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**National College of Art and Design  
Fine Art Print**

***THE CUTTING EDGE:  
The Transformation of Orlan***

**by  
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**Submitted to:**

**The Faculty of History of Art and Design  
and Complementary Studies**

**In Candidacy for  
The Degree of Fine Art Print, 1998**



# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**I would like to thank the following for their assistance  
in the completion of this thesis:**

**Niamh O'Sullivan**, my thesis tutor.

**Edward Murphy and the Library Staff**, for aiding my research.





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# INTRODUCTION

Orlan is a French chiuric-spectacle artist who has literally given her face and body to art, her latest piece of work being herself. She engages in practices of self transformation, through a series of 'performance' operations which have altered her appearance dramatically. The series entitled 'The Reincarnation of St. Orlan,' began in Newcastle, 1990 and is due for completion in Japan, in the year 2000. The ten year project witnesses the use of her face as a site of transformation, cosmetic surgery being the medium and various mythical female figures being the inspiration. Orlan does not attempt to rejuvenate her appearance, she uses cosmetic surgery in her work in order to challenge and change its objectives.<sup>1</sup> The use of her face as a mediating material, with which she articulates her central issues, is the subject of this dissertation.

Orlan remains conscious during surgery and considers the operating theatre her studio, recording proceedings with film, video and photography. She has been described as a 'beauty morph' (Kieve, 1997, p. 1); her work combines new technology, aesthetic surgery and virtuality in order to question the illusion of beauty. Focusing on the classical images of feminine beauty manifested in Greek mythology and the history of art, she stresses that her work is not to create a perfect composite of these images but to embody of the conceptual qualities inherent in "Mona Lisa," "Psyche," "Europa," "Diana" and "Venus." Her work aims to subvert accepted notions of beauty, as formulated by male desire, to interrogate the status of the feminine body and to deal with the problems of identity and alterity.

Orlan realises the universal power of the face, "the medium through which we most directly project ourselves on the world." (Liggett, 1974, p.175 ) She generates the image she wishes to realise on computer, which is then carried out by a team of qualified cosmetics





surgeons.<sup>2</sup> The operation is all the time directed by Orlan, thus asserting her identity and control over her face and body. Above all, the work asks radical questions about the current status of the body image as we approach the 21st Century. It is no longer necessary to conform to one's 'natural' looks; this being replaced by the growing sense of the possibilities of reinvention. Technology has made it possible to remodel our bodies, and Orlan has used this technology to redefine herself and question conventional notions of beauty. It is not comfortable to watch the art of Orlan because it is depicting the metamorphosis of one body into another.

Initially I explore the face, its power and what is deemed beautiful and how Orlan has used the face, in particular, as a site of resistance to feminine ideals of the body and notions of beauty. In Chapter One, I discuss the early work of Orlan in relation to the feminist movement and how she has used her face and body as material for her creative work. I also compare her work to other artists - specifically, Gina Pane and Hannah Wilke who were exploring similar ideas during the 1970's. In this chapter, I give a detailed account of the early work which has led her to her present cosmetic surgery based work. In Chapter Two, more specifically, I deal with her more recent work, which necessitates a detailed outline of the history of beauty and cosmetic surgery. This allows us to appreciate her reinvention of herself by these extreme means.





# CHAPTER ONE

## *Resisting Strategies*

Who is Orlan?<sup>3</sup> The name is not her real name, the face we see is not her real face, and ultimately, at some point in time, her body will no longer be her own. Each time we see her, she looks different; with the aid of a highly qualified team of cosmetic surgeons she continuously alters various features until she feels her self-transformation is complete. When this occurs, her assumed name will be altered and she will create a whole new identity for herself. Orlan's career, spanning over thirty years, has centred on the body image and constantly shifting identities. Barbara Rose writes that:

*Her actions call into question whether our self-representation conform to an inner reality or whether they are actually carefully contrived falsehoods fabricated for marketing purposes - in the media or in society at large.*  
(Rose, 1993, p. 83)

Throughout her career, Orlan has used her body as primary material for her creative work. She describes her work as:

*... always questioning the status of the female body, in my present work, I consider this in terms of social pressures; and in the past I identified some of the ways that the woman's body has been depicted in the history of art.*  
(Orlan, 1996, p.83)

Her first public spectacles and performances were triggered by the feminist movement of the late sixties/early seventies. The work of artists Gina Pane and Hannah Wilke, who were working contemporaneously with Orlan, using their bodies as sites of resistance, will



also be discussed in this chapter.

Feminists interventions questioned the dominant ideologies in society in the late sixties and early seventies. Griselda Pollock describes how it came about:

*The women's liberation movement, as it was initially known represented a resurgence of the four-centuries old struggle by women for access to full human rights, and the new feminism was shaped and fuelled by the many new and radical forces both political and cultural of the late twentieth century.*

*(Pollock, 1987, p.79)*

Orlan's early work emerged in an era when artists were grappling with social, political and ideological issues; it was a time when artists were deeply involved in their work - intellectually, conceptually and sometimes physically. Even in the early stages of her career, she began experimenting with surgery and the notion of life being a 'recuperable aesthetic phenomenon.' (Kieve, 1997, p. 2).

