

Castration and Medusa: Orlan's Art on the Cutting Edge

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French multimedia artist Orlan (b. 1947) literally altered her body and identity in the name of art by undergoing multiple cosmetic surgeries that replaced her features with those from art historical masterpieces. She transformed herself into an *objet d'art* as well as a site for public debate, thereby injecting a radical sensibility into Western art and its history. The provocative surgeries at the core of Orlan's "carnal art" both exemplify and expand Freud's notion of castration to include the wish to transcend gender and even the body itself. Like Medusa, Orlan confronts us with blinding images that compel us to question our assumptions about art, beauty, gender, identity, and technology. Her project shows us the fate of human embodiment in a posthuman age. In addition to elucidating her social, feminist, and aesthetic agenda, this paper clarifies her personal psychology and her work's effect on the audience.

Art that interests me has much in common with—belongs to—resistance. It must challenge our pre-conceptions, disrupt our thoughts; it is outside the norms, outside the law, against bourgeois order; it is not there to cradle us, to reinforce our comfort, to serve up again what we already know. It must take risks, at the risk of not being immediately accepted or acceptable. It is deviant, and in itself a social project. Art can, art must change the world; it is its only justification.

—Orlan

Several years ago, French multimedia artist Orlan spent the night at my place. Before retiring for the night, she asked me if I had any makeup remover. I shall never forget how we stood shoulder to shoulder before the bathroom mirror, each removing the masks we used to face the world, two middle-aged women, me with wrinkles around the eyes and creases at the sides of my mouth and she with her horned implants, swollen lips, and translucent skin, the results of her many cosmetic surgeries. As she wiped the dark purple from her lips and the silver glitter from her horns, I couldn't help thinking about Freud's concept of the uncanny—*unheimlich*, unhomey—and its opposite—*heimlich*, familiar and of the home. We were engaged in a very conventional female bonding experience and yet the difference between our faces *was* uncanny. Mine was the result of aging, the surrender to time and gravity, whereas hers the result of unbending intent. Horns do not normally grow out of the human head, nor do faces inherit a disparate collection of features from classical art.

I wondered how my then 3-year-old son might react to Orlan in the morning. Would he recoil in fear at her two-colored head, hair half black and half bright yellow? Would the matching thick round black and yellow glasses remind him of an owl's eyes? Would he want to touch the horns on the sides of her head? I reflected, too, on how many of my colleagues and attendees at

lectures I'd given on Orlan seemed stuck on the issue of whether she was a revolutionary and groundbreaking artist or simply "sick" and her "art" an expression of sheer pathology. I'd always found this issue tedious, for just as a system of reasoning depends on its axioms for the path to its conclusions, so too the response to the question of Orlan and her art depends on the presuppositions of the viewer; and it is precisely our assumptions about art, art history, female beauty, gender politics, and technology that Orlan seeks to disrupt and even overturn. If one is willing to bear the disruption imposed by Orlan's art and subvert the defensive response it engenders, one is rewarded with a radically provocative vision that consistently defies either/or definitions. Nothing in a once familiar world is as it seems and everything is opened to re-arrangement, re-interpretation, and re-creation.

When I awoke the next morning I found the two of them talking playfully, my son unbothered by her appearance. I thought again of Orlan's powers—female powers—of seduction and repudiation. She had invited my son into a play space, a space alive with possibility and contradiction, a space not unlike the one opened to us through her world of art, whose physical center is her very own body—a play most serious indeed.

In 1981, Orlan produced *Documentary Study: The Head of Medusa* at the Musée S. Ludwig in Aix-la-Chapelle. In this performance piece, spectators were invited to gaze, through a large magnifying glass, at the artist's colorfully painted genitals glimpsed through a hole at the center of sheets taken from her trousseau. Orlan's *Documentary Study* is meant as a reference to Marcel Duchamp's famous *Etants Donnés*, in which the viewer peers through a crack in a barnyard door to witness the splayed body of a woman who appears to have been raped and killed. At the end of Orlan's piece, the artist handed out a text taken from Sigmund Freud's (1922) "The Medusa's Head," in which he wrote, "At the sight of the vulva even the devil runs away." This is a misquotation attributed to Freud, who actually wrote, "We read in Rabelais of how the Devil took flight when the woman showed him her vulva" (1922, p. 274). In any case, Freud was referring to the moment in which boys (and girls) come to the realization of the mother's absent penis which, he believed, forces a reckoning with the reality of gender difference and, more traumatically, the possibility of castration.

