

13. Bound to Beauty: An Interview with Orlan

*I show images which almost make us blind. My work stands between
the folly of seeing and the impossibility of seeing.*

—ORLAN (October 1998)

Orlan is a French performance artist whose work on beauty elicits shock and disgust. Beginning in 1990, she began a series of nine aesthetic surgeries entitled *The Reincarnation of St. Orlan* that altered her face and body, placed her at risk in the operating room, and centered her within certain controversy in the art world. Undergoing only epidural anaesthesia and controlling the performance to the greatest degree possible (given that a surgeon does the actual procedure), she “choreographs” and documents the events. In 1993, one portion of a five-hour surgery, *Omnipresence*, was broadcast live to the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and Penine Hart Gallery in New York while Orlan interacted directly with critics and viewers watching on monitors.¹ Another performance was based in part on a text written by the French philosopher, Michel Serres, that asked:

What can the common monster, tattooed, ambidextrous, hermaphrodite and cross-breed, show to us right now under his skin? Yes, blood and flesh.²

Orlan’s aesthetic surgeries are integrally bound to beauty: more particularly, standards of feminine beauty codified in the art of “the great masters” of Western Europe, beginning with the Renaissance. By means of actual surgery—filmed in graphic detail—Orlan has altered her face to resemble a composite computer-generated image combining the chin of Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, the forehead of da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, the lips of Gustave Moreau’s *Abduction of Europa*, the eyes of a Fontainebleau School *Diane Chasseresse*, and the nose of Gerard’s *First Kiss of Eros*

Orlan, The Reincarnation of St. Orlan/Omnipresence. Scene from the operating room during Seventh Plastic Surgical Operation, November 21, 1993. Duration of performance: 5 hours; transmission: 1 hour. Courtesy of Sandra Gering Gallery, New York.

and Psyche.³ A template functions as the imagined Orlan: a technologically created composite of virtual beauties—where “virtual beauty” is defined as beauty “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. The actual Orlan, photographed during and after surgery, has realized each projected change: forehead, eyes, chin, and lips. Her project appropriates past norms of feminine beauty that were codified by revered artists but critiques them as well: both the control such norms wield over women and the subordination of women’s bodies in marriage, commerce, and art within patriarchal cultures. The ongoing artwork, *Reincarnation*, alters the physical body of Orlan but will also include a new name (and a legal change in identity).⁴ This is Orlan—*literally* at the cutting edge.

More recent work by Orlan consists of dozens of radically altered self-

portraits, realized in large-scale color photographs, called *Self-Hybridation*. In this series, she extends the notion of a template that operates as a guide for computer-generated identities but leaves the surgeon and operating room behind. Allowing for multiple transformations into visages that seem to originate in another time and place, these “portraits” are hybridized personae, unique constructions of past and present. The guiding role played by feminine beauty in *Reincarnation* is replaced by genderless norms of beauty in *Self-Hybridation*: norms held by both men and women as well as by members of various classes within the ancient Olmec and Maya civilizations. In these images, Orlan is pictured with crossed eyes, jewel-encrusted teeth, an enlarged nose, or a deformed skull. To our eyes, she does not look beautiful. Yet she brings to our attention the power of beauty to emerge and operate within a culture, even one so far removed from our own.

Her work has elicited debate from an amazing array of interpreters including physicians, psychologists, art critics, artists, philosophers, cultural critics, Women’s Studies scholars, and technophiles. As her performances are critiqued, a hierarchy of penetrating questions has emerged, beginning with the most basic, Is it art? and eventually taking more historical and contextual routes: How does her work relate to “Body Art” of the 1960s and 1970s, created primarily by male artists? What role does the graphic depiction of blood and flesh play and how does it relate to religious strictures about the sanctity of the body? How is aesthetic surgery different from cosmetic surgery? And most important, what is the role of beauty?

I have been fascinated for years by the work of Orlan: the controversy caused among art world critics, the abhorrence and rejection expressed by some feminist scholars, and the complex philosophical issues raised about the interaction of mind and body and what constitutes a person’s identity. For these reasons, I welcomed the opportunity to engage her in conversation where she generously shared her thoughts. I feel that two themes emerged that place her art squarely within recurring debates in the aesthetics and politics of bodily representation: (1) There is no one (universal) ideal of beauty, yet (2) we are bound to beauty in how we see ourselves and our relationships to others. When Orlan claims (in the opening quote) that images of her work make us blind and stand between the folly of seeing and the impossibility of seeing, she links together issues vital to perceiving art—what invites us (in) to look—to the way our assumptions and beliefs help mold what we *think* and *want* to perceive. Most people find the graphic display of a scalpel cutting through flesh nearly impossible to view. Yet, as in horror films or documentation of actual accident scenes or surgeries, we

Orlan au Masque Olmèque. *Digitally processed image,*
1998. *Courtesy of the artist with the collaboration of Pierre*
Zovile.

are drawn in to gaze, often more than once. Similarly, we may be horrified by the thought of babies' skulls being deliberately malformed in the name of beauty, yet we are curious as to how it would actually look. The folly of looking—of wanting to see what is horrible—is Orlan's stock in trade. The irony is that her exploration of beauty takes us down the grisly path one must travel in order to achieve beauty—causing us to subvert standard

philosophical notions of aesthetic distance and aesthetic appreciation.⁵ She brings us to the discomfort of a cutting edge which we aesthetically, and sadistically, enjoy.

Bound to Beauty: *Reincarnation*

I am not against cosmetic surgery at all. I am against the way cosmetic surgery is used. . . . It all comes down to this: The “envelope” [body] is not very important; I can change it if I want. The body is just like a costume, a bag.

