

With artists: Yerrie Choo
Cecelia Condit
Seth Cosford
Erica Eyres
Starkey Fossgreen
Simon Floris
Joana Azevedo Rodrigues
Liev Sibilla
Léa Tissot Laura & Anna Sougy
Amber Tutwiler
Sylvie Hayes Wallace
Klara Vertes

Curated by Bethelihem Gebresilasie

Note of Thanks

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“Being normal is a nervous place...”

Lauren Berlant

Bitten nails. Tapping. Jitters. Panic. Skin picking. Counting. Hoarding. Phobias, of disasters, of people, of animals. Avoidance. Compulsion. Repetition.

Neurosis?

Neurosis carries a shatter of definitions and expressions. However, the signs of neurosis seem to be an internalized cyclical apparatus of tension, and action, followed by a relief that dims with time, necessitating a repetition. Lacan describes this loop as a myth, which he defines as “a chronicle expressing an imaginary way that fundamental relationships characteristic of a certain mode of being human at a specific period...” (408). In *The Neurotic’s Individual Myth* the neurotic constructs a fable of relations that appeases a sense of debt, seaming the narratives of disparate events, into an exaggerated sense of duty to compensate. There’s a threat that can be defanged only through the sole completion of the neurotic’s ritual. Superstitions are a prime example of such myth building that is associated with ceremonial behavior. Those who partake in the compelled obligation of action, to evoke a result that is evidently disconnected from the action, are creating their own mythological story that fulfills the duty they assign themselves or by the circumstances of their life. For Freud, neurosis shatters in three: anxiety, phobia, and obsession. The categories explained in this essay are anxiety and obsession. Anxiety neurosis consists of irritability, anxious expectation, comorbid phobias, vertigo, panic attacks, nausea and waking up in a fright. Anxious expectation is the central node of anxiety neurosis, in which the neurotic reaches exaggerated conclusions despite lacking evidence. Obsession is a mechanism of avoidance, in which the original idea is replaced with an imposing thought that is trapped without exit until the source of obsession is addressed directly. For Freud, neuroses, “... have as their common source the subject’s sexual life, whether they lie in a disorder of contemporary sexual life or in important events in his past,” (149). Freud lineates that the impairment of libido either in excessiveness or limitation transfers to a psychic blockage which encloses the person in neurotic apprehension. On the other hand,

sociologist Karen Horney expands psychoanalytical definitions of neurosis generally to mean, "character trends of a particular nature the sum of which interferes with the individual's happiness," (426). These character trends develop in an attempt to stabilize through alternative means during the loss of equilibrium. As Dietmar Meinel expands, "...neurosis speaks to the tension between the individual (corporeal and emotional) experience of daily life and the pressures to conform" (15). In order to acclimate to the pressures of daily expectations, neurotic tendencies develop to compensate for what is awry. Using a personal example: I have had a peripatetic life, therefore, permanence and calmness were ungraspable. In an attempt to ground myself, I became obsessed with categorizing and hoarding my memories, developing an internal and physical system (with folders, different boxes, and color coded) in order to retain the memories I have accumulated.

Using these definitions as foundation, neurosis can be summarized as such. In an attempt to achieve a sense of relief from the tension of destabilization and obligation (debt), a compulsion with its own narrative structure (myth) develops which, for a moment, unburdens the neurotic. However, the ritual is a trap that demands repetition. Neurosis carries the threat of, "Do this, or else." The 'else' can range from being consumed with agonizing emotions, or expected disaster resulting from a superstition. The neurotic attempts to concede to expectations of normalcy under conditions and through means that are abnormal.

Normal?

What is normal? Though neurosis varies in definition, normalcy poses a greater difficulty. If neurosis is disorder, is normalcy order? If neurosis is a disease, is normalcy health? Ickstandt notes, "the Greeks linked the concept of the 'normal' with that of the 'natural' thus denoting an ideal state in which the regular and average also merges with the healthy and the good" (7)⁵. However, the abnormal is just as naturally produced as the normal. On top of that, what is the purpose of normalcy if there can be no indication normalcy exists beyond the abstract? Heinz Ickstandt counters such a question with, "...the creation of normalcy can be, that it is, or may function as, a strategy of physical as well as mental survival" (7). For Ickstandt, adhering to normalcy is a matter of resilience, of maintaining a sense of coherence in times of adversity, adhering to a norm and respecting the ordinary. To create a normal is to create

an idealized location to strive towards, a sense of destination with no material representative, rather ostensibly formulated in contrast to abnormality.