Orlan's self-named "carnal art" very explicitly deals with castration fantasies and gender differences.¹ She is best known for the radical and unprecedented employment of cosmetic surgery in her art which, as in her Medusa performance piece, recreates the notorious Freudian moment by traumatizing her viewers with unforgettable visual scenes of mutilation that horrify and repel but, more important, attack the schisms of male–female, inside–outside, real–artificial, art–life, and castrated–castrating, all of which challenge our normative and restricted understanding of gender and identity. Orlan is an artist who stages an encounter between castration anxieties and psychoanalytic, feminist, and postmodern theories as well as medicine and religion.

More than 100 years ago, psychoanalysis began by examining and trying to comprehend women's bodies—hysterical bodies, bodies that feigned illness even though they were physiologically intact. Orlan readdresses many of psychoanalysis' major concepts about the female body in her performance of hysteria as a critical method. Consequently, she has been labeled blasphemous for upsetting the bourgeois order and her art deviant and mad for its agenda aimed at social provocation and change. Here I explore Orlan's mind-body theater to highlight the

¹To see Orlan's art, go to www.orlan.net or click on Orlan at Google images.

many psychological dynamics at play in the complicated process she has initiated in her revolutionary art form. In addition to her artistic, feminist, and social agenda, I clarify the personal psychology of someone who has undertaken a complete identity transformation in the name of art and how the process of that metamorphosis affects her audience and challenges our theories of self, identity, sexual difference, and castration.

Interestingly, the burgeoning of “body art” has its parallel in growing numbers of those who suffer from eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorders, and transsexual disorders, all of which share the common conviction that there is something wrong with one’s body. It is in this vein that I speak of castration, that is, as referring to a sense of incompleteness in one’s physical self, a sense that can be experienced by both genders. In general, castration is about the restrictions set by one’s body and the desire to transcend one’s physical limitations. It is not only about cutting or being cut; it is about the gap between what one is and what one would like to be. It is about lack, loss, and fantasies of wholeness (For more on this, see Knafo, 2005). Cosmetic surgery and cyberspace, two media employed by Orlan in her art, allow such fantasies to become reality.

CASTRATION AND MEDUSA

Orlan’s choice of Medusa in her performance is an apt one. Medusa was the mortal Gorgon who, because she was raped by Poseidon in Athene’s temple, was punished by the angered goddess. Athene converted Medusa’s beautiful locks into snakes that could turn men who gazed at her into stone. Perseus killed Medusa by chopping off her head. He avoided looking at her directly by using his shield as a mirror. Even after her death, Medusa continued to petrify those who dared to gaze at her decapitated head.

In her Medusa piece, Orlan filmed her spectators’ faces as they entered and left the performance, rendering them an integral part of the artwork. Always concerned with seeing and being seen, Orlan’s art is largely about mirroring and the gaze, a psychological dipole that both reveals and conceals truth. Like Medusa, Orlan is both fascinating and dreadful. We wish to gaze at her as she engages in body mutating and life-threatening practices, yet we are aghast at the slicing of her flesh, frozen by the literal confrontation with bloody castration, mortality, and the uncanny encounter between reality and fantasy. As with Medusa, it is no coincidence that these reactions are heralded by a woman. Female sexuality has long been regarded as both mysterious and dangerous, and numerous theorists have struggled with the elusive power of the female genital. Stoller (1975), for example, wrote, “A phallus is dangerous but not mysterious; the womb’s danger comes from silence, secrecy, and growth in the darkness—which is its mystery (p. 98).”

