

Orlan and Body Art

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Orlan
from “Synthetic Pleasures”

Begin with film clip

Orlan is a French performance artist. Her work, *The Reincarnation of St. Orlan* began May 30 1990 involving a series of nine plastic surgeries that have transformed her face and body. She is a professor of Fine Art at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Dijon.

Duchamp and Intentionality

Photo of Marcel Duchamp

and

Fountain by R. Mutt

and

In Advance of Broken Arm

Orlan was influenced by Marcel Duchamp, a 20th Century avant gard artist.

Duchamp’s contribution to Modern art was the idea of the “readymade.” He believed that the artist’s intentions were the essence of art. That is, if the artist intended and selected a snow shovel as a work of art, it could be art. By shifting the object’s context (a snow shovel moved from a garage to a gallery), one could change the viewer’s understanding of the object.

This assertion that *intentionality* is the essence of art, strikes at the heart of our assumption that art is valued for the artist’s skill and technique, her ability to draw and paint well, to draw proportionately. Rather, Duchamp’s work was aimed at reducing or eliminating the significance of artistic technique in favor of an artform that was exclusively developed for its intellectual interest. Art came to be understood as being less about a beautiful painting and more focused on an interesting concept or idea.

Likewise, Orlan’s performance work is not about the product – its not like a painting or a sculpture – it is about the idea, the concept. Her process, her idea, asks us to consider not the aesthetic value of the work, but the consequences of the ideas she addresses and critiques.

Performance and Body Art: A Brief History

The use of found objects evolved into the use of the body and personal stories and relationships as media for art as well.

Joseph Beuys, *How To Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965

In this performance, Beuys painted himself in gold, strapped a ski to one foot, and sat in an exhibition of his works explaining pictures to a dead rabbit he held in his arms. The work was mystic and shamanic, as his works were intended to be. The ski is symbolic of movement, forward progression through snow, but because he only wears one, it is useless. Animals appeared often in his work as a symbol of purity and innocence and wisdom. This work is about the futility of pressing avant garde artistic ideas on a culture uninterested or untouched by avant gard concerns.

Beuys chose for himself the role of artist-shaman for a culture that was increasingly eroding in a spiritual malaise. To some extent Orlan shares his vision – by using her body in the surgery performances, she believes that she is moving to the forefront of the culture and exploring, firsthand, the consequences of genetic engineering, and standards of beauty to help prepare us for the problems of increased technology and control over bodies and what is considered culturally desirable.

Body Art

Two characteristics of Body Art: (1) Personal risk and pain were often important components of '70s body art; (2) this art form was explored exclusively by male artists.

Shoot F Space, 1973, Chris Burden

Chris Burden is a performance artist whose work appeared in the 1970s. In this performance, Burden had himself shot with a gun in the arm – the action and the result both, presented, through the intentionality of the artist, as art.

Transfixed, 1974 Chris Burden

In another work, Burden had himself nailed through the hands to a volkswagon beetle in a work that conflated crucifixion imagery with American consumerism.

Orlan's use of the phrase "Carnal Art" is intended to distinguish her use of the body from Body Art (ists). Her work does not merely use the body in short-term, high-risk performances, rather her work is a more extensive use of the body to affect and transform identity.

Orlan's work does not glorify pain as redemptive or sensational or bravado. The idea of pain as "natural" is objectionable to her. Particularly, unnecessary pain and suffering as in the work of Body Art. In her works, Orlan undergoes local anesthetics to make the surgeries pain-free and to allow her to be conscious to continue to perform and direct the event.

Risk is present in her work, however in the anesthetizing: The epidural block used involves a spinal injection that risks paralyzing the patient if the needle does not hit its mark exactly. With each successive surgery the danger is increased. To some extent then, she risks deformation, paralysis, even death with her performances.

For me, art which is interesting is related to and belongs to resistance. It must upset our assumptions, overwhelm our thoughts, be outside norms and outside of the law. It should be against bourgeois art; it is not there to comfort, nor to give us what we already know. It must take risks, at the risk of not being accepted, at least initially. It should be deviant and involve a project for society. And even if this declaration seems very romantic, I say: art can, art must, change the world, for that is its only justification.

Orlan's Early Work

The Kiss of the Artist, originally performed at the Caldas da Rainha Museum in Portugal, 1976

A photo-sculpture of Orlan's body with text written "insert 5 francs" and a slot by the jugular notch. The participant can see the coins fall through the body via a transparent column, to the crotch.

When the coins had descended, the real-life artist, Orlan seated nearby would leap up and kiss the participant.

