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## Carnal Art



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# Carnal Art

Orlan's Refacing

C. Jill O'Bryan

University of Minnesota Press  
Minneapolis • London



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Portions of an early version of chapter 2 were published in "Saint Orlan Faces Reincarnation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 50–56, and in *Medicine and Art: Sixth Biennial Symposium at the Center for Arts and Technology* (New London: Connecticut College, 1997). Portions of chapter 6 were published in "Penetrating Layers of Flesh: Carving in/out the Bodies of Orlan and Medusa, Artaud and Marsyas," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 11, no. 1 (1999): 49–63, and in "Carving in/out Bodies: Orlan and Medusa," in "The Monstrous Woman," a special issue of *Massage* (October 1999), <http://www.nomadnet.org/massage>.

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press  
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290  
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520  
<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

O'Bryan, C. Jill.

Carnal art : Orlan's refacing / C. Jill O'Bryan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8166-4322-9 (hc : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8166-4323-7 (pb : alk. paper)

1. Orlan—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Body art—France. 3. Performance art—France.

4. Surgery in art. I. Title.

NX549.Z9O7535 2005

700'.92—dc22

2004024173

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

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12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05      10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Dedicated to my sister, Ann,  
and in memory of my parents,  
Pat and Connie O'Bryan



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## Acknowledgments

As a scholar, I am committed to careful and critical examination of women artists' work. This book is a contribution to the growing body of critical writing that actively receives woman-made art into the world. Immersing myself in Orlan's work has been both enlightening and, as Mary Russo writes, "grotto-esque." I now begin to emerge from a grotto—the grotto of Orlan's body.

Throughout several years of research, I have become acquainted with Orlan. As a researcher, I initially felt I needed to maintain distance, to be "objective," but I also felt that, because she herself is also the art (thereby scrambling issues of subjectivity and objectivity), I had to come in close for a closer look. I learned many things about her: she spends a lot of time writing, and she and her husband are very much in love and enjoy being with each other tremendously. Like most artists who garner fame, she spends a substantial amount of time dealing with administrative responsibilities and traveling, and she is frustrated by how little time is left over to make art. She is obsessed with making her art, with managing her image, with not being misunderstood, and with managing her career. She struggles with financing her work. And yet she was very generous with her time with me; for this I am greatly appreciative and thank her tremendously. I also thank her husband, Raphaël Cuir, an art historian, for spending many hours reading and offering suggestions about this book.

Special thanks go to Tanya Augsburg for reading the manuscript numerous times and offering her keen perceptions regarding Orlan's work—perceptions that profoundly influenced my own understanding of Orlan's performances. Between 2001 and 2003 Dr. Augsburg and I collaborated on several informal interviews with Orlan that inform EXTRACTIONS. Dr. Augsburg's ideas are an inspiration to me, and her

writing is frequently referenced in *Carnal Art*. I thank her for her continuous support: it was always there, even through the disappointments and rough times.

Another special thank-you goes to Joanna Frueh, who read the manuscript several times and offered constructive and invaluable insights. It is an honor to have this amazingly talented writer and scholar believe in this book.

I very much thank Douglas Armato for his enthusiasm and curiosity about this topic. He is always there, inquisitive, helpful, and happy to facilitate the writing process.

From New York University I must begin by thanking my doctoral advisors, Judith Weissman, Joy Boyum, and Chris Straayer, for the endless hours of discussion I had with each regarding this research. I cannot thank them enough for their valuable insights into Orlan's work, for the encouragement they offered throughout my doctoral tenure, and for the large blocks of time they gave to reading and critiquing my work. I also thank Benjamin Binstock for his insightful comments and tremendous encouragement and enthusiasm. I thank Peggy Phelan for encouraging this research, begun under her directive, and Avital Ronell for teaching me to understand the performance of close reading—exploring the readability of texts through rigorous examination. I perceive this close reading of Orlan's work as a mirror reflection of what Orlan is doing with her body. As such, the close reading intrinsically connects the theory that grows from Orlan's performances with the performances themselves.

I thank Kirby Gookin for our discussions, which took place while I was beginning this research. He helped me to hone in on my objectives at a time when they were vast, overwhelming, and vague. And thanks to Martha Wilson for publishing the first article I wrote on Orlan and for giving me thoughtful feedback and encouragement.

Judith Weissman deserves large thanks for recommending me as a graduate assistant in the art department at New York University. Without an assistantship I would not have been able to consider doctoral research. I thank Kathleen MacQueen, Chris Straayer, and Joy Boyum for inviting me to deliver guest lectures, and Leonard Lehrer and Kirby Gookin for allowing me to teach in a department that does not normally provide teaching opportunities to doctoral students. Many thanks to Chris Straayer for her diss-write groups, which provided deadlines and constructive discussions focusing on each student's work.