Kristeva’s (1982) study in abjection, which she defines as that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (p. 4), underscores the danger commonly linked with the feminine. When applied to the woman, the concept of abjection reveals the monstrous feminine, the uncanny, the transgressive, the grotesque, and the alien, inevitably bringing to mind associations of woman as vampire, witch, hideous mother, possessor of monstrous womb (Creed, 1993; Goode, 1997). Menstrual blood, a blood of loss and gain, is among the most privileged signifiers of abjection Kristeva cites. It is no coincidence, then, that Medusa has been tied to menstruation

or that Orlan performed her Medusa piece displaying her vulva while she was menstruating, her crimson blood blending in with the painted genital hair. The bloody wound from Medusa's castrated neck acted as a womb that brought life to Pegasus and Chrysaor, the Golden Child. Orlan has also created self-portraits using the blood (and fat) taken from her surgeries. Perhaps more important than its abject quality, therefore, is the female blood's relation to procreativity and creativity. Interestingly, Freud and his followers nearly always neglect mention of the envy males experience for the female's genital capacities—in particular, her ability to give birth. Whereas for Freud, it is primarily the male genital that is envied; today's castration complex more accurately refers to the difficulties *each* sex has in adapting to its own bodily limitations (Fast, 1984; Knafo, 2005).

Thus, although Medusa appears tragic, her myth highlights our notions about castration and gender difference, the relationship between wound and womb, the abject and the maternal, the monstrous and the beautiful, and mirror and mirroring. Freud (1919, 1922) spoke of the inscription of the female genitals as uncanny and blinding. Likewise, Orlan has said, "I make images which almost make us blind. My work stands between the folly of seeing and the impossibility of seeing" (quoted by Brand, 1998, p. 289). Like Medusa, Orlan knows that certain images compel most people to close their eyes, the eyes becoming "black holes into which the image is absorbed willingly or by force. These images plunge in and strike directly where it hurts, without passing through the habitual filters, as if the eyes no longer had any connection with the brain" (Orlan, 1996). She forces us to recognize what we do not recognize and the effect is blinding.

Orlan and Medusa confront us with the seductive powers of a woman, the tragedy of woman as castrated victim, and the blinding—even fatal—powers of female sexuality. They have us think about martyrdom and the voyeuristic excitement we all share when we witness bodily mutilation. Yet Orlan is also the castrating female who controls the sadistic or, at the least, the shocked and galvanized gaze without attempting to soothe anxieties about sexual difference, the body's tender and bloody innards, or the inevitability of castration in the broadest sense. She always remains the artist, the one who literally takes (her) matter in(to) her own hands and creates herself in the image she wishes to be. The juxtapositions of the many paradoxes inherent in her art are what make it so compelling and impossible to dismiss. An inevitable sense of female empowerment emerges from her endless possibilities of creativity that use her self and her body. She repeatedly gives birth to a new art form as well as a new self. Orlan's art is, in essence, an art of self-creation and, as such, it demonstrates female generativity.

SELF-CREATION

About to give a performance in Lyons in 1978, an ectopic pregnancy sent Orlan to the hospital. With her life at risk, she had the brilliant idea while in the ambulance of filming the dangerous surgery and sending the film back to take the place of her performance. This moment highlights the multiple functions and meanings present in Orlan's oeuvre as well as her identification with the Medusan female. Orlan immediately appreciated the possibilities involved in moving her studio to the operating room, thereby equating the surgical act with that of creation. She noted the theatricality of surgery: the lights, the rituals, the surgeon who is God the father, the crew around him, the risk of life and death—a moment to be seized (*VST*, 1991, p. 16).

“My body was a sick body that suddenly needed attention” (O’Byran, 2005, p. 14), Orlan has said in a provocative statement about surgery as performance. Her transformation of deathly emergency into artistic opportunity reveals the manner in which she creatively came to terms with loss—the loss of a child—by replacing it with birth—the birth of a new art form incorporating medical technology. It also highlights her unity with her work, that zero distance between who she is and what she does. Perhaps most important, Orlan’s imaginative gesture suggests the healing potential of art.

