

## PURITY AND IMPURITY IN THE WILDERNESS OF THE IMAGINATION

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The life of a wild animal becomes an ideal, an ideal internalized as a feeling surrounding a repressed desire. The image of a wild animal becomes the starting-point of a daydream.<sup>1</sup>

1 John Berger,  
"Why Look at  
Animals," in *About  
Looking*, New York:  
Vintage International  
1991, p. 15.

In the French writer Marie Darrieussecq's debut novel, *Pig Tales*, a young woman working in a perfume shop gradually undergoes a nightmarish metamorphosis into a sow. This fictional story takes place ca. the year 2000 in the destroyed, abandoned, and hunger-stricken city of Paris, which is ruled by an oppressive police dictatorship. Against the backdrop of this infernal reality, the first-person narrator describes the transformation of her body and soul into those of a porcine animal. In harrowing detail, with a combination of pleasure and horror, she observes herself as her changing sensory perceptions give rise to a desire for new tastes, smells, and forms of tactile contact with other human beings and animals. Following the appearance of the first strange symptoms, such as an unstoppable urge to eat the flowers offered her by her clients, as she becomes accustomed to her hefty new weight and bodily rhythms, the climax of this metamorphosis arrives:

My eyes now seemed smaller to me in the mirror, closer together than before, and without powder my nose took on a slightly piggy look that was a total disaster. . . . The worst was the hair. It was growing on my legs, even on my back: long, thin hairs, tough and translucent. . . . My nails had grown quite hard and more curved than before. My teeth were strong, too. . . . It was as though my vitals – guts, tripe, bowels – were turning inside out like a glove. . . . I was naked on the tile floor. . . . When I finally managed to move, it seemed to tear something in me, as though exerting my will required terrific effort from both my brain and my body. . . . I wound up on all fours. . . . I was so upset by all this that I had to look at myself in the mirror. . . . I saw my poor

body, saw how damaged it was. . . . And there, in the mirror, was what I dreaded seeing . . . The teat over my right breast had turned into a real dug, and there were three other blotches on the front of my body: one above my left breast and two others, perfectly parallel, just below my real nipples. I counted and recounted, there was no mistake: that made six all right, including three fully formed breasts. . . .”<sup>2</sup>

2 Marie Darrieussecq,  
*Pig Tales: A Novel of  
Lust and Transformation*,  
trans. Linda Coverdale,  
New York: The New  
Press, 1996, pp. 42–49.

*Pig Tales* belongs to the genre of transformation narratives such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, or David Cronenberg’s *The Fly*. At the heart of these stories is a primal anxiety concerning the possibility of mutation into a different kind of entity, of existence as a foreign body within oneself, of losing one’s humanity, of becoming a monster. I recalled this novel while first observing a detail in Moran Kliger’s series “Gray Wolf” (2011),<sup>p. 46</sup> through which I became acquainted with her work. This delicate black-and-white drawing captures a wolf woman kneeling on all fours. Her body and face are those of a wolf, while her feet, hands, breasts and nipples are still being transformed from those of a woman into those of an animal. This heart-wrenching drawing, which was created close to the birth of her oldest daughter, was part of an autobiographical series that also included a self-portrait covered in furry hair, and a hairy female figure whose legs are spread open as she stitches her scarred belly, as if attempting to heal the sense of being a stranger to herself. A similar work created two years later (*Untitled*, 2013)<sup>p. 78</sup> once again features a woman on all fours. More woman than animal, she grasps a bleeding animal cub in her mouth as if either devouring or saving it. Unlike Darrieussecq’s hybrid woman-pig, Kliger chose to create a hybrid of a woman and a female wolf (known for being faithful to its mate and offspring); in both cases, however, hybridity is employed to comment on the politics of female identity and to give expression to the experience of femininity as a loss of both physical and emotional identity, with an emphasis on its affinity with animalistic forces.