Early on in Orlan’s project (1991), French psychologists, critics, and artists devoted an entire issue of a psychoanalytic publication to the relationship of her work to psychopathology and aesthetics, concluding that she was indeed sane and that her performances were art.⁶ American critic Barbara Rose argued in favor of art status based on “two essential criteria for distinguishing art from nonart, intentionality and transformation.”⁷ Feminist psychoanalytic writer Parveen Adams wrote about the “new space” opened up by Orlan’s surgeries. When the skin of her cheek, for instance, was lifted off her face during surgery, it created a space between the skin and what lay beneath. She interpreted the meaning of this physical space metaphorically: as the space between what is customary and what stands in contrast—the horrifying unknown; as the space between the inside and the outside. For her, the revelation of Orlan’s work is the underlying “emptiness of the image”:

It is here on the operating table that castration occurs, not in the act of cutting, not in the drama of the knife, not in the barely suppressed frenzy of it all, but in the space which is opened up. . . . Something flies off; this something is the security of the relation between the inside and the outside. It ceases to exist. . . . There is an emptying out of the object.⁸

Another feminist, Kathy Davis, approached the physicality and the meanings it evokes quite differently, coming at it from the perspective of a scholar seeking explanations for the increasing number of women who undergo routine modes of cosmetic surgery—procedures antithetical to certain feminist sensibilities.⁹ Her explanation of cosmetic surgery as a means of overcoming feelings of inferiority continues to cause controversy among feminists.

When it is assessed within the same context, Orlan’s work emerges as behavior that can be read simultaneously as feminist *critique* of beauty

practices today and feminist *utopia* where modern technology, as in standard cosmetic surgery which is designed to improve a woman's looks, brings about empowerment. Since Orlan does not attempt to become more beautiful or attractive, and has, in her words, come to look somewhat "monstrous," her performances are clearly distinct from cosmetic surgery. They are instances of what she calls "aesthetic surgery" and they result from a variety of complex intentions.

Since 1990, the year of Orlan's fortieth birthday, she has undergone nine surgeries, calling her work Carnal Art in contrast to the 1960s–1970s Body Art that captured the documented performances of Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, and Dennis Oppenheim and the four Austrian Actionists including Herman Nitsch, Gunther Brus, Otto Muehl, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler.¹⁰ Seeking to explain the differences between her work and the Austrian Actionists who claimed to be exploring the motif of sexual and erotic identity in the style of Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka, she wrote the Carnal Art Manifest: a series of definitions and observations on her work.

Carnal Art is self-portraiture in the classical sense, but realized through the possibility of technology. It swings between defiguration and refiguration. Its inscription in the flesh is a function of our age. The body has become a "modified readymade," no longer seen as the ideal it once represented.¹¹

As in traditional self-portraiture, the body is the subject matter of her art, but she also uses her physical self—her bodily flesh—to embody her depiction. No canvas, stone, or paper is used here! Unlike traditional painting or sculpture by which self-portraiture is achieved through a depiction or expression of the image of the body, she literally becomes (or transforms herself into) the *self* that is portrayed. Her portrayed self is both *de*-figured (destroyed, deconstructed) and *re*-figured (repaired, replaced). The body is the medium, but the physical attributes she borrows from Botticelli, da Vinci, and other artists are symbolic of characteristics *not* visible on the surface, that is, of personality traits or psychological characteristics. Each personage—Venus, Diana, Psyche, Mona Lisa, and Europa—is chosen for some quality each figure embodies or represents:

They all have some of me. Psyche is always sticking her nose into things. Diana traveled a lot; she is a goddess who doesn't surrender to men. Botticelli's Venus has the drive of birth. And Mona Lisa? A beacon, . . . the most enigmatic in all history of art. She is unavoidable.¹²

As with performances by other artists, actors, and dancers who use their

own bodies, she initiates and executes her plan. Agency and control are essential to the process; and the meaning of her work, and its ultimate empowerment, comes from her manipulation and appropriation of past icons of beauty. Unlike cosmetic surgery which is done to enhance the appearance of a person's face or body, however, she highlights the process, not the results. Borrowing from Duchamp, she calls the body a "modified" —not ideal—found object. It is not ideal nor can it ever achieve idealization; the beautifying surgery of modern technology, based on one's own projections, imaginings, or fantasies, is basically futile. Orlan offers herself as living proof: in the name of art.

My work is all about my own image, which is supposed to represent today's standards of beauty, as well as some "counter-standards," because these two bumps [on the forehead] are like a counter-standard of beauty today.

Orlan is referring here to the two silicone implants in her forehead, intended to resemble the forehead of the Mona Lisa. She has become an odd combination: an attractive woman with unnatural bumps, highlighted —for the sake of making them more prominent than they might ordinarily be—by two shades of frosted gold makeup. Her hair is bright yellow and black and she sports yellow and black eyeglasses. With no eyebrows, her forehead is even more prominent. Black lipstick and fingernail polish complete the look. The gaze she returns to onlookers is penetrating and intense; 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. She reports on how people react to her in public:

If you can't see me and someone describes me and they say, "This is a woman with two bumps," you'll think that I'm a monster and that I'm not pleasant: that you can't communicate with me. If you see me, however, it's different. And in my normal life—in the bus, in the subway, in the street—it ends up being very difficult for me. All types of people want to speak with me, look at me.

