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DE-SACRALIZING THE SURGICAL ACT: ORLAN AND THE ART OF TRANSFORMATION

by

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INTRODUCTION

Orlan is a French performance artist whose most recent work is herself. Entitled 'The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan', she has, since May 1990, undergone a series of plastic surgical operations to transform herself into a new being based on the classical images of feminine beauty, as manifested in Greek Mythology and the History of Art. Throughout her career, as a well known artist Orlan has trafficked in notions of an ambiguous and constantly shifting identity questioning how self representations are constructed. The photographs documenting Orlan's surgical procedures dissect more traditions than is generally recognised because they probe issues of aesthetics and beauty, touch on the origins of plastic reconstructive surgery, and expose the performative nature of all medical practise. Her presence renews the terms 'operating theatre' quite literally, and much of the shock involved in watching her work comes not so much from the cutting and slicing of her face and body, as the recognition of the surgeon as performer.

This dissertation seeks to investigate and question the construction of medical performances which Orlan problematises, and addresses how within feminist discourses her performances relates to contemporary theories and ideas of female identity. This thesis is concerned not so much with Orlan, but with the influences of medical practice and female performance which exist in her work.

Medical Practitioners have worked hard for centuries to promote an image of themselves as engineers of the flesh; reassuring healers of illness. Orlan plays on these ideas. Her intervention is this clinical setting disturbs these carefully protected attitudes. Her work is a reminder of the first anatomy theatres which were designed as ritualistic spaces, emphasising the spectacular nature of their function.

Scientific and medical ideas can be understood as speaking to and containing implications about matters beyond their explicit content. Thus when reading medical texts and anatomical drawings, or art works, it is easy to assimilate underlying ideas of gender and identity. Orlan's works also testify to the art world obviliousness and important feminist critique on societies's representation of women, and woman's representation of women themselves. Her work is a place of passage, a threshold where 'nature' confronts 'culture'. Orlan's art interrogates the boundaries of the private person in a political system.

This dissertation is set up initially with an exploration of how the female body was treated in anatomy theatres of the 16th and 17th centuries, and in the form of wax anatomical models of the 18th and 19th centuries. It discusses the implications for gender which these medical practises induced, and exposes the performative nature of medical practitioners . It goes on to discuss feminist performance and body art, which is concerned with the politics of gender and identity. Orlan is looked at in the light of these issues and what her work suggests will be explored.

CHAPTER ONE

The anatomy theatres of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries functioned as a register of civic importance, an index of the intellectual advancement of a community and an advertisement for a city's flourishing cultural and artistic life. In early modern Europe the people who made up the audience were not solely composed of students of medicine and members of the medical profession. Rather they were merchants, administrators and the fashionable elite. The anatomy theatres were places in which to see and be seen. Those who practised within them were also recipients of that structure of patronage which dominated the law, the church and the universities in the political life of the community.

Images of Renaissance dissection are understood by reading the many drawings of anatomical performances that exist. The title page of the Vesalia Fabrica 1543 is one such drawing (fig 1.). The title page does not represent what actually happened inside the Vesalian Theatre, but it aids in understanding the intellectual texture of performances, in order to begin to understand something of the contradictory emotions of pleasure and terror which dissection seems to have promoted within early modern culture.

The investigation which is taking place brings the reader of the Fabrica through the body, taking it apart and then putting it back together. It is not for the audience surrounding Vesalius, the anatomist, (most of whom can not see what he is doing) that he peels back the surface tissue of the female cadaver's abdomen, teasingly hinting at what the pages of his book will reveal in greater detail. The womb of the female corpse is situated at the centre of the imagined circle. The womb is the point of origin in this piece. Female body parts were held aloft as tokens of intellectual mastery, and the search for this principle encouraged the appetites of the anatomists. The womb or uterus was an object

Fig 1 Title-Page from Vesalius
De Humani Corporis Fabrica (1543)

sought after with intensity in Renaissance anatomy theatres. Here was not only the principle of life, but the source of all loss of rational (male) intellect. Once the uterus was seen, it had to be mastered in a complex process of representation through dismantling and then reassembling the complete structure. The female body was legible. Anatomists and artists could show the female body in whatever way they wished. It could be reconstructed as something both fetishtically adored and violently suppressed. In short physicians and anatomists strove to understand and conquer nature. Women represented nature. This had to be mastered. Anatomists could consume female bodies in front of an admiring and largely male audience without having to take into consideration how women during renaissance were the victims not only of the emerging science of biology, but of a European artistic tradition which located the female body as the source of a disturbing and dislocating power.

The skeleton stands above the outstretched figure from which, in symbolic terms, it came from. It is positioned in accordance with the vertical line marked by the womb, and the central pillar of the surrounding architecture. Vesalius stands on the left of the corpse looking out at the viewer. Passively the corpse gazes at him. The performative nature of this scene emphasises further the fact that the dissection is taking place on a raised platform or stage. Looking at images like this, it is easy to understand the ritualistic drama which surrounded the Renaissance anatomy demonstrations, the careful allocation of seats according to social status, the playing of music, the procession which occurred at the entrance of the anatomist and the organisation of the lesson which often began with an attendant describing how the corpse had died; "Our subject for the anatomy lesson has been hanged". (Sawday 1995 p75). This combination of loathing and profound fascination was the source of the ritual of Renaissance anatomy.

At Pauda and Leiden, and in the theatres built in their image, the living faced the dead, knowledge faced ignorance, civic virtue faced criminality and the judicial power confronted the individual. As is shown in the 'Fabrica', gathered on the benches sit not living spectators but a blending of the living and the dead, their post humas existences suggested by the curiously blank eye-sockets (Vesalius excepted).

Philpe Aries, an historian of death and childhood, describes the rise of anatomical science in the seventeenth century as;

> The almost fashionable success of anatomy can not be attributed solely to scientific curiosity. It is not hart to understand; it corresponds to an attraction certain ill defined things at the outer limits of life and death, sexuality and pain. (Aries, 1981 p369)

Aries goes on to suggest that in the nineteenth century a fascination with such ill-defined things became categorised as a disturbing and morbid phenomena. In Aries account, it is the location of a fashion for anatomy within a larger imaginative exploration of the dimensions of sexuality and pain which is of potential interest. In this same way death, sin, religion, war, the soul, or the individual could in some way be 'anatomized'.

The popular dread of dissection has been traced by Ruth Richardson in her book 'Death, Dissection and the Destitute'. The 1832 Anatomy Act in Britain empowered the authorities to confiscate the bodies of dead paupers (too poor to pay for their funerals) instead of hanged murderers, for dissection as a specific form of punishment. What had, for generations been feared and hated as punishment for murder, became a punishment for poverty. This act followed the 1752 Murder Act for better preventing the horrid crime of murder. It accepted penal dissection as a specific form of punishment which took place after execution. This act was a response to a perceived break-down

in law and order on the part of the authorities. It was felt that a punishment so appalling would terrify potential criminals. The Act provided for the execution of a capital sentence within two days of its pronouncement by the judge, and it concluded by prescribing a sentence of seven years transportation for anyone found guilty of attempting to remove a body after execution. The Act was designed specifically to evoke horror at the violation of the body and the denial of burial to the offender. Popular belief that denial of burial involved the punishment of the soul appears to have been widespread in early-modern period, despite the fact that neither the Protestant nor Catholic churches regarded intact Christian burial as necessary for obtaining posthumous grace. The anatomical theatres of early modern Europe instilled in many people an acceptance for punishment and partition and a justification for it.