Ickstandt compartmentalizes the variants of normalism that Jurgen Link summarizes in his collection, *Essays on Normalism*, as such, "...the still virulent 'protonormalism' of quasi-atavistic societies which enforce their notion of normality by setting it against a religious, or ethnic, or racial Other, repressing, persecuting or exterminating it. And there is the 'flexible normalism' of (post)modern societies which is characterized less by exclusion than by integration" (9). These two strands of normalcy, opposition and assimilation, invent a location to enter or to exit. Normalcy that negotiates itself against an other lines a boundary on who is normal, and who is excluded. Normalcy that demands assimilation still maintains an other, though provides an invitation to this place of normalcy, as long as there is obedience to the rules outlined. However, don't these definitions of normalcy point a path to neurosis? As mentioned before, "The neurotic attempts to concede to expectations of normalcy under conditions and through means that are abnormal." By contrasting with an other, or by integration into normalcy through compliance, does the rigidity and necessity of normalcy not evoke neurotic responses?

John Russon, in his book, *Human Experience: Philosophy, Neurosis, and the Elements of Everyday Life*, states normalcy is, "...to find that in case of this conflict of narrative one can exercise control over which set of habituation responses triumphs" (84). When confronted with adversity, the normal person can control the reactions that are produced out of them. Rather than tripping into stunting routines, the normal person reacts with choice rather than compulsion. However, for Russon, "...the very posture of normalcy is itself a neurotic posture" (85). For the reaction of the normal person in the view of Russon, rests on self-denial, and a brand of self-hatred that rejects the body's immediate response that is material and emotional. The normal person rejects what the body seeks, and acquiesces with what the world deems the body should seek.

According to the definitions outlined by Lacan, Freud, and Horney, is normalcy a constituent of neurosis? Weaving Lacan's definition of debt, compensation, and myth, Freud's symptoms of anxiety and repression transferred into impairment, and Horney's character deficits that impede happiness in order to promote functionality, to endeavor to be normal seems to provoke neurosis rather than being a type of neu-

rosis. The normal person, rather than constructing a myth, admits themselves to the social fiction of norms, assigning themselves a duty to respect the ordinary at all costs. They accept the obligation to respond as expected, regardless of any ulterior internal inclinations they may have. In an attempt to adhere and appear functional, their personal sense of individuality is repressed, resulting in the impairment of their expression.

In my personal experience, those who appear normal, or attempt to embody normalcy, reveal a dangerous level of neurosis and self-hatred that aligns with the texts cited in this essay. I used to have a friend who detailed their transformation into normalcy. They described their previous attitudes towards the world, their “absurd” behaviors and tendencies, which they received judgment for. In response, they altered themselves to fit what they deemed normal, describing their internal monologue as consisting of rigidity to the fiction of norms they had internalized and a punishing observance of every action they displayed. The more they tried to appear normal, the more the roots of rigidity strangled their honest responses to the world, replaced instead with the expectations of who they thought they should be.

Neurotic Endearance

There are books and essays that attempt to link disorder with creativity, and madness with artistic fulfillment. Victims of such myths range from Van Gogh to Antonin Artaud. Is it true, or is it that the pathological has its charms? Such myths are typically the pipe dreams of voyeurs, and those who misconstrue illness as individuality, drawing correlations between anxiety and art. Richard Wollheim, in *Neurosis and the Artist*, responds to such allegations, “And of the artist it can now be asserted that he suffers, that he has special gifts, and that he owes these gifts to his suffering. His art is his sickness” (155). Rather than accepting the work of art as the product of effort and labor, the illness voyeur displaces the skills of the artist onto their disease. Rather than the artist, the person, being the creator of the work, it is the neurotic tendency that champions the talent. However, the flaw in such thinking according to Wollheim is that it is antithetical to the definition of neurosis. For “...the neurotic repeats what he cannot recall. For to recall is associated in Freud’s thinking with a certain freedom, a certain mobility, the capacity to make sense of what in a pathological condition haunts the mind with a

gloomy, statuesque monotony” (156). Neurosis stunts, whereas creation is a movement that thaws through transformation the frozenness of neurosis. Of course, artists can create as a result of their neurosis--neurosis can infect anything, from work to parenting. However, the capacity to transform, rather than endeavor to normalcy, or remain in the loop of neurosis, indicates a looseness in the strangling hold of neurosis.