I chose to open my discussion of Kliger’s works with this shaking representation of a wolf woman because this archetype – much like the bronze sculpture of the *Lupa Capitolina*, the female wolf that nursed and raised the twins Remus and Romulus – is nourished by the affinity between femininity and the cult of nature. This ancient cultural affinity was made sacred as part of the mythical cycle of life and of the identification of divinity with a female element. Kliger thus joins a long line of women artists, as well as female sociologists and anthropologists, who have studied these ancient

myths and rituals. In doing so, they have refuted dichotomous equations and have deconstructed essentialist views of women as existentially inferior due to their earthy affinity with “nature,” in contrast to the seemingly noble, spiritual, and transcendental dimension associated with men and their affinity with “culture.”

Since she created these drawings of the female wolf, Kliger’s repertoire has been enriched by additional wild animals – bears, hyenas, predatory birds, and ravens. These animals, whose dimensions have gradually grown over time, were all portrayed with endless and obsessive patience. Some were drawn in ink or with a hair-thin pen, while others were etched, engraved, or delineated with sharpened pencils. Her unique drawing technique is composed of thin dotted lines that acquire an emotional charge precisely due to their seemingly graphic, illustrative, neutral, and pathos-free appearance. Over the past two years – ever since the creation of *Black Portrait* (2015),<sup>p. 45</sup> which served as the point of departure for the series of ape drawings – human monkeys have acquired a sweeping presence in her work, as is evident in the current exhibition “Seven Primates.” Whereas the earlier wild animals, which were borrowed from fairytales, folktales, and myths, symbolized a wild and unbridled past as reflected in culture, the human apes have an emphatically hybrid character, which raises disturbing questions concerning the proximity of humans to animals. Above all, these images address our resistance to blurring the line between humanity’s supposed supremacy and nature’s inferiority.

The exhibition features four large-scale drawings of human apes in scenes reminiscent of familiar Old and New Testament stories that are centered on conjugal and familial relations in the shadow of man’s relationship with God: the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the Binding of Isaac, the Holy Family, and the Descent from the Cross. The Expulsion from the Garden is viewed in Christianity as the root of the torment suffered by Jesus, who was crucified to atone for the Original Sin, whereas the Binding is viewed as a precedent to the Crucifixion. In these familiar scenes from the iconography of Western culture, Kliger has replaced the human figures with apes, thus unexpectedly inverting their meaning. The scene of the Expulsion, for instance, which is familiar from a painting by Tommaso Masaccio (1426–1427), is based on a Hiroshi Sugimoto photograph of monkeys from a series of dioramas in natural history museums. Whereas Masaccio’s composition focuses on the expressions of despair and shame on the faces of the naked Adam and Eve, the

body language of the apes in Kliger's work is more subtle, attesting above all to the surreal paradox inherent to the scene. A similar inversion takes place in the scene of the Descent from the Cross, in which Jesus is traditionally portrayed in foreshortening with blood flowing from his wounds, wearing a crown of thorns and surrounded by the other symbols of the Passion. Kliger's monumental ape maintains nothing but the pose associated with the iconography of the Crucifixion, as he lies (in inverted foreshortening) stripped of all special attributes, an image of melancholic beauty. Exceptional in this context is a primeval landscape depicted in a round format. This view of ancient, craggy cliffs and rocks overshadowing streams of water serves to relate the image to the myth of Creation, while raising evolutionary associations that contradict this same myth.

Kliger relates to the history of art as a representation of "culture," which stands in opposition to the earthly and untamed quality of "nature." Displayed in one of the niches within the exhibition space is a drawing of an ape's clasped hands (after Albrecht Dürer's famous drawing *Praying Hands*), while another space features a hovering halo. These motifs, which appear alongside the religious themes explored in the drawings, underscore the interpretation of the entire exhibition as an attempt to question the cultural distinction between the "polluted" (wild, natural) and the sacred (cultural, refined). Additionally, the works do not hang on the walls, but are rather set in wooden "cages" of sorts, so that the viewer can observe them up close and walk among them, while sensing the symbolic distance and protection from the images. By caging "culture" and replacing the images of saints with apes, Kliger subverts the deepest foundations of the cultural constructions that distinguish between man and animal, the sacred and the polluted, while ordering their relations.