Alexander Richardson, whose 'The Logicians School Master' appeared in London in 1629, observed that;

> If you mean to make any long discourse of anything divide it, for it gives greater light and helpe to your owne memorie and to the people hence distribution are the chiefe things in Art: hence many call their bookes partitions.
>
> (Sawday, 1995, p157)

This method of division accorded with the anatomical method proposed by Helkiah Crooke, a Renaissance Anatomist where;

> Art takes the corpse asunder peece and peece proceeding from that which is more to that which is less compounded till at length it came into the very grand worker foundation.
>
> (Sawday 1995,p137)

By dividing the body it was possible in imagination to travel into it. It became a place of infinite space easily accessible and understood.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the focus on the body shifted

slightly. Medicine began to be concerned with a particular aspect of body image, namely the difference between men and women. Wax anatomical models, particularly of female bodies, provided a starting point from which to explore the relationship between body image and sex roles.

Modern western society's preoccupation with sexual identity has led to a recognition of just how deeply our cultural processes are organised around ideas of gender. The word gender implies that masculine and feminine attributes are always defined in relation to each other. As Ludmilla Jordanova says in her book 'Sexual Visions'

> To say that something is socially constructed does not make it inherently evanescent, it merely signals that we are speaking not of a (natural) given but of a (human) construct.
>
> (Jordanova, 1989,p4)

Medical Practitioners of the 18th & 19th centuries believed that regardless of class, creed, age or race, women shared common characteristics. Women were seen as relative to men, who became the central point to which women were compared.

Many of the wax anatomical models were made in northern Italy during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They were dispersed all over Europe and their functions varied greatly. These 'Venuses', as they were nicknamed, lay on velvet or silk cushions in passive but sexually inviting poses (fig 2). The wax from which the models were made produced a similar colour and texture to real flesh. The anatomical parts were of natural colour also, and were meticulous in detail. Flowing hair, jewellery, eyelashes, eyebrows, pubic hair and makeup were all added together to make an eerie resemblance of the real thing. Medicine had created the perfect female cadaver.

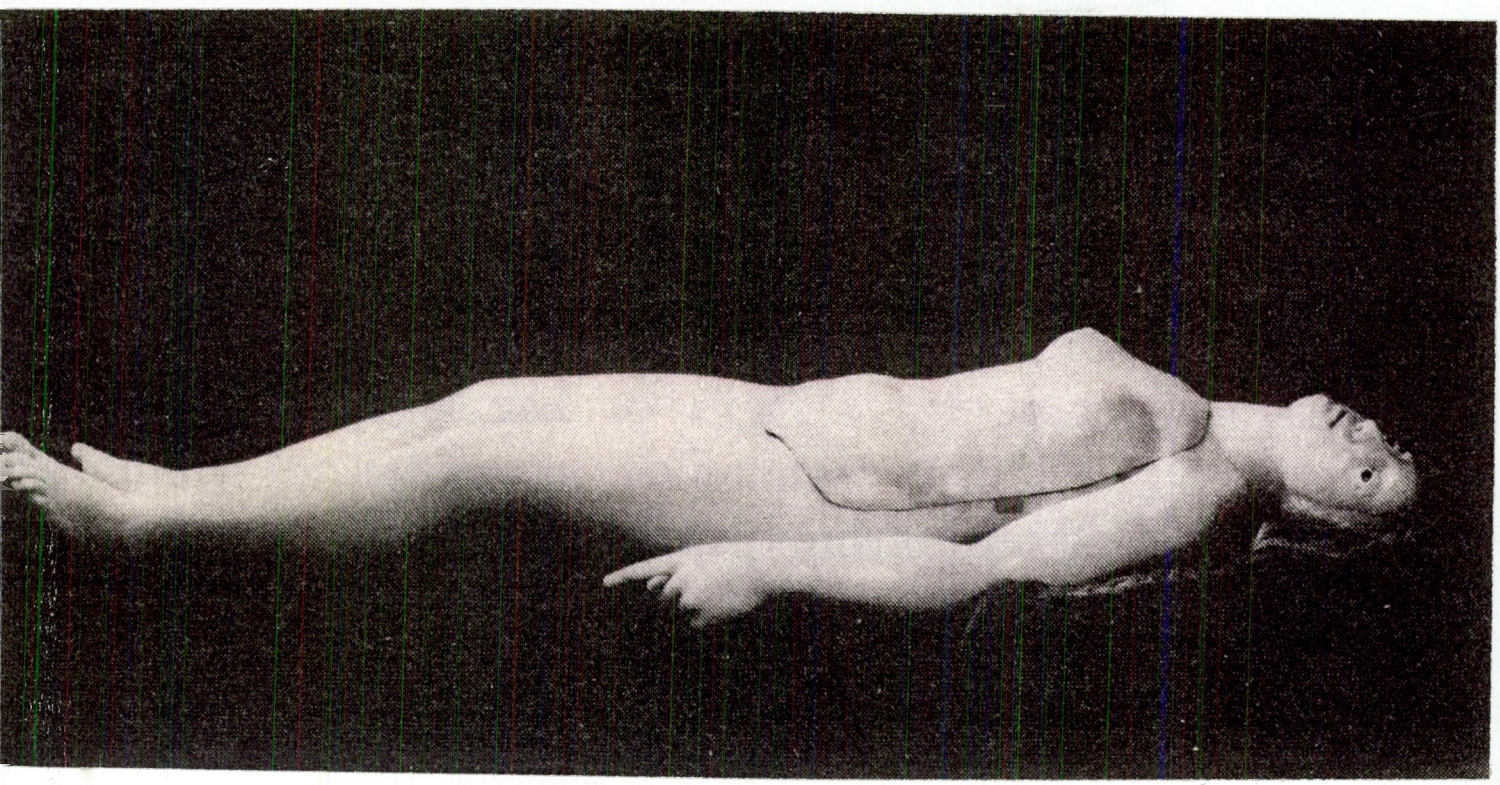


Fig 2 Wax Model with Removable Torso

Male wax models on the other hand were rarely a complete figure. They were upright muscle men with distinctly truncated torsos. It is thus apparent that there were many distinct visual demarcations of gender difference. Discourses on art and medicine met to produce visual art. A form of realism occurred which was an important goal towards which writers, artists and Medical Practitioners among others strived for. Details such as the pubic hair, eyebrows, painted nails and jewellery served no other function than to make the body as lifelike as possible, They did nothing for anatomical studies of the female body. "Here we have more that realism, a verisimilitude so relentless that it becomes hyper-realism".

(Jordanava, 1989 p 47)

It is possible to look at these models as cultural products and compare them with other similar artifacts, like contemporary or pre existing art works. An example of this would be that many, although by no means all, of the models repeat positions and gestures from well known works of art. Faces of some recall Berninis 'St. Theresa' with its ambiguous mixture of sexual and religious ecstasy.

