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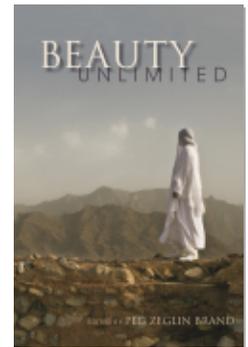
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16. ORLAN Revisited: Disembodied Virtual Hybrid Beauty

PEG ZEGLIN BRAND

If you are squeamish
Don't prod the
beach rubble
—Sappho, fragment 84

Between 1990 and 1993, the artist ORLAN offered nine surgical performances of Carnal Art in a series entitled *The Reincarnation of St. ORLAN*. In “Bound to Beauty: An Interview with ORLAN,” I sought to explain the complexities of these performances, as well as those of her series of large-scale photographs, begun in 1998, called *Self-Hybridizations*.¹ In the *Reincarnation* series, ORLAN’s actual body underwent multiple surgeries that permanently altered her physical self, turning it into an imagined self inspired by the forehead of the Mona Lisa plus the eyes, chin, and mouth of other women painted by well-known male artists throughout history, each with his own particular ideal of female beauty.² In that essay, I suggested a workable concept of virtual beauty that defined beauty as “being in essence or effect, not in fact; not actual, but equivalent, so far as effect is concerned. Virtual beauty substitutes for, yet is not in fact, real beauty.”³ In a later publication, I further expanded upon the concept of virtual beauty by citing conditions for its uniqueness and difference from real beauty.⁴ However, unlike some recent critics who call themselves ORLAN admirers, I did not call ORLAN’s performances hideous or her beauty monstrous. In fact, I cited her own report of how people react to her in public: that they might *think* she looks monstrous, although she does not feel that way. I remarked that “one

could even say that there is beauty in her eyes, evidence that only *some* of her features have been changed to contrast with today's standards of beauty."⁵ I still hold to that description, in spite of the time that has passed since the 1998 interview, and I now marvel that so many contemporary interpreters of her work have cast her as monstrous. My initial reaction is that this reading reduces her to an artworld beauty-basher who sounds more like a seller of shallow shock than a serious artist of feminist intent.⁶ Even if ORLAN's goal is to create a substitute for female beauty or to subvert ideals of physical beauty per se, does she warrant the descriptor "monstrous"? Human blood and sutures may indeed be distasteful, abject, or even disgusting, but surely the artist's intent is more complex than what is seen on the surface. Viewers who are squeamish are well advised to step back and refrain from prodding the metaphorical beach rubble of ORLAN's postoperative detritus. But for those of us who cannot help but look—like snatching a glimpse of a horrible car wreck—I offer a more nuanced analysis to give ORLAN her due.

Consider ORLAN's later work *Self-Hybridizations*, which carries her exploration of virtual beauty to new levels and engages in less theatricality involving blood and bandages. In describing how ORLAN was "bound to beauty" with this work, i.e., tied to imitating features of ancient Olmec and Mayan sculpture by means of digitally altered self-portraits—I suggested that these were her most successful realizations of virtual beauty. Unlike the *Reincarnation* series, which utilized a surgeon's scalpel, these on-screen images are the result of digitized, manipulated data. As self-portraits, they are imaginative and art-historically inventive. Moreover, they represent the disembodied ORLAN, based as they are on a computerized composite of features. They have elicited some unexpected criticisms, however, being described as "comical and grotesque," "potentially racist," like "a minstrel's use of blackface," and "carnavalesque, somewhat extraterrestrial, and generally misinterpreted." Cast as "caricatures" and as images of "the offspring of the carnival freak and the humanoid," they have been critiqued as being more about "costume" and digital technology than the physical process of "looking into the opened body," i.e., the actual body of ORLAN under the knife (as in the *Reincarnation* series).⁷ Because of this, some judge them inferior to her earlier surgeries.

But they are also about a much broader context of standards of beauty, international in scope, whereas the localized physical changes to ORLAN's own body were based on a masculinist version of European art history. The pre-Columbian images, for instance, incorporate both female and male standards of beauty. ORLAN extracts herself from the narrow confines of

European art history, transporting us back to reexamine an incised stone mask from 900 BCE and a stucco head of Lord Pacal from a seventh-century BCE tomb. The autonomy of the artist is essential to a healthy sense of identity across cultures; what follows in her work is an evident sense of empowerment and control. *Self-Hybridizations* is additionally about *self*-control. Under her own power, ORLAN creates extraordinarily colorful selves. To call her work “potentially racist” or similar to “a minstrel’s use of blackface” seems to misconstrue her intentions and to limit her artistic freedom through the censorship of a distorted form of political correctness. (Such a charge also demonstrates a lack of knowledge that African Americans themselves applied blackface, increasing the complexity of meaning of their actions . . . and hers.)⁸ Are current interpreters becoming too (in)sensitive? too PC? too dismissive of the artist’s intent, preferring their own misreadings instead? Moreover, is the aesthetic value of her work lost in these readings?

I argued in 2000 that ORLAN may have moved away from the *Reincarnation* performances toward *Self-Hybridizations* because she thought that in the latter she would be more transparently obvious in meaning and less frequently misunderstood. I may have overstated the ability of audiences to comprehend, however. I will argue in this essay that the virtual beauty that ORLAN unfolds in her ongoing series *Self-Hybridizations* is not a real or actual beauty but rather a fake beauty, causally disembodied, based on the effects she intends to create from an imaginative use of combined hybrid imagery. Subverting the familiar philosophical notions of aesthetic distance and aesthetic appreciation,⁹ hers is not a monstrous beauty unless one redefines the concept “beauty” and couples it with “monstrous” in fairly unprecedented ways. And yet fake beauty still has aesthetic features, ones not routinely discussed in assessing ORLAN’s work. Finally, in my attempt to problematize the tendency of current critics to interpret her works as monstrous, I suggest the possibility of generational differences in understandings of the term “feminist,” shifts in meaning from early feminist theory of the 1970s to ever-evolving, twenty-first-century notions of the term, all of which add to the confusion. As I negotiate this terrain, I hope to steer both critics and viewers more directly to the words of the artist herself, who seems to plead for clearer understanding and appreciation when she laments, “I have tried to make my *Self-Hybridizations* as ‘human’ as possible, like mutant beings, but I still did not think that the confusion could be possible.”¹⁰

Entre Deux (1997)

First, a brief word about the precursor to *Self-Hybridizations*: a series which dates from 1997 and is entitled *Entre Deux* or *Between the Two*. These photos are all about ORLAN: a series of eighty-two self-portraits arranged in two horizontal rows, like a diptych, with forty-one digitally altered images of changes to her face on the bottom row based on the five male inspirations of her actual surgeries in the *Reincarnation* series, as described by Kathy Davis.

She devised a computer-synthesized ideal self-portrait based on features taken from women in famous works of art: the forehead of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, the chin of Botticelli's *Venus*, the nose of Fountainebleau's *Diana*, the eyes of Gérard's *Psyche* and the mouth of Boucher's *Europa*. She did not choose her models for their beauty, but rather for the stories which are associated with them. *Mona Lisa* represents transsexuality for beneath the woman is—as we now know—the hidden self-portrait of the artist Leonardo Da Vinci; *Diana* is the aggressive adventuress; *Europa* gazes with anticipation at an uncertain future on another continent; *Psyche* incorporates love and spiritual hunger; and *Venus* represents fertility and creativity.¹¹

Her visage is already “morphed with this source material,” as Peggy Phelan notes, “creating a photographic hybrid, a half-‘natural’ and half-constructed image of her face, thus exposing the ways in which the natural is inflected by the constructed and vice versa.”¹² The top row consists of forty-one photographs of her face, taken on successive days of her healing from the 1993 surgery entitled *Omnipresence* (with each photograph's date and time noted). A textual banner reading “Between the Two” connects the two rows. ORLAN referred to the top row as produced by a “machine-body” (i.e., her own face) and the bottom row as produced by “the machine-computer.”¹³

The lower row presents computer-generated blurred images of her face, with her mouth in muted shades of blue, green, peach, and red on each print. In *Between the Two*, no. 15 (1994), she morphs into Botticelli's renowned fifteenth-century *Birth of Venus*, complete with wind-blown hair, as if Zephyros were just off-camera (fig. 16.1).¹⁴ In others, her lips are heavily outlined with dark red, revealing the bloody aftereffects of the surgery. In most she looks calm; in some she looks anguished, with her face twisted and lips askew. Looking saintly, suffering, and stoic—like a goddess in the making—she subtly alludes to Western European ideals of beauty. These images are about ORLAN dealing with what is inside her head prior to launch,

before she goes global. She is located between two realms of identity, her former and her future selves: *entre deux*. She is shadowy; contemplating; a chrysalis waiting to open. The repetitive shots of her face, like Andy Warhol's stacking of the image of Marilyn Monroe, show her mulling over her self, her identity: an inner churning with, as yet, no discernible direction. Once we see the work that follows, *Self-Hybridizations*, we can, in retrospect, discern a sense of deliberation: her self-obsessed introspection is about to expand to worldwide scope. She is about to project her self into the entire history of art, across different cultures, over thousands of years and various continents, becoming—herself—the virtual traveler through the interconnected continuum of civilization. The pensive positioning of her head (tilted, like Venus's) and the anticipatory demeanor of her gaze off camera do not prepare us for this explosion of intent, the breaking down of barriers, the breakthrough of subtlety into a deluge of color and form.