Returning to the main topic of this section, what is so charming about pathology? I believe that this fetishistic glorification of neurosis stems from voyeurism by those who strive for normalcy, and a conflation of pathology with individuality. Those who control their compulsions for the appearance of normalcy leads develop a voyeursitic fascination with the otherness, though marginal, of the neurotic, those who are incapable of subscribing to the fictions of norms. However, those who appear “normal” responding with such curiosity in rejection of their own neurotic tendencies, are leeching vicariously from those who refuse to adhere to social expectations. The neurotic can be just as complicit. Who can neglect the numerous social media profiles that begin their introductions with a list of diagnoses? Illness has expanded to define the whole personhood of some, as an accent of individuality rather than a component of the whole. It has become adorable to be ill. Once a pitiable trait, it has become a mark of defiance. This is not without nuance. It can be subversive to be neurotic, to admit one’s purposeful or unavoidable inability to ascribe to external expectation in a social arena that requires perfect aptitude at the detriment of the self. However, the inclination to find pathology charming is infantilizing. It doesn’t transform neurosis, it allows it to persist under the guise of an acceptable quirk. It doesn’t admit its weight, rather, it reduces neurosis to another adjective to describe one’s personality. On top of that, neurosis exists upon a spectrum. You can be more or less neurotic, severity inclining and declining based on external factors. To regard neurosis as a charming quirk that accentuates one’s individuality fails to consider that these tendencies are general within the population, and can be a source of solidarity rather than being enclosed in a solitary scope.

Neurosis in Art

The pieces selected for the show recall neurosis through material, form, and content.

Possibly in Michigan - Cecelia Condit



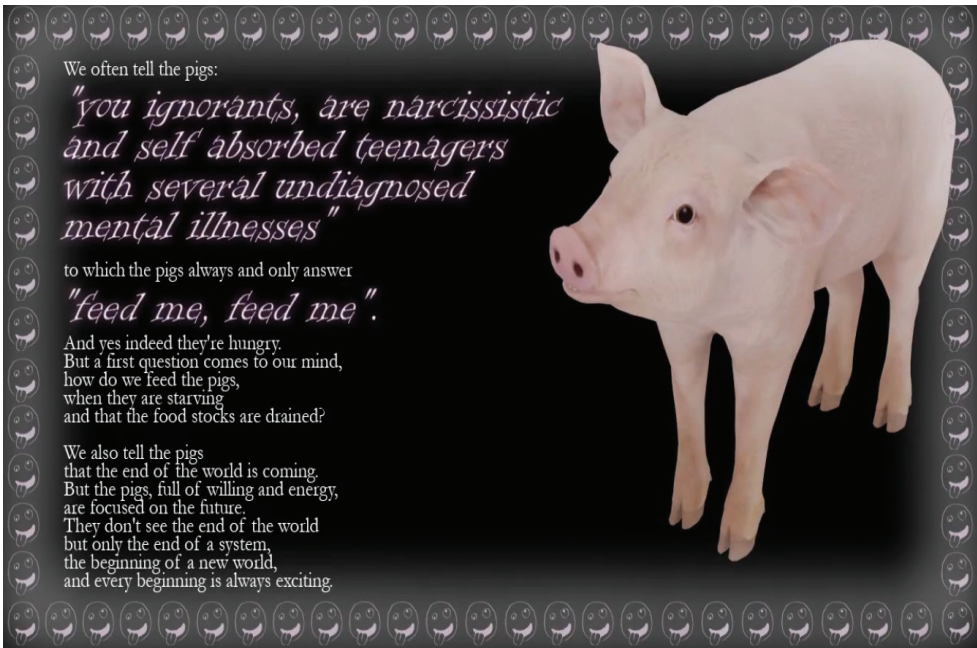
The musical short film startles into a start with, “I bite at the hand that feeds me/Slap at the face that eats me.” The short film follows two friends, Sharon and Janet, through the mall evading the danger of a stalker Arthur, who is intent on cannibalizing Sharon. The evasion doesn’t last as Arthur continues his quest to Sharon’s residence. The measured synthesizers set a tone of nervousness. The nodding pace of electronic beats alternate from atonal to melodic depending on the scene. The neurotic in this piece is the cannibal, Arthur. Neurosis is as much repetition as it is compulsion. Arthur bears a compulsion to eat women, repeating the same persistent seduction of violent stalking in order to achieve his goal of consumption. Arthur is held hostage to a loop, which he reasons as being evoked by love. He is stuck equating love with neurotic gratification. Upon consumption, the cycle restarts.