Looking at these models now they are underlyingly highly sexualized and erotic yet they were presented as objects rather that subjects. Many indicate female reproductive capacities through the presenence of the foetus, which embodies the commonly felt idea that women should be child bearers creating discourses on maternity.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as in the 16th & 17th Century it was taken for granted that the human body was legible and there was no consensus on exactly how it could or should be read. The viewers of the waxes were intended to respond to them in the same way as if looking at genuine female bodies. This instilled delight and erotic thoughts. One such thought

could have been mentally unclothing the women, not literally of her clothes for the models were naked, but the unveiling of body parts to an even deeper looking into female chests and abdomens, actively exposing women. However apparent these ideas are they can not be taken directly to reflect social conditions. Although quite obvious assumptions can be made by dividing woman or man into universal categories, as scientific and medical discourses tend to do. The 'fixing' and 'naming' through obtaining knowledge of the female body involved a high degree of voyeurism. Women were represented as passive and submissive, exposed and vulnerable to medical dominance.

Other distinct issues are at play here also. The ideas of the nervous temperament of women and their heightened sensibilities was a common place remark in medical writings, it associated hysteria with the nervous system. Female torsoed models displayed the nervous system, while men on the other hand were depicted with models of muscle. This sparked off much writing of the muscle weakness of women, and encouraged a distinctly middle class notion of femininity as sedentary, domestic, maternal (as with the foetus) and emotional yet it produced masculinity as a strong and physical active identity.

Medical history and the theatrical nature of such practises inspires Orlan's performances and offers a historical context. The prominent common bond between Orlan's performances, sixteenth and seventeenth century anatomy theatres, and wax anatomical models, is how the theatrical focus of these spaces and objects serve to highlight the fact that the open body is a very easily manipulated medium. Orlan draws from the atmosphere of the anatomical theatres, creating a ritualistic performance in a usual clinical setting. Her choice of plastic surgery as the focus of her performances underlines the connections to the dissection theatres and to wax models. Orlan illustrates how the female body is an integral part in exposing the performative nature of surgery.

CHAPTER 2

The history of performance art in the twentieth century is one of a liberal, open-ended medium with countless elements, practised by artists wishing to bring work directly to a public. Performance or body art is the literal use of the body (whether one's own or another's) as a means of exploration and expression. The role of the artist as a performer puts an emphasis on the place of the body of the performance, and highlights the importance of the making of the work rather than the finished piece. The performance belongs to its author. It is a piece of personal life handed over to the viewer. It is therefore difficult to be repeated by another artist. In many cases the intent of this type of work is to shock and repulse in order for the viewer and the performer to question together many controversial issues, such as the boundaries of propriety and the social structures imposed on society, art, and women.

During the late sixties and early seventies when performance was at its highest artists provided texts to aid work expressing ideas and the new direction in which art was taking. Artists attacked the commercialisation of art and the gallery was boycotted as a place to exhibit work, with many exhibitions appaering in alternative spaces such as in cafes, warehouses and lofts. Performance reflected conceptual art's rejection of the materials associated with making art, such as the chisel, brush and paint. Artists manipulated their own bodies as a medium of art.

Beginning in the early 1970's , the Feminist Art Movement presented a challenge to mainstream modernism that radically transformed the art world. Early feminist art allowed for conscious designation of female values and experiences as a legitimate basis. For the creation of "high" art as well as the realm of serious content - both political and personal - to mainstream art which modernist abstraction ignored.

The feminist critic Lucy R. Lippard argued in 1980 that feminist art was neither a style nor a movement but "rather a valve system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life, like surrealism and dada and other non-styles that have "continued to pervade all movements and styles every since".

(Broude 1994,p10)

What was important in feminist art was its content not its style. Feminist art created a new theoretical position , a new aesthetic category - the position of female experience. Until 1970 there had not yet existed a self-conscious and universalising female voice in art - self-conscious in articulating female experience from an informed society and political position and universalizing in defining ones experience as applicable to the experience of other women. "The personal is political" was a slogan used at that time that summed up feminist beliefs. From the 16th to 18th centuries women artists worked in cultural isolation and were seen more as objets of art, such as the analytic drawings, discussed in chapter 1. Prior to 20th century, although some women artists took part in social movements, feminism and art had not yet joined forces in a political visual way. While many women artists in France had joined in promoting a "l'Art Feminin" that acknowledged the feminine in art according to the principle of "separate spheres". Political feminists and the artists of "l'Art Feminin" were at odds with each other, and the feminine art they encouraged was based on gender stereotypes which were restricting rather than progressive.

The emergence of a vocal and visible feminist consciousness in the 1970's by The Women's Liberation Movements in America, recognised political value of "art". Feminists believed that women's experiences were different from men's and accepted that they were both equally valid. It was the achievement of feminists to articulate the realization that only within the boundaries of social framing the self exists. Thus feminist artists began to make work about the decolonizing of the female body. While intellectual debates about feminism

were current in France (Simone de Beauvoir, the Second Sex 1949) and pioneered a marxist feminist approach that can be identified as European, in America social events like the Vietnam war and the Black Civil Rights Movement created an infrastructure (or pre-existing system for talking about such things like oppression and the body in society) for protest and change. 1968 was a revolutionary year in France with students protests, but issues in America were more fragmented, dealing with specific problems such as women's rights as opposed to anarchist and socialist revolts. For those reasons the visibility of women's rights as a bonafide political issue, American feminism was seen to pioneer debate on social change and avant garde practise for women. The agenda was less marxist and socialist than the French counterpart.

America provided a forum for debate. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in the early 1970's initiated the first feminist art academic programme at the California Institute of the Arts, thus creating, or attempting to define, a social academic agenda for feminist art practise.

Performance art proved to be an ideal means of connecting for the first time , in a conscious way, the agendas of social politics and art. Feminist artists asserted a new position for 'women' in art, as subject rather that object, active speaker and not passive theme. Women artists understood that there was no longer a clear idea about the nature of female identity, realizing that it was up to them to redefine it. The problem was to find, within a body already badly warped and damaged by social conditions, an authentic voice that might serve as a basis for a new construction of female identity. Female artists used their bodies to provide an alternative 'ground' to the traditionally male 'ground' of canvas and chisel. Performance, like female art, was seen as being marginal, an 'Otherness' art form. This suited female work and gave it a starting point. The use of the body as a medium enabled the female artist to portray, through

her victimized body, her victimization. Women created work about repressive abuse in a patriarchal society ranging from incest to sexism, racism to dieting and motherhood to battering. Though work categorising women's oppression is necessary in explaining questions of identify, it may be seen as loaded with self-hatred by exhibiting the same methods of objectification and abuse of the female body which existed in the work of many male artists throughout history.