Orlan has taken up a formidable task. She states it simply: “I fight against God and DNA” (Orlan, 1997). Her “reincarnation” of self indicates that *she*, not nature, controls the process of self-creation and self-definition. “I hate nature. Because I don’t know where the switch is that forces me to die. . . . Life is a killer. . . . Nature represents everything that locks me in, that applies force to me, that bothers me” (Brand, 2000, p. 301). Orlan’s rejection of nature initially involved rejection of her own budding femininity. She recalls how, as a young adolescent, she could not stop her breasts and pubic hair from growing. She hated what was happening to her: “I couldn’t stop it; it was against my will” (personal communication, March 29, 1999).

Whereas Orlan rebels against the restrictions of her natural-given skin, at the same time, she appreciates the many aesthetic possibilities the skin as a malleable plastic medium provides her with. Her art is what is born in between nature’s grim reality and the poignant desire throbbing in the heart of imagination; it struggles against finality and seeks to surpass and transcend limitation, gender, position, and circumstance; to prevail against loss, change, and death; and to forge from her own flesh a formula for immortality. It is from the fury of her rebellion that she creates, sparing neither safety nor convention.

One of Orlan’s earliest works (1964) rejects her mother’s “natural” position as the person who gave birth to her by depicting the artist giving birth to herself—here, a mannequin, a non-human creature. The French title, *Orlan accouche d’elle m’aime* (Orlan gives birth to herself), plays on the homonym *elle meme* (herself) and *elle m’aime* (she loves me). Eerily predicting what she would do throughout her artistic career, Orlan gives birth to herself as a way of loving herself.

Orlan’s repeated representations of the birth process culminated in her best and most ambitious and controversial project, *The Reincarnation of Sainte Orlan*: ten cosmetic surgery operations to date, the first initiated on the artist’s 43rd birthday, May 30, 1990. These dramatic alterations engage in a literal and often ironic dialogue with (art) history because they have shaped on her face the features from female models, most of whom are Greek goddesses, in art historical masterpieces. She “takes” the chin of Botticelli’s *Venus*, the nose from the school of Fontainebleau’s *Diana*, the mouth of Boucher’s *Europa*, the eyes of Gerome’s *Psyche*, and the forehead of da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. Incredibly, under her direction, Orlan’s doctors mold these classic features from iconic women into her own, forever altering both her appearance and our perception of those great works. As a consequence of this mutual transmutation, Orlan is the very first time traveler, gone back to forever change the work of the masters while expropriating something that belonged to women all along. She thus disrupts the symbolic and historical order. Anyone who has seen Orlan can never look at a classical masterpiece of a beautiful model in the same way again. She has destroyed our naiveté forever.

Orlan reacts angrily when critics accuse her project of masking a desire to be more beautiful. She insists that she chose these icons for their personal qualities rather than because they embody an ideal of beauty. Diana, the adventuress, denies herself to men; Europa allows herself

to be carried off to an uncertain future and the painting of her by Moreau remains unfinished; Psyche, beloved of Eros, is the embodiment of the life force; Venus is equated with fertility and creativity; and the Mona Lisa is the quintessence of androgyny because it is said to be a self-portrait of the artist, Leonardo da Vinci. To further prove her rejection of the claim that she was aspiring toward ideal beauty, Orlan had two silicone implants inserted in her temples. These swellings, often referred to as [Dionysian] “horns,” clearly mark her face as grotesque and otherworldly. They also turn it into a phallic visage. Most important, Orlan argues, the horns “protrude . . . like volcanoes erupting against the dominant ideology” (O’Byrne, 2005, p. 135).

During the surgeries producing her self-hybridizations, the artist remains awake and reads from psychoanalytic or philosophical texts. For example, at the onset of each of her surgical operations, Orlan quotes from Lacanian psychoanalyst Eugenie Lemoine-Luccioni’s (1996) *La Robe*:

Skin is deceiving . . . in life, one only has one’s skin . . . there is a bad exchange in human relations because one never is what one has . . . I have the skin of an angel, but I am a jackal . . . the skin of a crocodile, but I am a puppy, the skin of a black person, but I am white, the skin of a woman, but I am a man; I never have the skin of what I am. There is no exception to the rule because I am never what I have [Quoted in Orlan, 1996, p. 88].