Orlan both appropriates and comments on male artists as she places herself within the history of how women are visually represented *by* men as codified by centuries of practice within the art world. As a composite of borrowed (false, virtual) beauty, she places her *self* as art within the context of the everyday world around her. But she also brings us face to face with the realities of how beauty standards function in art and advertising to motivate women to undergo dangerous cosmetic surgery simply for the sake of looking better. She questions the motivation of women who seek a

Portrait of Orlan. © 1997. Courtesy of the artist with the collaboration of Pierre Zovile.

simple “fix” to their physical problems: sagging breasts, crow’s feet, thick thighs. Her claim — “One thing is sure: it is through cosmetic surgery that men can exert their power over women the most” — reminds us that technology has made this possible and that, in the past, where male artists held the paintbrush and controlled the representation of women in the realm of high art, now male surgeons hold the scalpels and control the tucking, sucking, and erasing.

Such power can be overt, as in the case of a male surgeon operating on a female patient, or it can be more subtle. Some feminists, like Naomi Wolf, argue that women are duped “victims” of “the beauty myth” — pressured against their wills to undergo expensive and dangerous procedures in order to look better according to the ideals promoted by the male-dominated fashion industry and its massive advertising campaigns.¹³ In contrast, Kathy Davis asks why women should refrain from such procedures *if* they end up feeling better, more confident and self-assured. At issue is justified skepticism about basic motivation: For whom is the woman undergoing surgery? Is it for a husband, male lover, the fashion industry complex? Or is it (really) for herself?

Orlan realizes the futility of answering such questions like these that lie at the heart of feminist disagreements about cosmetic surgery. In truth, no one can answer them *except* the person undergoing the actual procedure and even then, like artists reporting artistic intentions, s/he may be self-deceived or deliberately untruthful. As she clearly states, Orlan is not against *all* cosmetic surgery but rather against *the way it is used*. She disapproves of women submitting their autonomy to the preferences of men. This manifests itself on several levels. First, on a personal level, Orlan’s manipulation of past codes of feminine beauty enables her to feel control, agency, and a new sense of identity and empowerment. Second, on a symbolic level, her simultaneous appropriation and critique of past art’s historically encoded norms of beauty is an instance of feminist activism; she attempts to show, by example, that the legacy of masculine portrayals of feminine beauty precludes women’s full agency and control. In appropriating the power inherent in the very act of creating the image, she wrests control away from men who help set the standards and enshrine them in oil on canvas. It is a political act that goes beyond art-historical significance. Hence the interest in her work by persons in the medical and health-related professions.

Orlan explicitly ties the uses of cosmetic surgery to the need for persons to reassert or reactivate an individual sense of identity:

In the past, women, and men too, had a much shorter life expectancy; women often died in childbirth. And very often, people, once they’ve reached seventy, wind up with a face they don’t recognize as theirs any longer. There is a loss of identity because they no longer recognize themselves. They are alien to themselves. And I think that, in this case, when it is too difficult to feel “other,” there is cosmetic surgery.

Until the time when we find “injections or drugs to cure facial disfigurement or disease,” the only option — other than to do nothing and risk

loss of one's sense of self—is cosmetic surgery. She cites an example close to home:

Recently, I was with a friend who is, I don't know, sixty-five or something like that, and she feels fine. She is married and happy with her husband. But she was telling me—it's very odd—she felt very healthy and had a lot of energy; still, people would say to her, "Oh, you look so tired." She would answer, "No, I'm not tired. I feel good." But you couldn't tell that she was fit anymore. She simply looked tired. And at first, she would tell me that she'd always been against cosmetic surgery but that now she couldn't stand people telling her that she looked tired when she wasn't. "I am not tired or sick and I want people to know and to see for themselves," she said. I think that by now, she's had surgery. It was for her social life, her normal life, but her herself too.

She contends that although cultural norms encourage us toward possibilities to educate, expand, and even alter and control our minds, we are not similarly encouraged toward physical changes. Recent trends of tattooing or body piercing seem innovative and experimental, yet they lack originality and lapse into mere conformism.

For example, many people said to me: "But your bumps, it's the same thing as tattoos or piercing." But for me, it's a very different thing because very often, those who do piercing do so to differentiate themselves from others. In fact, their intention is mainly to join a different group, another tribe, to "resemble." It's becoming a new kind of conformity. That's the danger.

Several people have suggested she try meditation or Zen techniques instead of changing her physical features. Her response brings us back to the issue of who she *is*, internally, in spite of her appearance: "I can change images of myself and still have this kind of radiance that some inner quality or strength allows me to have."

Perhaps this explains her disdain for a young Belgian fashion designer, Walter Van Beirendonck, whose initials, WLT, come from his nickname, "Wild and Lethal Trash." He has fashionably appropriated Orlan's bumps on both male and female runway fashion models as well as her rhetoric. For instance, one of her statements has been "Remember the future," and his statement is "Kiss the future." Orlan laments, "I don't want the imitation; I don't want to be the model."

Fashion has caught up with me. I mean that a great number of designers, American or French, find inspiration in my work. And there's one in particular, called WLT, who has made a lot of fashion shows with models on whom he put the same bumps I have, but these were made out of materials like latex or cinema make-up.¹⁴

She complains that he is imitating her implants simply to copy her, not to assert any individual sense of self or identity nor to make any sort of original artistic statement. This, too, is the problem with women who undertake surgery for the “wrong” reasons and why such reasons are attributed to *her* when she undergoes surgery:

A lot of women are very self-conscious; they want to look like the most beautiful women, like the supermodels we see on commercials or in magazines. So, when the critics hear “cosmetic surgery” in relation to my performances, they inevitably assume that I want to be the most beautiful woman, that I want to do as Michael Jackson does, or Cher, or I don’t know who.