Feminist images which celebrated the 'universality' of women, can be problematic in the way that they erase genuine difference between women. This essentialising discourse assumes that all women's experiences are the same and doesn't take into consideration the differences of age, class, sexual orientation or ethnic identify. It assumes an essence of 'womanness'. Early feminist art practise utilised essential discourses strategically in order to create an initial sense of identify to mobilise women to political action and recognise a collective identify. An example of essential discourse in feminist art is Judy Chicago's 'The Dinner Party' 1979 Fig 3. This piece of work celebrated the lives and achievements of many different women. They were from different periods, classes, ethnic ties, geographies and experiences. It was an instillation of china and embroidery which grouped all of the women with a discourse of biology and universality which suggested that all women were the same. It ignored the differences that women had. The use of traditionally 'feminine' craft of embroidery suggested that such work was intrinsically more female that other art forms. It reinscribed the domestic idea in female. Another criticism in this piece is the vaginal imagery, reducing women to the stereotypical metaphor for women. However, on describing her work Judy Chicago denies the essentialist explanation "

> The point of the vaginal reference in the Dinner Party" was to say that these women are not known because they have vaginas; that is all they had in common actually ... but what kept them within the same confined historical space was the fact the they had vaginas. Now how does this get turned into 'Judy Chicago reduced women to vaginas? (Broude 1994 p 71)

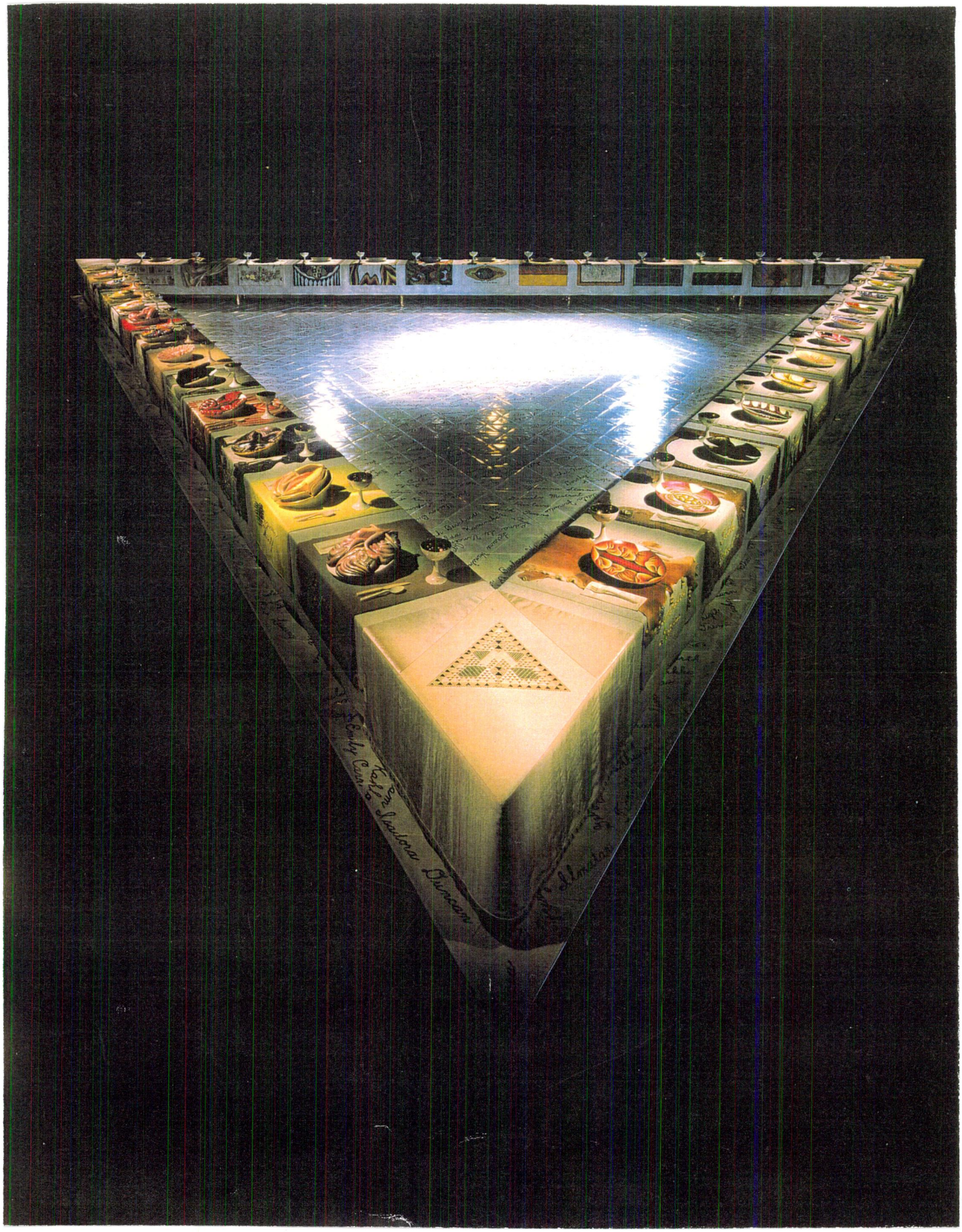


Fig 3 Judy Chicago 'The Dinner Party' (Installation)

Janet Wolff argues that there is nothing wrong with such celebratory work in which the female body is portrayed in a positive way, however, such practises are not particularly good or correct ways of representing women. Wolff argues that sometimes feminism has a problem with over academised theory which ignores the valid experience of real women and through its obscure language and ideas is hierarchal, partiarchial and elitist and seeks to exclude more people that it includes. Wolff believes however that theory is not elitist, and argues against the notion that nobody should say anything unless everyone can understand it. She says "it is important to acknowledge that it is a valuable project in it's own right for artists and critics to engage in some cases in analytic and critical work" (Wolff 1995, p60).

The notion of a universality of female experience is problematic, on one hand it denies women the pleasure of their identities of the very bodies they are trying to free, but on the other hand it allows for the necessary expression of collective unity for political consciousness raising. Hannah Wilke's presentation of herself as a female Christ in Super -T-Art in 1974, was a reaction to a perceived form of oppressive feminism; as part of Jean Dupu's 'Soup and Tart Show', Wilke uninhibitedly displayed her body. This piece related to a poster she had made at the same time entitled 'Beware of Fascist Feminism' (fig 4) which warned of the dangers of a certain kind of feminist puritanism that opposed and denied women their sexuality. However, in representations of the female body, is it possible to avoid objectification? One alternative is to refuse the use of the figuration of the women's body, to actually create significance out of absence. The difficulty is dealing with no body. For centuries women have metaphorically been no-bodies. Absence creates the possibility of a richness of meaning without the problems associated with representing the female body which is marked by sexual codes. There is at times however, a need to communicate communal experiences.