Many questions arise from Orlan’s use of texts in her art. Could they somehow mirror what she does with the surgery, borrowing from texts the way she borrows the features of historic artistic models? Is this the staging of irony she purchases with her blood and appearance, the impossible female heaping herself upon the postmodern alter to plumb the depths (the texts) as she plays with the surface (the face and skin)? Is she, at the same time, mocking the Patriarchy, thumbing her modified nose at its values and history while turning it inside out by injecting herself into it? Is she the ultimate cultural foil—not merely monster beauty but a beautiful monster—who crashes through the edifice of Western culture to remind us that we got it wrong to begin with because we subverted, appropriated, and marginalized the woman as a being, a self, a living inside, both sacred and precious? Interestingly, Orlan brings something both sacred and precious into her oeuvre—her personal quest for transcendence expressed as art carved into her flesh. What is sacred about this is that she is reaching beyond the limitations of our culture and history, even finding “God” in herself; after all, she is Saint Orlan. And what is precious is again that there is no reserve between her and her project, no space of safety. She has put into it her entire life and body.

Orlan alters the medical environment by having surgeons and assistants attired in designer wear and adds props and music as she choreographs and directs the surgery, turning it into a theatrical production. Posters of the painting from which she has chosen a body part are on display to guide the surgeons’ hands. Interestingly, the computer-generated composite images of her face with the painting being employed as a guide are not static pictures but change even as we look at them. Revealing the layering of both women’s features, the images she calls *Entre-Deux* [between the two] are semitransparent, shadowy, and deceptive renderings that cause our gaze to move back and forth between shifting figure and ground representations. As with cosmetic surgery, Orlan here focuses on a gap between illusion and representation, the real and the imaginary. She demonstrates, through these hybrid depictions, that the outcome of this process is always indefinite and that who she is and what she becomes is largely a play of creation and projection.

MONSTER BEAUTY

Cosmetic surgery, the fastest growing branch of surgery in the United States, has naturally become a locus of controversy for feminists. Some take strong positions against any surgical manipulation and modification, believing that the male-fabricated myth of ideal beauty is what lies behind attempts to control and victimize women by these practices. Others believe cosmetic surgery frees women to become empowered agents who can take control of their desires (see Davis, 1995, for the contrasting feminist views regarding cosmetic surgery). Orlan's art critiques cosmetic surgery as male-defined ideals of feminine beauty that remain unattainable and artificial, an impossible standard of beauty women suffer to attain; yet she states, "I am not against cosmetic surgery at all. I am against the way cosmetic surgery is used . . ." (Brand, 2000, p. 293). When she began her *Reincarnation*, Orlan's sculpting of her flesh was outrageous and novel. Yet, what was once undreamed of has become part of our daily human landscape.

Unsurprisingly, then, Orlan's *Reincarnation* project has been explained by herself and others as a feminist critique of Western standards of beauty and the male gaze (see Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1989). That is, the purpose of her art is viewed primarily as a critique of the traditional gendered relationship between the active male gaze that is imposed on the female form, whether in Western art or in the medical practice of cosmetic surgery. That is why it is important to Orlan that her audience see that her art creates a reciprocal dialogue between herself and her fantasies as well as the model and what she has come to represent in Western art; in turn this creates a dialogue between the fantasies of the artist and those of the audience, an immensely complex dialogue that provokes, challenges, frightens, and incites change.

She becomes the grotesque body, Kristeva's (1982) abject body whose boundaries are unstable, ambiguous, open, excessive, and out of control. It is a body whose owner is regarded as impolite and aggressive, subversive albeit humorous. Whereas classic bodies, especially those of goddesses like the ones whose features Orlan dialogues with, are elevated on pedestals to distance themselves from the baser human realm, Orlan's body lies down as its materiality is dissected and scrutinized. Hers is a body intimate with bleeding transgression, a body conversant with pain and shock, a body that utilizes the frozen ideals of classical beauty in order to mock them because they are false and steeped in denial. "Carnal art loves parody and the baroque, the grotesque and the extreme," she asserts in her *Manifesto* (Orlan, 2007, p. 123).