Needing emergency surgery, she made use of the situation and photographed and videoed the operation theatre turning it into a 'festival,' as she called it. Humour and the carnivalesque have always been major aspects of her work, grinning incessantly at the camera while posing as a 'Madonna' or having a pre-operative injection. (Fig. 1) The ridicule of the sacred and the denial of pain, for example, are powerful forms of subversion. Jo Anna Isaak describes notions of humour and the carnivalesque as having "the potential to disrupt the authority of church and state." (Isaak, 1996, p. 15 )

In 1971, Orlan baptised herself 'Saint Orlan,' and draped her body in elaborate costumes of black vinyl and white leatherette.<sup>4</sup> Describing herself as a 'readymade,' a concept coined by Marcel Duchamp, she implied that she felt she was a versatile artist in her own installations. To accompany the performances were large colour photographs of herself as 'St. Orlan,' exposing one breast, (as the nursing Virgin Mary is depicted). Barbara Rose asserts that "her incarnation as St. Orlan focused on the hypocrisy of the way society has traditionally split the female image into Madonna and whore." (Rose, 1993, p.84)







**Figure 1**



This raises the question whether or not representations of man by woman would offer the same stereotypical imagery that man has proffered as illustrative of woman. As Lisa Tickner has observed:

*... what would be the iconography of man where women made the imagery, what parallels or alternatives to the Virgins and Venuses, mothers and whores, femmes fatal, vampires and Lolitas with which we are familiar?*  
(Tickner, 1970, p. 265)

Playing on the idea of the virgin/whore dichotomy in a performance in Lyon in 1976, Orlan appeared draped as a baroque virgin, exposing one breast suckling a swaddled bundle. Then, shedding her bundle and garments along with maternity and modesty, she posed naked, dishevelled and ecstatic. (Fig. 2) In 1977, she took the idea one step further by offering kisses for money during a performance in which she enticed her audience to: "Roll up, roll up, come to my pedestal, the pedestal of myths: mother, whore and artist." (Wilson, 1996, p. 11) (Fig. 3)

The work of performance artist Hannah Wilke for an exhibition called Super - T - art, parallels Orlan's work of the same period. In a series of twenty photographs, she transforms her image from a martyred saint, hands held outward as if to reveal stigmata, to the burlesque dancer doing a seductive striptease, and finally to the image of Christ at the crucifixion where the drapery she had been using as a prop, is now simply a loincloth. The same facial expression is retained for each character, a trait also employed by Orlan in her work. Both realise the power the face projects and their expressions display a form of defiance or ridicule.

By 1978, Orlan's work was more and more concerned with resistance and the violation of taboos. The video work entitled 'A documentary study: the head of Medusa,' shows her using a magnifying glass to show her vagina during her period (half of her pubic hair was painted blue), while Freud's texts on the head of the Medusa were distributed to the viewers. They read: "At the sight of the vulva, the devil himself flees." (Orlan, 1995, p.6)

The writings of psychoanalysts such as Freud, Kristeva, Lacan, Lucconi and Serres were, and are, a huge influence on Orlan's performances. (She reads aloud the writings of







Figure 2  
Figure 3



the psychoanalysts during her performance operations). (Fig. 4) The influence Julia Kristeva's 'Powers of Horror' is quite evident. Kristeva writes: "... horror and its power are linked to the bodies orifices and secretions, physical oneness and separation." (Fausing, 1997, p. 1) For Kristeva, death, a body being opened, bodily fluids (blood, vomit, spit etc.):

*... provoke cultural and individual horror and disgust, symptomatic of our cultural inability to accept the body's materiality, its limits, its 'natural' cycles and its mortality.*  
(Fausing, 1997, p. 3)

Kristeva's theories have informed Orlan's early work, concerning the violation of taboos, in which she exposes the body's materiality. Barbara Rose, who first coined the phrase 'vaginal iconography' described how the public reference to such issues as menstruation and other established taboos "symbolises a disrespect for social order, women are not expected to be disgusting and this sends shockwaves through the art-world and society."<sup>5</sup> (Rose, 1970, p.272)

Orlan similarly observes:

*Only a few kinds of images force you to shut your eyes: death, suffering, the opening of the body, some aspects of pornography for some people, and for others, birth.*  
(Orlan, 1995, p. 6)

Orlan has used strategies of subversion throughout her career, re-presenting stereotypical images of women, which are ultimately used to control women. As a result, she has been accused of narcissistic indulgence. Her power as a performance artist is perceived as a constant threat:

*Men can use beautiful, sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces but when women use their own faces and bodies, they are immediately accused of narcissism.*  
(Lippard, 1976, p. 125)

The transformation of Orlan through cosmetic surgery, as I discuss in detail in Chapter Two, raises the question of why women are not accepted as they are. While women are







**Figure 4**



accused of narcissism, paradoxically they are also expected to be beautiful and to strive for perfection. How this is achieved is rarely discussed, admitting pain in the attainment of beauty for example, is considered a fault. The act of cosmetic surgery or rituals such as plucking eyebrows, shaving armpits are private things, but Orlan makes the surgical act public desacralising the act of surgery, violating operating room protocol and publicly flaunting what is usually denied, by videoing, photographing and broadcasting the procedures live.