The responses were varied:	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
	Told her she was brave	tipped her in their own currency
	Brought her champagne	were reluctant to pay the full price
	Encouraged their men to participate	came back several times
		kissed her nose in return to being kissed by Orlan

This was one of the earliest work in which her body was the medium for the idea.

The performance led to suspension from her teaching position at an art school. Her students protested for her reinstatement.

The pay-and-kiss performance was critiquing above all else the gendered, patriarchal, and exploitative model of the capitalist economy. The work is about the economic exchange of works of art for cash.

By presenting a work that highlights economic trade (I give you this, I get that), Orlan was making a case for the similarities between the art industry and prostitution. The artist presents the economic relationship in order to critique it. This is a post-modern strategy: going through with an act, creating an offensive image in an effort to illustrate the offensiveness of it.

St. Orlan / The White Madonna in Assumption / Black Virgin

Orlan took this name when she was 15. She later used St. Orlan as a performative character, she appeared as saint and madonna in a number of performances. This persona was The White Madonna, breast bared as if preparing to feed an infant Jesus.

Another persona was the Black Virgin – the whore – whose breast is bared not to nurture, but to suggest carnality, as sexualized part of the unchaste woman.

These two images depict the oversimplification of women into two 'desireable' categories created by men throughout the ages.

These characters appeared in her work for several years as references in various performances and two-dimensional work.

The White Madonna is the character at the heart of the cosmetic surgeries. She is being reincarnated into a new identity.

The Reincarnation of St. Orlan: Orlan's Aesthetic Surgeries

Identity is central to the protracted performance work "The Reincarnation of St. Orlan" It involves not only extensive plastic surgery to transform the skin by which people might recognize Orlan, but also intense

psychoanalysis which is designed to re-incarnate her personality as well. Her ultimate goal is to fundamentally shape a new identity for herself – and to test this new identity in the courts.

The Plastic Surgeries

As a critique of the western idea of female beauty, and addressing specifically the use of elective cosmetic surgery by women to enhance their faces and bodies, Orlan undertook a series of nine surgeries over several years. The surgeries were actual surgeries, performed in surgical units, but staged, choreographed, and directed by Orlan. They were also documented on video tape.

Slide Images of Botticelli, Gerard, Da Vinci

The surgeries to her face include the following body parts, appropriated from Renaissance/Baroque-era works:

Chin = Botticelli's Venus (the model was Amerigo Vespucci's sister)

Eyes = Françoise Gérard's Psyche

Forehead = Da Vinci's Mona Lisa

Mouth = Boucher's Europa

Nose = either a Fontainebleau School version of Diana or a Mayan alternative that is very, very big. This surgery has not taken place yet.???????

Female Parts

This selection of the “best” parts from works of art of the Renaissance/Baroque is deliberate and it has its origin in the story of the Greek Sculptor Xeuxis who regularly created the most beautiful female forms out of several models – choosing the best nose, eyes, mouth, etc. to create a composite woman – the *ideal*.

This deconstruction of women's bodies is significant: we live in a culture of images and language that deals with female bodies as parts and we focus on those parts: breasts, hips, legs, hair, eyes.

Certainly there is a language among men that often claims preference from women with long hair or perky breasts. And women frequently have elective surgery hoping to fix a part that keeps them from being beautiful. This is a system of valuation of women that reduces them to the features or parts of their bodies.

So like Xeuxis and *Dr. Frankenstein*, Orlan seeks to bring several parts to bear on one body.

The use of Renaissance images is also telling – as these values of beauty still remain with us: we value the look of the women in works of art *and* we value the works of art themselves as beautiful – standardized and conforming to a constructed and narrow perception of beauty that is Eurocentric.

Orlan's project, however, is to show us the folly of deconstructed beauty – beauty reduced to the best ‘parts’. And she uses her body to show us that an accumulation of the best parts all located on one real female body does not necessarily add up to “beautiful.” She has described the way she looks following the surgeries as “monstrous”

Trident and Skull, Cibachrome print, 1991 from the fifth operation.

The surgeries are performances and events. All choreographed and directed by the artist and involve music, poetry, and dance. They are costumed if possible by a famous couturier. All the accoutrements (crucifixes, plastic fruit, trident and skull, etc.) are sterilized in accordance with operating room standards. Only state certified surgeons operate.

“During surgery I read texts as long as possible, even while my face is being operated on. In the most recent operations this produced an image of a cadaver under autopsy which keeps on speaking, as if its words were detached from its body...”