Special thanks to my partner, Charles Ross, for being ceaselessly supportive throughout the despair, frustration, and exhaustion; and to my mother, Connie O'Bryan, and my sister, Ann O'Bryan, for constant encouragement, care packages, and generous emergency financing. Without my family I would have had to abandon my research long ago. Special thanks to Ann for reading this book and making valuable suggestions; her vast knowledge and love of philosophy are always an endless source of pleasure, and our discussions of Hegel helped to structure some of my thoughts about self/other.

Finally, a thank-you to all of the friends and colleagues, too many to list, who have listened to me, read parts of the book, and offered criticism. All of these discussions were valuable, and I am eternally grateful.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Shape-Shifting

Throughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity. . . . Nor will you have escaped worrying over this problem—those of you who are men; to those of you who are women this will not apply—you are yourselves the problem.

—Sigmund Freud, “Femininity,” *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*

Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic. . . . [P]ost-modern identity [is constructed] out of otherness, difference, and specificity, and is definitively linked to the social upheavals of advanced capitalism, which has destroyed the “individual” or Cartesian subject as previously understood.

—Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject*

What do we see when we look at depictions of the female body in art? What is the relationship between our interior understanding of consciousness and our exterior form? What does it mean to have an identity: does the body determine the identity, or is identity constructed? What does a change to our body mean to our identity? What does it mean to enact a live performance of body-morphing as art?

The French artist Orlan’s surgically manipulated face is a collage of features appropriated from art: Greek goddesses painted by Botticelli, Gérard, Moreau, and an anonymous school-of-Fontainebleau artist; also included, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. But what really sets Orlan apart from others who repeatedly engage in cosmetic surgery is that, for Orlan, there is no “before” and “after.” Rather, there is a continuance of change, an enactment of difference, and an unveiling of the slippery nature of identity. In her statement defining her performance surgeries (*La réincarnation de Sainte-Orlan* [The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan], 1990–95) as “carnal art,” Orlan emphasizes that she is not interested in the final results of her reincarnation. Rather, as a venue for public debate, carnal art emphasizes the process revealed during the surgical performances and the significance of the modified and remodified body. To interrogate art historical equations that link constructed beauty and female identity, Orlan performs ever-fluctuating reconstructions of her face. To execute *La réincarnation de Sainte-Orlan*, nine times she has publicly de- and reconstructed her face by surgically implanting male-made Western art historical attributes of feminine beauty.

In *La réincarnation de Sainte-Orlan* a paradox exists with regard to the iconography derived from Western art history. Orlan references five paintings that are an inspiration to her, symbolically located deep inside her work and heavily relied on by the artist.<sup>1</sup> But it is important to Orlan that there be no misinterpretation. She is not trying to resemble any one or any combination of these painted images: this is apparent when looking at her. She has deliberately failed to clearly acquire recognizable features of the five idealized females she references:

I do not want to resemble Botticelli's *Venus*.

I do not want to resemble the *Europa* of Gustave Moreau—who is not my favorite painter, I chose this painting because she figures in an unfinished painting, just like so many of his works!

I do not want to resemble Gérard's *Psyche*.

I do not want to resemble the *Diana* of the Fontainebleau School.

I don't want to resemble the *Mona Lisa*, as I have said and continue to say in certain newspapers and on television programs despite what I have said on numerous other occasions!<sup>2</sup>

But Orlan's relationship to art history is as ironic as her relationship to beauty. She is reconstructing her own face by appropriating features of fictive women created by male artists to exemplify sublime feminine beauty. She is reincarnating herself by utilizing an industry that promises beauty to women and men by enhancing their features and reconstructing youth. She is not becoming, nor is she claiming to make herself, more youthful or more beautiful either in the modern notion of beauty exemplified in film and advertising or in the Renaissance notion of beauty portrayed in the paintings she references. The uniqueness and the irony of *La réincarnation de Sainte-Orlan*—that in the name of individual identity she appropriates physical attributes associated with others; that in an attempt to unite an interior image with an exterior physique she acquires a fragmented appearance; that in the face of standards of beauty she circumnavigates these standards—create questions pertaining to the conceptual nature of her work.

What happens during Orlan's surgical performances? As the other, one can witness a material tampering with the relationship between the face and individual identity, the original and the constructed, the real and the imagined. One witnesses the possible disruption of identity in accordance with the flaying of the face, the possibility and meaning of an individual identity that is in flux, and the im/possibility of ontological universality. So then, visually, historically, and ontologically, what is the relationship of the interior to the exterior of the body, and how does this relationship wreak havoc and/or organize layers of identity? Within Orlan's critique of ideal beauty lies the grotesque, and within her appropriation of art history lies the futuristic cyborg body. Exactly how and why do these binaries collide, and why do they seem to insist on the existence of each other?