Her work is radical in its overt use of the face and body as raw material for transformation. The reactions of the media to the work show how the public at large, find it difficult to witness the cutting and altering of the face and body live on the internet or video. Similar shockwaves occurred when Gina Pane, an American performance artist who, in May 1972, as part of a performance, cut her face with a razor blade whilst turned away from the audience. Upon turning around, she saw and heard the reaction of the audience to what she was doing:

*Suddenly I turned to face my public and approached the razor blade to my face. The tension was explosive and broke when I cut my face on either cheek. They yelled, 'no, no, not the face, no!' ...the face is taboo, its the core of human aesthetics, the only place which retains a narcissistic place.*

*(Tickner, 1972, p. 272)*

Orlan, using her body as a site of resistance to accepted notions of femininity, attempts to counteract the exploitation of the female image in advertising and the media in general. Here too, she subverts the power of the media, using it for her benefit. She sees the reaction of the media as an integral part of her work; it allows her to see the impact she is having on the public she is targeting, 'a public not necessarily involved in the microcosm of art.' (Orlan, 1995, p. 8)

It has been suggested that Orlan has reached a mid-life crisis, of sorts, which is manifesting itself through her desire to use cosmetic surgery to redeem herself. On the contrary, Orlan's choice of cosmetic surgery is to:

*"question the status of the body in our society and its future in coming generations in terms of new technologies and the genetic manipulation which will not be long in coming"*

*(Orlan, 1995, p. 8)*





The use of the face and body has always been an integral part of the work of Orlan, from the subversion of religious iconography to the extreme actions of cutting herself up to reinvent herself. It is interesting too, the similarities of the work of various 'feminist' artists, like Pane and Wilke, who each exercise their ownership over their bodies and address issues of female identity. They represent whatever they feel necessary for their opinions to be heard. It is all too easy for the public to write off the work by describing it as narcissistic, extreme or insane, when in fact these artists dealt with, or are dealing with what is relevant to the society in which we live - social issues and dominant ideologies which dictate our lives sometimes without us even knowing.



## CHAPTER TWO

### *Identity and Transformation*

The human face is the primary site of the visual representation and has shaped the very conditions of visibility (Welchman, 1988, p.131). It is our most basic feature of human life, providing protection for the brain, housing the senses and our linguistic modes of communication as well as displaying a diversity of emotions. Orlan, realising the universal power of the face, with the aid of technology and advances in cosmetic surgery has used her face as a territory rather than as a representation. Her use of the face as a site of resistance to feminine ideals of beauty, creates alarming and provocative results.

The medium with which we most directly project ourselves on the world is the face, which is inevitably where the private goes public. Orlan is of the opinion that:

*...we are beginning to have the means of reducing the distance between what we are and what we look like, specifically by surgery .... It is now possible, therefore to bring the internal image closer to the external image."*  
(Orlan, 1995, p. 8)

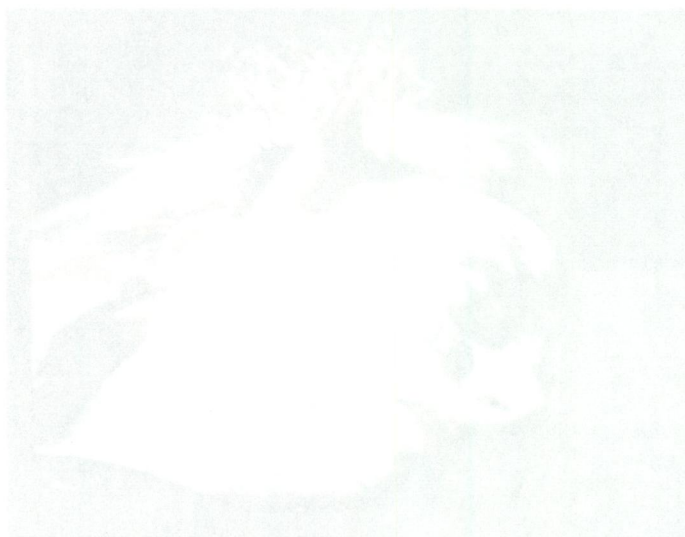
Orlan's work deals with the binary notions of interior/private and exterior/public. The work has been described as a 'triumph of representation.' (Moos, 1996, p. 68) The notional attachment of the face from her head during the operation questions the face and the function as a mask. In this sense Orlan uses the head to challenge prejudicial suggestions that there is nothing behind the mask. (Fig. 5) The gap between the interior and the exterior is exposed and the spectator is able to see what goes on behind the face, which is truly horrifying.





