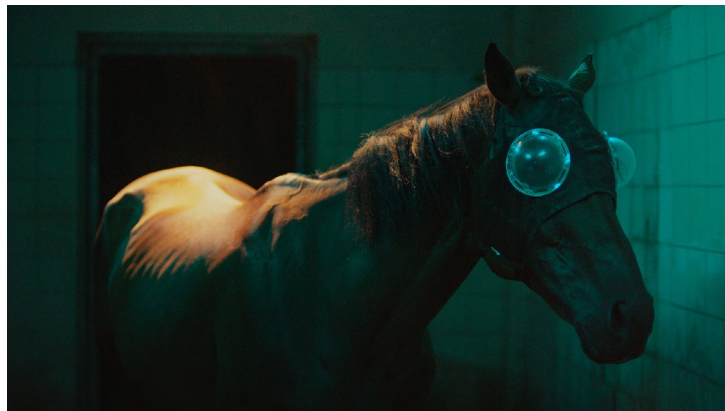


Janis Rafa.

Flair du temps

By Lynn Turner



Janis Rafa, *The Space Between Your Tongue and Teeth*, 2020, still, 16 min. Courtesy of the artist.

Listening closely to his French tongue, psychotherapist Sarah Wood emphasizes philosopher Jacques Derrida's recourse to scent and to scenting when he questions who follows what, or what follows whom, between the human and that vast array of creatures that humans misname "the animal." It is a "matter of the scent"—*il y va du flair*, he says.¹

Janis Rafa's *flair* is not a perfume packaged in a fetishized glass bottle bearing no visible trace of the animals from whom its active ingredients derive, concocted to clothe the human bodies whose own feral scents it downplays. It is a skill for today, something she has a *flair* for. She sniffs them out, follows them, stays close to them, sometimes overlapping with them, constrained, and sometimes navigating her own implication in their constraint. In our times—of a renewed licence for misogyny and an escalating extinction of animals "in the wild"—Rafa makes films in and on the edges of animal and sexual differences.²

Freud famously positioned hominization as the process of becoming upright and assuming visual dominance over a domain while repressing the memory of being on all fours in the stink of terrain.³ That erect figure is so persistent that even our elementary division of images into "landscape" versus "portrait" formats can impose its thought-to-be-absolute division between the animal and the human, a division frequently mapped onto feminine versus masculine sexes. Taking this architectural and postural and political binary habit as her habitat, Rafa outflanks its operation. Humans sleep, their activities subtracted from a flooding landscape; birds explode upwards flightlessly; a long lolling tongue animates equine jaws in an imagined speech acting against the technique of the bit.

Unusually, rather than perpetuate this "descent of man" as the one who can transcend his body, Derrida feels ashamed standing "stark naked" before a cat—the French idiom says he is *à poil*, which carries the more visceral and equine sense of being stripped down to his animal hairs.⁴ He knows that to be "like an animal" regularly connotes the feminine; it is a conceptual comparison designed to earth bodies in the reproductive flesh, locking them within ahistorical species duty. Through making films, Rafa refashions any attempt to separate procreative nature from creative culture.

Cutting from extant footage of male experts exerting 360 degrees of control over an equine body in a hoist, Rafa switches to masculine human bodies soaping down a horse. Naked men, their bare flesh as wet as that of the larger beast: their musculature runs with water. Equine flanks organize the space of the shot, dispensing with any focus on human faces or heads that would distinguish, personalize, or anchor masculine authority. One of the screens in this triptych repeats its close-up of a horse's eye, that reflective portal reflecting a neon text inserted into this enclosed space casting a lurid cerise light as the metallic bits—the paraphernalia of technical mastery—are flushed with water

36

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on the floor. *The Space Between Your Tongue and Teeth* has opened.

A fisheye lens bloats the floor in the disorienting overhead opening of *Lacerate*. Panting and gulping, dogs rush around the narrow entranceway snatching at the glossy strips of flesh with which the floor is disarmingly littered. No *chef d'état*, no human, no steer from the leader of any hunt now authorizes their movements; the sound of running taps everywhere magnifies the disorientation. Subsequent shots substitute the prone body of a man for those pieces of meat, with sheets draping his inert flesh as if he has been cut out of a classical painting,⁵ blood flaring out across the floor from his slit throat. Sniffing out the scent of our own flesh and blood, we follow Rafa's impersonal camera, zoning in and out of the still lives splayed throughout this house until a woman comes into frame. Sitting on a chair as minimal index of portraiture's attention, she remains enfleshed—*en chair*—partially clothed; her bare chest still heaves as her breath reveals exertion. Her smile flickers and *Lacerate* cuts to the joint stage exit of dogs and woman abandoning their subordination: its aerial shot organizes them along a shared plane.

Shall we join them?

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1. Jacques Derrida, quoted in Sarah Wood, "Swans of Life (External Provocations and Autobiographical Flights That Teach Us How to Read)," in *The Animal Question in Deconstruction*, ed. Lynn Turner (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 26.
2. The World Wildlife Fund's 2024 (WWF) *Living Planet Report* highlights the average change in observed population sizes of 5,495 vertebrate

species. It shows a decline of 73% between 1970 and 2020. [<https://livingplanet.panda.org/en-GB/>]
3. Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents" [1930], in *Civilization, Society & Religion*, (London: Penguin Freud Library Vol. 12, 1991), 288–9, n. 1.
4. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man: Selection in Relation to Sex* [1871] (London: Penguin, 2004); Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*,

(New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 4.

5. Specifically, Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1620.

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