself. It represents part of the vital, instinctive, sexual jouissance lost to us due to the confounding mediation of language, which interferes every time one human subject ventures to address another. Linguistic mediation causes endless misunderstandings, missed opportunities, mental anguish, even, or especially, amongst closely related people. As Lacan noted, Freud's famous cases were often named after animals – the Rat Man, the Wolf Man; while in the case of Little Hans, the animalistic element resides in Hans's phobia of the many horses transporting humans on the streets of his town, Vienna.

### III THE FLORENCE SYNDROME AND OTHER BENEFICIAL TRAUMAS

The exhibition is called "The Florence Syndrome," after a well-known eponymous (named after a person or a place associated with its first identification) syndrome. The syndrome is a psychosomatic disorder, also known as Stendhal syndrome or *hyperkulturemia*. Visitors to museums, old cities, or other places with a high concentration of artworks, develop anxiety, disorientation, confusion, panic attacks, dizziness, nausea, fainting, and in some cases delusions and paranoia.<sup>[6]</sup> In most cases, the symptoms disappear when the afflicted visitors return to their homes and their natural

environment. Between 1977 and 1986, 106 cases of "art attack" were admitted to the psychiatric ward in a Florence hospital. In 2010, a news story was published about a group of Italian researchers who were measuring the reactions (pulse, blood pressure, etc.) of visitors to one of Florence's art-filled palazzi.<sup>[7]</sup>

### The Socrates Syndrome

The shock that people experience when they are suddenly displaced from their usual certainties and their orientation in reality; the dizziness, and certain other phenomena, such as the uncontrollable attraction and repulsion they feel toward the figures that cause those reactions in them, were also known even to the ancient Greeks. We could perhaps allow ourselves to say that at that time it would have been fit to call this reaction "The Socrates Syndrome," after the famous philosopher, who was sentenced to death by the Athens City Council, as a punishment for asking the respected citizens in the agora annoying questions about subjects they believed they knew well. Socrates posed seemingly innocent questions and sly flattery (such as, "Hello Meno! How glad I am to meet you, for you are so well learned, and here I sit in distress at my ignorance and lack of understanding, hoping and waiting for a clever, handsome man like you who could finally explain to me the nature of *virtue*").<sup>[8]</sup> The Socratic method of questioning made the good citizens of Athens realize with growing confusion and annoyance that they did not indeed understand what they had always thought they knew very well. Socrates was accused by the judges (not directly, but in a clear subtext) of asking questions that subvert the certainties of current knowledge and the established traditions (what the Gods want of us), and of corrupting the noble youths of the city. The destabilizing effect of the Socratic questioning method, which has been likened to the

symptoms of brain poisoning caused by the touch of a stingray, actually drew the lovely young Athenians to Socrates and his teaching, as if intoxicated with good wine. Some youths even fell desperately in love with the old and very ugly philosopher. The symptomatic shock manifested in those subjects of Ancient Greece who had encountered a concentrated dose of philosophical thinking, or had experienced challenging questions, disrupted their mental balance in a manner that recalls the shock caused by overexposure to excellent art in the Florence syndrome.

#### The Lacan Syndrome

Another thinker whose work has been known to cause a phenomenon similar to the Florence Syndrome is Jacques Lacan. Readers of his books report severe symptoms such as confusion, weakness, indignation, vertigo, nausea, and repulsion, and they tend to develop extreme love-hate relationships with his teaching. Lacan claimed that, since Baruch Spinoza's banishment by the Jewish community of Amsterdam in the 17th century, there had never been in intellectual history such a severe and final banning like the one inflicted on him in 1963 by the professional community he had belonged to for many years – the International Psychoanalytic Society (I.P.A.), and what had aspired to become its local group, the Paris Psychoanalytic Society.<sup>[9]</sup>