Figure 16.1. ORLAN, *Between the Two*, no. 15, 1994. Color photograph in light box, 120 × 160 cm. © ORLAN.

It is important to highlight that strict visual copying or imitation of the original artworks' formal properties is not the artist's intent here; recall ORLAN's own words:

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 the Europa of this painter because she figures in an unfinished painting, just like so many of his paintings!

I do not want to resemble Gérard's Psyche.

I don't want to resemble Diana of the Fontainebleau School.

I don't want to resemble Mona Lisa, although this continues to be said in certain newspapers and on television programs despite what I have said on numerous occasions!¹⁵

This explanation allows us to understand the error of many of the claims made about ORLAN, namely, that she is trying to replicate the physical ideals of female beauty; that she fails; and that (whether intentionally or not) she becomes monstrous. She borrows visual motifs, but she is more interested in the characteristics of these women than the way that male artists portrayed them. She appropriates, but not to replicate. This fact is often lost on viewers. Thus, hers is not an imitative art form; rather, she is concerned with what I would describe as inner beauty: the aggression of an adventuress, the courage of facing an uncertain future, love and spiritual hunger, fertility and creativity. These are qualities derived from the stories or narratives of goddesses, not their visages; they are not visible, but rather lie below the surface. (After all, goddesses *are* mythical and fictional, i.e., nonreal beings, at their outset.)

In 1997, Davis (who has subsequently written extensively on the topic of cosmetic surgery) sought to distinguish ORLAN's surgeries for the sake of art from typical cosmetic surgery utilized by women for the sake of enhancement or beauty:

Although she draws upon mythical beauties for inspiration, she does not want to resemble them. Nor is she particularly concerned with being beautiful. Her operations have left her considerably less beautiful than she was before. . . . While ORLAN's face is an ideal one, it deviates radically from the masculinist ideal of feminine perfection. Her ideal is radically nonconformist. It does not make us aware of what we lack. When we look at ORLAN, we are reminded that we can use our imagination to become the persons we want to be.¹⁶

In assessing *Reincarnations* in 1997, Davis offers the clue to the first works of *Hybridizations*—ORLAN'S ongoing series that is all about imagination and becoming something one is not, something imaginary, something unreal, fictional, and disembodied:

ORLAN's project explores the problem of identity. Who she is, is in constant flux or, as she puts it, "by wanting to become another, I become myself." "I am a bulldozer: dominant and aggressive . . . but if that becomes fixed it is a handicap. . . . I, therefore, renew myself by becoming timid and tender."¹⁷

In other words, one can undermine and change one's identity in a variety of ways. From 1987 (the year of the first *Reincarnation* surgery, on ORLAN's fortieth birthday) to 1997, ORLAN used her own body ("My body is my art"). From 1997 on, the alterations are digital; she moves beyond scalpels and blood, unleashed upon multiple traditions of visual representation within the entire history of art. Davis adds,

Her identity project is radical precisely because she is willing to alter her body surgically in order to experiment with different identities. What happens to the notion of "race," she wonders, if I shed my white skin for a black one? Similarly, she rejects gender as a fixed category when she claims: "I am a woman-to-woman transsexual act." . . . ORLAN's art can be viewed as a contribution to postmodern feminist theory on identity. Her face resembles Haraway's (1991) cyborg—half-human, half-machine—which implodes the notion of the natural body. Her project represents the postmodern celebration of identity as fragmented, multiple and—above all—fluctuating.¹⁸

Disembodied identity becomes, overwhelmingly, the *modus operandi* that transitions ORLAN from surgical alterations to her visual exploration of pixels printed on paper. She moves from the real to the virtual, and her appropriations of beauty, within her self-described "self-portrait," become virtual as well:

At the inception of this performance, I constructed my self-portrait by mixing and hybridizing, with the help of a computer, representations of goddesses of Greek mythology—chosen not because of the canons of beauty that they are supposed to represent (seen from afar), but for their histories.¹⁹

Histories are chosen and illustrated but not, strictly speaking, imitated. ORLAN is up to much more here: I suggest that what she is up to is the

creation of virtual beauty. Consider the conditions I placed upon “real” versus “virtual” in 2001:

X is an instance of *real beauty* in artworks for perceiver *P* at time *t* if and only if *P* recognizes and appreciates with (disinterested) pleasure the perfection, or uniformity amidst variety, or smoothness, or smallness, or uniqueness, or symmetry, etc., in *X*.

Y is an instance of *virtual beauty* created by artist *A* for perceiver *P* at time *t* if and only if *P* recognizes and appreciates with (disinterested) pleasure that

- (i) *Y* is created by *A* by means of reconfiguring digital information in cyberspace;
- (ii) the figures and objects represented in *Y* are disembodied;
- (iii) the digital information reconfigured in *Y* may be reconfigured by *P*; and
- (iv) *Y* is not an instance of real beauty.²⁰

ORLAN has subsequently elaborated on the distinction by blurring the boundaries:

The aim is not to confront what is real with what is virtual—and vice versa—in a sort of endless Manichean and reductive opposition. On the contrary, virtuality mingles with reality as its imaginary part and the reality which I create is not devoid of virtuality. . . .

All figurative works can be said to be “virtual.” The representation of the Virgin and Child by Jean Fouquet [ca. 1450], for instance, is the portrait of Agnès Sorel. Still we do not see Charles VII’s mistress, but a painting.

. . . The virtual and the real elements, when they are used at the same time, become new ways of obliquely questioning art itself and the world around us.²¹

Like numerous artists before her, ORLAN seeks to create and understand a multiplicity of selves through both her own likeness and invented faces; like many women uncomfortable with their own bodies, Davis claims, she first used plastic surgery as “a path towards self-determination—a way for women to regain control over their bodies.”²² As a digital artist, she moves beyond the mere physical. As a feminist, she combines the two goals in order to become empowered: in control. As Davis notes, “ORLAN has to be the creator, not just the creation; the one who decides and not the passive object of another’s decisions.”²³ *Entre Deux* is just the beginning. There

are no limits to the identities ORLAN can imagine. Freed from her body, her new identities are disembodied and hybrid: unreal and virtual. *Entre Deux* lies between the two bodies of work: the earlier *Reincarnations* and the later series of *Self-Hybridizations* to come.

Self-Hybridizations Pre-Columbian (1998–2000)

Just one visit to ORLAN's website (<http://www.orlan.net>) immediately immerses a viewer in a dizzying array of work: clicking, one moves forward and backward, in and out of time. Gone are the days when to see such works one needed to travel to a museum or gallery, pick up an exhibition catalogue from the library, or purchase an art magazine for glossy reproductions. It's all there on your screen, in living color, bursting with vim and vigor: an instant look at art produced in a studio outside of Paris by a woman whose conceptual reach far exceeds her geographical grasp.

In 1998 ORLAN commented on the scope and intent of *Self-Hybridizations*: "My new work is a global survey of standards of beauty in other civilizations and at different periods in history. I start with the pre-Columbian civilizations and will eventually study Africa and Asia." Like many other artworks currently celebrated in international artworld environs as explorations of cultural, multicultural, and cross-cultural identities, this series was intended to pursue a "range of multiple, evolving, mutating identities" by means of a global travelogue.²⁴ Having chosen the Olmec colossal heads (weighing five to twenty tons) found on the Gulf Coast of Mexico—male heads that signify respect and honor—she additionally utilized smaller stone masks of rulers that flaunted the proportion and symmetry of the formal incised patterns across the face. Both originals invoke the shamanic or godlike power of the male ruler that ORLAN dons in her self-portraits as she recreates her self as a hybrid of cultures and a virtual beauty with underlying meaning and power: a reference to inner power and beauty. She explained her use of the visage of Lord Pacal similarly: "It wasn't a religious thing; it was an aesthetic thing."²⁵ In this series she becomes obsessed with the physical ideals of beauty, performance, and royalty that operate within a culture totally outside the paradigm of the white European middle class. She engages in aesthetic play by engaging her imagination in the manipulation of what used to be and what could be, all constructed without the interference of real bodies. Gone are the shadowy references to Botticelli as muse. ORLAN has projected herself back in time with her creativity under complete control; she manipulates her self and her face in

virtual sacrifice to the gods of beauty standards past. The updated version of her 1998 face, photographed by Gerard Rancinan in 2001 as *Woman with Self-Hybridized Head*, incorporates the same incised facial marks but is even more powerful, because her head is shown, disembodied, upon a platter.²⁶ My previous essay explains how the incised lines on ORLAN's face in her *Refiguration, Pre-Columbian Self-Hybridization, no. 1* (1999) replicate those on an Olmec mask made of white and gray jadeite, making her a hybrid that seeks to appropriate the shaman's power to enter the supernatural realm (fig. 16.2).²⁷ As rephotographed in 2001, ORLAN literally highlights her disembodiment and dismemberment (her head without body); virtuality triumphs.