Orlan's performance surgeries deconstruct binary codes by viscerally tampering with epistemological truths, and, from the point of view of the spectator, a deconstruction of Orlan's identity comes into play as well. Taking the necessity of this performed deconstruction into account, what is the relation between Orlan's work and the binary structures: self/other, interior/ exterior, and feminine beauty / the monstrous feminine? Informing these discussions are Luce Irigaray's feminist psychoanalytic analysis of women's relationship to the self/other binary; Gilles Deleuze's, Félix Guattari's, and Camilla Griggers's discussions of facialization; Antonin Artaud's description of the body without organs; Jacques Derrida's definition of deconstruction as a double affirmation; and Elizabeth Grosz's appropriation of deconstruction into feminist theory.

Regarding identity and faciality: What is a woman's identity with regard to the interior of the body from both medical and mythological perspectives? (How can we compare Orlan's surgeries to Renaissance depictions of self-dissection?) What is Orlan's work within the context of the carnivalesque? I will review a history of the performance of opening the body beginning with Renaissance anatomy theaters and continuing to contemporary medical theaters; and I will review Orlan's work as deconstruction, a performed collision of the self/other binary, and a performance that touches upon the ontological status of woman.

#### **THE PERFORMANCE OF SHAPE-SHIFTING: EMBODIMENT AS IMAGE, EMBODIMENT AS TEXT**

Lacan believes that the subject is completely caught inside of language, that language constitutes the subject. (This is contrary to Saussure, who believed that the subject could step outside of language.) Lacan insists that words convey multiple meanings and that, because of the human ability to use metaphor and metonymy, we often use words to indicate things other than those being literally articulated. Also, signifiers slide in a chain of meanings, because they are determined only by other signifiers. No signifier is locked within one meaning.<sup>3</sup> Referring to Lacan, Terry Eagleton explains this phenomenon as he demonstrates that nothing is ever fully present in signs, including and especially the speaking or writing subject:

The "subject of the enunciating," the actual speaking, writing human person, can never represent himself or herself fully in what is said: there is no sign which will, so to speak, sum up my entire being. I can only *designate* myself in language by a convenient pronoun. The pronoun "I" *stands in* for the ever-elusive subject, which will always slip through the nets of any particular piece of language; and this is equivalent to saying that I cannot "mean" and "be" simultaneously.<sup>4</sup>

Orlan substitutes her body for language so that she performs this fiction as though a live signifier; shifting shape, her face does not literally articulate a fixed identity: "I make myself into a new image in order to produce new images."<sup>5</sup> Derrida's term

*auto-affection*—a substitute for self-presence, that which, he claims, we can never purely know—comes closest to describing human experience at this level.

Derrida has partially revealed deconstruction within Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology, which has brought to the fore the impossibility of experiencing the world phenomenologically. Here Derrida not only facilitates an understanding of how one experiences the world but also articulates some of the possible complications that exist in experiencing Orlan's performance art. For example, Husserl's phenomenology relies on a place of certainty that is immediately available in the present. In other words, we rely on the fact that the immediate world that we are experiencing in the present is a certainty. Derrida undermines this certainty by questioning the possibility of self-presence. This is perhaps best described in terms of Derrida's definition of *auto-affection*, which is the illusion of self-presence and the substitute for the lack of self-presence. Auto-affection is the state of giving-oneself-a-presence. It is a speculative state within which a phantasm of immediacy and self-presence exists.<sup>6</sup> Even so, for Derrida, auto-affection is essential and irreplaceable, because it structures experience, thereby making it accessible to the self, as far as experience is of presence.<sup>7</sup> Specifically regarding phenomenology, Derrida writes:

The intuition of time itself cannot be empirical; it is a receiving that receives nothing. The absolute novelty of each now is therefore engendered by nothing. . . . "Time" cannot be an absolute subjectivity precisely because it cannot be thought on the basis of a present and the self-presence of a present being. . . . [T]emporalization is at once the very power and limit of phenomenological reduction. Hearing oneself speak is not the interiority of an inside that is closed in upon itself; it is the irreducible openness in the inside; it is the eye and the world within speech. *Phenomenological reduction is a scene, a theater stage.*<sup>8</sup>

Derrida also maintains that no sign can refer to anything other than itself, and therefore a realm of meaning does not exist which can be distinguished from the marks that point to it.<sup>9</sup> Further, Derrida questions the binary opposition subject/object, which is fundamental to the possibility of objective description. The subject's desire intercedes and contaminates any possibility of objectivity.<sup>10</sup>

The close reading that Derrida performs upon previous philosophical texts (and that he demands as an interaction between the reader and his own texts) is in itself a performance of rigorous philosophical thinking and therefore a place of intersubjectivity, a place of human interrelations. The complication here arises in the meaning of Derrida's decentering of self-presence with regard to the experience of art. An intrinsic relationship exists between Derrida's defined "auto-affection" and Orlan's investigation into the certitude/flexibility of her own self-presence, which possibly culminates in the erasure of one auto-affection—with regard to a self/other relationship—and simultaneously the discovery of the possibility of other constructed auto-affections within the realm of the same self/other relationship.