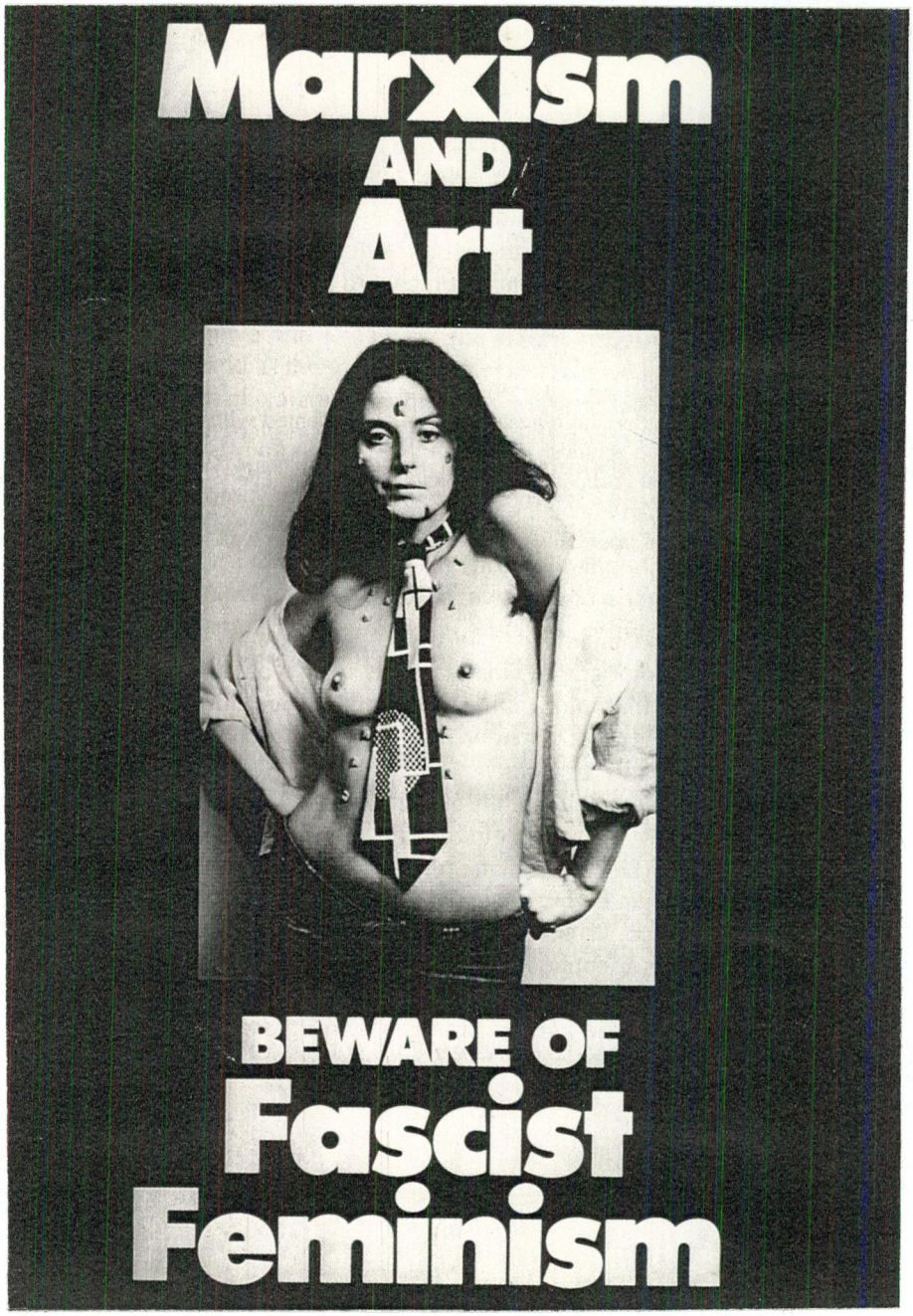


Fig 4 Hannah Wilke 'Beware of Fascist Feminism' (1974)

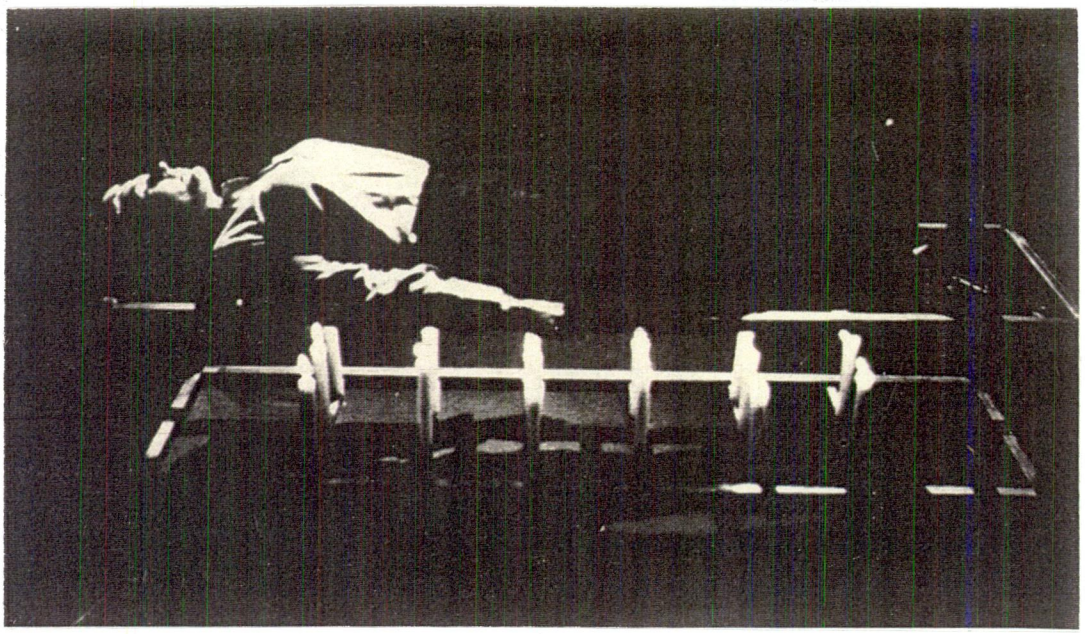


Fig 5 Gina Pane Segment from 'Autoportrait(s) (1973)

Fig 6 Marina Abramovic 'Rhythm 2'

However in an art form such as performance, where the body is central, how can a female artist express "woman's" pain, and communicate her experience in particular of the female body within a specific cultural context?

As a predecessor to Orlan, Gina Pane in Paris during the seventies would regularly inflict cuts to her own body, particularly the hands, face and back. She believed in order to reach a pain-free society such ritualized pain had a purifying effect and such work was necessary. As well as using her body as the object and recreation of pain, blood, milk and fire were common elements in her work. In 1972 she performed a piece of work entitled 'The Conditioning' (fig 5) which involved Pane lying on a bed with very few crossbars, fifteen long candles burnt below her. In her own words she succeeded in "making the public understand right off that my body is my artist material".

(Goldberg 1979, p165)

Understanding the ritualised pain of self-abuse was similarly sought after by Marina Abramovic during the 70's in Belgrade, she was particularly concerned with the disconnectiveness that exists between the body image and the body interior. She examined the pain in psychologically disturbed patients and performed works, Rhythm 2 (fig 6), which involved her actually consuming tablets for various illnesses, then videoed the effect they had on her. Some of the results are horrifying as her face and body twisted and contorted uncontrollably. In 1974 in a work entitled 'Rhythm O'(fig 7), Abramovic opened her show in Naples with a gallery full of randomly chosen people taken off the street. The visitors were invited to do as they pleased for six hours as Abramovic stayed standing. Seventy two objects lay on two tables in front of her. These included among others a loaded gun, an axe, make up, a pen, a hammer and olive oil. By the third hour the audience, many of whom were not used to seeing performance had torn her clothes off with razer blades, cut her body and painted her. The whole performance was cut short when a loaded gun was put to her head.

Fig 7 Marina Abramovic 'Rhythm O'

Elaine Scarry, a feminist theorist, noted that pain "is that which can not be denied and that which can not be confirmed" (Forte 1992, p250). Thus pain is always doubted when another is claiming it. Pain resists language and can even be said to break down language completely. "Pain resists language because it has no object, no point of reference, it is not of or for anything" (Forte 1992, p251). Nevertheless , the representation of pain is an attempt to convey the pain of a person to a person who is not in pain, in order to move them in some way and relate to it. The expression of pain is necessary in the task of diminishing pain. Scarry's point is that the discourse of pain crucially depends on getting others to listen and secondarily in eliminating the tendency to doubt the reports.