Figure 16.2. ORLAN, *Refiguration, Pre-Columbian Self-Hybridization, no. 1*, 1999. Digital photograph, 100 × 150 cm. © ORLAN.

In my 2001 attempt to expand (or “explode”) the aesthetics of “art” and “beauty” that help us understand such works, I compared ORLAN’s photographs to those of the Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura, who photographed himself as various actresses, both American and Japanese. Whether dressing up as Vivien Leigh or Marilyn Monroe, Morimura took traditional analog photographs of his body; that is, he was never Morimura-as-Marilyn in the disembodied sense of computerized art. Like Cindy Sherman in many of her works, he merely dresses up and poses for the camera. In another series, however, he digitally pictured his face on the body of a nude and pregnant Mona Lisa (*Mona Lisa in Pregnancy*, 1998), and then replaced the belly of the nude Mona Lisa with an internal view of the fetus and organs, reminiscent of da Vinci’s sketchbook drawings of the fetus in utero (*Mona Lisa in the Third Place*, 1998).²⁸ These composite collages span centuries, combine and hybridize body parts (real and fictional), and create virtual beauty of its own sort: the beauty of a “person” who is not real, but only virtual. When Morimura appropriated Sherman’s *Untitled #96* (1981) by scanning the original and reconfiguring it with a computer to produce *To My Little Sister (For Cindy Sherman)* (1998), he again created a disembodied hybrid fictional candidate for expanding or exploding the traditional category of beauty into that of virtual. Interestingly, no critic has called either artist’s work “monstrous.”

In addition to undermining any one philosophical definition of “beauty” that may provide comfort to those of us craving the ideals of Western civilization that we so devotedly learned in art history and aesthetics classes, ORLAN seeks to create new hybrids that exercise the autonomy of the artist and the empowerment that viewers subsequently derive from the image. Her insistent pushing of the boundaries of “multiple, evolving, mutating identities” is a playful but reverential romp; the process is more important than the product, although the product becomes more vivid and intense as the series progresses. She does not set out to portray real beauty, to re-create real beauty, or to imitate it. Rather, as I have been arguing, hers is an intentionally false beauty: fake as can be, yet—and here is where her true genius lies—as seductive as the real thing. Virtual beauty is that of the disembodied object, the fictional ORLAN-as-Mayan or ORLAN-as-Olmec. Why, then, does she elicit the more serious charge of monstrosity, even from her defenders?

Self-Hybridizations African (2000–2003)

The next phase in *Self-Hybridizations* is a series of photos inspired by African natives, photographed as if being discovered for the first time in the nineteenth century by a probing explorer with a new camera (most are in black and white). Consider the image entitled *Ancient Crest of Ejagham Nigeria Dance and Face of Euro-Saint-Etienne Woman* (2000; fig. 16.3). Also included in the African series is a life-size sculpture of a human body (ORLAN's) scarified in decorative patterns. As described by one sympathetic critic, Serge Gruzinski, the photographic images exemplify the “still relatively little explored—and therefore relatively unfamiliar” phenomenon of *mélange*: “Mixing, mingling, blending, cross-breeding, combining, superimposing, juxtaposing, interposing, imbricating, fusing and merging are all terms associated with the mestizo process, swamping vague descriptions and fuzzy thinking in a profusion of terms.” Considered as a manifestation of



Figure 16.3. ORLAN, *Refiguration*, African Self-Hybridization series, *Ancient Crest of Ejagham Nigeria Dance and Face of Euro-Saint-Etienne Woman*, 2000. Digital photograph, 124 × 155.5 cm.
© ORLAN.

the fracturing of modern society, ORLAN becomes a forerunner of a trend whereby “standard frames of reference are being shattered by these surprising and sometimes awkward juxtapositions and presences.”²⁹ Beauty is hardly subject only to subversion, as in the twentieth century. In the new millennium, it is shattered, shocked, and shunted. Prompting more questions than they answer, these are the harbingers of a so-called postmodern, hypernarcissistic, amortal, mutant world.³⁰ But what, exactly, does this mean?

Consider ORLAN’s own words, written expressly for Elisabeth Azoulay and Françoise Gaillard’s five-volume collection *100,000 Years of Beauty*:

Like sex and money, beauty follows the dictates of criteria of recognition, codes and laws in which the artist’s job is to divert so as to expose supremacy. In an attempt to thwart the authoritarianism of the perceptions of beauty that prevail in our societies, I had two small lumps implanted on my temples. They are like two erupting volcanoes that threaten the predominant notions governing female beauty, which gives my work a subjective and political meaning.³¹

The artist’s feminist intentions are undeniable; she continues to challenge the patriarchal norms that have established the dictates of female beauty over the centuries, continuing into the present day of mass media saturation and consumer culture.³² She is, herself, the photographic print upon which the battle between actual and virtual body ensues.

I show that beauty is in no way a natural phenomenon but a cultural construct. I also want to mark the fact that, in an age of globalization, the range of possibilities is simultaneously spreading and shrinking. In one sense, we are witnessing a proliferation of pluralistic expressions and theatrical orchestrations; in another we are using Western criteria as a filter to all of this multiplicity and creativity, in the image of what Impressionism and Cubism in particular did for Oriental and African arts.

In addition to her feminist perspective, ORLAN adopts the Western lens by which most artworld aficionados view the world: us versus them; us versus other. Her goal is to expose the bias we bring to the perception of multiplying “expressions” and “orchestrations” as she projects a utopian possibility that lies beyond the intensifying pressures of today:

I construct images of mutant beings whose presence may be envisaged in a future civilization not beholden to the same physical pressure as we are. It

might therefore accept their potential for beauty and sexual attractiveness. The *Self-Hybridizations* are created through the hybridization of my face, supposedly corresponding to current codes of beauty, along with works from other civilizations and other timescales that embody standards of beauty different from our own.

The beauty of her future, however, is a virtual beauty of hybrids and mutants. It has little connection with beauty as defined by the power brokers of the multi-million-dollar “beauty industry” today. It is a false, unreal, made-up beauty of the disembodied; it is a fakery of the original, a deliberate offspring. Note ORLAN’s use of the phrase “supposedly corresponding to current codes of beauty.” Moreover, it is explicitly constructed, *socially* constructed by the artist, with no tie to a “real” beauty that is considered innate, inherited, or genetic. It is fiction, though based in fact and social standards. She concludes, while simultaneously projecting even further into the future with the introduction of bio-art:

My work has always been a struggle against all that is innate, inexorable, programmed, against nature and DNA. And also against all the pressure of prevailing ideologies, all bodily formatting procedures. One of my current projects involves the development of an installation called the Harlequin cloak from the culture of my own cells and those of different origins (animal and human). While the body is a language, it is above all a theatre for the staging of alternative, nomadic, mutant and shifting identities. A theatre of pleasure and humour that opens onto the infinite interplay of metamorphosis, marking the global hybridization of beings and cultures.

As if to verify that virtual beauty is causally connected to the diffuse disembodiment of the original physical body, but not an imitation of it, art critic M. Perniola offers the following:

Virtuality is not a simulation,
An imitation, a mimicry of reality,
But an entry into another dimension,
Ontologically different, as it were.³³

Ontological difference is essential to understanding the ephemeral, meta-physical selves of ORLAN disembodied. She hybridizes herself into multiple “copies,” but not imitations. Attempts to understand her work have not always carefully maintained this distinction. Operating in another dimension lifts

her from the physical, even the (traditionally) photographic, into another realm that is tricky to distinguish and even more difficult to discern. How, then, do we put into words her apparent imitation of, for instance, a nineteenth-century painting by George Catlin (plate 11)?

Self-Hybridizations American-Indian (2005–2007)

Numerous life-size photographic prints of ORLAN dressed in Native American garb with rich red backgrounds pulsate while her painted face changes, mutates, and explores. Consider one example, entitled *Painting Portrait of Wash-Ka-Mon-Ya, Fast Dancer, a Warrior, with ORLAN's Photographic Portrait, Refiguration, American-Indian Self-Hybridization, no. 3* (2005) (plate 12). The theme of a 2010 group show in which she participated entitled “Islands Never Found” is vague and indeterminable, like the seeking of an elusive “place” or perhaps a frame of mind:

Leading, internationally renowned contemporary artists interpret their very own islands never found through a series of extraordinary works—some never before exhibited. Installations, videos, photographs, sculptures, drawings and paintings take the visitor on a journey, where each island—a metaphor for life and constant exploration—raises questions and doubts about the very meaning of life.