**Figure 5**  
**Fig.5 (Detail)**





As Francois observes:

*Orlan shows us the gap, indispensable as it is, in the breach she opens by superimposing what is on to what she wants to be. Orlan is the mask, made, unmade, whilst we watch, that aspires to forge itself a new identity before our eyes, laughing all the while at our credulity. (Francois, 1996, p.59).*

An extract from the Lacanian psychoanalyst, Eugenie Hemoine Lucconi's book 'La Robe,' is one of Orlan's favourite texts to read during the performance; "The skin is deceptive ... in life one only has one's skin ... I have an angel's skin but I am a jackal " (Orlan, 1995, p.8)

As an artist, Orlan uses the skin of her face as her material with which she questions the dominant ideals in our society. Her reinvention of her face is a form of resistance to the social pressures existing in our culture - in particular ideals of 'Beauty'.

## **BEAUTY:**

Down through the ages, artists, philosophers, psychologists and anthropologists have variously dedicated themselves to unravelling the complex reasoning behind beauty. For the ancient Greeks, conceptions of beauty were clearly definable, it was a question of harmony, balance and proportion. According to Plato, its essence lay in the golden section; a special way of subdividing an object so that the smaller part is to the greater as the greater is to the whole. In the 'perfect' face, therefore, the brow would be one third of the way down from the hairline and the mouth one third of the way up from the point of the chin. (Fig. 6)

Renaissance artists like Botticelli and Leonardo de Vinci, on the other hand were more intrigued by the number seven. They believed that the 'perfect' face was divisible into sevenths. The hair occupied the top seventh, the forehead extended over the next two sevenths. A further seventh was occupied by the space between the nose and the mouth and the final one from the nose to the chin. The width of the face was decreed to be twice the length of the nose. Orlan chose representations of goddesses from Greek mythology,





as depicted by Renaissance and post-renaissance artists, including Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" and Botticelli's "Venus," not only for the canons of beauty they were supposed to represent but also for their mythological-symbolic values. (Fig.7) Curiously, the pursuit for the mathematical formula of beauty persisted well into the eighteenth-century, men of stature such as Sir Joshua Reynolds and Chevreul were still concerning themselves with the perfect solution believing that the secrets of beauty lay in arithmetically defined physical proportions. The Gestalt school of modern psychologists discovered that simple shapes were most aesthetically pleasing while another principle maintains that beauty is the total experience. A beautiful face is then:

*Every detail interacting and affecting one another and in turn being acted upon by its surroundings by context and by the whole perceptual framework in which the face is enclosed at that moment.*  
(Liggett, 1974, p.149 )

In our culture, however, it seems that female beauty concentrates on facial details. By the twentieth century, the cultivation of experience had become a central concern for women of different classes, regions and ethnic groups, simultaneously uniting themselves in the desire for beautification, and setting up standards to differentiate themselves according to class and race. (Woolf, 1981, p. 104) As the century progressed the standards of beauty shifted but one thing remained - the attainment of beauty remained a constant aspiration. Beauty is achieved by hard work and pain, something that is willingly accepted by women of today, we now know that women are willing to go to extreme lengths to improve and transform their bodies to meet cultural requirements of femininity and desirability. Orlan goes to great lengths to transform herself, but not for superficial reasons. Her work is a serious comment on traditional ideas of beauty which are used to oppress women.

Cosmetic surgery is now a method of body 'improvement' for contemporary women, on the premise that one need no longer endure one's 'natural' looks. Women feel the social pressures to embody beauty, now more than ever. Naomi Wolff writes in 'The Beauty Myth' that:

*The embodiment of beauty is an imperative for women and not for men, like any economy it is determined by politics and in the modern age in the west it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a*