Clearly this is not her goal, and she is “absolutely opposed” to any one standard of beauty or any notion of a timeless or universal ideal of beauty. Her fight against the visual icon of Venus—“the image I fight against the most”—was motivated by surgeons attempting to tell her *how* to proceed “correctly” with what they thought would be typical cosmetic surgery:

I had some surgeons tell me, “Your nose must be at a thirty degree angle, your chin here with respect to your forehead.” They showed me very precise pictures and some geometrical percentages, and so on and so forth. They would tell me: “This way is fine, you will be attractive; otherwise, you aren’t fuckable.” Really! Plastic surgeons didn’t really understand what my intentions were, and I had to go to the States, where I met a woman surgeon, a feminist, to get what I wanted.

Her problems may come as no surprise to those familiar with the world of cosmetic surgery which, like medicine in general, is dominated by men. Magazine and newspaper ads routinely advocate surgery as a site “where art and science meet,” that promise women they will still be *themselves*, only enhanced: “You. Only better.” One Web site, for example, advertises such procedures as breastlifts, lipsuction, rhinoplasties, facelifts, and other procedures against the visual backdrop of two classic works of art: an Ingres painting of nude women in a Turkish bathhouse and a small insert of Michelangelo’s image of God infusing life into the hand of Adam!¹⁵ Given that men are now undergoing surgery at increasing rates, Orlan finds her work caught in the subtle politics of the role good looks play in the lives of powerful *men* in the art world:

It’s very difficult for my work to be understood in art milieus because very often, the collectors—the people who have money, power, and who have almost all had cosmetic surgery—call my work “shameful.” They are ill at ease because they’ve already taken care of everything [i.e., their own looks].

To call her work “shameful” also raises ethical and religious questions similar to those asked about the work of Andres Serrano (creator of the controversial photograph, *Piss Christ*) and other artists. In the Manifest, Orlan seeks to contrast her motivation from that of typical surgery:

Carnal Art is not against aesthetic surgery, but against the standards that pervade it, particularly, in relation to the female body, but also to the male body. Carnal Art must be feminist, it is necessary. Carnal Art not only engages in aesthetic surgery, but also in developments in medicine and biology: questioning the status of the body and posing ethical problems.

She articulates the political and subversive role of the artist:

Carnal Art asserts the individual independence of the artist. In that sense it resists givens and dictates. This is why it has engaged the social, the media (where it disrupts received ideas and causes scandal), and will even reach as far as the judiciary (to change the name of Orlan).

And in contrast to the imitative fashion designer WLT, originality and playfulness play an important role:

Carnal Art loves parody and the baroque, the grotesque and the extreme. Carnal Art opposes the conventions that exercise constraint on the human body and the work of art. Carnal Art is anti-formalist and anti-conformist.

It is the opposition to constraints on the body—again a case of agency and control—that inevitably raises the issue of the pain she endures at the conclusion of her performances. She neither seeks nor condones it:

As distinct from “Body Art,” Carnal Art does not conceive of pain as redemptive or as a source of purification. Carnal Art is not interested in the plastic-surgery result, but in the process of surgery, the spectacle and discourse of the modified body which has become the place of a public debate.

Technology allows her to explore and exploit advances over the past several decades in aesthetic surgery and in medicine and pain control. As she notes, any presumption that the body is sacrosanct is already outmoded in medical circles:

Many people are against cosmetic surgery because it corresponds to an influence of our Christian religion, at least in Europe: one should not alter one’s body, one should accept oneself as one is. But I think that a lot of taboos concerning the body are going away, including that one. We realize that we can alter our body and that when we grow older, it seems normal to change a patella here, or put a plastic hip there, and there are no problems, physical or psychological. On the contrary, we feel better.

For Orlan, the step to extending this argument to elective changes in physical appearance is a small one:

We still think that if we change our appearance, the sky will fall down on our head! It goes along with the idea of doing something against nature. But I'm happy to take an extreme position on this, even if it's not genuine: I hate nature. Because I don't know where the switch is that forces me to die, for instance. I don't know how to switch it off, and this is what nature is: Life is a killer. . . . Nature represents everything that locks me in, that applies force on me, that bothers me.

She cites four examples: (1) growing up as an adolescent, unable to stop the natural process of developing breasts and pubic hair—"I couldn't stop it; it was against my will"; (2) later, several times when she became pregnant—"It was so unbelievable at first that I thought that my will alone would cause me to abort; but it didn't, nature kept it going"; and (3) now, at middle age—"I can't stop that thing which takes me closer to death." Perhaps her most convincing example, however, is (4) control of pain. She recalls an anecdote about a family acquaintance:

Recently, I was having a conversation with a woman in my family who wanted to deliver her baby with an epidural shot but shortly before she was due to give birth, called me to say: "You know, Orlan, actually I've decided to do things the natural way, normally. It will be an important experience in my life. I have to know what it's like."

Orlan's response was swift and certain, arguing by analogy:

It's so ridiculous because if we go to the dentist's to have a tooth pulled out, just before going, we don't say: "Hey, I wonder what it would be like to have it done without a shot? Maybe it would be an experience, maybe it would be interesting, natural!"

Thus, unnecessary pain is a form of *uncontrolled* nature that "bothers" her, that "locks" her in and "applies force." Anything outside one's control—death, pain, physical maturation, and pregnancy—are "natural"; they take place in spite of our resistance. From a philosophical point of view, it is interesting to note that these are all bodily processes and that Orlan's views about the body end up aligning her with some of the most influential dualist thinkers like Plato and Descartes. The most tenacious doctrines of male-dominated philosophy include those that hold that persons consist of mind and body, that the body is far inferior to the mind, and that man (and in nearly all cases men exclusively and not women) are defined by the rationality of their functioning minds. It has been only recently that feminist philosophers have challenged the legacy of Western philosophy, searching for ways to rescue the body, which was previously

seen as an impediment to knowledge, and to secure status and integrity for the emotions, which were seen as an antithesis and impediment to reason. Is it conceivable that Orlan's attention to the body is a feminist philosophical activism as well? Although there is no space to pursue it here, future philosophical investigations into Orlan's assumptions would prove fruitful, especially in light of Plato's *Symposium*, in which the eternal and intangible Form of Beauty is first perceived and appreciated *in* the body through sexual attraction.