The artists taking part in this project have embarked on a journey through uncharted waters, on a never-ending voyage, continually haunted by the possibility that the destination might in fact be a nonplace, a utopia, a simple territory of desire—and therefore beyond reach.³⁴

ORLAN's identity is ever evolving and can adapt to a new swatch of paint worn boldly on her face, an imposing bearclaw necklace hanging defiantly around her neck, or the feathers and beads that sprout from her head and ears. According to one description of these works, the large-scale series was created during ORLAN's New York studio residency at the International Studio and Curatorial Program and was based on the paintings of George Catlin, who documented native tribes before the widespread use of photography.³⁵ The Indian is romanticized here, beautified perhaps, but ORLAN's goal is not to make herself beautiful in the traditional sense, nor to approximate the real beauty of an Indian that she, as a white European woman, can never attain. Hers is a false beauty, purely virtual, where virtuality is not a simulation, an imitation, a mimicry of reality, but an entry into another, ontologically different dimension.

One way to interpret this distinction is to deem ORLAN's virtual beauty without substance or interiority, as Jill O'Bryan notes: "The *Self-Hybridation* photographs have no interior, no texture, no body."³⁶ Her claim is similar to an earlier observation by Arthur C. Danto about ORLAN's previous *Reincarnation* series:

Hegel characterizes Romantic Art as responsive to the demand for making inwardness visible, of showing what a person is so far as that person is coincident with his or her feelings. And that would explain why *The Spear-carrier* is bland: classical art, if Hegel is right, had no concept of inwardness. It explains as well why a contemporary artist, ORLAN, who submits herself to plastic surgery in order to make herself conform to aesthetic prototypes, in fact looks, well, creepy. She shows no inwardness.³⁷

Can this description be extended to *Self-Hybridizations* as well? Is O'Bryan, following Danto, on to something here? One of ORLAN's inspirations is Catlin's painting *White Cloud: Head Chief of the Iowas* (1844–45), one of many he created to portray "paradigmatic 'Indianness'"—images that became icons of the "wild" inhabitants of the western United States, as imagined by the more "civilized" immigrants back east who were new to the land, fresh from Europe, or descended from newcomers to America.³⁸ ORLAN's vacuous look may digitally replicate the way that George Catlin sought to depict Native Americans, but for this reason it lacks the real thing, or, as Danto frames it, a "person coincident with her or her feelings." She uses Catlin's image to replicate the vacuity that Europeans and newly arrived "Americans" perceived in Indians. Her comment upon their colonialist superiority is not racist, but rather points out the narrowness of their encounters with people they condescendingly referred to as "savages."

Consider the contrast between ORLAN's disembodied, virtual, hybrid images, devoid of inwardness and interiority, and contemporary art by Native Americans. When Indians themselves satirize or parody images like Catlin's paintings and Edward Curtis's photographs, their works are considered reclamations and subversive examples of commoditization.³⁹ When ORLAN does so, according to some critics, the result is potentially racist and "monstrous." Upon what interpretive strategy do such labels depend? It is time to dive into monstrous beauty.

Mistaking Monstrous Beauty: ORLAN's Virtual Beauty

Joanna Frueh originally defined “monster/beauty” in 2001 in a book of the same name, subtitled “Building the Body of Love,” locating the concept of monster/beauty within an ideal, prescribed beauty—our current “standard of success,” i.e., cultural norms that extol purely visual beauty, equal to perfection, and its attendant sexual charisma that attracts lovers of beauty. In contrast, monster/beauty is self-care and self-development that comes from “aesthetic/erotic attentiveness, . . . self-consciousness, self-pride, self-pleasure, and self-love.” “Aesthetic/erotic wit, a decisive way of dressing oneself in the sensuality and beauty of Aphrodite, proceeds from the corporeal subjectivity and agency that define monster/beauty.” Moreover, it is not (merely) a visual beauty; Frueh emphasizes “the sensual dimensionality that is a human being’s beauty . . . the aesthetic/erotic field that people create for themselves and inhabit, the field that they in fact are. . . . Beauty as only and simply a visual feature—a still picture—is erotically devoid, a failure of love. . . . In contrast, and in eros, monster/beauty is the flawed and touchable, touching and smellable, vocal and mobile body.”⁴⁰

Focusing on the agency of the woman whose body might traditionally be culturally seen as lacking, disappointing, or aging, monster/beauty embodies the agency of action and not just her passive reception of the gaze of others; it also includes discomfort with her physical body that is never perfect. Thus it offers the (still) taboo personal voice, i.e., the body that speaks (up for itself). It is “an aesthetic/erotic aptitude, fleshed out and inspirited with the essence of Aphrodite.”⁴¹ This aptitude is a form of sexual allure, and monster/beauty is a “monster” only insofar as the woman embodies the allure of pleasure and satisfaction with(in) her own body, in spite of cultural norms, resulting in the true enjoyment of her own body and the authentic valuing of her beauty. As such, the “monster” learns to “build the body of love” whereby the aesthetic (the seen) and erotic (the sensed) are inseparable.⁴²

Frueh is focused primarily on American culture and her role as a middle-aged woman within prescribed beauty norms not of her own creation. The monster who builds the body of love is engaged in the positive and constructive task of making herself more comfortable in her own skin, not in the negative and destructive critique of cultural norms or her own physicality. This so-called monster learns to accept her body while bypassing cosmetic surgery for the purpose of enhancement; self-empowerment comes from self-love and strength. In contrast, ORLAN challenges and undercuts the ideal beauty norms that exist to be challenged. Her work, *Reincarnation*

or *Self-Hybridizations*, is not about love or the seeking of love or self-love. Thus Frueh's concept of monster/beauty—as innovative and insightful as it is—offers little in the way of helpful interpretation of ORLAN's performance art. In fact, Frueh offers explicit evidence that it is inadvisable to apply monster/beauty either to the documentations of ORLAN's surgeries or to certain photos by Cindy Sherman, Jo Spence, and Hannah Wilke; she calls their work “the modern erotics of damage.” As an aberration from the socially accepted ideal of physical perfection, the monster/beauty of the bodybuilder, for instance, may be considered grotesque, abject, bizarre, incongruous, eccentric, strange, and ridiculous. For Frueh, it is separate from violence, disease, breakdown, mutilation, or the hospital. Hence it is not, Frueh adds, the “Sadeian or Batailean erotics of horror based in an aesthetics of disgust,” i.e., an erotics of damage, nor is it attached to the Western tradition of shame and transgressiveness outlined by Freud.⁴³ Yet, as we will see shortly, Frueh's concept of monster/beauty has been inappropriately applied to ORLAN's work by at least three recent authors.

But first, let us look briefly at the comments of Tanya Augsberg, another feminist who, like Frueh, focuses on woman's subjectivity and agency by citing the history of philosophy's male-dominated construction of woman as an inferior, irrational being who is merely passive and inactive. Writing in 1998, she suggests ORLAN's surgical performances constitute an antidote to this tradition, calling them “performative transformations of feminist medical subjectivity” which “cannot simply be reduced to extreme acts of self-mutilation in the guise of art.”

ORLAN's multimedia surgical theatre is meant to be *transformative* as well as risky; by undergoing a planned series of cosmetic surgeries, ORLAN is self-consciously exploring a means of identity transformation. . . . [She] undergoes a particular beauty ritual—cosmetic surgery—in order to expose and question those techniques of gender that simultaneously construct and discipline “beauty-conscious” female identity.⁴⁴

Like Frueh, Augsberg highlights the proactive agency and subjectivity of ORLAN's work, but refrains from calling it monstrous. Citing criticisms of her as “hysteric, a narcissist, a fetishist, a scalpel slave (or polysurgical addict), and even a sufferer of Body Dysmorphic Disorder,” she defends (but does not necessarily condone) her body art as an act of social resistance (one of many forms since 1990) that results in an uglification of self within our rapidly evolving age of technologized beauty.⁴⁵

Only when Augsberg is explaining ORLAN's "complicity in, and dependence on, these institutions [of medicine, science, and art] in order to stage the resistance she enacts"—what she calls ORLAN's "Staging the Medical Subject"—does she invoke the concept of the "bloody, slimy, ghastly, yet also celebratory carnivalesque scene reminiscent of Gargantua's birth in the writings of Rabelais." But she takes this characterization of the carnivalesque (professed by ORLAN herself, as mentioned earlier) no further; rather, she highlights the uniquely created subject of ORLAN who orchestrates the live surgical scene, in which she is awake and gazes back at the camera filming her:

ORLAN may allow her body to be cut, stretched, and resculpted, but her persistent gaze signals not only her resistance to becoming the completely docile body that medicine requires but also her insistence on being recognized at all times as *more than just a body*. Her art demands of her audience that we witness her self-awareness not only of her surgery but of *us* looking at her. In other words, ORLAN not only returns the viewer's gaze, but expects—if not demands—that her recognition of us be in turn recognized by each individual.⁴⁶

Augsberg is comfortable calling ORLAN's exposure of her body's living tissues mesmerizing and revolting. Moreover, she interprets ORLAN's challenge to us as one of "highlighting the body's grotesque abjection in surgery and in recovery" without reducing it to "visceral performance." "To put it bluntly, ORLAN's art does a lot more than just gross all of us out: she provokes us to become more self-reflexive in our roles as spectators."⁴⁷ Augsberg's cogent analysis of ORLAN as a medical subject who creates and controls a self-conscious subjectivity in her performances neither suggests nor lends credence to the charge of monstrosity, perversion, or mental imbalance. There seems no reason to presume that "grotesque abjection" is equivalent to or implies monstrosity. Moreover, sometimes ORLAN is playful and perversely provocative, as in *Kiss on Tracing Paper, The Fourth Surgery-Performance Titled Successful Operation* (1991), a photograph in the *Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN* or *Picture New Pictures* series (fig. 16.4). Yet at multiple points, Augsberg cites the tendency for viewers and critics to misinterpret ORLAN and to cast her as mad and irrational. This analysis presents a stark contrast to the critics who follow—writing in 2005, 2007, and 2009 respectively—who mistake ORLAN's intent or misconstrue her meaning. Question: What has happened to such criticism in the twenty-first century? ORLAN, it appears, becomes monstrous.