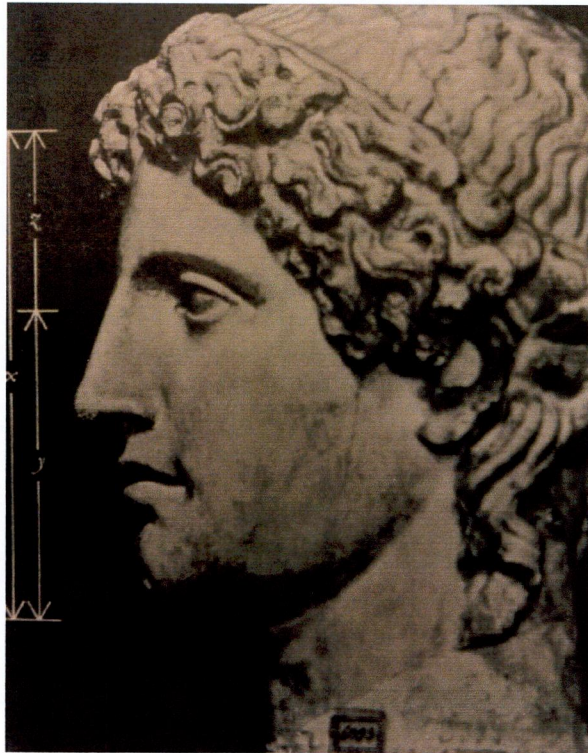
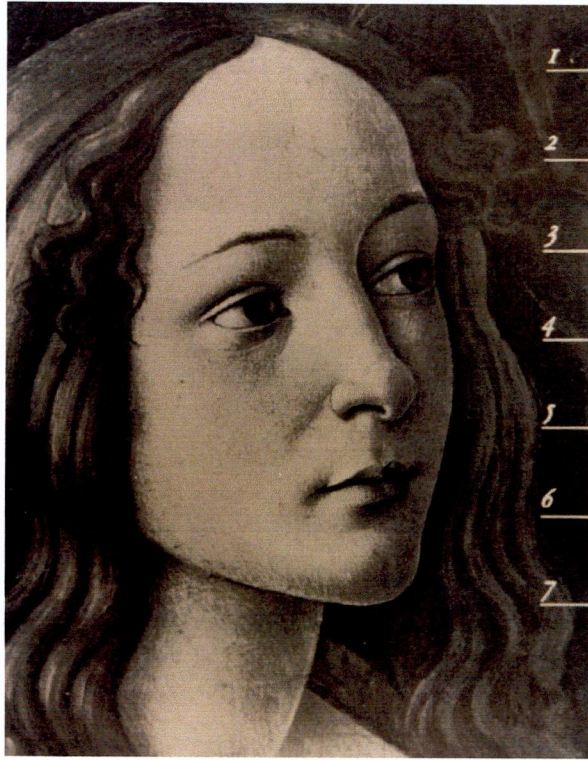


Figure 6  
Figure 7





*culturally imposed physical standard it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves.*  
(Wolff, 1990, p.12).

The beauty myth, as Wolff calls it, is not about women at all, but about men's institutions and institutional power. Orlan works against the norms of beauty and the "dictates of the dominant ideology which is embedded more and more in female flesh." (Orlan, 1995, p. 8).

### **BEAUTY AS OPPRESSION:**

It is as if advertising, the media and the cosmetic surgery industry have joined forces to make women all over the world comply with the western model of beauty. We are constantly bombarded with images of 'beautiful' women (in the sense that they are conforming to accepted norms of beauty), images which make us dislike natural occurrences such as blemishes, bulges and facial hair. Women consequently suffer when their bodies do not meet the standards of conventional femininity. As a result women routinely undertake expensive and painful rituals in the name of beauty. As Kathy Davis observes:

*"The beauty system is a repressive collection of structures and practices which work through the mechanism of internalised oppression."*  
(Davis, 1995, p. 53)

What occurs is a compulsion to conform to standards of feminine beauty, which is not only impossible to meet but must be achieved by unnatural means; e.g. liposuction, rhinoplasty, face-lifts etc. Orlan's work proves that no one person obtains the perfect face or body; her work brutally explains this point.





## THE OPERATION:

In 1990, Orlan decided to become "reincarnated" by altering her face and body through a series of carefully planned and documented operations. She began to deconstruct mythological images of women recalling the work of the ancient Greek artist Zeuxis, who made a practice of choosing from different models and combining them to create the ideal woman, Orlan selected features from famous Renaissance and post-Renaissance representations of idealised feminine beauty - "Diana" of the Fountainbleau School, Boucher's "Europa," Botticelli's "Venus," Gerome's "Psyche" and Leonardo's "Mona Lisa." These female figures are chosen because of their mythological-symbolic values as well as their beauty. "Diana," because she was a powerful adventuress who would not submit to men; "Psyche" because of her need for love and spiritual beauty; "Europa," because she allowed herself to be led into an unknown future; "Venus" because of her association with fertility and creativity; and "Mona Lisa" for her androgynous quality.

The operations are designed to alter a particular feature. They are choreographed and directed by Orlan herself, involving music and the reading of various texts. It is no coincidence that the 'performance' takes place in a 'theatre'; dressing the surgeons up in designer gear, she recites literature in her conscious state throughout the operation. She receives only an epidural injection in the spine and a local facial anaesthetic, reinforcing the idea of self-empowerment - she remains in control throughout. There are bowls draped with green and black grapes while the team of surgeons and nurses partake in this 'Theatre of St. Orlan.' (Moos, 1996, p.67) While the audience watch and listen to this theatrical performance, Doctor Kramer marks Orlan's face with dots to indicate the line of surgical cuts and sites of implants. (Fig.8) The injection to the face and body follows, (Fig. 9) while Orlan reads aloud psychoanalytical texts already mentioned until the first incision is made. The surgeon cuts for ten minutes, producing a number of flaps when lifted, reveal the interiority and materiality of the body. The implant is then inserted over the left cheekbone, and Orlan quips; 'I am very pretty?' (Adams, 1996, p. 57). Ultimately, this question is loaded with subversive intent. It is irrelevant whether any 'improvement' has occurred. It is her intention to challenge accepted ideas of beauty by undergoing these operations, thus suggesting that the possibilities of reinvention are a part of our culture; but





**Figure 8**  
**Figure 9**





she also questions whether or not this reinvention is, in fact, necessitated by social pressures to conform to ideal beauty.