Junkfood Junkie - Simon Floris



In the short video, Floris is featured consuming seemingly endless swathes of junk food, specifically, Doritos and Diet Coke. In the background, a techno beat hums alive following Floris as he moves from his couch, to the shower, to his balcony. The neurotic loop is clearly presented as Floris seeks relief for his craving, only to want more as the tension of hunger for the familiar tastes inflates once more.

Sexy Pigs - Lea Tissot & Anna Sougy



"How do we feed the pigs?" centralizes the video piece, *Sexy Pigs*. The piece expands as a narrative of starving 3D pigs. Questions abound on power, dependence, and weakness. The peculiarities and the relationships to neuroticism are multiple. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the grounding theme of starvation and its compensation. The piece connotes the expanse of mass neurosis triggered by elements of dire need. As the narrator directs, persistence for existence demands vigilance and breeding in achievement of collective safety and survival. Following such directions, "...balance will be restored." The directions align with Horney's point on neurotic compensation for external loss of equilibrium. The pigs lose a necessary resource, and as a result, the narrator recommends rigid rules in order to return to homeostasis. As the excised scene above shows, the pigs are misconstrued as disabled and avaricious for wanting, blamed for their hunger. However, a penultimate scene in the piece details a dialogue between two pigs, "...they had to deal differently, To learn to cope on their own, in need to survive." Despite their neurosis inciting position of helplessness and hunger, the pigs "refuse to be positioned as victim." They transform their collective neurosis to develop their own economic system that gratifies all.

Anxious Artists - Erica Eyres



This humorous piece shows a host, Cassie, who claims to aid anxious people, specifically anxious artists, who end up loving their loneliness in a “diseased way.” She contrasts the reality of modern artists with the stereotypes associated of bohemianism and whimsical lives. The connection I draw from this piece to neuroticism is two-fold. The host, by claiming artists are anxious, supposes that she is “normal”, yet her mannerisms indicate that she is as neurotic as those she claims to help. She gesticulates, announcing her jokes as no one can tell they are jokes. As she overexplains through stutters of “uhms”, and staring at the floor, she describes her palliative of hiring models for artists who can’t face the public. Once she introduces her client, Erica, who is evidently neurotic, as she gesticulates through pauses and stutters, and defines her difficulty with self-deprecation. Cassie then attempts to diagnose the artist’s anxiety based on her artistic portfolio. Cassie recalls both illness voyeurs who correlate neuroticism with artistic creations, and those who “pose” normalcy, neglecting their own neurotic tendencies, while declaring others as such. The host infantilizes Erica for her anxiety, patronizing her while she postures her own elevated stance as someone who is ostensibly “normal”.

Ebuliões II - Joana Azevedo Rodrigues



Ebuliões translates roughly to mean “boiled” from Portuguese.

The mangled underwear, brown and tainted, boils in the rust of steel. The main relationship to neuroticism noticed is the Freudian proposal that the repression of sexuality represents itself in expression as a neurotic blockage. The underwear, the piece that hides the sex, that protects it, is destroyed, boiled. The transition from sexuality to psychic blockage that induces neurosis arranges itself in the loss of revelation. The underwear destroyed neither protects nor hides the sex, it proves dysfunctional. This dysfunctionality, in Freudian terms, translate to a psychological dysfunction induced by repression.

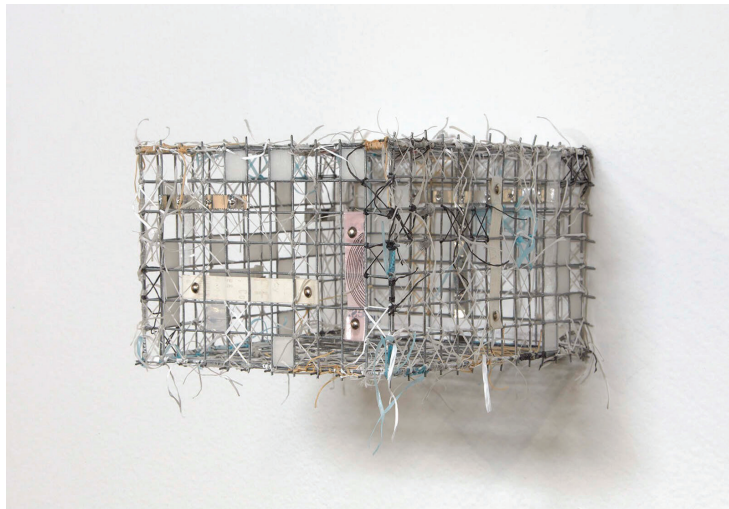
Body is an unmade bed - Amber Tutwiler



In this piece, two feet dangle on either side, swaddled in sheets of shimmering turquoise, purple, beige and blue. It is disordered, yet there is order in the placement of the objects, from the comptability of the tints of the sheets to their centralization in the middle of the painting. An addi-