"Why Look at Animals?" – the opening chapter of John Berger's book *About Looking* – centers on modern man's attitude towards animals, while attempting to decipher the source of the enchantment and nostalgia underlying these relations of subjugation. Berger speaks of our distance from nature and of the fact that over the past two centuries, animals that were once an inseparable part of the human world are gradually disappearing from our lives. At once similar and unsimilar to us, they mediated between human beings and their origin – nature. "The rejection of the dualism at the very origin of the relation between man and animal," he writes, "is probably an important factor in opening the way to modern totalitarianism. . . . The look between animal and man, which may have played a crucial role in the

3 Berger, p. 26.

development of human society . . . has been extinguished.”<sup>3</sup> Modern zoos and their theatrical settings may thus be viewed as a memorial to the past relations between men and animals, “demonstrations of how animals had been

4 Ibid., p. 24.

rendered absolutely marginal.”<sup>4</sup> Like ghettos, prisons, insane asylums, and concentration camps, zoos impose a marginal existence on their inhabitants.

5 Ibid., pp. 5–6.

“To the same degree as man has raised himself above the state of nature, animals have fallen below it: conquered and turned into slaves, or treated as rebels and scattered by force, their societies have faded away, their industry has become unproductive, their tentative arts have disappeared . . . Such wild life as remains is increasingly confined to national parks and game reserves.”<sup>5</sup>

6 Ibid., pp. 13, 15.

Yet Berger's main argument is that “The animals of the mind cannot be so easily dispersed. Sayings, dreams, games, stories, superstitions, the language itself, recall them . . . The images of animals are receding into a wilderness that existed only in the imagination.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Moran Kliger's strikingly human apes inhabit a wilderness that exists only in the imagination. In this case, the wilderness extends to the theological realm – to Christian mythology and to the story of Creation – the two founding myths of Western culture. Her devotion to her subjects and her compassion for them, expressed through the laborious depiction of every single hair – lends them a human quality, thus blurring the boundary between “us” and “them.” The insertion of the drawings into cage-like structures echoes one of Berger's remarkable insights: “A zoo is a place where as many species and varieties of animal as possible are collected in order that they can be seen, observed, studied. In principle, each cage is a frame around the animal inside it. Visitors visit the zoo to look at animals. They proceed from cage to cage, not unlike visitors in an art gallery who stop in front of one painting, and then move on to the next.”<sup>7</sup>

7 Ibid., p. 21.

The preoccupation with the relations between humans and apes is multifaceted, and is often attended to in cultural contexts ranging from *Planet of the Apes* to the story of King Kong, the Indian monkey-faced god Hanuman, and the comics figure Man-Ape. The prevalence of such representations in popular culture, film, literature, and art seems to stem from the ape's role as the liminal and symbolic figure at the threshold between the human and animal worlds. Kliger thus modestly joins a long line of artists, anthropologists, and primatologists engaged in an attempt to redefine humanity and understand human “nature” as reflected by apes. Noteworthy in this context is the exhibition “Ape Culture” (2015, Haus der Kulturen

8 Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg (curators), *Ape Culture* (exh. cat.), Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2015.

9 Peter Høeg, *The Woman and the Ape*, trans. Barbara Haveland, New York: Picador, 2007.

10 Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, Hove, United Kingdom: Psychology Press, 1989.