### **COSMETIC SURGERY.**

Throughout the 1990s, as women gained power and wished to redesign themselves, unprecedented numbers of them sought out and submitted to the knife. Cosmetic surgery is the fastest growing 'medical speciality.' As it now stands, it is a \$3 billion industry, making it one of the most powerful of today. The origins of plastic surgery, (the precursor to cosmetic surgery) date back to 1,000 BC., with the first reconstruction of a persons nose. Plastic surgery appeared in Europe much later, in the early-fifteenth century when Sicilian physician, Branca began a primitive form of grafting. Much of the surgery carried out through the sixteenth right up to the nineteenth-century were on individuals with congenital abnormalities or deformities due to diseases.

Surgery through these times would have been sporadic, as under conditions then pertaining, the operation would be traumatic for the patient and in some cases the doctor. With the discovery of anaesthetics in 1867, the rate of plastic surgery increased, although attitudes within the existing cultural domains, prevented most women from altering their bodies. More fundamentally, the the relationship between God and Man meant that disease and deformity were attributed to the body as consequences of immorality. In this context, surgical intervention was seen as blasphemous, because it disturbed the 'natural' order of things and eliminated the marks of punishment. Orlan sees her work as blasphemous, she maintains that her work "is a struggle against the innate, the inexorable, the programmed, nature, DNA and God!." (Orlan, 1995, p. 10)

With scientific enlightenment the traditional beliefs that the physical body was linked to a person's moral character began to diminish. But still a stigma lingered, and it was not until the advent of mass warfare that plastic surgery became respected as a medical speciality. Enormous strides were made in developing techniques for reconstructing limbs and repairing badly scarred or burned skin - techniques which were later modified and adapted to another form of surgery, devised for aesthetic reasons - namely Cosmetic surgery.





With the development of technology and advances in surgical procedure, as well as the shift in attitudes, cosmetic surgery began to surpass plastic surgery. Cosmetic surgery was seen as a form of body improvement, and became a mass phenomenon as a result.

*"The body, no longer simply a dysfunctional object requiring medical intervention, but a commodity - not unlike a car, a refrigerator, a house which can be constantly upgraded and modified in accordance with new interest and greater resources "*  
(Davis, 1996, p. 34).

Orlan puts her own body at risk to redefine the human body. Realising the power of the face, advances in technology and science, she has taken control of her destiny and transformed herself to what she desires. Jeffrey Deitch writes in his book 'Posthuman:'

*Technology will make it possible to remodel our bodies and superchange our minds, but art will have to provide inspiration for what our bodies should look like and what our minds should be doing. In the future, artists may no longer be involved in just redefining art. In the posthuman future artists may also be involved in redefining life.*  
(Deitch, 1992, p.25).

The commodity culture we now live in allows us to modify ourselves as we wish, noses, lips, ears, can be endlessly manipulated, reshaped, restyled, reconstructed to suit fashion and cultural values. Orlan's work brutally transmits disquieting and alarming signals of profound psychological and social disorder. For Barbara Rose, Orlan's project provides:

*a devastating critique of the psychological and physical consequences of the distortions of nature implied in the advanced technologies discovered by scientific research from microsurgery to organ transplants to genetic engineering. "*  
(Rose, 1993, p. 125 ).

Orlan's live broadcasts of the performances/operations are startling, to a general audience, provoking questions about our expectations of the medical profession and our relationship with the ownership and design of our bodies. The operations, as well as being televised, are directed by Orlan, whilst under local anaesthetic, and are intended to contribute to the demystification of the surgical action and to the mastery of the face or skin. With the advent of new technologies in medicine, there is a definite shift in the dynamic between doctor and patient. 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 and her intervention in the clinical setting disturbs these carefully protected attributes. She exposes the new relationship between doctor and patient and addresses the



technological and political transformations in Western society's attitude to medicine. Orlan's enquiry into medicine warns that by unquestioningly accepting the values of medicine and science, by unquestioningly sacrificing ourselves to medical institutions and our compliance in being dissected, ruptured, categorised and examined through medical microscopes, we are "in danger of becoming sterile." (Orlan, 1995, p. 11)

The body has become an easily redefined object, at the owner's own discretion. Surgical intervention has become commonplace and with new technological advances the possibilities for changing one's appearance are endless. Computer technology now gives us a preview of what we want to look like, what we will look like. The patient's image is scanned into the computer, then the surgeon plays God as such, selects a nose for example from a selection of them, and superimposes it on the face. Flesh can be added or taken away, wrinkles disappear, noses reduced. In Orlan's case she plays God and makes the necessary changes according to what she wants. The finished image is a computer-generated ideal pieced together from art-historical references - the forehead of the "Mona Lisa", the lips of Botticelli's "Europa," the chin of Botticelli's "Venus" etc. The image is then shown to the surgeon who will carry out the transformation, operation by operation. All the time Orlan is in control, she chooses the image, the alteration and remains conscious during the transformative operation. By doing this Orlan is ultimately violating operating procedure, demystifying the surgical act and making public the 'private' act of surgery, by transmitting it live on the internet.