Surprisingly, Lacan, many years after he became a much admired leader of his own Psychoanalytic School, in a landmark interview with the Italian magazine *Panorama*, in the year 1977,<sup>[10]</sup> claimed that he did not find his own work as incomprehensible as everyone had thought, and predicted that in a few years most of his innovations would be studied to exhaustion and readers would realize he had been easy to understand, even

banal, "like a good glass of beer."<sup>[11]</sup> Furthermore, Lacan said, the author whose work indeed remained complex and hard to encompass or exhaust fully was Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis. Freud had been so innovative and radical, Lacan said, that we have not even begun to comprehend the radicalism of his innovations. Moreover, he indicated, Freudian psychoanalysis is not only still alive and kicking, but it also is one of the last protective barriers against the extreme neurotic listlessness which afflicts humanity today. This kind of lethargy is the main effect of "Progress," of the constant technological advances and the triumph of science over humanity.<sup>[12]</sup> Long after many illustrious citizens announced that "Freud is dead," even from within the International Psychoanalytic Association, and after they claimed that we have exhausted to the full everything Freud had to say, and after they had been sure that the power and the subversion of his work had faded, Lacan turned us back to rereading Freud with fresh eyes and to renewing our basis in the complexity and radicalism of Freud's thought.

#### The Florence Syndrome and Women's Sexuality

A.M Forster's novel *A Room with a View* takes place in Florence. The novel is about a young woman from a good English family who undergoes a process of empowerment and a sexual and political awakening, a process that, as Freud and Lacan have shown, is destined to be traumatic. The development of the child, for instance, is not "cognitive" like the stages model of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, but is rather a series of sexual-libidinal encounters, via the trauma of weaning and castration. In Forster's novel, the older, traditional chaperone aunt, who is charged with the safety of the young heroine, asks the hotel manager to transfer them to "a room with a view." This is a request to expand the gaze – always a risky enterprise.

The request sets in motion a chain of events that acquaint the young woman with sexuality and death, with the temptation to disobey social norms, and with the awareness that she can choose whether or not to cross class boundaries in order to realize her desire.

... To make us suddenly see something we believed we knew very well how to look at..... to experience the vitality and complexity of something that has not touched us before.... to accept the presence of the sexual instinct and the reality of the death instinct... to make vision foggy, to make perspective disappear, to blur the visual object and to change its appearance... the Florence Syndrome.

#### IV FREUD

**"All dreamers are equally insufferably witty .... If you deem it necessary I shall insert a remark to that effect somewhere. The ostensible wit of all unconscious processes is intimately related to the theory of the joke and the comic."** (*Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fleiss*,<sup>[13]</sup>)

Freud wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams* in the late 1890s, and the first edition of this amazing book came out in at the turn of the century. The date was very appropriate since it was clear to Freud that he was blazing a trail and founding a new discipline. How fitting that he achieved this great breakthrough into the secrets of the interpretation of dreams through a dream of his own, the famous dream of "Irma's injection", which he had dreamed during a family holiday at a country villa, Bellevue (Beautiful view). The next day Freud sat down and wrote the first full analysis of a dream and its meaning for the unconscious desire.

Freud used to send his esteemed friend, the physician and scientist Wilhelm Fleiss, daily drafts with transcriptions of dreams of his and his patients. While documenting them Freud was often excited but also sometimes in despair, doubting the progress and the reliability of his insights into the unconscious. He felt exiled, isolated from the medical community in Vienna, and his dependency on Fleiss's opinion was evident from his emotional letters. Freud awaited his friend's comments on the drafts with some trepidation. At some point, Fleiss started to warn Freud that "your dream interpretations sound too much like jokes," perhaps because of the brilliant word games that dreams often played, the unconscious being articulated through the play of signifiers. Fleiss advised Freud to excise these amusing dreams from the book, lest they damage its value as a serious scientific essay. In the letter to Fleiss quoted above, Freud promises to insert a comment in his all-but-finished book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Indeed, the witty element that appears in certain dreams is mentioned in the last chapter.

Freud thought that if dreams sounded like jokes he should not conceal this from the readers, and he integrated this new, interesting, and surprising information into the theory of the unconscious. What does it tell us, when dreams sometimes function as jokes? They must have something in common. Freud started collecting jokes and, in 1905, published his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.<sup>[14]</sup>

#### Formations of the Unconscious

**"To the complaint 'There are no people in these photographs,' I respond, 'There are always two people: the photographer and the viewer.'"** (Ansel Adams)<sup>[15]</sup>

**"A joke involves at least three people: the teller, the listener, and the 'third person,' a vital component for a witty joke but**

*not necessary when the situation is just comic.*" (Sigmund Freud)<sup>[16]</sup>

Keren Gueller's installation provokes two directly opposed reactions: delight in the wit and the humour, versus compassion, empathy, and a distressing identification toward and with the recorded animal's anguish. The complex images in the installation are bright and graceful, like Gueller's other works over the years. But at the same time, they evince pathos and tragedy, inviting us to direct a Buddhist's straight gaze toward this fragile, anxious existence, founded on the helplessness and suffering of all creatures fated to live on this earth. The animals in the installation are Buddha, as well as you and I.