11 Ivanov first presented the idea of artificial insemination in order to create a hybrid ape-man at the International Congress of Zoology in 1910. In 1924, he gained access to three fertile female chimpanzees and unsuccessfully attempted to inseminate them with human semen. These experiments, which were funded by the Soviet government, were undertaken at a station of the Pasteur Institute in French Guinea. Ivanov used the sperm of local men, based on the racial view prevalent at the time that Africans were genetically closer to chimpanzees than Caucasians. Following the failure of his experiment in Africa, Ivanov returned to a research institute

der Welt, Berlin), which centered on the cultural and scientific obsession with “our closest relatives,” while exploring the transformation of cultural representations of apes.<sup>8</sup> Peter Høeg’s bestseller *The Woman and the Ape*, a love tale suffused with Christian motifs, tells the story of Erasmus, an ape escaped from an animal smugglers’ ship, and the wife of the zoologist who studies him, similarly raising questions concerning the relationship of human beings to nature and to animals.<sup>9</sup> In this context, one should also mention the writings of the feminist theorist Donna Haraway, whose subversive studies of the metaphors and narratives structuring the sciences of primates have raised fundamental questions concerning the familiar family model in light of scientific findings about the sexual behavior of female primates.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the genetic closeness between humans and chimpanzees (which are distinguished by only two chromosomes) has given rise, over time, to intriguing questions pertaining to the twilight zone between the human and the animal. The term “humanzee” gives expression to the theoretical possibility of mating a human being and a chimpanzee. A comparative genetic study has revealed that an exchange of genetic information between our human ancestors and chimpanzees continued for some 1.2 million years following the split between the two species some 7 million years ago. In the 1920s, the Russian biologist Ilya Ivanovich Ivanov, who had developed a technique for artificially inseminating horses, conducted a failed experiment to mate a human being and an ape.<sup>11</sup> Close to a century later, about three years ago, a precedent-setting court decision in Argentina decreed that apes should be given “human rights” due to their cognitive abilities: the court ordered the release of a female orangutan that had been held for two decades in a Buenos Aires zoo and her transfer to a nature reserve in Brazil. Three judges decreed that the ape, Sandra, was a “non-human personality,” and that her freedom had been illegally denied. The attorneys who represented Sandra argued that she had proven cognitive abilities and could not be treated as an object.<sup>12</sup>

These controversial concerns resonate with Kliger’s images of strikingly human apes. “Seven Apes” was preceded in 2017 by her exhibition “Primates,”<sup>pp. 54-63</sup> which was held in Sweden and included images from the same body of works. “Primates,” the scientific term for over 200 species of apes, as well as human beings, implies the supremacy of the human race. This exhibition featured large-scale drawings of human apes, including family scenes of a mother and child ( *Holding, 2017*)<sup>p. 61</sup> alongside splintered wood and tree trunks covered with moss, mold, and fungi. Drawings of hairy body parts

in Georgia with 20 chimpanzees. He "recruited" five human female volunteers who agreed to be inseminated with the chimpanzee's sperm and later with that of orangutans, yet this experiment also failed. In 1930, he was imprisoned and exiled to Kazakhstan, where he worked as a veterinarian until his death. See the Wikipedia entry for "Humanzee."

12 <https://news.walla.co.il/item/2812786> [in Hebrew].

13 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

14 Sara Cohen Shabot, *On the Grotesque Body: A Philosophical Inquiry on Bakhtin, Merleau-Ponty, and other Thinkers*, Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008, p. 148 [in Hebrew]. For an abstract of some of the major ideas presented in this book, see: Sara Cohen Shabot, "Notes on the Grotesque Body," in *Wild Exaggeration* (exh. cat.), Haifa Museum of Art, 2009, pp. 98-101.

were placed on the floor. In this exhibition, Kliger introduced nature itself into the gallery space. The figures' expressions, gazes, hand gestures, and postures provoked ambivalent sensations of familiarity and estrangement, closeness and repulsion. The entire exhibition touched upon the twilight zone in which the human is formed out of the animal, the elastic space betwixt and between, the limbo of this *and* this.

In order to understand Kliger's strategy in the current exhibition, one must examine her earlier preoccupation with animals. As already noted, prior to her engagement with apes, wild animals were almost always presented in relation to the artist's own figure or to another female figure – in dark, "dirty" contexts that gave expression to a fluid and multi-dimensional identity. In these early works, the female body revealed its abject dimensions (in her self-portraits, her facial skin always sprouts dark bristles). The animal, meanwhile, was observed with a fresh and original gaze that undermined cultural conventions: what is usually viewed as low and abject, and associated with primal bodily functions, excretions, and drives, was suddenly reflected in a different light as entertaining a more harmonious affinity with the body.