Orlan's thoughts on the body as "envelope" — changeable without limit — remind us that we live in an age of startling technological advances that enable us to control nature more than ever before. It is logical, then, to extend the category of what is natural (given to us by nature) to the body and its parts that cause us unhappiness or dissatisfaction, especially the changing, aging body. Cosmetic surgery is one means of alteration now available. The body and face given to us by nature can easily be changed. Consider the case of the Barbie "clone" — a woman with an extremely high (in fact, MENSA-level) IQ who has undergone eighteen surgeries to resemble the famous Barbie doll in order to improve her social life (so she says); or the many women who undergo breast implants; or numerous girls who choose to get nose jobs to mask undesirable ethnic traits.¹⁶

The religious implications of Orlan's views about nature, natural pain, and pain in childbirth have led some to consider her work as blasphemous. She places her pain in the broader context of women's pain as it has been recorded in scripture and religious doctrine:

The famous "You shall deliver in pain" is still deeply fixed in women's minds, just as religions dictate: Suffering is prestigious, it means you'll get to Heaven, it's good. To me, suffering is a mere alarm signal that goes off when our body is sick; we don't need more suffering. So, this is my first goal concerning suffering: to show that suffering is uninteresting. In fact, the times we live in are wonderful, for we are overcoming pain; at least we can control it.

She elaborates in the Manifest:

Carnal Art finds the acceptance of the agony of childbirth to be anachronistic and ridiculous. Like Artaud, it rejects the mercy of God. Henceforth we shall have epidurals, local anaesthetics and multiple analgesics. Hurray for morphine! Down with the pain!

In addition, she highlights the difference in attitudes toward pain management in France and the United States:

My work is not about standards of beauty alone; it is also on physical pain, in Europe and particularly in France. I believe that, concerning pain,

things are different where you're from. For instance, in hospitals in France, most of the time, they don't give palliative care. When people die, they are left in agony for days without the morphine or drugs that would alleviate the pain.

Thus pain management operates as an issue of medical ethics as well as an issue for women in childbirth since both are involved with control over one's body, whether male or female. Carnal Art is the site where these concerns come together:

Carnal Art does not inherit the Christian Tradition, it resists it! Carnal Art illuminates the Christian denial of body-pleasure and exposes its weakness in the face of scientific discovery. Carnal Art repudiates the tradition of suffering and martyrdom, replacing rather than removing, enhancing rather than diminishing—Carnal Art is not self-mutilation.

Her goals, then, are both artistic and political:

I am one of those women who fought a lot to defend the right to have an abortion (at a time when women who had abortions were hunted down like witches) and to use contraception. My work is not feminist in its artistic dimension alone; I have also worked a lot in the political arena. That's why I also work among women, because the idea that childbirth has to be painful is still widespread. And in my mind, this is ludicrous.

Her intentions are insistently feminist, in spite of being misunderstood and alienated in what she considers a hostile atmosphere in France:

You do not realize how widely feminism is accepted in the States. But in France, if you declare: "I am a feminist" or if people think you are, well, your career as an artist might as well be over. People won't pay attention to you any more.

She recounts two instances as evidence:

Something quite extraordinary happened: There was an exhibition held in Beaubourg and there were guidelines for the art historians who wrote in the catalogue. One of them was told not to use the word "feminism." I was not part of this exhibition and somebody told me, literally, "Your work is too feminist." In another case, the cover photo for a catalogue for an exhibition in Italy has a woman on all fours! That's Europe for you. I don't think you would find this in the States.

In addition, she cites examples where the public and critics from the art world have misunderstood her explicitly stated feminist intentions:

First, I was on a television show with Madonna. It was a program about sex, provocation, and religion. On this program—it was a fake live program with an audience of maybe five hundred people—I said that my nose was natural, that I never had any surgery on my nose, and that if one

day I do, it will be very, very big (like the Mayas). Still, at the end of the program, three people in the audience, three young women, came up to me. It was quite comical. They put their hands on their noses and said to me: Do you see how ugly our noses are: so long, so big! We want a nose just like yours. Tell us, who is the surgeon who did it? We want exactly the same nose.

Now another story, because the most difficult thing about my work is to make myself understood, because my work goes against our customs, our habits, to such an extent that people cannot see it; all they hear is “cosmetic surgery.” When I came back from the States with my bumps which, at the time, were much bigger — there’s since been a physiological change — one of my friends told me: “I’ll make a deal with you; I’ll throw a huge welcome-back party in your honor in a night club called Le Palace but in return, I want you to allow me to organize a press conference, so that at last, the press will stop saying stupid things about your work.” And I agreed and found myself in front of about sixty international journalists, and I told them, “Look at my head! Will you stop saying that I want to look like Venus, which is the image I fight against the most? For me, this is what I want to debunk. And stop saying that I want to look like Mona Lisa. You can see it’s not true. Do you understand now?” Afterwards, more than fifty percent of the headlines in the press read, “She wants to be the most beautiful woman,” “She wants to look like Venus,” or “She wants to look like the Mona Lisa.” Headlines! At times it is irritating; at other times, it is amusing, but what is terrible for me is that now a whole movement has started. Namely, some art historians took what had been said in the popular press, elaborating some big theories that were all wrong. Even in one of my catalogues, one that was done quickly in Italy and that I didn’t have a chance to proofread, an art critic wrote about my ideal of beauty, etc. It’s just unbelievable. It’s crazy. It’s very difficult.