Of course, both these responses are influenced mainly by the diagnostic text next to each video. Almost all the animals in the recording are behaving in the normal, routine, animal manner expected of their species, and only a few display severe mental anguish (that is, mental anguish beyond the basic distress that we assume animals experience due to loss of their free life in nature. The footprints of Man's interference with nature are everywhere, including the act of photographing). For example, the first two videos Gueller recorded, the first pair that had made her realize that she wanted to extend them into this great project, show real suffering and true symptoms: they show the female elephant Mara, who has suffered years of abuse in the circus, and a handsome spider, trapped in a bucket and delicately suspended on the surface of the water in the bucket. The existential helplessness of the exhausted spider evokes in us both horror and wonder. Our gaze is captured by the beautiful arabesques his frantic movements sketch upon the water's surface, vibrating it like violin strings.

I am trying to make the case that Gueller has created a new

kind of hybrid. It reminds me of the way Freud has combined very different human phenomena into an astonishing conceptual series called "formations of the unconscious:" dreams, errors, verbal slips, mistakes, typing errors, the forgetting of names, jokes, and neurotic symptoms. This list of heterogeneous human phenomena, what can they possibly share in common? Some of the phenomena in the Freudian series are light and amusing, like verbal slips or jokes, but some are serious and painful, like nightmares or humiliatingly bungled actions. Some may even be destructive, like certain mental symptoms – food phobias, touch phobias, and open- or close-space phobias, debilitating compulsive behaviours, conversive hysterical paralyses, suicidal thoughts and more. Freud reveals to us that all of these phenomena, from the mild to the most severe, share a similar inner structure and follow the laws of the unconscious (i.e., condensations and displacements).<sup>[17]</sup> The Freudian series has an internal logic, causality, and order, which can be demonstrated, argued and conceptualized. All this theoretical enrichment flows directly from the insight that dreams sometimes resemble good jokes, which followed Fleiss's complaint.

Freud's enigmatic chain of formations of the unconscious resembles a mathematical series of seemingly unrelated numbers that, with some thought and effort, reveals the hidden connections between its elements in their precise glory. We start with a sense of difficulty and astonishment if we are the subject summoned to solve the riddle, but we can end up with some real logical satisfaction if we manage to figure out the rules of the organization when we finally see the hidden connections that pull together all the elements in the series.<sup>[18]</sup>

*"What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?"* The Sphinx's deadly riddle is another fateful series.

## V THE BENEFICIAL ART TRAUMA

### Art and the Real

**“In photography, there is a reality so subtle that it becomes more real than reality.”** (Alfred Stieglitz)

So what is being represented here, in this series of animal images and their attendant diagnoses culled from lists of human mental illnesses? Which creatures are we being shown? Who is the subject of the show and where is it? Is the subject the recorded animal? The psychiatric illness? The human viewer? Is it the video works together with the artist’s manipulation? Is the anthropomorphism? Let us not forget that for Freud and Lacan, the subject of the gaze is not the one doing the looking; it is the one being looked at from somewhere else in the picture, the one who comes under the weight of the gaze. The subject is not simply the agent of language, as one tends to think, but is the subject being spoken, and he/she is represented in language by one signifier for a second signifier. Thus, the subject may get caught in the gaze of the screen that is looking at us, a screen on which our animal jouissance and our concealed mental illnesses are being publicly projected, albeit in a gallery, under the convenient cover of an animal figure, mediated and connected with us through poetry/metaphor, prehistory and legend, or horror.