Figure 16.4. ORLAN, *The Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN or Pictures New Pictures series, Kiss on Tracing Paper, The Fourth Surgery-Performance Titled Successful Operation*, 1991. Photograph, 165 × 110 cm. © ORLAN.

Three significant critics currently invoke either Joanna Frueh’s monster/beauty or Sigmund Freud’s theory of the terrifying castrated woman as their inspiration for misinterpreting ORLAN as monstrous.

First, C. Jill O’Bryan (2005), already cited earlier, does not directly reference Frueh’s concept of monster/beauty in her *Carnal Art: ORLAN’s Refacing*, although she includes a chapter entitled “Beauty/The Monstrous Feminine.”⁴⁸ Rather, in this chapter, O’Bryan calls ORLAN’s work “the monstrous feminine” in an attempt to locate ORLAN within the binary tradition of beauty and the monstrous, personified by the gorgon Medusa. When Medusa’s beauty “prompts” Neptune to rape her in the temple of Minerva, Minerva’s revenge for this transgression turns her into a snake-haired monster who, in turn, transforms—into stone—all who gaze upon her. According to Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, her serpent-hair frightens evil-doers.⁴⁹ This myth prompted both Freud and Jacques Lacan to link Medusa’s head to male fear of castration; to quote Freud,

To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made

us familiar with the occasion of this: it occurs when a boy who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches a sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother.

Lacan describes Medusa's head as

this something, which properly speaking is unnamable, the back of this throat, the complex, unlocatable form, which also makes it into the primitive object *par excellence*, the abyss of the feminine organ from which all life emerges, this gulf of the mouth, in which everything is swallowed up.⁵⁰

O'Bryan utilizes these descriptions of "an anxiety of sexual difference that traverses the centuries" to analyze a 1978 performance piece by ORLAN entitled *Documentary Study: The Head of Medusa* in which she allowed viewers to view her sex through a large magnifying glass while simultaneously showing the heads of persons arriving, viewing, and leaving on video monitors. Exiting visitors were handed a copy of Freud's text on Medusa, including the words "At the sight of the vulva even the devil runs away."⁵¹ I have no quarrel with O'Bryan's contention that ORLAN is exploiting the "monstrousness" of her sex in this early performance work, but when she extends the accusation of monstrousness to the skin lifted from ORLAN's face in her surgery in *Omnipresence*, she holds that viewers (like the devil) will similarly run away from such monstrousness, leading her to conclude that "like those who gazed upon Medusa, we respond to ORLAN's monstrousness." Our gaze upon ORLAN's flayed face, or, as she calls it, her animal nonface, directly refers to the gaze that alternatively turns the body to stone, the gaze that instills fear in the male who sees the castrated female. O'Bryan realizes the need to explain how ORLAN's subsequent work, however, transcends this binary entrapment in the monstrous; she points out that "the myth of Medusa and Freud's analysis exhibit a male understanding of female genitalia that culminates in horror—the monstrous feminine" and that ORLAN's subsequent work "points toward overcoming the male economy of viewing described by Freud, to the degree that ORLAN's images begin to redirect the relationship of the female body to language and to representation."⁵²

Along those lines, in a later chapter of *Carnal Art*, O'Bryan extends the explanation of the digital images of *Self-Hybridizations* by mentioning an occasion in 1999 when she presented the work of ORLAN to a group of feminist art historians who strongly objected, denouncing ORLAN's future

humanoid hybrids—her fantasy aliens and fictional beings—with “accusations of ORLAN’s overwhelming pretence and racism,” likening them to “a minstrel’s use of blackface,” and saying that they exhibited “a carnivalesque otherness that serves to exacerbate the gap between the normative and the grotesque (the self and the other).” Apart from the art historians’ reactions, O’Bryan herself believed that ORLAN’s images were “comical and grotesque,” and appeared “carnavalesque, somewhat extraterrestrial, and generally misinterpreted.” But she succumbs to calling ORLAN’s faces “offspring of the carnival freak and the humanoid” and critiques them as being more “about digital technology or, at best, costume” than the physical process of our “looking into the opened body,” i.e., the actual body of ORLAN under the knife (in the *Reincarnation* series).⁵³ These are the images O’Bryan previously described as having no interior, no texture, no body, compared to the images of ORLAN’s actual surgeries.

When O’Bryan moves on to discuss ORLAN’s *Self-Hybridizations*, she initially defends ORLAN’s use of both the carnivalesque and the grotesque but equates the female grotesque with going beyond sexualization, an odd sense of the term indeed; she even calls some of ORLAN’s images “really quite sexy.”⁵⁴ (It is important to note here that ORLAN herself suggests that different styles were used in her operations, ranging from the carnivalesque and the parodic to the grotesque and the ironic, and since *Self-Hybridizations* is a continuation of the *Reincarnation* series, these styles persist.)⁵⁵ O’Bryan’s deeper analysis of ORLAN’s mutating and mutant photographic identities undergirds her preferred sense of “grotesque,” borrowed from Bakhtin, in which the grotesque body is “in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.”⁵⁶ Thus, ORLAN does not mock other cultures but rather “plays with our own prejudices and the often absurd perceptions that Western culture projects onto other cultures.” Her images “appear more sci-fi than cross-cultural.”⁵⁷

ORLAN herself, quoted in O’Bryan’s chapter on *Self-Hybridizations*, reports on people’s reaction to the images, just as she reported on their reactions to the bumps on her forehead: “People talking about these photographs have a tendency to describe me as a ‘monster’ with a strange face, a distorted face; still these two pigeon eggs do not seem to produce the same effect when I am seen in reality.”⁵⁸ This is the second instance of ORLAN rejecting the terms “monster” and “monstrous.” To use these words to describe her face as well as digital images of her face seems misguided at best and dismissive of the artist’s intentions at worst.

Our second author, Elizabeth C. Mansfield, does not cite Frueh on monster/beauty but builds upon references to Freud in her 2007 book *Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis*. The first objection to Mansfield's approach is her insistence that ORLAN's performances and imagery are instances of imitation, strictly speaking. Her book is about Zeuxis and the copying of formal features, i.e., mimesis. The story of the painter Zeuxis dates back to Cicero and Pliny; he set out to paint the portrait of Helen of Troy only to realize that a single model would not suffice. Helen's beauty could only be realized by combining the best features of five different models. Mansfield touts this story as a lesson in imitation and in the triumph of ideal beauty over natural beauty. Much of the text focuses on various depictions of the legend, both artistic and literary, as well as the possibility of a female Zeuxis, e.g., someone like Angelica Kauffman (1741–1807): child prodigy, recognized portraitist by age fifteen, and the first female artist to depict Zeuxis selecting his models.⁵⁹ The inclusion of her own self-portrait in the scene significantly alters the meaning of the painting and subverts the traditional discourse of the male artist depicting female beauty. Kauffman deliberately challenges the hitherto uncontested authority of the male artist, the artistic conventions of the genre, and the social norms of gender hierarchy. Mansfield also cites Mary Shelley, author of the 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, as a challenge to the Zeuxis myth by attributing to her its recasting as a tale of monstrosity. Like Kauffman, Shelley assumes a critical position, taking “aim at both academic and romantic theories of creativity”; the monster's creator, Victor Frankenstein (whom Shelley called “the artist” in the introduction to her 1831 revised edition of the novel), is a symbol—verging on a parody—of Enlightenment faith in human knowledge (science) and his creation is formed with “a discriminating approach. . . . ‘His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful.’”⁶⁰ Mansfield concludes, “Both Frankenstein and Zeuxis seek perfect form through a composite of well-chosen parts.”⁶¹