Orlan’s frustration with viewers’ misunderstanding of *Reincarnation* is understandable given her explicit denial that she intends to improve her physical appearance with cosmetic surgery. Such circumstances have led her to move in a direction that is less likely to be misinterpreted and which places *Reincarnation* within a broader spectrum of exploration. Moving away from Western European standards of feminine beauty and her own reconfiguration based on Diana, Psyche, Venus, Europa, and the Mona Lisa, recent work explores an expanded notion of beauty while simultaneously infusing technology with a more prominent role.

Bound to Beauty: *Self-Hybridation*

Orlan’s *Reincarnation* series can now be placed within a broader cultural and historical context in light of more recent work that features computer-generated self-portraits with Olmec and Mayan features:

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.¹⁷

In *Self-Hybridation*, Western European standards of feminine beauty no longer function as virtual beauty that inspires actual surgery. Instead, computer-generated self-portraits become examples of virtual beauty that allow the artist to pursue a range of “multiple, evolving, mutating identities”:

I am not like most transsexuals, for instance, who have a mental image of themselves that they want to resemble at any price. To my mind, everyday results are not important. It's not my problem, and what I like is multiple, evolving, mutating identities, not one fixed identity with an image you want to resemble.

This new phase of techno-art enables her to transform self-portraits into dozens of images that seem to spring from another time and place: hybridizations of past and present, the real and the imagined. The role of beauty in these works differs from that in *Reincarnation* since Orlan adopts the norms of beauty from the past, shaping her own computer image according to ancient cultural codes of Olmec and Maya symbols of regal and supernatural power, thereby becoming on-screen (and in printed photograph) a hybrid of virtual beauty.¹⁸

What sorts of refigurations does Orlan create? First, she borrows two distinct styles from the Olmec tradition. One comes from giant basalt rocks called “Colossal Heads” from the Gulf Coast region of Mexico, some of which measure seven to twelve feet in height and weigh five to twenty tons. They are believed to be individualistic portraits commemorating male rulers, expressing respect and honor. Volcanic in origin and thus a manifestation of earthly power, the placement of the heavy stone—eventually located miles away and at higher elevations than their original source—is a testament to the ruler's organizational power to coordinate the many people needed to transport them to a place of veneration. Stylistically, the faces were round, full, curvilinear, and naturalistic:

The heads represent adult males wearing close-fitting caps with chin straps and large, round earplugs. The fleshy faces have almond-shaped eyes, flat broad noses, thick protruding lips, a slight frown, and downturned mouths.¹⁹

The other Olmec style was quite different. Found in life-sized masks—often made of jade and placed on top of the deceased ruler's face upon burial—as well as on much smaller maskettes, faces were generally more abstract, geometrical, and idealized. Human and animal images, and com-

posites of the two, as in the case of the human jaguar (also a representation of the Olmec Supreme God), were routinely depicted.²⁰ The facial mask became the repository for the ruler's likeness: not in terms of specific physical features that captured resemblance, but rather in symbolic patterns of proportion and symmetry that captured a ruler's *inner* transformation, thus revealing the true nature of the wearer. The masks of one particular period, from 900–600 B.C.E., are described as “spiritually ecstatic faces” designed “to represent the soul within” by means of the “beauty of geometric shapes.”²¹ One example of this time period, an illustrated incised mask made of white and gray jadeite, seems to provide the inspiration for one of Orlan's hybrid faces which adopts conventions from the two Olmec styles: broad forehead, elongated skull, almond-shaped eyes, large curved nose with enhanced bridge, full lips, down-turned open mouth, elongated ears, and facial line drawings. The following explanation offers guidance on the incised line drawings of the illustrated Olmec figure as well as the hybridized face of *Orlan au masque Olmeque*:

Made legible by the red pigment rubbed into the fine lines, the incisions are divided into four major elements: an irregular, rectangular cartouche surrounding the right eye, a T-shaped element below the right eye, and vertical bands on either side of the face. . . . The profile heads of the cartouche recall the T-shaped monoliths of Teopantecuanitlan. The encircled double merlons suggest the portal and passage to the supernatural realm. The triple-pronged element between them may be a cloud motif and symbol of the celestial realm. The cartouche may then be understood to represent an enclosed court, a sacred precinct in which the wearer of this mask was a ritual performer. These incisions speak to the shamanic empowerment of both the mask itself and its wearer.²²

Thus Orlan becomes, through computer-generated images, a composite of two distinct Olmec styles as well as a hybridization of past and present. She creates a hybrid which replicates the process of hybridization crucial to sustaining the ancient culture. Art objects like masks were seen as animate: more than just art objects, they were links with primordial power. The predominance of human forms in specific idealized proportions sought to convey the character of the ideal ruler and his role within society, a society whose welfare was in his hands. One of his main responsibilities was to feed his people and since the principal crop was corn (maize), its role in the culture's representations was recognized as a central life force of the earth and the ruler. Hybridizations of corn successfully carried out by the Olmec people required not only an extensive knowledge of plant reproduction but also considerable ingenuity. Maize, the great Mesoamerican

Incised Olmec mask, 900–600 B.C.E. White and gray jadeite with red pigment, 17 cm (height) x 16 cm (width) x 9 cm (depth). Courtesy of Justin Kerr.

staple, could only reproduce with human intervention and it is postulated that the women were the gardeners who performed such tasks.²³ Olmec scholars now consider such hybridizations to have functioned at a metaphorical level as well, that is, like composite figures of human and animal, they represented a symbolic synthesis of two life forms made more powerful as one.