So, for instance, in the work *Untitled* (2013),<sup>p. 14</sup> the seemingly refined feminine image appears to have sprouted wild, animalistic, monstrous elements. The figure lies on her back in a position reminiscent of Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World*. Her legs are spread out, and forms resembling internal organs emerge from her vagina, as if the body was either giving birth or dying. It is difficult not to think of Julia Kristeva's term "abjection," which has been incorporated into feminist discourse above all in the context of motherhood and the act of giving birth, when the line between the protective outer layers of the body and its tremulous internal layers is blurred.<sup>13</sup> The parts ejected from the body are viewed as dirt, which disrupts the existing order and threatens to dissolve the comforting divide between the quivering flesh and the skin. Like bodily fluids and excretions, dirt undermines the regime of prohibitions governing the body. The female body exists in this context in the ambiguous sphere between subject and object, which reconciles the poles of both the human and the animal, nature and culture, the polluted and the sacred – the formless void out of which creation emerges.<sup>14</sup>

In the triptych *Goldilocks* (2014),<sup>p. 72</sup> Goldilocks is no longer an innocent girl lost in the woods, whose discovery of the bear family home duplicates the familiar patriarchal order. In one of the panels, she is represented naked in a

forest clearing, surrounded by hyenas. These animals, which usually provoke a sense of disgust and repulsion due to their consumption of carcasses, are presented here in a harmonious scene, eating pomegranates together with the young girl. In the third panel, she is seen wrestling with one of the bears in the forest. This scene, which symbolizes the struggle between the “forest” (urges and drives) and the “home” (social order, culture) is not violent, and makes obvious the girl’s power over the bear.

Kliger studies in depth the animals she chooses to represent. It is no coincidence that she has also chosen hyenas, which have suffered poor public relations in comparison to other animals. Hyenas, as it turns out, live in large groups that are led by matriarchs. The hyena females are strong and large, and their genitals, which are unique among mammals, are almost identical to those of the males: they have no vagina, and their clitoris is large and capable of an erection just like the male penis. The female urinates, copulates, and gives birth through the clitoris. During mating rituals, the females uncharacteristically choose the most patient male, rather than the most aggressive one. The male does not impose itself upon the female during copulation, and if the female shows disinterest, it will desist.

Turning once again to observe the mother ape in Kliger’s *Untitled (The Family)*<sup>15</sup> and  *Holding (Mother and Child)*, one cannot ignore the irony that arises from comparing it to Simone de Beauvoir’s famous description: “Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a stock-pile of colloids, an incubator, an egg.”<sup>15</sup> The irony is especially notable given the stereotypical images of the “good mother” cultivated over the centuries as a distinct category, a concept rather than a lived reality. I am referring to the images of the Holy Virgin familiar from depictions of maternity in Christian art as a symbol of sacrifice, purity, devotion, and virginity. Only in these rare cases were women allowed to sound their voice, the motherly voice of the gentle, loving, pregnant woman who gives birth, cares for her child, and is filled with compassion. These qualities and actions were seemingly the *raison d’être* of women and the sole source of their happiness.<sup>16</sup> Here, by contrast, the compassionate mother is represented as a human ape that disrupts and subverts all of these categories.

More than anything, the images of sacredness – the praying hands and religious scenes – call to mind the studies of the British anthropologist Mary Douglas, who defined dirt or pollution as “matter out of place,” the disruption

15 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. Constance Borde, New York: Vintage Books 1974, p. 553.

16 José Brunner, “The Mother’s Voice: Dialectics of Feminist Self-Consciousness,” *Zmanim* No. 46-47, 1993, pp. 4-17 [in Hebrew].

and subversion of defined categories and norms. Douglas offered an alternative way of understanding linguistic structures such as “cleanliness” or “dirt” through the study of religions, based on two central sources: field work among the Lele people in the Congo, and a reading of biblical texts. In her seminal book *Purity and Danger*, Douglas analyzed the symbolic dimension of the discourse on purity, arguing that pollution and taboo are a result of exceeding the established order and rupturing the boundaries of social and cultural organization.<sup>17</sup>

17 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 5.