Mansfield sees ORLAN as a third in this series of pioneering women creatively recapturing artistic agency by undermining repressive patriarchal norms, and she devotes an entire chapter to her work, entitling it “Zeuxis in the Operating Room: ORLAN's Carnal Art.” She sees ORLAN's borrowing from the faces of five different painted women for her *Reincarnation* series as a perfect match to Zeuxis, except that she reminds us that ORLAN is quoting the goddesses' stories, not strictly copying their physical features. But her explanation is brief and unclear, linking mimesis to DNA. More to the point, she offers a lengthier analysis that likens ORLAN to Mary Shelley,

drawing “an explicit comparison between the artist’s studio and the operating room. . . . ORLAN’s theatricalization of the operating room through the use of props, costumes, and recitations echoes Hollywood’s treatment of Frankenstein’s laboratory as a carnivalesque chamber of horrors.”⁶²

This connection between ORLAN’s art performances and Hollywood horror movies relies upon the presumption that both serve to expose and disguise enacted trauma by a fetishistic means, where “fetishism [according to Freud] is a consequence of an unresolved castration complex”; recall the boy witnessing his mother’s genitals (her lack of a penis) and his subsequent anxiety and castration complex. Freudians also assume that that anxiety can be assuaged by means of a fetish, usually a body part. Through the less traumatic, and perhaps even comforting, vehicle of the fetish, “the moment of originary trauma is revisited and the scene is unconsciously reenacted under controlled and reassuring circumstances.” Mansfield interprets ORLAN as an explorer of fetishism; explicit photos of her surgeries—complete with distracting designer couture worn by the physician and ORLAN’s reading of French philosophical texts: visual props and theatricality—serve as fetishes “through which her performances might be psychically reenacted or authenticated” and by which we watch with horror.⁶³ Mansfield believes that horror is the specific emotion ORLAN seeks to arouse in viewers, yet she argues that fetishism transforms trauma to reassuring spectacle. As in Hollywood’s campy versions of *Frankenstein*, the horror is both preserved and disguised. Like Kauffman and Shelley, ORLAN orchestrates the Zeuxis myth on her own terms, viz., those of a woman with a point of view unavailable to men.

The comparison of ORLAN to both Kauffman and Shelley seems forced, however. First, Kauffman repeats the Zeuxis myth in order to inject female agency into a genre of painting and to counter a long-standing attitude that denied any identity and activity to beautiful models. By injecting herself into the scene, she replaces Zeuxis, taking control and coordinating the action. Moreover, she does not create anything like a monster, or provide any sort of fetishistic displacement of Freudian castration anxiety to her viewers. Shelley does create a monstrous literary invention, but her artistic intent seems quite unlike that of ORLAN, who repeatedly and undeniably states that she does not seek to make herself beautiful (as cosmetic surgery typically intends) nor to make herself monstrous (in spite of how viewers might initially see her, i.e., before they understand her artistic intent). Furthermore, if we invoke any standard definition of horror or the monstrous—for instance, that of Noël Carroll—horror (as often embodied in a monster) is the antithesis of beauty both visually and ethically.⁶⁴ In other words, someone of

horror, like *Frankenstein*, is also morally depraved. Where does Mansfield see the analogy between ORLAN's fetishistic self-portraits and the evil of *Frankenstein* and his monster creation? ORLAN's intent to subvert, not imitate, beauty ideals and her feminist agenda to create shifting, disembodied, hybrid identities is neither immoral nor ethically suspect. In fact, she optimistically aims for multiplicity, possibility, and virtuality. As far back as 1988, in a series of painted posters prior to her transformative surgeries, such as one entitled *Imaginery crédits for ORLAN before Saint ORLAN* (fig. 16.5), she playfully parodied Bernini's sculptural tribute to the ecstatic Saint Teresa of Avila, dressing up as the devotee but with breasts exposed and body on display.⁶⁵ Mansfield's harsh comparison and unfair characterization seems mistaken in that it denies a fair and plausible interpretation of ORLAN's oeuvre. Her misunderstanding of ORLAN's work also serves to influence the third author I discuss, Danielle Knafo.

Danielle Knafo's 2009 essay "ORLAN: Monster Beauty" praises ORLAN for the rebelliousness of her work—its deviance, its challenge to the social order, and its intention to change the world—by citing Frueh's concept of monster beauty and by adding her own reference to "the terrifying aspects of femininity . . . that simultaneously embrace and challenge Freud's notions of the castrated woman." She quotes Frueh:

Monstrousness is an unnamed and implicit feminine condition. . . . The Western tradition is populated by terrifically exciting female monsters, whose threat to men or male dominance is so great that they must be killed; Tiamat, the Sphinx, Medusa. Woman has been constructed as a hormonal and sexual monster whose physical attractions lure man into the *vagina dentata*, where he will be emasculated; whose femininity must be controlled through the administration of estrogen and progesterone and through dieting, the constriction of appetite. Female monsters in film can be monsters whose protectiveness of their spawn and whose procreative powers are both deadly to the human species—witness female villainy in the *Alien* films.

Frueh speaks of monstrousness as an implicit feminine condition that threatens men and makes them fear castration, recalling Freud. But she also points out how these assessments of women are male fantasies, or male projections, as Knafo readily admits. Frueh's goal is to suggest a productive way to build the body of (self-)love, not to create a monster to fulfill male fantasies. How, exactly, does Knafo argue that ORLAN actually seeks to be monstrous? Knafo goes on,



Figure 16.5. ORLAN, *Painted Posters* series, *Imaginery crédits for ORLAN before Saint ORLAN*, 1988. Acrylic on stretched canvas, painted by Publidécor, 300 × 200 cm. © ORLAN.

Indeed, it can be said that ORLAN's reincarnation gives birth to a type of she-monster. She has explicitly compared her artistic aim with the creation of a monster; and even had herself photographed as the Bride of Frankenstein in 1990. The difference between the two “monsters” is that she is the creator as well as the final product: the sacré monstre.⁶⁶

Here Knafo is replicating an argument (without citation) that appears in Mansfield's chapter on ORLAN, where Mansfield provides pictures of ORLAN's 1990 photograph *Self-Portrait with a Bride of Frankenstein Wig* next to a publicity photo of actress Elsa Lanchester from the 1935 Universal Studios film *The Bride of Frankenstein*.⁶⁷ At the outset, it should be noted that ORLAN has never compared her artistic aim with the creation of a monster; recall her comments specifically refuting this interpretation. Knafo is simply wrong on this issue.

Next, in the original comparison, Mansfield describes the filmic bride of Frankenstein as a being who is created (i.e., reanimated as a human being) “to mollify the monster's loneliness and violent hatred of humanity.” Several observations come to mind. First, this hardly seems to be the stuff—evil,

horror, castration-anxiety-inducing she-monster—of which a monster, male or female, is made. Yet Mansfield insists that ORLAN's imitation of the bride of Frankenstein is her creation of a new identity, “an unstable icon of femininity”: “At once reassuring in its mimicry of Hollywood glamour shots or glossy advertisements and threatening in its evocation of monstrosity, violence, and death, the figure in ‘Self-Portrait with a Bride of Frankenstein Wig’ vacillates between two subject positions: phallic mother and castrated and therefore threatening other.”⁶⁸

Second, being neither monster nor mother, the bride of Frankenstein was intended (we presume) to be the helpmate of the male monster, the Eve to his Adam. To attribute monstrosity as well as “erotic potential” to her is to present a caricature of the bride (who is already a parodic figure herself) as erotically charged and alluring monster. It is doubtful that Frueh would agree that the bride of Frankenstein, even as a mythic creation, could possess the allure of which she speaks so highly, the self-possessed, agentic sexuality of beauty and self-love.

Third, ORLAN's self-portrait as the Bride of Frankenstein was created in 1990, quite early in her artistic output: before *Entre Deux*, before *The Reincarnation of St. ORLAN*, and even before *Self-Hybridizations*. The photo of her with wig and dramatic pose is not the outgrowth of her surgeries and imaginative photographic plays on hybrid identity; rather, it is the precursor. To ascribe monstrosity to it as if it is tied to the bloody surgeries of her performances is to misconstrue its role within the evolution of her total artistic output and to inject a 1990 photo into 2009 critical discourse without acknowledging its date of production. Knafo goes on to briefly discuss *Self-Hybridizations*, and although she does not call these photographs monstrous (she sees them, in part, as ORLAN's refusal “to accept her body's limitations—its difference and/or lack—which place her in a state of castration”), she lumps them together with the previous examples, as if they too might be monstrous:

Thus, whether we gaze at Medusa's head, the head of Frankenstein's Bride, or the composite images of ORLAN's face with those of pre-Columbian, African, or Native American origin, we come tête-à-tête with the artist's hybrid images in an intimate yet bizarre reciprocal mirroring of her own devising.⁶⁹