Orlan shows us that the concepts of beauty, the grotesque, and castration are more closely related than we would otherwise presume. If we consider woman's need to deal with her body, which is constantly deemed lacking or incomplete (e.g., never hairless, odorless, fashionable, or thin enough)—that is, "castrated"—then we can grasp her need to make that body beautiful in order to attain a sense of wholeness associated with classical beauty. It is not a penis that woman covets but, rather, beauty, or at least the illusion of completeness that ideal beauty represents.

Pacteau (1994) has drawn a parallel between the significance castration anxiety holds for men with that beauty holds for woman: "Freud observes that no man escapes castration anxiety . . . it seems to me that, at least within the so-called Western world in which I am situated, no woman escapes 'beauty'" (p. 14). Although I agree with Pacteau, I add my belief that the two anxieties are interconnected. Woman is preoccupied with beauty whether she considers herself, or is considered, beautiful or not. She is raised to seek beauty at any cost, to suffer for it, and to lament it when it diminishes. Orlan's art, by dealing with issues of castration (surgeries) and

beauty (features lifted from classical art), exposes the plight of contemporary women. They are (a) considered incomplete—“castrated”—and seeking perfection; (b) monstrous and grotesque, castrating and frightening; and, therefore, finally (c) challenged to establish a new and more fluid standard of beauty, one that is constantly being recreated.

Interestingly, feminists have recently begun to write about female beauty as monstrous. Moreover, they are proudly beginning to own terrifying aspects of femininity—the “monster beauty”—in ways that simultaneously embrace and challenge Freud’s notions of the castrated woman. Frueh (2001) describes monster beauty as expressing male projections while simultaneously revealing the authentic, rather than ideal, dimensions of woman:

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 [pp. 18–19].

Frueh celebrates the notion of monster beauty and illustrates the real and erotic potential it possesses. She claims that “becoming *visibly* different from normative beauty will prove women’s powers in self-love and transformation” (p. 22).

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*. Part of Orlan’s “monstrosity” entails her use of technology and media to advance her argument that “the body is obsolete.” Indebted to telecommunication, artificial intelligence, and the creation of virtual realities, contemporary artists like Orlan and Stelarc draw inspiration from medical technological advances and cybernetics, such as cloning and genetic programming. In the virtual world of cyberspace, the physical body is absent; it is gender-free, age-free, race-free, and siteless. Media theorist Derrick de Kerckhove predicts the dissolution of the boundary of our skin: “Through interactive media . . . we will no longer be sure where our body begins and where it ends” (de Kerckhove, 1993, p. 231). In *Omnipresence*, Orlan’s seventh surgery, the physical reality of the live body was less relevant than the mediatized reality in which electronic signals transmitted the surgery by satellite to galleries around the world.

Orlan’s ongoing series of *Self-Hybridizations* consists in virtual images created by computer technology to morph her image with non-Western (e.g., pre-Columbian, African, and Native American) representations of beauty, thereby making of her a hybrid of past and present, self and other. Orlan speaks of these works as “entering into the skin of the other” (Ayers, 2000, p. 177). The aim of Orlan’s refashioned body, then, is not only designed to transcend gender limitations; it is meant to rise above the body itself, to become pure image, in the brave new world of posthumanity. For Orlan, “the body is no longer adequate for the current situation. . . . We are on the threshold of a world for which we are neither mentally or physically ready” (Orlan, 1996, p. 91). It is in this vein that the artist titled a traveling exhibit, “This is my body . . . This is my software.”

Altering the body through medical technology is a contemporary phenomenon; yet, for Orlan, such acts also challenge classical conceptions of a core identity presupposed in religion and psychoanalysis while making use of both systems. Psychoanalysis, religion, and some feminisms (Heilbrun, 1979, 1988) agree in the position that one must not attack the body, that one must accept oneself as one is, and that any change one makes is first built upon self-acceptance. Theories that posit a core self (e.g., Kohut, 1971) and relational writings that discuss true and false aspects of the self (e.g., Winnicott, 1960) imply that individuals have one genuine self and that changing or altering that self is a sign of alienation, narcissism, mental illness, and impostorism. For example, McDougall (1980) has described the developmental mourning process we must all go through when relinquishing a particular gender identity or sexual preference. Orlan dismisses these theories as primitive, ancestral, anachronistic concepts. Instead, she refuses to accept her body's limitations—its difference and/or lack—by implying that she must choose one gender over another.