This theme was also replicated by the Mayas, who depict in some of their illustrations the combination of two sexes into one deity. One example is an Earth or Moon God/Goddess which is half male, half female. Even more notable is the divine nature of Lord Pacal, designated as both

male and female, whose features—known to us from a tomb sculpture from the mid-seventh century B.C.E.—are also replicated by Orlan.²⁴ Consider this description from an art history text:

A stucco portrait of Lord Pacal found with his sarcophagus shows him as a young man wearing a diadem of jade and flowers. His features—sloping forehead and elongated skull (babies had their heads bound to produce this shape), large curved nose (enhanced by an ornamental bridge, perhaps of latex), full lips, and open mouth—are characteristic of the Maya ideal of beauty. Traces of pigment indicate that this portrait, like much Maya sculpture, was colorfully painted.²⁵

Other Orlan images offer many variations: some showing the Maya nose, another with crossed eyes, and another with filed-down, jewel-encrusted teeth. This collection of images (available on CD-ROM) is a type of catalogue of her work, and as she notes, is “not definitive” but is rather open-ended; “It’s possible here to do many things.” Humor even plays a

Orlan Pacal de Palenque. *Digitally processed image, 1998. Courtesy of the artist with the collaboration of Pierre Zovile.*

Lord Pacal, from his tomb in the Temple of Inscriptions, Palenque. 17th century, stucco. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City.

role, as Orlan pictures herself with Olmec and Maya features with rollers in her hair. This points to the consistency in her underlying message of both appropriation and critique. The egalitarian nature of the standards of beauty employed by Orlan (that operated for both men and women) also draw our attention to issues of class as well as gender. She explains:

The main idea is to study the deformations of the skull found in the Olmecs and the Mayas. They would put a wooden frame on the baby's head as soon as he was born, in his crib, and for the first three years of his life, this frame would be tightened until the fontanel was firm, so that the

skull is permanently oblong. Such deformations were found in all social classes in the Mayas, on both men and women. There was no difference.

Orlan remarks, "It wasn't a religious thing; it was an aesthetic thing." As she notes, the Maya also appreciated crossed eyes.

They would place a ball of wax or clay on the baby's nose until the child squinted. There were other criteria of beauty such as filing down teeth and having them inlaid with diamonds, jades, or precious stones. And another study is about Mayan noses. Dignitaries wore false noses for ceremonies: long noses starting from the forehead, with a large bump.

Transforming computer-generated images of herself along Mayan lines again highlights the malleability of her own facial features and the "multiple, evolving, mutating identities" that result. Like *Reincarnation*, she is less interested in the product than the process. *Self-Hybridation* highlights the process of experimenting and manipulating virtual beauties, so much so that in her recent exhibitions, viewers are allowed to actively participate in the process of experimenting with individual features of her "interactive 3-D clone" which ask questions of viewers by means of Aztec riddles on parts of the body.²⁶ She encourages viewers to repeatedly "hybridize" her image, thereby empowering them with agency to change her looks. They come to share firsthand in the ancient Olmec process of cultivating hybrids, creating twentieth-century virtual beauties of their own.

Given the emerging interest in virtual reality in recent art, it is noteworthy that Orlan has been preoccupied with these issues since 1990. In her early work, computer technology fabricated the template of various norms of western European feminine beauty as inspiration for self-exploration through actual surgery. Beauty was "lifted" from paintings of the past while it was simultaneously critiqued. The computer-generated image of a face incorporating past beauties was virtual, but the surgery and pain were real. In *Self-Hybridation*, technology to create virtual beauty becomes primary. Olmec and Maya standards of beauty, power, and agency function as inspiration but also as a visible means, as created masks of virtual beauties: as metaphor for inner strength achieved through transformation.

As Orlan pursues the process of creating "multiple, evolving, mutating identities" we are drawn into how "the spectacle and discourse of the modified body has become the place of a public debate." She underscores the futility of the philosophical search for one universal standard of beauty while she undermines the security of personal identity that rests solely on one's looks. Most of all, she encourages us to ponder the extremes: the

impossibility of seeing (the horror of Carnal Art) and the folly of seeing (the playfulness of techno-art). Philosophy shows that we have defined ourselves as *rational* human beings that privilege mind over matter; but history shows we are *emotionally* bound to elusive, impossible ideals of beauty manifested in the physical body. Technology may ultimately show us that in our folly, the only beauty we can ever (really) attain is virtual.

NOTES

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes of Orlan's speech are from the interview she did with me in Paris, France, on October 8, 1998.

I would like to thank Dr. Emita Hill for invaluable help with translation during the interview, and Chad Langford for his skillful transcription and translation of the recorded conversation. Thanks also to Carolyn Korsmeyer for helpful suggestions on an earlier draft.

1. For over an hour, she answered faxes. Her current gallery in the United States is the Sandra Gering Gallery. In addition, there are several others in Europe and one in Israel.

2. Additional text from Michel Serres's *Tiers-Instruit* reads: "Science talks of organs, functions, cells and molecules, to acknowledge that it is high time that one stopped talking of life in the laboratory." See Miryam Sas, "The Doyenne of Diva-section," *Mondo* 2000 13 (Fall/Winter 1995): 109.

3. The plan to alter her nose to that of Psyche has not yet been realized.

4. Part of the plan is to adopt a new legal name at the completion of the series of surgeries.

5. For a discussion of how Orlan's graphic images both repel and attract (thereby causing viewers to experience them both disinterestedly and interestedly) and how a viewer's cognitive predisposition may affect such viewing, see my essay, "Disinterestedness and Political Art," in *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998), pp. 155–171.

6. *VST, Revue Scientifique et Culturelle de Sante Mentale* 23/24 (September–December, 1991). Two of the essays are descriptions of three of the first five operations, written by the attending surgeon, Dr. Cherif Zahar.