During all my operation-performances I read the following extract from her book La Robe (The Dress) which says this:

'The skin is deceptive ... in life one only has one's skin...there is an error in human relations because one is never what one has... I have an angel's skin, but I am a jackal a black skin but I am white, a woman's skin but I am a man; I never have the skin of what I am. There is no exception to the rule because I am never what I have

When I read this text I thought about how, in our era, we are beginning to have the means of reducing this distance, specifically by surgery...It is now possible therefore to bring the internal image closer to the external image."

Ominpresence, 1st day after the 7th surgery, 1993

Ominpresence, 41st day after the 7th surgery, 1993

I say that I am involved in a woman-to-woman transsexual act, making allusion to transsexuals as, for example, a man who feels like a woman wants other people to see him as a woman. We could summarise this by saying that it is matter of communication.

The money to pay for all this is earned through payment for interviews and the sale of work generated from the surgeries – often digital works and photographs....

...and in the Sydney Biennale, in 1992, she submitted vials of liquefied flesh and blood drained from the surgeries as “relics” of St. Orlan.

Refiguration Hybridation, series no. 1, 1997, digitized images

Like Dr. Rose (aka “Dr. Dadelus of our reading this week), Orlan objects to the ways in which plastic surgery has been used. Her use is aesthetic to help us understand the folly of the ways we currently use it. But she feels that its technological power is still tied very much to patriarchy and dominance over women.

Her concern that women undergo surgery, ostensibly for themselves, is dubious to her, since so many women try to make their bodies conform to cultural standards (and even more limiting – advertiser’s/media’s standards) of beauty.

Plastic surgery is one of the areas in which man's power can be most powerfully asserted on women's bodies. I was not able to obtain [collaboration] from male surgeons what I was able to achieve with a female surgeon, for I believe [the male surgeons] wanted to keep me "cute".

The Ninth surgery will probably take place in Japan, to give me a very large nose, the biggest nose technically possible in relation to my anatomy and deontologically acceptable to a surgeon from that country. This operation will not take place for another three or four years (quote from 1996), perhaps even more, for it will take time to find the necessary technical and financial infra-structures to develop the overall project. But above all, the greatest danger I am taking is that this extremely radical and shocking performance will obscure the plastic art work which results from it. My current aim is also to produce and exhibit works from earlier operations, making clear the process whereby this performance is created and debating the questions which it raises with the widest possible public.

After the Performance/Life Are Over

"I have given my body to art, for after my death it will not be given to science, but rather to a museum to be mummified: it will be the main part of a video installation. When the operations are finished, I will employ an advertising agency to find me a first and second name and an artist name, then I will get a lawyer to appeal to the Public Prosecutor to accept my new identities with my new face. This is a performance inscribed within the social fabric, a performance which goes as far as the law ... as far as a complete change of identity. In any case, if it proves to be impossible the attempt and the lawyer's appeal will be a part of the work.

This issue of identity returns – we heard it in the text from the surgeries: the idea that the internal, personal identity is often very different from what we look like. This issue of identity – becoming who we feel we are, becomes the significant issue in the work.

The current use of plastic surgery, then, according to Orlan, is to make us less of the individual we are and make us more of the body that the culture expects us to be.

Bibliography

"I Do Not Want to Look Like...: Orlan on becoming Orlan by Heidi Reitmeir, published in *MAKE*, October/November 1996

Orlan: Millennial Female by Kate Ince, Published by Berg, 2000

Bound to Beauty: An Interview with Orlan by Peg Zeglin Brand, from *Beauty Matters*, Indiana University Press, 2000

"Is It Art: Orlan and the Transgressive Act" by Barbara Rose, *Art in America*, February 1993

Art on the Edge and Over, Linda Weintraub, Arthur Danto, Thomas McEvelley, Art Insights Inc., 1996

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Performance Art and Body Art

In Advance of Broken Arm, 1915 by Marcel Duchamp

How To Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare, 1965, Joseph Beuys

Shoot F Space, 1973, Chris Burden

Transfixed, 1974 Chris Burden

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The Kiss of the Artist, originally performed at the Caldas da Rainha Museum in Portugal, 1976

White Madonna in Assumption, cibachrome, 1984

Black Virgin and Video, cibachrome, 1984

Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, after 1482, oil

Francoise Gerard, *Psyche Receiving Cupid’s First Kiss*, oil 1798

Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, oil 1503

Trident and Skull, Cibachrome print, 1991 from the fifth operation.

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See also, www.Orlan.net, Orlan’s official website