Orlan also emphasizes the decentering of her own self by complicating the temporal frame of her work. *La réincarnation de Sainte-Orlan* is only partially contingent upon experiencing a here-and-now performance. Because the entire project takes place over an extended period of time and many operations, one is forced to conceptualize the work within the context of this continuance. Orlan does not offer the simplicity of one resolved image or finishing point in time. Rather, she challenges us to imagine the possibility of multiple auto-affectations, which are also in flux. Regarding the multiplicity of auto-affectations that occur across an expansive period of time, the live surgical events exist within the linear temporality equated with human mortality; the reliquaries that house her own flesh venture into the more abstract temporal zone of immortality. The reliquaries accomplish this by negating the loss of the body.

Orlan's work, however, is also about the materiality, the perception, and the experience of embodiment. These are not the same, given that the indicator of each takes place as experience. In other words, I have no way of knowing that my experience of embodiment is in any way comparable to that of any other being. Our experience of embodiment is also contingent on the structure of the body. This is at the crux of Orlan's experimental art making. Merleau-Ponty writes:

[I]nteriority no more precedes the material arrangement of the human body than it results from it. What if our eyes were made in such a way as to prevent our seeing any part of our body, or if some baneful arrangement of the body were to let us move our hands over things, while preventing us from touching our own body? Or what if, like certain animals, we had lateral eyes with no cross blending of visual fields? Such a body would not reflect itself; it would be an almost adamantine body, not really flesh, not really the body of a human being. There would be no humanity.<sup>11</sup>

The experience of the other is therefore contingent on the knowledge of one's own embodiment, which evokes self-presence. The pursuit of the experience of embodiment is something reflected a thousand times over: in each other, in the mirror, through photography, through painting, sculpture, theater, music. Art, which at best investigates this experience of being, creates an experience of embodiment for the seer. Orlan accomplishes this. Her body in all of its states—whole, lacerated, represented as twenty grams of fat and blood—is presented as an investigation of her embodiment. In other words, she literalizes her own embodiment by threatening the security of her body's enclosure. As a result, an encounter with her lacerated, interior body or extracted body fluids has the potential to lend new meaning to any viewer's own experience of being embodied. Orlan intends her performances to be painful to watch. "These images plunge in and strike directly where it hurts, without passing through the habitual filters, as if the eyes no longer had any connection with the brain," she says.<sup>12</sup> Orlan pushes the visceral intersubjective encounter as performance to an extreme because she intends for the viewer to have a physical response to her work. (Artaud's "theater of cruelty" was also based on this mode of encounter.) Within this encounter



and because her performances are also *of* the body, Orlan performs Merleau-Ponty's point that knowledge of embodiment evokes the knowability of self-presence, or, to use Derrida's term, auto-affection, the necessary substitute for self-presence.

With regard to performance, exclusive sets of dilemmas occur as the critic retells the experience of viewing. Peggy Phelan writes, "[O]ne of the deepest challenges of writing about performance is that the object of one's meditation, the performance itself, disappears."<sup>13</sup> Phelan goes on to explain that within performance theory and criticism the text has largely adopted the very conservative mode of detailed historical documentation. But she indicates that we should resist the desire to merely document, "[f]or what one otherwise preserves is an illustrated corpse, a pop-up anatomical drawing that stands in for the thing that one most wants to save, the embodied performance."<sup>14</sup>

The loss of the embodied performance exists in the unrepeatability of that performance. Orlan creates a type of stand-in, a repeatable video documentation of her performances. However, the documentation does not exclude the qualities of unrepeatability and loss from Orlan's surgical performances. The footage is an archive of Orlan's lost original body and the unrepeatable processes of changing that body. Also, the footage is public. The live surgical performances, which take place in an operating room, are not. So, the videos allow an audience to witness her lost original body and her lost performances.

What Phelan writes in *Mourning Sex* is the creation of something new from loss.<sup>15</sup> This is also a demonstration of Derrida's auto-affection, because self-presence is something always lost, and the desire for the manifestation of self-presence is inscribed in auto-affection: "My hunch is that the affective outline of what we've lost might bring us closer to the bodies we want still to touch than the restored illustration can. Or at least the hollow of the outline might allow us to understand more deeply why we long to hold bodies that are gone."<sup>16</sup> For Orlan, the outline of the hollow keeps changing shape. Her changing body is a performance of exchange—loss and gain. Within this exchange Orlan creates images of herself that no longer fit inside the hollow of the original body. Also, the original body is one and the new bodies multiple: nine times flayed during surgery, swollen and bruised during recovery, healed with altered features.<sup>17</sup> What is the meaning of her disappeared original body and the multiplicity invoked in her emerging body as an experience of loss and gain?