tional connection is the wooden platform setting the stage for the painting. The piece as the artist describes is ‘unruly’. My initial attachment to neurosis saw it as a metaphor for neurosis, drawing the analogy of discomfort yet familiar state of an unmade bed. However, a more astute relation is how it resists the suffocating necessity of perfection that neurosis forces. By setting imperfection upon a stage, rather than the caustic venture towards a flawless ideal, Tutwiler presents how neurosis can be undone; embracing your dysfunctionality, rather than endeavoring towards some non-existent “perfect”.

Cage (Brain) - Sylvie Hayes Wallace



This cage, the size of a brain, imitates the neurotic captive, unable to escape the spiral of compulsion. The analogy of the brain as a cage is succinct in conveying the turmoil of being trapped in one’s mind. The cage has no entrance/exit, though the transparent cubes allow windows through which a filtered view is allowed. Within the cage, lies emptiness. Neurosis is a net of behaviors that the hostage can fall upon in times of imbalance. However, as the emptiness within the cage conveys, neurotic compulsion fails to convince of its content.

Gray Entity- Seth Cosford



The theme of exit returns in this piece with a door with no walls. The background is a desolate tundra with dark spiked trees. The spikes have also infected the figure in the foreground who is hunched over sheltering themselves from the gaze of an ominous eye floating diagonally from the hounded body. The spikes are a protective measure from the torture of being seen as someone you are

not. The gap of discrepancy that persists in experiences of gender dysphoria cultivates the gaze of others as a punishing observation, When others pressure your presence into a gender paradigm you can't relate you, being seen is a breeding ground for neurosis, demanding a completion of an image that isn't you.

First Step (Clumsily) - Starkey Fossgreen

Without reading the title, the interpretation of this piece can be dismal. Besides, what could be so delightful about a daffodil destroyed? However, the connection I notice to neurosis, is how it opposes it. The figure's first step, likely a child's, results in a mistake. However, aren't mistakes natural? The destruction is not an act of maliciousness, rather an act of confusion. Relating back to neurosis, a mistake in this piece remains an act of clumsiness, with no demand for perfection or a following punishment.



Slipping Place - Klara Vertes

According to Vertes, the piece recounts the following narrative, "Someone dropped an urn in their room and the ash of the departed was scattered about. Their fan slowly collected/sucked that ash into its frame and it became a pseudo urn. It was then mounted as a haphazard reliquary. It's worshipped as the container for the remains but also symbolizes the shame of the accidental sacrilege." The shame evinced in this piece sparkles in the emblazoned "SORRY" on the textile carrying the urn of honor. The burden of shame and guilt pronounces a debt to the dearly passed. Much like the neurotic of Lacan, the titular character of this narrative reimburses the sacrilege against the passed by memorializing the event, as though absolution from someone who is no longer there is possible.



The Moon - Liev Sibilla

Stabbings by knives and wooden knobs protude from a form both soft enough to allow insertion yet hard enough to keep the wounds freshly intact. Illegible script vandalizes the form, while it lies there, glazed in beige. The moon, once a spotted disk, is a victim in this piece. What is strikingly neurotic about this piece is the tension encapsulates. It captures violence inert, the instance of agony,



and tension. Recalling the neurotic loop of tension, action, and relief, the piece visualizes the enclosure of tension, how it hurts, and how it demands reaction.



The symptoms of panic attacks according to Freud are, “sweating, tremor, hunger, vertigo, diarrhoea, congestions, parasthesia (pins and needles)” (95). The piece discharges panic and anxiety, using colors that seems to be on fire, evoking visual parasthesia. Faces groan and contort in pain, melting in a nervous spread. Hands seems to grasp out, seeking a grounding pillar, landing upon nothing. The piece, aptly titled, expresses neuroticism at its peak: flaming panic.

Citations

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