Jean Lowe’s Freudian Parslips

Achieve and maintain a More Powerful Delusion, Jean Lowe’s recent exhibition in New York and Los Angeles, leads us to the heart—better, the stomach—of her wickedly insouciant, word-driven, gastro-visual humor.¹ Taken from one of the garrulous, spoof book covers that populate the show, her title crosses the gung-ho language of corporate promotion with a rhetoric of fitness—only to skewer both with a phantom declaration of psychological recovery. Lowe’s wittily peevish paradox meets the provocative injunction of dissident pop-cultural analyst Slavoj Žižek to “enjoy your symptom,”² as she admonishes us—mouth first—to embrace, perpetuate, and exacerbate our “delusions.”

Lowe’s ironic administration of the delusional reaches us in the form of Barnes-and-Noble-style, “bestseller” book racks packed with improbably colorful volumes, their covers turned toward the viewers or consumers they solicit. Each tome is a palpably handmade, papier-mâché object finished in glossy enamel paint that joins with the ensemble to form a panorama of edgy, cartoon-like vulgarity. True to their mall or high-street context, the books are loosely consigned around topical subjects ranging from DIY to dieting, from save-the-planet pamphlets to pop psychology. Founded in the artist’s wittily elaborate gestures of surrogate publication, with which she first took up in the early 1990s, Lowe conjures a dissenting semantics from her array of books, derailing their conventional significations (of professional competence, consumerist distraction, or unremitting self-improvement) and substituting a sly commentary on the culture of narcissism.

Food lies at the symbolic center of this rebarbative bibliophilia, acting as a kind of synecdoche of parts warmed over from a blighted whole, a corrosive set of deviant stand-ins for the wider social and political conditions satirized by the artist. To the bigotties of organized religion and its compliantly pious tomes, Lowe responds with Just Ask God: Hot and Stacked (with its syrup-drenched pancake stack) or Growing Up Isn’t Easy Lord (with a man and child governed by their alcoholic beverages). To the dubious assurance of gender politics or radical feminism, she retorts with Militant Feminist Veganism for All (illustrated with what she terms a “super labial Venus de Willendorf”) and The Battered Women’s Cookbook (with its witty rib-eye steak). To the depredations of “big pharma” she replies with a dedicated series, Pharmaceutical Solutions, which addresses “Boredom,” “Grandiosity,” “Disappointment,” “Loneliness,” “Athlete’s Foot,” and “Grief”—as well as “Erectile Dysfunction,” “Lice/Menopause,” and three volumes on “Alcohol and Drug Problems.” The burgeoning cookbook industry is the specific target of a whole rack of parodies—geographic (A Taste of Omaha), symptomatic (The IBS Cookbook), convenience (Savvy Fast Food Choices), and more.

In a previous incarnation, segments of Lowe’s licentious library were given a more specific location in The Loneliness Clinic (2004–2007), her rambunctious simulation of a psychiatrist’s waiting room and office.³ Confected from signature life-size, papier-mâché models—of tables, chairs, a couch, an ottoman, and paintings—these spaces also contained a magazine rack and shelves set with fabricated books, magazines, objects, and curios, including a pair of kooky covers for bootleg editions of Gourmet and Bon Appétit magazines. Lowe cleverly transforms the waiting room—that preamble to the interface between science and its...
subject public—into an arena for reading between the lines, for overactive projection, and for the accommodation of a general restlessness of being that debunks the frameworks and etiquettes of the talking cure. In her work, the space of mental restitution itself now becomes a symptom of the wider culture of narcissism that has willed it into existence. Lowe takes on what Christopher Lasch termed the “imperialism” of the psychiatric industry and its inhibition of spontaneity, so that in her hands the whole apparatus of self-help—the industry of how-to, can-do, and guidance manuals and the spine of food and consumption that holds them together—is revealed as a parody of the very health and wellness it purports to promote. Lowe offers the space and time otherwise killed or tranquilized by the situational normativity of the waiting room, a salient resurrection. But they are regurgitated with a life of their own, administering to their clients and passersby a salutary dose of what Salvador Dali—another artist whose aesthetics of edibility crosses obsession and symbolic reverie—termed “critical paranoia,” as their environment turns humorously hostile by interpreting them back. It was Dali, of course, who famously preferred “delusion” to artistic “spontaneity”—likening the latter to the “stereotypical taste of the unvarying restaurant crawfish”—and whose defiantly unorthodox brand of “comic humor” was “always a step ahead of his ideas.”

So it is that Lowe trains her mordant wit on the cultures of excess and deprivation measured out by our regimens of greed, consumption, and both nutritional and psychological dysfunction. Alcoholism and anorexia, for example, generally provide poor company for comedic irreverence, and few artists have successfully engaged them in any dimension, let alone to the accompaniment of laughter. But Lowe takes on these stigmatized illnesses in a unique compound of unswerving giddiness and satirical glee, secured by her consummate command of the graphic, painterly, and textual parameters that converge with fearless yet unforced commentary on the covers of her faux editions. Sometimes her titles are apparently literal and descriptive, as with Six Simple Steps to a Better Attitude. But instead of correlating the anticipated improvements with bullet points or happy diagrams, Lowe’s illustration assembles six glasses, each filled with a different colored cocktail. The vaunted path to
the amelioration of bad “attitudes” is fortified by escapist
detours, so that any quick-fix coherence and sobriety is
ambushed by the very temptations that confound it. Lowe
gives us here an image-driven version of the delusional
paradox that animates her book projects.