In Orlan's performances the focus is on the changing body; a body that exists between two identities. The performance itself exists with the actual presence of pain echoing earlier work by Abramovic, Pane and work by the Viennese Group such as Herman Nitsch (fig 8), Otto Muhl and Arnolf Rainer. The torture of plastic surgery when exposed in public enlists horror and amazement not unlike the sensation of looking at anatomical drawings of dissection. Orlan believes that plastic surgery and the medical sciences are one of the areas in which mans power can be most powerfully performed on women's bodies. "I was not able to obtain from male surgeons what I was able to achieve with a female surgeon, for I believe they wanted to keep me cute"

(Orlan 1995, p9)

The work of many female performance artists raises questions about the contradiction between reality and stereotypes. Can a woman be feminine and powerful at the same time? Or is the powerful woman desirable? These may seem like easily answered questions, however, what is sometimes presented as a simple dichotomy in fact disguises a more complex scenario, in which a range of binary opposition occur.

Orlan is such an artist. Her work, although she is a feminist, contradicts many feminist views and their theories. She could be said to reinscribe male fantasy of the female body, and, instead of decolonizing the body which feminist try to do, she is colonizing it once more with historical metaphors of beauty and passivity. In order to appreciate her work however it is necessary to look deeper. What Orlan actually does is by highlighting the identify problem through her medical performances she takes away its authority, its importance. Just like feminism, Orlan's work is loaded with contradictions. She problematises the body and how it is treated under her supervision, although she uses the body as a medium of expression. She is the first artist to manipulate the body through the art of plastic surgery. She diverts plastic surgery from its aim of improvement and rejuvenation. She exposes the surgeon as a performer and his work which she is in control of, as art.

Fig 8 Herman Nitsch 'Aktion (1974)

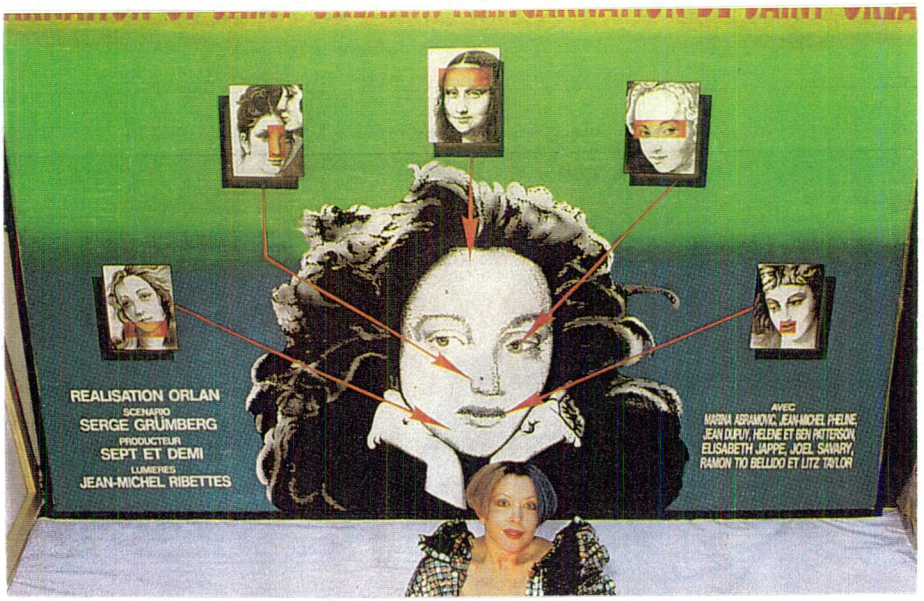
CHAPTER THREE

Orlan seeks to create a whole new image in art and to "absorb and act out society's demands for omnipotent perfection", (Leigh, 1994, p 53). She is doing this by instructing doctors to re-figure her body and face according to her specifications.

Echoing Zeuxis, the ancient Greek Artist who in order to create the 'ideal' women choose the best parts from various models and combined them, Orlan has selected features from famous Renaissance and Post-Renaissance models of idealized feminine beauty. Orlan calls herself a portrait. As guides to her transformation Orlan has given surgeons computer-mapped images of these features, the nose of a school of fontainebleu sculpture of Diana, the mouth of Boucher's Europa, the chin of Botticelli's Venus, the eyes of Gerames Pysche and the forehead of Leonardo's Mona Lisa. However Orlan differs from Zeuxis as these women were not only chosen for their exterior beauty but they contain mythology and history, "I chose them not for the canons of beauty they are supposed to represent (seen from afar), but rather an account of the stories associated with them", (Reitmaler 1995 p8). Diana was chosen because the goddess was an aggressive adventuress and did not submit to men of the gods; Europa because she looked to another continent, permitting herself to be carried away into an unknown future. Venus is part of the Orlan myth because of her connection to fertility and creativity, Pysche because of her need for love and spiritual beauty and finally the Mona Lisa because of her androgyny - the legend being that the painting actually represents a man , Leonardo himself.

> After having mixed my image with these other images I reworked the whole as any painter might , until a final portrait emerged and it was possible to come to a halt and sign it
>
> (Reitmaier 1995, p8)

Each operation/surgical performance is constructed in its own style from the medieval to high tech with Baroque running through. Orlan transforms the decor of the operating room. The surgeons and her team are dressed in costumes



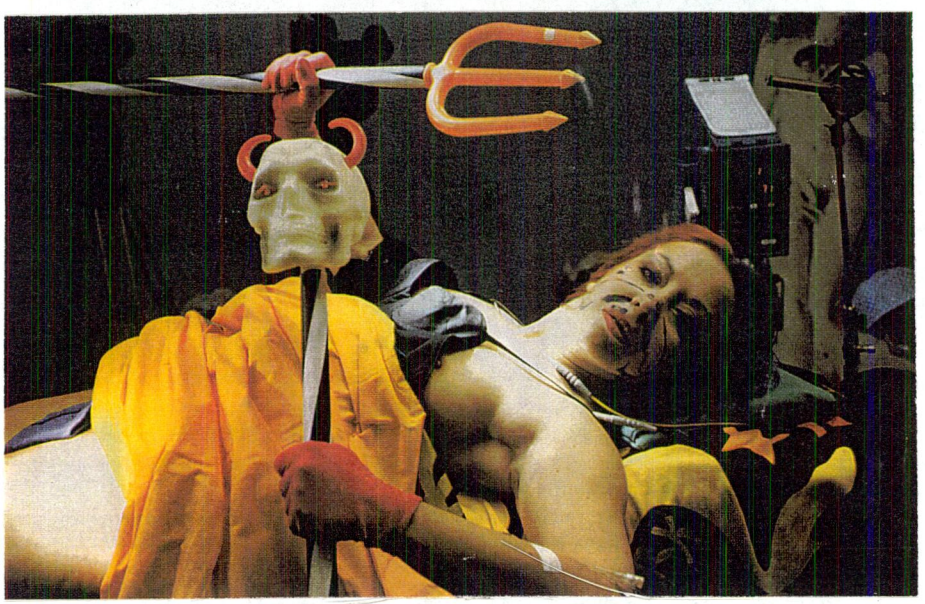


Fig 9 Photographs Documenting Orlan's Surgical Performances.

by top designers including Paco Rabanne, Issey Miyake, Lan Vu and various stylists. All the props, including the swords, crucifixes and plastic fruit and flowers are sterilized in accordance with operating room standards, as are the blown up photographs of pervious performances that decorate the walls of the theatre. Only state certificated surgeons operate. Every operation is also structured around a philosophical, psychoanalytic or literary text including the works of Michel Serres, Hindu Sandscripts, Alphanse Allais and Raphael Cuir.