So, again, where is the subject in the show? Where is the split subject of the sentence that has been formulated by each pair of an animal video and a human diagnosis taken from humanity’s most severe psychopathologies? I tend to suspect that we cannot completely locate the subject in any of the possibilities I offered above. Because the subject of the show is divided, broken apart, pulverised, into tiny fragments. And those subject-fragments ricochet throughout the gallery between

the recorded animals and the psychiatric diagnoses and us, the viewers: the gallery fills up with fragments of virtual animal flesh-word- and subject, as if after the splitting of an atom, perhaps like psychotic beta particles, as Wilfred Bion conceptualized them. And the terrible secret is that after we smile our delight at Gueller’s very funny humour, we continue to look and discover that perhaps there is more than a regular, well-ordered logical series awaiting discovery here. The sentence spoken by every video is not as coherent as it seems at first glance. If we look closely, we would see that is made up not of ordinary words and common language but neologisms.

A neologism is a term that describes two unusual, and sometimes harmful, ways of using language. The first is the invention of words that do not yet exist, such as James Joyce’s coinages and compound words. In this form, neologisms are very common in the speech of psychotic patients and their presence is very indicative of a psychotic structure. For Lacanian clinicians, a distortion of language is in itself sufficient for making a diagnosis of psychosis, even in the absence of any hallucinations. The second meaning of neologism is an odd and unusual use of existing words, thus giving them a different meaning. The neologism may sometimes appear with this meaning too in the speech of psychotic patients.

Neologisms also exist in other kinds of non-psychotic contexts, for example, in witticisms and jokes, or poetry. In fact, any ground-breaking work is a kind of neologism since it goes beyond, or even destroys linguistic codes while enriching language with new ones.

### Inventing a New Mental Illness

The sense of discomfort and perplexity that accompanied the writing of this essay, at least at the beginning, was probably

brought about by the brilliant daring of Gueller's project. The hidden artistic abstraction in "the Florence Syndrome," which claims to present the psychopathology of the animal world, takes us beyond the competency of existing words, to places with no clear meaning and representation, unrecognizable in reality. In our conversations, Gueller told me that she began the project with an ambition to "invent new, non-existent mental illnesses" for her animals. She discovered this was beyond her powers, that the thing she was seeking to invent already existed abundantly in reality and that the available descriptions of mental illnesses already reminded her of science fiction without need of invention. Then, when Gueller became involved in more daily research into psychiatric illnesses she found that this immersion brought about severe symptoms in her – stresses, anxieties, charged emotions, mood swings – phenomena that were surprisingly similar to the Florence Syndrome. This worrying identification with all the mental illnesses is very familiar to most mental health professionals, who experience some form of it during their clinical training when they are required to delve deeper into psychopathology and to encounter the patients in the closed wards of psychiatric hospitals.

It is well-known the libido is extremely sticky and does not easily relinquish its objects. Even after a relationship has failed, the libido adheres to the lost object for a long time. It seems that Gueller's ambitious desire to invent illnesses continued to operate, even without the subject-artist's conscious participation. Perhaps we can surmise that, like Dr. Frankenstein, Gueller has stealthily, or unwittingly, invented a new mental disorder, one that fits the cyber world and the new hybrid connections between the animal world and virtual reality. We do not yet know the name of this "mental disorder," but we "see" it, we laugh from the place it creates in us, and

we may thus experience it through the installation, thanks to the artistic process that created it. We can conclude that it was Gueller's project that brought confusion and dizziness upon me when I tried to write about it, and perhaps it does the same to anyone who tries to look deeper into it, which attests to the presence of the Florence Syndrome. If we remember Lacan's famous aphorism, "The sexual relation does not exist," Gueller is nevertheless attempting to write it. The sexual relation does not exist, it is impossible to write it or to find places where it is written, and that is precisely why art exists, why art is so necessary, so vital in facing the Real of discontentment in civilisation.

In psychoanalytic theory, a mental symptom is not a flaw to be gotten rid of (like a medical symptom). It has positive value because it expresses and preserves an unrecognized unconscious desire.