Fourth, to link the supposed horror of the photo, i.e., the fact that ORLAN chose to picture herself as the Bride of Frankenstein, to the horror

of Hollywood movies seems superficial. It leads Knafo down the path of ascribing horror to ORLAN herself (birthing herself as a she-monster), ending with the “virtual disappearance of the female as the subject of beauty in the art of recent decades.” Nothing could be further from the truth; nearly every artwork and performance by ORLAN deals with beauty. Knafo is incorrect to claim ORLAN leaves it behind, just as she is wrong to attribute to her a preoccupation with monster beauty concurrent with her dismissal of real beauty. Her final assessment of ORLAN’s monstrosity reveals something even more important, however: “When classical traces of beauty appear in the works of artists like Hannah Wilke, Cindy Sherman, or ORLAN, it speaks as social commentary, rather than bristling with its own aesthetic energy.”⁷⁰

This leads to a final criticism of all three authors, and in fact, many feminist critics to date: they dismiss aesthetic concerns by attending primarily and solely to the nonaesthetic. Of course ORLAN, like many other artists with feminist intentions and effective strategies to construct critical discourse and viewer reactions, is explicitly concerned with social commentary. But that is not her only concern. Her choices of form, color, expression, medium, size, and technology all attest to her aesthetic decision-making priorities. It is not inconsequential that her photographs, whether of real or virtual beauty, are in themselves often both stunning and beautiful. Artistic choices are dictated by aesthetic concerns; to deny her that agency is to relegate the aesthetic import of her work to the trash heap. ORLAN expects her critics, particularly her supporters, to understand and appreciate the combination of both social commentary and artistic value.⁷¹ Viewers need to multitask! It is undeniable that ORLAN demands a lot of her audience, but then again, she spares us nothing. She gives her all.

Changes in Feminist Discourse

Perhaps, not surprisingly, there is a significant yet subtle change in the term “feminist” in evidence here, visible over time from 1998 to 2010. Tanya Augsberg, at one point in her 1998 essay, compares ORLAN’s negative views of her mother with those of Simone de Beauvoir, who unabashedly denounced the bourgeois housewife of twentieth-century France as too self-sacrificing (for the sake of family) and obsessed with an overly clean house and its sterile objects within. Augsberg is not alone in seeing similarities between generations of women, noting how both ORLAN and Beauvoir—in attacking idle housewives, i.e., their mothers—“can be viewed as the succeeding generation’s rebellion against its predecessors.”⁷² The history of

feminism, like that of philosophy, includes self-criticism and self-correction, so we should not expect this rebellion against one's predecessors to be unnatural or unwelcome. I only mention it here in order to make sense of why certain critics of ORLAN, namely Augsberg and still others too numerous to mention (including myself), have never attributed the descriptor "monster" to her work, and yet it has been applied three times (by O'Bryan, Mansfield, and Knafo) in only the first decade of the twenty-first century. Perhaps it is the psychoanalytic turn in the assessment of her work that invites the term. My suggestion is that a careful analysis of ORLAN's work with a focus on her artistic intent shows that it does not warrant the charge of monstrosity.⁷³

Conclusion: The Future of Virtual Beauty

Sorry, Kant and Kantians near and far, but virtual beauty is the wave of the future, and ORLAN is not the only one leading the charge. Elisabeth Azoulay and Françoise Gaillard, editors of the outsized project *100,000 Years of Beauty*, consider the many variations of "Mona Lisa and me" in an introductory essay to the fifth and final volume of the series, *Future/Projections*. Although Yasumasa Morimura's versions are not mentioned, they could easily have been included, since his virtual self-portraits as the Mona Lisa qualify as much as those they discuss, by Bani Thani, Dominic Philibert, Paul M. Constantin Boym/ELIKA, and an anonymous artist, all of whom hybridize the body and face to make it more diversified in its expansion to the five themes of the volume: cosmopolitanism, hypernarcissism, the third sex, mortality, and cyber sapiens. "Each one represents a window open onto a future whose mysteries stir our collective imagination," they write as they predict a future world that borrows from the imaginations of decades of science fiction writers and unlimited artistic visions.⁷⁴ They base their prediction on demographics, emphasizing that by the year 2050, 70 percent of the world's nine billion people will live in cities, all mixing together—majorities with cultural minorities—in melting pots of globalization, hybridization, new canons of beauty, and cosmopolitanism, where individuals will seek unique ways to distinguish themselves from others by beautifying in unimaginable ways, asking themselves "How many am I?" rather than "Who am I?" In light of this projection, ORLAN's deliberate exploration of self-hybridization is revered as a highly personal form of beauty and technoscience. Artificial wombs, cloning (of a third sex?), and the blurring of traditional age categories will lead to people living much longer lives, creating a new norm of elderly beauty for the species, a hybrid of postmortality, i.e., a form of mortality. Moreover,

technoscience will bring us far beyond the advances in self-invention offered by technologies like Photoshop, doubtless soon to be outdated.

The digital revolution has explored only a fraction of the full potential of virtual reality. The virtual realm will develop into a flood of ideas, images and sounds beyond our control, accessible instantaneously and simultaneously in all four corners of the globe.⁷⁵

These are lofty predictions with scary implications, particularly one's sense of loss of control, given the rather unfathomable number of nine billion people all being sustained by Planet Earth.

In an introductory essay, the philosopher Gaillard imagines persons of the future to be "nomads of identity," free from the delusion of "purity" because we have all come from various strains of lineage and we are "the fruit of inter-ethnic and inter-cultural *mélanges*. . . . We are all hybrid children of history." The nomad of identity will be at home anywhere, accepted and encouraged, resulting in a hybrid humanity. Most importantly, we will have overcome the resistance to change, the new, the alien, and the hybrid: "Deep-rooted prejudices had to be overcome as the hybrid figure had long borne the brunt of archaic fears. It was seen as an anomaly of nature, a monster that menaced a group's homogeneity by undermining its purity."⁷⁶ But those days are over, replaced by an open, optimistic, and welcoming view of the future:

The world has never before experienced such human migration through interposed images. From the East, South, Middle East or Far West, representations of oneself and others are diffused, exchanged and interpenetrated, along with one's cultural practices, beginning with those relating to beauty. An unprecedented kind of cosmopolitanism is being engendered before our eyes, at the junction of the real and the virtual. . . . What outcome will it have for the people of tomorrow? Two ways take shape: the fusion and confusion of aesthetic models and norms or their juxtaposition and cohabitation.⁷⁷

Acknowledgment and welcome of aesthetic change will follow nomadic identity, and this vision of the future is replete with considerations of new aesthetic norms, particularly for virtual beauty. There will be an aesthetic of "shock" that includes collages and juxtapositions (already very much in vogue), hybridizations of genes, cultures, and images from all over the planet, and the unlikely mix of both real and virtual whereby beauty will

often be defined as ugliness transcended. “The dictators of beauty will be disorientated, as instead of leading the ball they will be the ones who have to follow the movements of the street’s orchestration.”⁷⁸ In this unprecedented world, seeing ORLAN on the street will seem as ordinary as encountering her disembodied virtual hybrid beauty in large-scale, colorful, aesthetically pleasing photographs.

NOTES

My thanks to art historian Jean Robertson for comments on an earlier draft of this essay, as well as to the participants at the “Bodies of Art Conference” held at Florida Atlantic University, December 2, 2010, organized by Richard Shusterman. We were graced with the presence of ORLAN at this conference; she did not fail to impress.

The epigraph is fragment 84 from *Sappho: A New Translation*, by Mary Barnard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958). Sappho wrote poems from approximately the seventh to sixth centuries BCE on the Greek island of Lesbos. Many survive only as fragments.

1. Peg Zeglin Brand, “Bound to Beauty: An Interview with ORLAN,” in *Beauty Matters*, ed. Peg Zeglin Brand (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 289–313. On ORLAN’s website and in most writings about her work, the spelling used is “Self-Hybridations.” In two essays (one written by ORLAN herself) in Elisabeth Azoulay and Françoise Gaillard, eds., *100,000 Years of Beauty* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), vol. 5, *Future/Projections*, the spelling used is “Self-Hybridisations.” In *ORLAN: Le récit* [ORLAN: The Narrative] (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2007), two spellings are used: “Self-Hybridation” and “Self-Hybridization.” This essay will use “Self-Hybridization.” Also, the artist now spells her name ORLAN, in capitals. All of her artworks can be found at <http://www.orlan.net>.

2. ORLAN’s *Imaginary Generic no. 31: Successful Operation(s)* (1990) was a view of her posing in front of a schematic poster of her visual inspirations.

3. Brand, “Bound to Beauty,” 290.

4. Peg Brand, “Virtual Beauty: Orlan and Morimura,” in *Exploding Aesthetics*, ed. Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager, Lier en Boog Series of Philosophy of Art and Art Theory 16 (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2001), 92–104.