7. Barbara Rose, "Is It Art? Orlan and the Transgressive Act," *Art in America* 81, no. 2 (February 1993): 87.

8. Parveen Adams, *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Differences* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 153–154. Orlan plans another surgery in the future. Although it is not a part of the *Reincarnation* series and is as yet unscheduled, she speaks of a surgical event in which she will defy the traditional connection between an "open" body, pain, and suffering. In her Carnal Art Manifest, she wrote: "I can observe my own body cut open without suffering! I can see myself all the way down to my viscera, a new stage of gaze." In our interview, she notes that our "old" bodies—receptors of old ways of thinking—must overcome the natural reaction "that when we see an open body, this body is not necessarily dying, due to war, torture,

or sickness; that today, an open body does not have to be a suffering body.” When asked what she intends to open and why, she points to her underarm and replies: “I plan to have a large opening here, because here, we have hair; it looks like the genital area, and I can place my head very close and have close-ups of myself smiling, laughing, or reading, when my body is open.” Calling it “an operation of opening and closing of the body” —she plans to be awake throughout and to block the pain by means of a local anaesthetic. She adds, “Maybe it will take place in the year 2000; I’m ready to stop having surgery. I don’t want to have surgery all my life. I’d like to stop having cosmetic surgery.”

9. Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) and “‘My Body Is My Art’: Cosmetic Surgery as Feminist Utopia?” *The European Journal of Women’s Studies* 4, no. 1 (February 1997): 23–37. Davis is professor of Women’s Studies at Utrecht University, the Netherlands.

10. Schwarzkogler reportedly bled to death after cutting his penis; it was discovered later that the event was a fake. His work has been called “staged photography.” See Rose, “Is It Art?,” p. 87.

11. The Carnal Art Manifest is an unpublished manuscript.

12. From a 1991 interview by A. C. Remond, *France-Soir*, February 12, 1991.

13. For only a small sampling, see the writings of Susan Bordo, *Twilight Zone: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (New York: William Morrow, 1991); and Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

14. Valerie Steele mentions Van Beirendonck in her “Letter from the Editor,” in *Fashion Theory* 2, no. 2 (June 1998): 109. In the same issue, author Kate Ince discusses Orlan’s art in relation to skin (the covering of the body) and fashion. “Operations of Redress: Orlan, the Body and Its Limits,” pp. 111–128. Ince is writing a book-length manuscript on Orlan.

15. The latter is from the Web site of The Aesthetics Center (the Banis-Derr Center for Plastic Surgery) located at www.aesthetics.org/.

16. One report notes a decline in these numbers based on the current desire of women to retain “a natural look,” in contrast to past decades. “They’re not trying to erase their ethnic background anymore,” said a Park Avenue surgeon. In addition, insurance coverage is less extensive. Jane Gross, “As Ethnic Pride Rises, Rhinoplasty Takes a Nose Dive,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1999, sec. 4, p. 2.

17. A number of these works were exhibited in “Out of Portrait” in October 1998 at the exhibition space of Espace D’Art Yvonamor Palix at FIAC (an exhibit of 150 galleries) and at Yvonamor Palix Gallery (from November 1998 to January 1999), both in Paris.

18. The earliest Olmec society began around 1200 B.C.E. and lasted into 400 B.C.E. It was the first major Mesoamerican civilization, extending from central Mexico (near Mexico City) into northern Central America, where some of the earliest agricultural settlers located in the Andean region of South America. The earliest Maya civilization arose around 1000–300 B.C.E., gaining its own identity in 300 B.C.E.–250 C.E. in southern Mesoamerica (Guatemala, the Yucatan peninsula, Belize, and the eastern part of

Honduras and El Salvador). It peaked 250–900 C.E. and endured until the Spanish Conquest in 1500 C.E. The influence of the Olmecs on the Maya was particularly widespread between 1000–300 B.C.E. but the two cultures still maintained distinct artistic styles and goals. See Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams), pp. 445–447.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 448.

20. Caroline E. Tate cites evidence from Beatriz de la Fuente in an essay, “Art in Olmec Culture,” in *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership*, ed. Michael D. Coe (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Art Museum, in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1995), p. 47.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

22. A mask with incisions is described in Coe, *The Olmec World*, p. 268. Another mask, not pictured here, contains a V-shaped cleft which is also utilized by Orlan. The cleft is an interesting element, described by Coe on p. 154 as follows:

The extension at the top of the head is broken, but the beginning of a V-shaped cleft can be seen. The meaning of this motif, a defining attribute of the Olmec style, is much debated. Various interpretations have been offered, i.e., that it is the result of a blow to the head from an axe, the fontanel of a newborn baby, the furrow of a jaguar’s head, or the split in the skin of a toad beginning the molting process. It is read as a “generalized deity head” or symbol of fertility, perhaps the corn plant itself, or the parted earth from which the plant emerges, a symbol of passage from the terrestrial to the supernatural realms. The V-shaped cleft appears in so many different contexts that it cannot represent an attribute of a specific deity, but it is an all-powerful one for a shamanic ruler to appropriate and incorporate into his own image.

23. David A. Freidel, “Preparing the Way,” *The Olmec World*, p. 4.

24. See the Codex illustrations associated with the tomb of Lord Pacal in James C. Gruener, *The Olmec Riddle: An Inquiry into the Origin of Pre-Columbian Civilization* (California: Vengreen Publications, 1987), pp. 271, 276.

25. Stokstad, *Art History*, p. 454.

26. More information on *Self-Hybridations* can be found online at: <http://www.cicv.fr/orlan>. The exhibit is not yet scheduled for the United States.