In other instances, pointedly aphoristic text supplies
the motor force for a more biting critique. In
Anxiety: The
Unexploited Weight Loss Tool, for example, the title itself
converts the general plus/minus binarisms of Lowe’s ellipti-
cal paradoxes into a benighted formula that comes up lose,
lose. The negative of anxiety begets the false positive of
weight loss, so that one disorder catalyzes another. Nor is
there any refuge in the comforts of professional discourse
or academic wisdom, such as those presided over by the
offstage protagonist of The Loneliness Clinic, a certain Dr.
Pohatten. Neither the clinical environment nor the prod-
ucts of institutional knowledge bear much fruit for Lowe,
who bursts their pretensions mercilessly in such titles as The
Philosophy of Binge Drinking or Preparing for Your Career
as a Lactation Consultant, which pictures a young boy at a
soda-fountain counter in front of a sundae.

While wit takes center stage in this carnival of gaudy
delusions—doctors, professors, and their ilk are banished to
the wings—Lowe’s critique also engages, at times profoundly,
with the structures used by twentieth-century psychoanalysis
to understand the mechanisms of the mind. In fact, her
cascade of puns, innuendos, and smutty humor, and the
off-kilter shuttle between text and image that sustains them,
create new artistic circuits between wit and food, dreams and
projections, which have remarkable parallels with the way
Sigmund Freud set about unraveling the operations of the
unconscious. Both use jokes and comestibles as their leading
actors; and for both, the need (and desire) for sustenance is
not simply one of the triumvirate of founding drives—along
with self-preservation and libidinal gratification—but is at
the same time emblematic, even in dreams, of the “reality”
of the quotidian world—of those “simple and unimportant
occupations of everyday life, such as packing trunks, prepar-
ing food in the kitchen,” as Freud puts it.7

In addition to focusing the primary “exigencies of life,”
Freud’s discussion of wish-fulfillment makes recourse to
the most basic scenario of want and will represented by
the hungry infant and follows it up with accounts of the relatively simple prompts represented by his own food-based dreams, such as the “salted anchovies,” as well as the “swawbeewwies, wild swawbeewwies, omblet, pudden” sleep talk, pseudo-dream of his daughter Anna.

Lowe, like Freud, is interested in the relation between these apparently grounded significations and more complex rounds of association that arise as food crosses over into other symbolic territories—as the oral merges with the libidinal and rituals of food consumption broker fundamental relations of kinship, marriage, taboos, and larger forms of social organization. Freud uses another one of his own dreams, that of “the three Fates” (or Parcae), to stake out preliminaries for the enmeshment of food in the symbolic domain: this was “clearly a hunger-dream,” he notes, “but it succeeded in shifting the craving for nourishment back to a child’s longing for his mother’s breast, and it made use of an innocent desire as a screen for a more serious one which could not be so openly displayed.” To put it briefly, one might claim that the associative journey embarked on here culminates in Freud’s extraordinary accounts of food-related dreams in which words themselves, in the forms of puns and double-entendres, finally detour the basic exigencies of the comestible into the symbolic abstractions of language. We witness this move in a “dream-composition” so elaborate that Freud suggests it “might be entitled “The Language of Flowers,”” the preamble to which is framed by a woman who went “into the kitchen where her two maids were, and found fault with them for not having got her ‘bite of food’ ready.” The physical or literal diminishment associated with the little “bite” is balanced here by rhetorical engangement at the level of association and symbolization. Something similar transpires in the famous “breakfast ship” dream, though here the dreamer’s punning sleep talk, pseudo-dream of her daughter Anna.10

Lowe is heir to these founding elisions of edibility and euphemistic language, as her garish, childlike images, like the implications of Freud’s starving infant, are overwritten by wildly plausible inference and constant tropic revision. But while Freud provides the model for opening out the symbolic association of food into language and the social order, Lowe reports back on the diminishment of its prospects in the era of food as a ready-made. As her regimen of content-less, full-frontal, crypto-books suggests, the legatees of the “me” generation in the new millennium merely recalibrate the zoning of their narcissism, synthesizing, in the process, any new technology, social innovation, or political expediency into the self-serving culture of the caption, as the tidbit merges with the sound bite.  

NOTES
1. Jean Lowe’s Achieve and Maintain a More Powerful Delusion was shown at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, March 17 to April 4, 2007; and at McKenzie Fine Art, New York, February 14 to March 15, 2008.
3. The Loneliness Clinic was shown at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery, November 20 to December 24, 2004, McKenzie Fine Art, February 9 to March 11, 2006, Dust Gallery, Las Vegas, September 7 to October 21, 2007; and as part of Found Out, curated by John C. Welchman, the U.S. section of the Incheon International Women’s Biennale, Korea, November 2007.
10. Described by Freud as “one of the most youthful dreams in my whole collection,” Anna’s talk/dream is recounted in chapter 5, “A Dream is the Fulfilment of a Wish,” The Interpretation of Dreams, 209.