*"Cosmetic surgery is the cultural product of modernity and of a consumer culture which treats the body as a vehicle of self expression."*

*(Davis, 1996, p. 35).*

Cosmetic surgery is one of the areas in which man's power can be most powerfully asserted on women's bodies. Orlan has turned this around for her own benefit - she is in control of her face. She controls the processes of cosmetic surgery to challenge and change its objectives.

Eric Blackwell's review of Orlan's performance in San Francisco, which featured in the New Art Examiner, sees that she is revealing the ordinary concealed workings of the





“engines of merchandising,” and by doing so helps to destroy the “power of media-ized conformity.” (Blackwell, 1994, p. 96) The work forces us to contemplate our relationship with pain, technology, the social pressures to conform to body-type, skin colour, and gender. Blackwell sees her work in terms of a “rare courage” in which she takes “upon herself the sins of the beauty industry.” (Blackwell, 1994, p. 97)

Orlan is the first artist to use surgery as a medium, to divert the purpose of cosmetic surgery. This is blatantly demonstrated by the most recent operation, where two horn-like lumps were implanted in her forehead and in her plans for the culmination of “The Reincarnation of St. Orlan” series.<sup>6</sup>

*“My work is not a stand against cosmetic surgery, but against the standards of beauty, against the dictates of a dominant ideology that impresses itself more and more on feminine as well as masculine flesh”.*  
(Orlan, 1995, p. 9 ).

The media play an essential role in making cosmetic surgery acceptable in our society. Women’s magazines provide personal testimonies of the ‘before’ and ‘after’ variety, which depict women’s experiences with various kinds of operations. Orlan plays on these ideas by having her own ‘before’ and ‘after’ pictures in the exhibitions. (Fig. 10) These photographs brutally show the process of change which has occurred, the imagery is far from flattering - it is gory, bloody, and Orlan looks timid and vulnerable as if she has been beaten up. (Fig.11) These images deliberately recall women’s magazines, but do not depict the dramatic improvement normally associated with such photographs. Her work is literally at the cutting edge, it reaffirms the beauty equals pain equation and emphasises the futility of the pain.

Orlan does not assume the role of the victim in these performances. During the process of planning, enacting and documenting the surgical steps of her own transformation, she remains in control of her own destiny. This is very much part of her intention for the work which is reflected in her observation that: “Plastic surgery is one of the areas in which





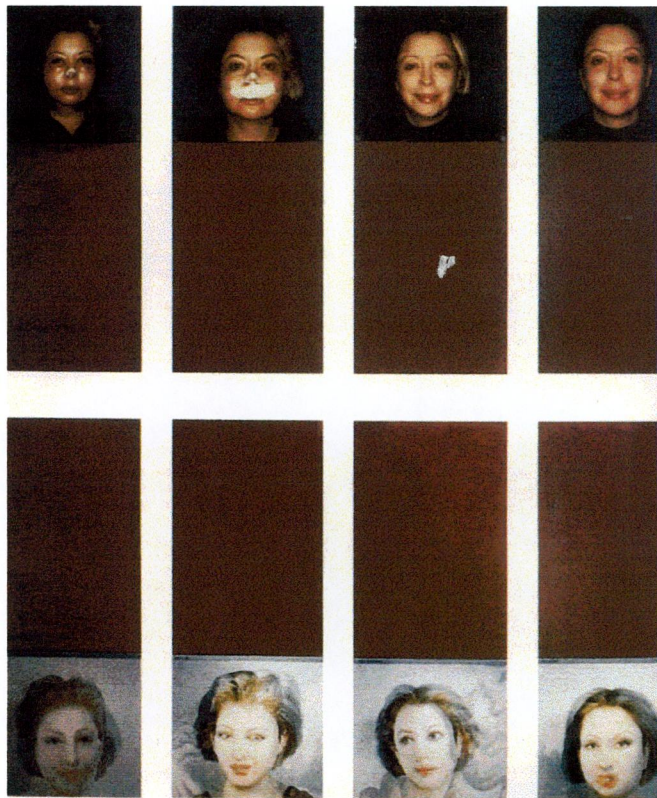
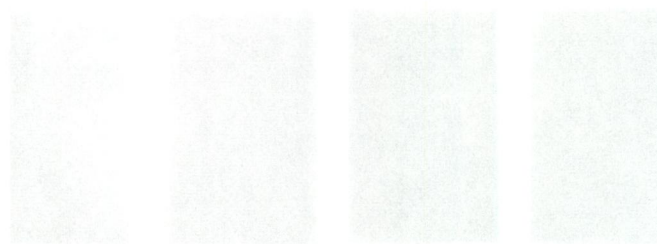
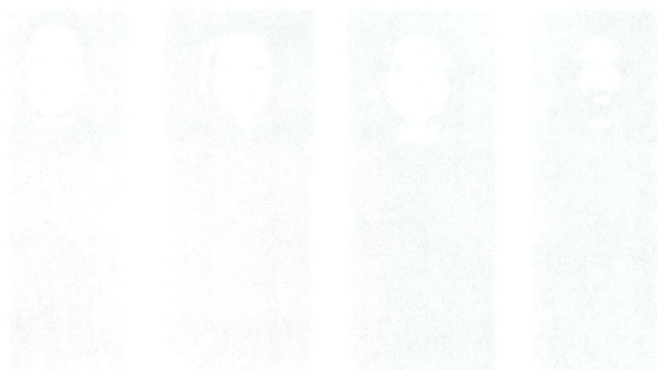