It is difficult to identify the moment of the 'work' in Orlan's art. There is her body and the records of its transformation through surgery. Her operations are networked live by satellite and reach a world-wide audience. Orlan chooses to take local anaesthetic as opposed to general anaesthetic in order for her to stay conscious so she can literally direct her performance. Two exhibitions she performed; Omnipresence and "This is by body...., this is my software" involve an attempt to turn the theatre into a theatre.

Omnipresence (fig 10) took place in the Sandra Gering, Gallery in New York in 1994. It revolved around her seventh operation and intended to augment her chin, temples, cheekbones and nose through insertion of silicone implants. The exhibition opened with a live broadcast of the operation from the operating room. During the opening the guests were given champagne and canapes while viewing Orlan's skin being peeled from her face to insert the implants. This ritual-like interpretation of surgery was video taped and broadcast to twelve sites around the world. Clocks on the wall provided the time in these sites. The audiences were asked to fax or phone the artist with questions and she replied to them live. To indicate the line of the surgical cuts, Orlan's face is marked with dots.

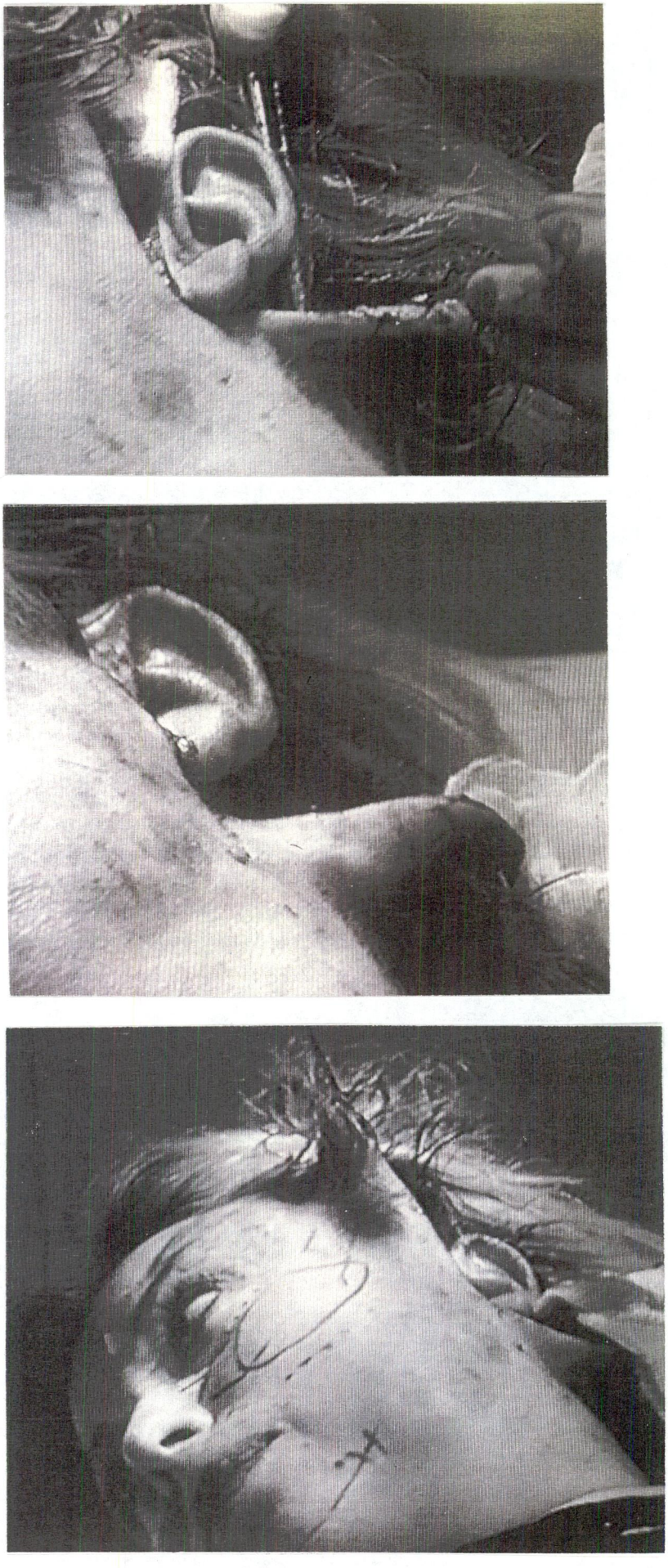


Fig 10 Orlan 'Omnipresence'

During this and all other previous operations Orlan reads from a text in french describing the burden of the flesh.

> 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 never have the skin of what I am. There is no exception to the rule because I am never what I have.....
>
> (Reitmaier 1995, p8)

Two costumed interpreters are present, one reading in English and the other using sign. Orlan suggests that she is there to remind us that we are all at some time deaf and dumb. Her presence in the operating theatre enacts a body language (Orlan 1995, p6)

Injections follow. The surgeon's cut producing a number of flaps, in front of the ear, behind the ear, behind the temple. The ear begins to come away from the face. The skin and flesh are separated. Still Orlan carries on reading. Speech in Orlan's work is important in many ways. It is not the meaning of the text so much, but the articulation that is worth noting. Orlan's voice carries on through all the various incisions and pain during the operation. It would be very understanding if no one was listening. Her reading is a turning away from the body at the very moment when it is critically involved in surgery. It is a way of ignoring her body.

Orlan's work instills a feeling of horror as she blatantly shows how the face is detachable, removable. Is she mad? This question filled a special issue of a French journal of Mental Health which described her as not being mad but in need of protection from herself.[1] Or is it perhaps the ultimate act of narcissism? During her many talks throughout the world Orlan states that her acts of self-transformation are based on ideas of identity as opposed to those of beauty. Her intentions are to erase her personal history and to create a new identity. What she seems to be saying is that there is a separation between the outer physical shell and the inner spirit.

Cosmetic surgery aims at a re-figuration of the face and figure. Orlan adds to this the problem of keeping the images she has chosen prominent. Her so called 'Carnal Art' is 'the flesh made word' (Anson, 1996, p35). The boundaries between life and art are fogged, she is turning herself into an art historical morph. Both are present in her mask which is her face. She is an image trapped in a woman's body. She speaks of a Woman to woman transsexualism which is a changing from one point to another. That is from her individuality, to what she artfully chooses. She focuses on the emptiness of exteriority in order to access the true meaning of identity, which for Orlan is located in her voice, her consistent feature.

The main object of cosmetic surgery is always a move towards a form of completeness. It is not that one type of feature is preferable to another; it is only that the new feature will complete the image. Surgery fixes and finishes. It makes the image whole. Orlan although she seeks to become an image, actually empties the image by exposing the performance of the operation. Through her work Orlan shows the emptiness of an image by showing how the image is formed, thus, instead of creating a completeness, she creates a gap which the image should have filled.

Orlan's work breaks down the glorification of representation. Throughout her surgical performances we see her face detaching itself from her head. In this sense she destroys the normal narcissistic idea that the image of the face stands for something. The face becomes only a mask without anything to represent and no meaning. It no longer has depth. The inside and the outside are thrown into a state of confusion. The outside, which provided an image which represented the inside, is made redundant. There is no 'true' femininity but only a series of subject positions or identities. Orlan literally demonstrates at least one form of feminist thought; there is nothing behind the mask[2].