Phelan's performative writing, another level of experiencing performance, investigates the relationship of the spectator to the now-disappeared live body in performance: "The events I discuss here sound differently in the writing of them than in the 'experiencing' of them, and it is the urgent call of that difference that I am hoping to amplify here. . . . To name this 'performative writing' is redundant since all good critical writing enacts something in excess of the thing that motivates it."<sup>18</sup> This emphasis on the difference is also an emphasis that Derrida calls for.<sup>19</sup> Thus, a close reading of a performance in which the difference between "the writing of [it]" and "the experiencing of [it]" is emphasized bears a relationship to Derrida's pronouncement,



“Phenomenological reduction is a scene, a theater stage.”<sup>20</sup> The theater stage is an apt metaphor. At least the emphasis on the retelling of the performance is acknowledged as being a performative act in and of itself, alluding to, but different from, the original performance.

What is the relationship between the event and the aftermath of the event, between the *writing about* the event and the *being in* the aftermath of the event? In Orlan’s performances these temporal positionings are always in relation to the artist, who stages events, then lives the results while anticipating yet another event. Orlan’s is a performance of incompleteness. This book is dedicated to the exploration of the effects of witnessing Orlan’s body (of work) that is as resistant to completion as it is to creating one identity.

Chapter 1 includes an overview of Orlan’s work; a detailed description of *Omni-presence*, the seventh performance surgery in *La réincarnation de Sainte-Orlan*; and a contextualization within the context of feminism and body art. Chapter 2 is devoted to an inquiry into the history of the performance of publicly opening the human body. Within this chapter both scientific and mythological examples are discussed in relation to Orlan’s surgical performances. These include the Renaissance dissection theater, the myth of Medusa, and the biblical story of Eve.

Orlan’s interrogation of identity is unique and ardently feminist; that is, Orlan *performs* a form of poststructuralist feminism. One of the signposts of poststructuralist theory is its commitment to obliterating binary oppositions,<sup>21</sup> because the binary structure creates a hierarchy within itself: good is better than bad, male is better than female, spirit is better than body. Orlan utilizes the concept of ideal beauty to construct her live Frankensteinian body—a deconstruction of the real to expose it as a fiction that serves the construction of ideal beauty. In addition, her feminism, first and foremost, ignores the essentialist Cartesian association of nature and woman’s body—the idea that woman is equated with the body (childbirth), whereas man is equated with the (superior) mind.<sup>22</sup> An addendum to this association is that the natural body tends to be privileged over the manufactured body. Orlan is thus unsympathetic to the feminist aversion to the use of cosmetic surgery. Hers is a challenge to feminists to see beyond her use of medical intervention in order to fathom the more complex issues of identity that her performances provoke.

In *Carnal Art I* identify and probe questions derived from the conceptual nature of Orlan’s work regarding beauty and the grotesque, art history, medicine, identity, and feminist strategies. Orlan’s work plays a significant role in exposing the constructedness of representation both *within* art historical images of women and *within* contemporary *constructed* beauty (literally constructed by surgeons). Thus, she does not acknowledge validity in an external point of view. Rather, she works from within contemporary systems of (surgical and art historical) constructions of feminine beauty in order to deconstruct them from the inside. She recognizes that it is necessary to place herself inside a situation to participate in its dismantling, and that dismantling the idealized female form is a feminist political strategy.

Chapter 3 includes a discussion of feminist psychoanalytical theory as it pertains to Orlan's artwork, particularly in relation to the topic of identity. Here some of the complex philosophical issues of Orlan's work are also addressed, including an analysis of deconstruction as it pertains to Orlan, issues concerning the performed collision of the self/other binary, the ontological status of women, and an exploration of Orlan's woman-to-woman transsexuality.

In the fourth chapter the interior/exterior binary is explored with relation to the spectator of Orlan's work. Orlan's performances are compared to Antonin Artaud's "theater of cruelty" and discussed in relation to Artaud's notion of the body without organs; the myth of Marsyas is described to illustrate the relationship between identity and the interior and exterior of the body; and the filmic close-ups in Orlan's video *Omnipresence* are examined within the context of feminist film theory.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the beauty / monstrous feminine binary. It begins with a definition of facialization with regard to texts by Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Camilla Griggers. Then, with regard to facialization, Orlan's work is elaborated upon with regard to the myths of Medusa and Baubo. The chapter concludes with a comparison of Orlan's self-images to images of women portrayed by Hans Bellmer and Cindy Sherman. The sixth chapter concludes the discussion of the meaning of Orlan's work within the context of theory and is written as a performative piece. Here I articulate the aporia that Orlan is performing.