The mutative Art Trauma, so necessary to our ability to see, can happen in the exhibition only under one condition – if we succeed in finding a good angle for approaching the various stations in the present installation, like the angle that Alice found when she journeyed through Wonderland, or when she passed through the Looking Glass. Alice's angle as she fell into the hole of the White Rabbit, also enabled her to travel in a particular way that seemed strange and random at first reading. Subsequent scholarly research revealed it to be a sequence of chess moves that comply perfectly with the rules of the game. This angle also caused Alice to give new words, (neologisms), to classical, educational children's poems, poems that were usually very well known by every good little girl of Victorian England. Alice found she was reciting instead strange new versions of the poems, using words whose phonetic sound was somewhat similar to the original words, though their new sense sounded

somewhat questionable and quite anarchistic.

In the case of our exhibition, the angle could be indicated by the trail we, the visitors, would mark in space as we walk along the screens, as we pause to watch the animals in the videos, and lean forward to read the texts of their diagnosis by Geller. And, at the same time, unawares, we will be seeing and reading what our path through the gallery has traced. Our bodies will participate in the writing of the installation.

- [1] Diane Arbus "Five photographs by Diane Arbus." *Artforum*, 9, (1971, May) p.65
- [2] Sigmund Freud. "On narcissism: an introduction", Ch. 2, in *The Penguin Freud Library*, Vol. 11. On Metapsychology: *The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, translated and edited by James Strachey, London, (1914), pg. 82-3
- [3] Theo Van Doesburg, *Composition VIII*, (The Cow), (c. 1918)
- [4] On this, see, for example: Richard Noll, "The Bed Makes Gestures", *Psychiatric Times Online Journal*, January, 2016. <http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/articles/bed-makes-gestures>
- [5] T.S.Eliot, "The Naming of Cats," in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, (1939)
- [6] "Having an Art Attack", by Mark Griffiths. *Psychology Today*, Blog: In Excess, March 10, 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/in-excess/201403/having-art-attack>
- [7] Nick Squires, "Scientists investigate Stendhal Syndrome – fainting caused by great art." *Daily Telegraph*, July 28, (2010).
- [8] Meno to Socrates, who has asked him how to understand *Virtue*: "Now I think you have been bewitching and bewildering me. You've cast some spell over me, so now I'm completely at a loss. [...] you're like one of those stingrays that paralyzes everything it touches; you look a bit like one, too – broad and flat. Anyway, now you've done it to me; both my mind and my tongue are completely numb. I've got no answer to give you. And yet I must have made a thousand speeches about virtue before now – in front of large audiences, too; but now I cannot even say what it is." *Plato's Meno Dialogue*. Translated by J. Holbo and B. Waring. p.12
- [9] Lacan would have been allowed to stay on as a member of the French section of the I.P.A., on condition of being stripped of his status as a training psychoanalyst for psychoanalytic candidates, that his training activity be banned forever, and on condition that training candidates would not be allowed to attend his seminar. See, for example, Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*.
- [10] Emilia Granzotto, *Freud Per Sempre. Intervista con Jacques Lacan, Panorama*, 21 Novembre 1974  
Translated as *There can be no crisis of psychoanalysis*, Jordan Skinner. See: <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1668-there-can-be-no-crisis-of-psychoanalysis-jacques-lacan-interviewed-in-1974>
- [11] As for the number of readers, I have had more luck than Freud. Maybe my books are even too widely read – find it astonishing. I am also convinced that within ten years at the utmost, people reading my work will find it entirely transparent, like a good glass of beer. Perhaps then they'll say 'This Lacan, he's so banal!
- [12] The rise of religion and the triumph of science in the service of the capitalistic discourse are two trends Lacan perceived as mutually reinforcing, and he correctly predicted the great increase of both trends toward the end of the 20th century.
- [13] Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess*, 1887 – 1904. Translated and edited by J. M. Masson. Letter B, September 11, 1899, pg. 371.
- [14] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. (1905). Translated into English in 1960.
- [15] David Sheff, (1 May 1983), *Playboy Interview: Ansel Adams*, p. 226
- [16] Author's paraphrase of Freud's long argument in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.
- [17] Sigmund Freud. *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Translated: A. A. Brill. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914
- [18] For instance, this simple sequence: [3, 5, 7, 9, 23, 25...]: steps of +2, and skipping every number that has 1 in it. Also this one, even simpler: [11, 15, 19, 12, 16, 20, 13, 17, 21, 14, 18, 22...]; add 4, add 4, subtract 7, and repeat.