5. Brand, “Bound to Beauty,” 295.

6. In “Bound to Beauty,” I noted that ORLAN’s work “elicits shock and disgust” (289), particularly at the beginning of the *Reincarnation* series when audiences were unaccustomed to her graphic performance practices and their underlying meanings. At their most outraged, critics called her insane and deranged; at the very least, she was condemned as medically unethical, given her use of actual physicians to accomplish her surgical goals for the sake of art. A careful reading of my essay and its attempt to undergird her performances with philosophical, art-historical, and religious meaning yielded, at most, a description of her face as that of “an attractive woman” who had become “an odd combination” of superimposed features, most prominently the bumps on her forehead (295). Author Elizabeth C. Mansfield criticizes me for writing

one of many “ostensibly scholarly essays on her work [that] begin with statements like ‘ORLAN is a French performance artist whose work on beauty elicits shock and disgust,’” thereby implying that I was highlighting viewers’ response of shock and disgust and that I had somehow trivialized or denigrated ORLAN’s work. Nothing could be further from the truth, as my personal encounter with ORLAN only heightened my sense of curiosity and respect for her work. Interestingly, Mansfield herself describes ORLAN’s performances as “horrifying,” “grisly,” eliciting “outright disgust,” “dread,” and “horror” (Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007], 140–47 passim).

7. Jill C. O’Bryan, *Carnal Art: ORLAN’s Refacing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 135, 134, 136, 134, 135.

8. See John Strausbaugh, *Black like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult and Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2006).

9. Brand, “Bound to Beauty,” 293.

10. Quoted in O’Bryan, *Carnal Art*, 140, from “Body and Action,” in ORLAN: 1964–2001, ed. Maria Jose Kerejeta, trans. Brian Webster and Careen Irwin (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Artium; Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2002), 228.

11. Kathy Davis, “‘My Body Is My Art’: Cosmetic Surgery as Feminist Utopia?” *The European Journal of Women’s Studies* 4, no. 1 (February 1997): 26.

12. Peggy Phelan, “Cinematic Skin,” in ORLAN: *Le récit*, 73.

13. *Ibid.*

14. According to Wikipedia, a 1488 poem by Demetrios Chalcondyles described Venus as “blown by the moist breath of Zephyros” and was one source of the painting ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_Venus_\(Botticelli\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_Venus_(Botticelli))).

15. ORLAN, “Intervention,” in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 320.

16. Davis, “‘My Body Is My Art,’” 29. Davis also authored *Dubious Equalities and Embodied Differences: Cultural Studies on Cosmetic Surgery* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

17. *Ibid.*, 29–30. The quotation is from *Actuel* (January 1991), 78.

18. *Ibid.*, 30.

19. ORLAN, “Intervention,” 319.

20. Brand, “Virtual Beauty,” 94. Condition (iii) was prompted by an exhibition in which ORLAN invited viewers to participate by transforming and altering her digital images on computers she made available in the gallery.

21. O’Bryan, *Carnal Art*, 148, quoting ORLAN, “Body and Action,” in ORLAN, 1964–2001, 227, 229.

22. Davis, “‘My Body Is My Art,’” 30.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Brand, “Bound to Beauty,” 305.

25. *Ibid.*, 310.

26. The photograph can be seen on the website of the French Institute Alliance Française, on a page advertising a 2010 event celebrating the publication of Azoulay and Gaillard, *100,000 Years of Beauty*, <http://www.fiaf.org/events/winter2010/2010-02-02-loreal-beauty.shtml>.

27. Brand, “Bound to Beauty,” 306.

28. Brand, "Virtual Beauty," 97. For images, see the Luhring Augustine Gallery's website at <http://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/yasumasa-morimura>.

29. Serge Gruzinski is a historian from France, author of *The Mestizo Mind*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (New York: Routledge, 2002); his remark is quoted in Azoulay and Gaillard, *100,000 Years of Beauty*, 5:30.

30. Volume 5 of Azoulay and Gaillard, *100,000 Years of Beauty*, includes discussions of these issues and more, such as cosmopolitanism, new genders (a third sex), and cyber sapiens (mutants, posthumans, and cyborgs that bid "farewell to bodies," 166). I return to these topics later in the essay.

31. This and the following quotations are from ORLAN, untitled essay in Azoulay and Gaillard, *100,000 Years of Beauty*, 33.

32. See, for instance, *Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women 4*, the most recent version of a DVD examining hundreds of images from advertising and popular media, narrated by Jean Kilbourne (Media Education Foundation, dir. Sut Jhally, 2010, <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=241>).

33. M. Pernio, *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), 38, quoted in Eugenio Viola, "Le récit," in ORLAN: *Le récit*, 45.

34. "Isole mai trovate—Islands Never Found," Palazzo Ducale Fondazione per la Cultura, Genoa, <http://www.palazzoducale.genova.it/isole/index.html>, describing a group show at the Palazzo Ducale, Genoa, Italy, March 13–June 13, 2010.

35. ORLAN's newsletter for July 22, 2006, http://www.orlan.net/download/newsletter22jui106_bis.pdf, p. 2.

36. O'Bryan, *Carnal Art*, 134.

37. Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 2003), 75.

38. Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 30. See also Gregory Trianosky's essay in this volume.

39. Berlo and Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 212. For instance, portraits by Fritz Scholder (1937–2005, Luiseño) depict the "psychic cost of the gap between romantic and backward-looking popular stereotypes of Indians and the actualities of their daily lives" (224–25) while Carl Beam (born 1943, Ojibwa) has juxtaposed images from Western and Native history in his *Columbus Chronicles* (232).

40. Joanna Frueh, *Monster/Beauty: Building the Body of Love* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 5, 2.

41. *Ibid.*, 8.

42. *Ibid.*, 11.

43. *Ibid.*, 19–20, 289–92. Frueh cites Sherman's *Disasters and Fairy Tales* series, Jo Spence's breast surgery images, and Hannah Wilke's cancer treatment photographs.

44. Tanya Augsberg, "ORLAN's Performative Transformations of Subjectivity," in Phelan and Lane, *The Ends of Performance*, 288–89.

45. *Ibid.*, 291. Here Augsberg invokes Philip Auslander's interpretation of ORLAN's uglification in "Orlan's Theatre of Operations," in *Theatre Forum*, no. 7 (Summer–Fall 1995): 26, as well as Kathryn Pauly Morgan's call for a reassessment of "the domain of the ugly" in "Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women's Bodies," *Hypatia* 6, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 45–46.

46. Augsberg, "ORLAN's Performative Transformations of Subjectivity," 305.
47. *Ibid.*, 306.
48. O'Bryan, *Carnal Art*, chapter 5, 107–22.
49. *Ibid.*, 107.
50. *Ibid.*, 110, 111, quoting Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head" (1922), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), 18:273, and Jacques Lacan, *The Second Seminar: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1991), 164.
51. O'Bryan, *Carnal Art*, 112.
52. *Ibid.*, 113.
53. *Ibid.*, 134–36.
54. *Ibid.*, 137.
55. ORLAN, "Intervention," 321.
56. O'Bryan, *Carnal Art*, 137, quoting Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 317.
57. O'Bryan, *Carnal Art*, 137, 136. Indeed, O'Bryan compares the hybrids to Diane Arbus's photos of circus freaks (139).
58. *Ibid.*, 135, quoting ORLAN, "Body and Action," 228.
59. Mansfield, *Too Beautiful to Picture*, chapter 5, "Women Artists and the Zeuxis Myth," 75–102.
60. Mansfield, *Too Beautiful to Picture*, 96, quoting Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. Johanna M. Smith (Boston: Bedford Books/St. Martin's Press, 1992), 55, 57, 58.
61. Mansfield, *Too Beautiful to Picture*, 97.
62. *Ibid.*, 144.
63. *Ibid.*, 144–45, 146.
64. See, for instance, Noël Carroll, "Ethnicity, Race, and Monstrosity: The Rhetorics of Horror and Humor," in Brand, *Beauty Matters*, 37–56, as well as Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
65. Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* can be seen on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teresa_of_%C3%81vila.
66. Danielle Knafo, "ORLAN: Monster Beauty," in *In Her Own Image: Women's Self-Representation in Twentieth-Century Art* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 162.
67. Mansfield, *Too Beautiful to Picture*, 149.
68. *Ibid.*, 150.
69. Knafo, "ORLAN: Monster Beauty," 163, 166.
70. *Ibid.*, 162. As in her treatment of the *Reincarnation* series, she ignores the aesthetic properties and value of the *Self-Hybridization* images as well.
71. In her manifesto on *Carnal Art*, ORLAN expressed her assumption of aesthetic priorities: "My work is not feminist in its artistic dimension alone; I have also worked a lot in the political arena" (Brand, "Bound to Beauty," 303).
72. Augsberg, "ORLAN's Performative Transformations of Subjectivity," 293.
73. Given the limits of this essay, I leave the important and detailed task of assessing the differences in rhetoric between generations of feminist art criticism to others,

and I encourage all art lovers to pay more attention to the terminology we choose, particularly in light of ORLAN's repeated plea for more understanding and appreciation of her work.

74. Elisabeth Azoulay and Françoise Gaillard, "Mona Lisa and Me," in Azoulay and Gaillard, *100,000 Years of Beauty*, 7.

75. Ibid.

76. Françoise Gaillard, "Nomads of Identity," in Azoulay and Gaillard, *100,000 Years of Beauty*, 15.

77. Ibid., 18, 14.

78. Ibid., 18.