Chapter 7 is an investigation of the carnivalesque qualities in *Self-hybridations* (1998–), a series of computer-manipulated photographic self-portraits, Orlan's most recent work. Finally there is "EXTRAActions," a performative dialogue I have with Orlan. It is inspired by an interview Tanya Augsburg and I conducted with Orlan in March 2001 at Arizona State University in Phoenix—and ensuing dialogues held over several years between the three of us. References to the 2001 interview are included in "EXTRAActions."

## Orlan's Body of Work

Orlan's earliest photographs, a series of small black and whites, target overt art historical themes. Several feature her challenging pictorial conventions of the female nude as she awkwardly bends her torso, arms, and legs, reshaping her curvy bare body into angular abstractions. In another black and white the masked beauty transforms herself into a grotesque hag. In yet another she voraciously escapes convention by climbing out through an ornate picture frame. And Orlan's very first photograph, *Orlan accouche d'elle m'aime* (1964; translated both as Orlan Gives Birth to Herself and as She Loves Herself), articulates later themes of doubling, cloning, androgyny, and prostheses as a nude Orlan gives birth to an androgynous double (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> It resonates with Orlan's motifs—the body as sculptable material, the multiplicity in individual identity—and sets the stage for *La réincarnation de Sainte-Orlan*, begun twenty-six years later.

Orlan participated in a feminist protest in Saint-Étienne in 1968, during which she carried placards that read “Je suis une homme et un femme” (I am a [feminine *a*] man and a [masculine *a*] woman), indicating the possibility of shifting gender.<sup>2</sup> In the same year she began to work with her trousseau.<sup>3</sup> The trousseau, a traditional collection of white linens (*toile*, translated as both “linens” and “artists’ canvases”) was embroidered by a bride-to-be and used upon marriage. In *Étude documentaire n°1: Couture-clair-obscur ou plaisirs brodés* (1968), the blindfolded Orlan is featured in a series of framed black-and-white photographs embroidering her flowing white trousseau. The sheets have already been taken to a rendezvous with a lover or lovers. The results are displayed in the last picture frame, where a portion of the trousseau (*trou sot*, “foolish hole”) sheets are covered with spermy “wet spots” and Orlan's messy embroidery outlines their shapes.<sup>4</sup> Sarah Wilson writes:

A violent and symbolic confrontation led to Orlan's snatching of the trousseau lovingly amassed by her mother; on those sacred sheets bestowed to symbolize the "giving away" of the daughter to another patriarchal nexus, Orlan exultantly, euphorically, received her lovers, tracing their sperm trails with pen and then with savage, enraged embroidery, again a d'étournement of the womanly skills she had been taught "to please."<sup>5</sup>

Orlan baptized herself Saint Orlan in 1971 by adorning her body in mounds of draped white leatherette or black vinyl, then exhibited these sculpted costumes in Milan in 1972, and created *Les draps du trousseau* (*Les tableaux vivantes: Situations-citations*) from 1967 to 1977. Referencing Bernini's *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy*, Orlan toyed with images of female ecstasy and maternity from the perspective of the new *écriture féminine*.<sup>6</sup> She also reversed gender roles in several powerful images: her *Origin of War* is man just as Courbet's *Origin of the World* is woman. In her *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Manet) she is dressed and all of the men are nude.

*Occasional Strip-Tease Using the Fabric of the Trousseau* (1974–76) begins with Orlan dressed as Madonna with child; then, throughout eighteen black-and-white photos, she disrobes, transforming herself into a Botticelli-like birth of Orlan without a shell. This transformation articulates a connection between the archetypes Madonna and



Figure 1. Orlan, *Orlan accouche d'elle-m'aime* (Orlan Gives Birth to Herself, and She Loves Herself) (1964). Black and white photograph, 81 x 76 cm with frame. Copyright 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

whore, not by opposing them but by enacting their connection to one another. The final frame of the series depicts only the trousseau fabric in folds on the floor, like a shed skin.