According to Douglas, sacredness is an expression of wholeness and unity – the unity of the classified and accepted order – while dirt is a sign of this order’s disruption. The unity of order is given expression, among others things, through the wholeness of the body as the perfect container. Moreover, as David Sperber notes, “the classified order is maintained through prohibitions concerning hybridity, thus giving rise, according to Douglas, to the distinction between domestic animals that chew cud and have cloven heels and those that do not. The animals excluded from this order are forbidden due to their anomalous status . . . the forbidden animals are those that do not fall neatly into a given category.”<sup>18</sup> There is no doubt that the human apes in Kliger’s works, which appear as the fathers and mothers of human civilization – Adam and Eve, Abraham and Isaac, or Jesus and Mary – are anomalous figures located on the borderline, which emblemize dangerous liminal states and undermine the efforts at preserving the order and the mechanisms of exclusion, surveillance, preservation and classification referred to as “culture.”

18 David Sperber, “How Naïve Can We Be Towards the Beliefs of Others,” *Erev Rav*, September 11, 2011 [in Hebrew]. <https://www.erev-rav.com/archives/14751>

The hybrid disruption that characterizes the exchange between human and animal figures calls to mind an additional term prevalent in feminist discourse, the grotesque, which is characterized by its foreignness, its chaotic nature, the clashing of different orders, ambiguity, distortion, and hybridity. The human apes in this exhibition are not grotesque in the comic sense of this term, awakening not ridicule but rather a sense of threat due to their fluid identity and resemblance to human beings. In this sense, they are closer to Freud’s *uncanny*. Yet as part of the inversion of the existing order, in the course of which what is central becomes relegated to the margins and the sacred is profaned and polluted, the placement of the human apes in religious scenes endows them with a grotesque dimension. In her book *The Grotesque Body*, Sara Cohen Shabot argues that the grotesque body undermines the representational conventions of the human body and subverts clear-cut definitions and boundaries. The metaphor of the grotesque, she

observes, is a meta-metaphor that includes other metaphors emblematic of the spirit of the time. According to Cohen Shabot, the grotesque is the distinct manifestation of an opposition to the idea of a single, unified whole that can be represented in a specific and defined way: “The grotesque expresses change, dynamism, the possibility of being several things at once. The realm of the grotesque encompasses multiplicity, hybridity, mixture, distortion, the chaotic connection of different worlds and entities whose borders are blurred within the grotesque entity.”<sup>19</sup>

19 Cohen Shabot, p. 189.

The exhibition “Seven Primates” marks a turning point in Kliger’s oeuvre and a shift from works that echo her own private and exposed physiognomy as a woman-animal to a larger universal statement, which offers an alternative mythology concerning the origins of culture. In response to my question about whether she would like us to focus our attention on the human aspects of her apes or on their animal aspects, she replied without hesitation: “The human aspect, of course! . . . If only we could be a bit more like animals and a bit less like heartless machines.”<sup>20</sup>

20 Quoted from a conversation with the artist, 2017.

In his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari delineates the evolution of human beings over hundreds of thousands of years from an insignificant animal species to the top of the food chain, as they became masters of the earth possessed of a godlike ability to create and destroy, the horror of the ecosystem.<sup>21</sup> Kliger’s deceptive human apes seem to shorten the history of humankind by millions of years, having been removed from their natural environment in the heart of the forest and transferred to the wilderness of an imagination predicated upon archetypal cultural memory. In this imaginary expanse, man and nature are inextricably intertwined, nourishing each other and growing from within one another. These expanses foster the existence of everything that is not ordered, that diverges from the norm, that is out of the ordinary – serving as a space that preserves a subversive spirit, an insistence on the right to open definitions, and the freedom to navigate among countless existential options.

21 Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, London: Harvill Secker, 2014.