Figure 10  
Figure 11



man's power over the body of the women can inscribe itself most strongly." (Orlan, 1995, p. 9)

She is always critical of the suffering women endure because their bodies do not meet the oppressive, normative requirements of feminine beauty. But she consciously undergoes the necessary mutilation to reveal that the quest for beauty is painful, unnecessary and in most cases it does not change what is within. Orlan realises that the beauty system in our society is an exploitative one, which is used to discipline and normalise women through their bodies, she subverts this so - called beauty system and asks radical questions about the current status of the body.





# CONCLUSION

*Woman sees herself and makes her choices not in accordance with her true nature...but as a man defines her...Man dooms woman to artifice...one is not born, but rather becomes a woman.*  
(de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 295)

Orlan is one of the most daring artists of our time. She is acutely aware of the social and cultural idealisations of the female form - in advertising, and in western art. These idealisations of the female body reflect and enforce cultural desires about a woman's beauty and sexuality, her social place and power. She subverts these idealisations using her face and body as her medium, allowing her power and control to reinvent her outward appearance.

Orlan calls into question the status of the female body image, in terms of social pressures, from early interrogations using religious iconography to the latest performance operations. The universal power of the face has enabled Orlan to confront the ideals of beauty in a brutal and provocative way throughout her career. She is the first artist to use cosmetic surgery as a vehicle of self expression. With the combination of new technology and surgery in the performance, Orlan exerts a dominance over her own body, asking radical questions about the current status of the body, and notions of the body image in the development of genetic manipulation.

The transformation from computer generated image of the ideal face (in relation to artistic icons), through the medium of cosmetic surgery is broadcast interactively around the world. The method of remaining conscious as a means of self-empowerment reaffirms the notion of Orlan's control over her own destiny. She never plays the victim, submitting to the hands of the doctor, she is both subject and object, actress and director, passive patient





and active organiser. She has used her face as a site of resistance to feminine ideals of the body and beauty with shocking and provocative results. Her work implies that, due to developments in new technology, advances in science and plastic surgery one can now, as we enter the 21st century, have the choice to alter our faces/bodies according to shifting cultural norms of 'beauty'. The work of Orlan is a celebration of new possibilities of being. Her work sets about to resist the stereotypes of aesthetic tyranny, she offers us inspirational, post human body designs for new identities and appearances, which possibly in future will help us cope with our increasingly stressful environment.



# FOOTNOTES

1. I use the term cosmetic surgery as opposed to plastic surgery, because cosmetic surgery is more an elective procedure than a necessary one.
2. The first six operations were performed in Europe by two French surgeons, Dr Kamel Chérif Zahar, Dr Bernard Cornette de Saint Cyr, and a Belgian surgeon, Dr Pierre Quin. The seventh, eighth and ninth operations were performed by Dr Marjorie Kramer, a feminist plastic surgeon from New York.
3. Orlan was born on May 30, 1947 in St. Etienne, France. Her real identity is unknown but the name Orlan contains allusions to the artificial material, orlon, to the maid of Orleans (Joan of Arc) and to Orlando (Virginia Woolf's androgyny in the novel of the same name). Orlan cleverly combines the artificial, the religious etc., and thus reinvents her identity.
4. Orlan created her new identity, calling herself 'St. Orlan', as part of her work dealing with religious iconography, which lead her to performance operations entitled "The Reincarnation of St. Orlan."
5. As described by Rose: "the acceptance and re-integration of the female genitals into art for political rather than erotic reasons." (Rose, 1993, p. 83)
6. The final episode of the series, "The Reincarnation of St. Orlan," will take place in Japan in the year 2000. Here, Orlan plans to construct the largest nose technically possible in relation to her anatomy.





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