In 1977 Orlan played out *Le baiser de l'artiste* (The Kiss of the Artist) (Figure 2). This is one of several performances in which Orlan exposed herself as a woman/artist, stripped of subjectivity to become an objectified commodity. This posture is twofold. "In the name of art,"<sup>7</sup> she presents her performance/installation in the form of two life-size photographs of herself on a platform with a bouquet of white lilies. She is seated behind a photo of her life-size nude torso, which doubles as an automatic kiss-vending slot machine. She gives kisses in exchange for five francs. Next to her is her photographed image as the Virgin draped in mounds of cloth with exposed breasts, to which one can offer candles for the same price, five francs. Orlan set up the installation by the entrance of the Grand Palais in Paris, where the International Contemporary Art Fair (FIAC) was taking place, and, as hawker, yelled, "Cinq francs, cinq francs!" Passersby inserted five francs into the slot between her breasts and watched the money fall into the box—at her crotch. In response Orlan jumped off her pedestal and offered the slot player a kiss while several bars of Bach's Toccata in B Minor played on a tape recorder. A screeching siren sounded at the end of the kiss.



Figure 2. Orlan, *Sculpture et piédestal du Baiser de l'artiste* (Sculpture and Pedestal from *Kiss of the Artist*) (1977). Collection of Fonds régional d'art contemporain (Frac) des Pays de la Loire, France. Copyright Frac des Pays de la Loire, France.

In “Facing a Society of Mothers and Merchants,” Orlan writes, “At the foot of the cross, two women: Mary and Mary Magdalene . . . Mother or prostitute, private woman . . . or public woman, duty and pleasure, respect and disdain.”<sup>8</sup> By uniting these two female archetypes, Orlan asserted her right to use her body as she pleased.<sup>9</sup> While unabashedly critiquing the art world for insisting that she become a commodity (as both artist and female), she became one. As a political strategy she spotlighted the art world’s particular brand of sexual discrimination by publicly enacting it. Ironically, but not surprisingly, by advertising herself as a commodity, Orlan gained recognition (albeit infamous) as an artist. Catherine Millet describes the scandal that this performance created but also offers further insight into the content of this piece: “[T]his sexual union [between the artist and the spectator purchasing a kiss] was like an x-ray of the frenzy of exchange of contact in the contemporary art world where the merchandising of the artist’s personality replaces the merchandising of art.”<sup>10</sup> Orlan repeated the performance in Lyon a month later, where *Le baiser de l’artiste* captured the attention of the media. Eight days after the Lyon performance, she received a telegram from the Atelier des trois soleils, where she taught art, stating that her extracurricular activities were incompatible with her teaching duties.<sup>11</sup> Orlan was not rehired in spite of her students’ loud protests.

Orlan’s 1977 Art and Prostitution exhibition at Ben Vautier’s gallery, la Difference (in Nice), continued this theme.<sup>12</sup> During the exhibition Orlan invited three of the leading gallery dealers in Nice to join her in having sex on sheets as part of the performance. “As an artist, I have only one choice: to sell myself. One has to face up to this situation. I launch myself as an artist. I go [to] the meeting with Mr. Untel, offer him my body while I show him my work: stain the sheets of my trousseau to exhibit them. Mr. Merchant provide me with paint.”<sup>13</sup> All three dealers declined. However, Wilson points out that the exposure of the artist as promiscuous—willing to sleep her way to the top, on the condition that it be public—politicized the male-dominated business of art. As long as the female artist / sex object was handled in secret, the dealings of the empowered male dealer were legitimate; both male and female agreed to such a secret contract.<sup>14</sup> Orlan exhibited the sheets even though the dealers refused to take part.

In 1978, invited by Jean Dupuy, Orlan performed *A poil / sans poil* (Naked / without Hair) at the Louvre.<sup>15</sup> Standing in front of Jacques Blanchard’s *Venus and the Three Graces Surprised by a Mortal*, Orlan began with a paintbrush between her teeth, her friends seated on the floor between her and the guards so they would not be able to easily reach her. She opened a coat to disclose a dress upon which was rendered the image of her nude body. Tearing from the dress a geometric pubic triangle, she then revealed her own pre-shorn and reglued pubic hair covering her genital area. Orlan pulled out this reglued hair and then painted her nude genital area black. (The genital areas of those in the painting are nude but in dark shadow.) She then held a white palette (as though it were a fig leaf) over her painted genitals. Orlan next inserted the paintbrush into the hole of the palette. Slowly she turned her back to the audience;

with her body in profile, the brush appeared to be an erect penis. Tanya Augsberg points out that “for a brief instant Orlan unveiled what could be called ‘an impossible figure of totality,’ in which she presented herself as both being and having the phallus.”<sup>16</sup>

*MesuRAGEs* (1972–83) revealed Orlan’s body to be a political unit of measure.<sup>17</sup> In a given *MesuRAGEs* performance, Orlan wears a white tunic made from the fabric of her trousseau, and high-heeled boots. She lies down on the ground, marks a chalk line above her head, gets up, and repeats the action as many times as it takes to discover how many Orlan-*corps* fit into selected male/institutional spaces (e.g., the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris). In the process of the *MesuRAGEs*, Orlan sullies her white trousseau garment. In a final gesture Orlan removes the trousseau garment, washes it, and then bottles the dirty water, making it a relic of her female assertion smudged with male institutionalization. In conclusion Orlan triumphantly holds up the jar of dirty water, posing like the Statue of Liberty.<sup>18</sup> The filthy water, of sweat and dirt, is then put into containers sealed with wax as relics. Sarah Wilson assesses the performance:

The Virgin, conceived “immaculately,” without stain, counters the tradition of the bride’s display of bloodied linen after the wedding night; we are brought back to the central motif of the trousseau for Orlan. Her “measuring” performances provoked violently sexual reactions: she was spat upon, insulted as “a woman of the streets”; the trial of measurement passes through filth: “L’épreuve de la mesure passe par la souillure.”<sup>19</sup>

So, how many Orlan-*corps* make up the Georges Pompidou Center (measured in 1977)? A brass floor plaque commemorating the event proclaims 69 x 24 Orlan-*corps*. The numbers add up to yet another impressive “figure” to consider. Orlan physically situates herself, and her art, squarely inside the art museum while simultaneously insisting on the symbolic importance of the female body throughout the history of art. She performs a solid critique of the lingering patriarchal biases still operating within art institutions.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout all of Orlan’s work this balancing act exists: on one hand, there is the banality of narcissism—the artist is desperate to be recognized as such; her body and face are the sole objets d’art. On the other hand, the artist’s body performs an iconic political critique by troping male-made, and male-scaled, Western art and art history. This dichotomy has appeared before in the work of artists scrambling through the nexus between individuality and societal / art historical molds that shape “woman’s body.” Both Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann were originally criticized for narcissism while claiming higher conceptual ground. But Orlan’s *MesuRAGEs* is truly successful at rendering a woman forcefully figuring herself into the male equation.<sup>21</sup>

Kate Ince, who focuses her study of Orlan’s work on the notion of skin as dress and fashion, aptly points out that units of measure such as the foot or the cubit (the



forearm) are derivative of the male body and that Orlan interrupts this language of measure as perhaps a contribution to the construction of a “female universal . . . perhaps . . . a double universal, as in the thinking of Luce Irigaray.”<sup>22</sup>

Incorporated into the length of her body like prostheses are the high-heeled boots Orlan always wears when performing her *MesuRAGEs*. This is important to Orlan and lends insight into the meaning of her body as unit of measure. High heels are a politicized and sexualized item of fashion. The standard feminist party line, of course, is that they are worn for the male gaze, they inhibit movement, and so they metaphorically enslave women. So why wear them while interpreting male-scaled architecture with female units of measure? The chalk lines she leaves behind are traces of Orlan-*corps*. Viewed as a whole, one after another, with the numbers added between each, the chalk lines appear to be inscribed, standardized, spatial markings. So a more critical feminist perception of *MesuRAGEs* might be that just by participating in a measuring process Orlan is already subscribing to male construction and constructedness. But one of Orlan's most powerful feminist political strategies is that she participates in male constructions of femininity and masculinity in order to deconstruct them from within. The *MesuRAGEs* contributes to Saint Orlan's hagiography—but the difference that she inscribes onto the architecture includes the sexualized female and her unkempt, boundary-less (and extended) sexuality. The high heels signify the sexual identity always activated when close to the trousseau. Sexualized femininity is forcefully present, not excommunicated from the scene. She is there because historically she has always been there, and so must participate in the deconstruction of her form, which has also always been shaped by the Western cultural imaginary. Orlan is not trying to “fit” into male-scaled institutionalized space. Rather, she is rescaling it to include herself, also a trope for the female body. She allegorizes the scaling process by creating an event and by giving it representation.

With Ben Vautier a “measuring” took place in Nice (1976). In addition to the one at the Centre Pompidou (1977), others took place in Aix-la-Chapelle at the Neue Gallery (1978), in Strasbourg at the Strasbourg Museum, (1978), and at the Musée Saint-Pierre in Lyon (1979).<sup>23</sup> Aside from museums and galleries, Orlan also measured churches, convents, and streets bearing the names of other artists (e.g., Victor Hugo), measuring herself against their legacies. Augsburg's discussion of this work establishes the relationship of the measuring movements to martyrdom:

Martyrdom as a self-conscious loss of self is nevertheless the result of free choice—even if that act of choice stems from a sense of obligation or duty. Artists can be viewed as secular martyrs to the extent that they must defer to their institutional sponsors as well as to the critics who compare their works with the works of other artists for the sake of their art. In other words, artists must comply with constant surveillance and evaluation before they can be “officially” recognized as artists by institutions. In her performance series *MesuRAGEs*, Orlan turned the table on art institutions by using her body as a measurement device to measure them.<sup>24</sup>



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