'*This is my body... This is my software*' was the first British showing of the

large scale cibachrome prints made from Orlan's seventh operation/surgical performance, 'Omnipresence' described above. Presented by the Zone Gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne from April-May 1996. In sequence the photographs documented Orlan's recovery from Omnipresence. The prints were rectangular in shape, separated by the date of each image. A computer-generated image of Orlan morphed upon her artistic source were placed below each photograph. The final picture in the series is of Orlan, her face completely healed and in full make-up and new hair style (a streak of blue hair pulled back in the middle of her head with the rest of her hair cut in a bob and dyed silver). The final computer-generated image is of Orlan morphed into all the sources.

The C.D. rom produced by Artifice which accompanied these photographs displayed detailed extracts of the operations and appeared no less shocking than her video pieces. To Orlan the public response and media hype are, whether good or bad, a necessary part of her work.

Her next operation is to have made the largest nose possible for her anatomy and decontologically acceptable to the surgeon who will perform the act. This operation will probably take place in Japan, but it will take time for Orlan to find the necessary technical and financial infrastructures to develop the overall project. When this operation/ surgical performance takes place she will own a work of art that she can never ignore. Her name will then be changed once more. When the total self-transformation is complete an advertising agency will select a new name first second and artistic name. Then they will try to get it legally acknowledged or not. Either way it will be part of her work. "This is a performance inscribed within a social fabric, a performance which goes as far as the law, as far as a complete change of identify". (Reitmaier 1995, p7)

Feminist criticism has for some time been concerned with the problematics of the operating theatre and the dissection of the female body. The figures in many of the anatomical drawings of Renaissance anatomy and the wax anatomical models

Fig 11 Orlan 'Surgical Performance'

permits and invites sexual voyeurism as the response to women's passivity. Not only can these representations be devoured the by the eyes, but the meal they present exists layer by layer, course by course. The dissection of these models and of the corpses lead to the idea that dissection is itself a process of unveiling; but the whole description of the predatory eye and the layers of the corpse leave the normal distinction between inside and outside undisturbed.

Orlan's performances might be read as rituals of female submission, primitive rites involving the cutting up of womens' bodies. She says herself that "in the most recent operations this (work) provided an image of a cadaver under autopsy" (Reitmaier 1995,p8). During the process of planning, enacting and documenting the surgical steps of her transformation, Orlan remains in control of the representation. She is not the passive erotic model which anatomists can penetrate. Consciously Orlan chooses to undergo the necessary mutilation to reveal that the objective is unattainable and the process horrifying. Orlan the artist and women do not play the victim; she is both actress and director, passive patient and active organiser, subject and object, performer and viewer.

Feminists have tended to cast a critical eye on women's quest for beauty, which is described in terms of suffering and oppression. Beauty standards set up dichotomies of 'Otherness' and power hierarchies between women. They are compelled to conform to standards of feminine beauty which are not only impossible to meet but have to be met in private behind closed doors. Orlan is making surgery transparent creating a public event out of a private act. Some feminists believe Orlan promotes cosmetic surgery. Orlan argues that although she is a feminist she is not against plastic surgery.

> We all experience a strange sensation in front of the mirror especially as we grow old. For some people this becomes unbearable and in these cases the use of plastic surgery can be extremely positive
>
> (Reitmaier p9 1995)

One way of looking at her work would be to say that she personifies what many feminists argue about surgery: it does subscribe the patient to the ideals of beauty. Fundamentally it is the patient who chooses what or whether it should take place, and for this reason the concepts of individuality and agency must be taken into account; ideals which feminism has also sought for women. Cosmetic surgery can be a way, if a problematic one, for women to manipulate their image in any way they wish.

Through Orlan's medical performances she has found a way of representing the body without remaking the same images that have victimized women through the hands of male artists. She has taken the images but distorted them in such a way that how we think of them is totally different. This is however ironic as she achieves this at great physical pain.

Orlan states that she is trying to make her work the least masochistic as possible. "I prefer to be drinking champagne or a good wine rather that being operated on" (Reitmaier, 1995 p10). She believes that because she has not undergone the pain of childbirth that this reincarnation of herself is a tribute to traditionally sanctioned areas of female pain, i.e. childbirth, which is a pain that is given as part of being 'female'. In her art, being a woman is continuously being born through surgery. Birth and making art are combined. Orlan is only the new Orlan. She is only who she is making. Orlan 's performances, unlike Gina Pane and Maria Abramouic, do not so much focus on the image of pain to resolve a problem, but on the image that consequently can not exist without pain. Orlan's work is about the recovery and reorganisation of the image rather that the issue of pain. For this reason her work carries an ambiguity of different meanings and interpretations. She is herself a work in progress with no conclusion, and her medical performances will continue to blur the boundaries between art and life.

End Notes:

Chapter 3

1. Revve Scientifigue et Culturelle Sonte Mentale
   Sept -Dec 1991

2. For further reading see Mulvey, L
   'Pandora: Topographies at the Mask and Curiosity'
   in B Colamina (ed), Sexuality and Space, New York
   Princeton Architectural Press 1992

CONCLUSION

Orlan's work is informed by the histories of medicine and performance art. She dissects the discourses of medicines, not in a passive erotic way in which medicine has done to women for centuries, but in an active and constructed way using her body. Her operating theatres echo in style those of the 16th and 17th century anatomy theatres with her use of props, music and ritualistic drama. The influence of the wax anatomical models is also evident as she and her team are dressed in designer clothes, make-up and exhibit the stereotypical attributes to female dissection -unnecessary adornments which have no purpose in the surgical act. Orlan believes that there are as many pressures on the bodies of women as there are on the physical body of works of art. Works of art are only accepted within certain networks and in certain galleries because of their moulds and compulsory ways of speech. The parodical grotesque, and ironic styles, she believes, are an irritation to such institutions, often scorned for being in bad taste.

Cosmetic surgery and performance art are sites where a body can be manipulated to express something of the individual 'body image'. As a term from psychology 'body image' is used to express an individual's subjective picture of his or her own body. Within feminist theory women's pre-occupation with their appearance is explained as "an artefact of femininity in a context of power, hierarchies between the sexes and among women of different social and cultural backgrounds" (Davis, 1995 p 25). Orlan is constructing her femininity through the art of surgery. To understand her merely as criticising female body image is to simplify her work and ignore the

problematic multi-layered nature of what Orlan does.

It is impossible to have an individual expression of the body as the body already has meaning inscribed on it by cultural, social, medical, historical and aesthetic discourses. Orlan is a useful vehicle for an exploration of where a female body is situated in these types of discourses. In the context of this dissertation Orlan is used to illustrate the problematic nature of female beauty and identity. Her performances question what femininity is for women. By tracing her roots in medical and historical discourses, she de-constructs cultural narratives on femininity exposing the idea that femininity is 'made' and that many discourses construct the socio-sexual body.

The question in Orlan's work is not whether it is good or bad art or good or bad feminism but how she demonstrates how a body comes to have different meanings in different situations. For example, is Orlan the person separated from the work. Is she a feminist or not? Is it art or not? Is it medicine or aesthetics? Is it history or an ongoing process of creating a body? Orlan exposes these different 'bodies' which create different intentions according to where the body is 'situated' whether it be the gallery, the theatre or the operating theatre.

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