Catholicism, the religion Orlan was born into, is also rife with taboos, many of which center around the body and self-sacrifice. Orlan uses her art to make intentional parallels to religious martyrdom. She says, "The vision of my body being opened painlessly was extremely seductive aesthetically . . . I found it similar to the light coming through the windows of a church illuminating the religious imagery inside" (Gale, 1995, p. 31). Orlan's fantasy of self-liberation from the shackles of her body leads to the fantasy of rebirth, a Christlike attempt to transcend the body and mortality.

For the culmination of *Reincarnation*, Orlan has expressed her intention to commission an advertising agency to create a new name for her as it would for a commercial product. She then plans to go to court to change her name legally to the one chosen by the agency. Although Orlan may appear to passively hand her naming to another, she, in fact, is an active agent in the transformation of herself into a product for market consumption. "I have given my body to Art," she exclaims again and again (Orlan, 1996, p. 92). Orlan has also declared the wish to have her body embalmed after death and donated to a museum, thereby becoming the first living/dead work of art. In so doing, she will not only wrap herself in an eternal skin to attain immortality; she will transform the museum into a womb/tomb, a skin for the dead, the ultimate dwelling for a "body of art" (Knafo, 1999, p. 19).

ORIGINS

Orlan claims that the idea for her "reincarnation" first occurred to her when she realized that she had mistakenly signed her name "morte" (death) on a check to her psychoanalyst. At that moment, she says, she appreciated the need to kill off her old self, Mireille Porte (rhymes with morte) and reincarnate as Saint Orlan, a person whose outer layering matters only so far as it becomes a site for public debate.

Clearly entering into a power struggle with her analyst over a sudden change in policy that had her pay cash rather than by check, Orlan wrote the check signed as "Morte." Orlan's aggression toward her analyst turned into an internalized death wish, yet she acted out her anger and sublimated it all at once by deciding to retain "or" (gold/light), the only positive part of the signature, and expand it into Orlan. There are many names that might have inspired the artist in her choice of name. Like the artificial self she creates, orlon is a synthetic fabric. Virginia

Woolf's Orlando is a character who exists between male and female worlds. French heroine and martyr Joan of Arc is also known as the Maid of Orléans. And, finally, Pauline Réage's *Story of O* comes to mind because of its sadomasochistic themes.

Parallel to the relationship women have with their plastic surgeon, people often enter psychoanalytic therapy with the intention of refashioning themselves into the kind of person they would prefer to be. It is interesting that Orlan informed me that when she phoned her analyst to share her novel idea of employing cosmetic surgery in her art, the analyst expressed shock and admonished her not to go through with it. At that moment, Orlan, a savvy analysand, knew that if she had succeeded in getting her analyst to depart from her characteristically neutral therapeutic stance/distance, then she must be on to something—in her words, she had “hit a nerve” (personal communication, March 29, 1999). Her relationship with her analyst (she has undergone at least two analyses, both classical and Lacanian) is significant both for its catalytic function in her art and also because that relationship, in its transference manifestations, takes the place of the parent–child relationship and, therefore, informs us about the origins of her character formation and object relationships. Aware of the dynamic function of her art, Orlan has said, “I am in the process of creating a psychological self-portrait” (*VST*, 1991, p. 17). Indeed, Orlan has helped changed the definition of art, which was previously concerned with a final external product, to a practice, not unlike psychoanalysis, that is in constant flux and that emphasizes process rather than outcome. Both activities highlight identity and the self as never-ending processes of construction.

Orlan's rebelliousness in relation to her analyst most probably reflects the ways she was with her family of origin, of whom little is known. What we do know is that she was born to a Catholic family in the industrial town of St. Etienne, France, on May 30, 1947. She was close to her father, an electrician for the local theater, a man she called an “anarchist and libertarian” (personal communication, March 29, 1999). She had a strained relationship with her mother, a woman who seemed only to pay attention to her when she was sick. Her sister, 8 years her senior, apparently got along better with the mother as she too was always preoccupied with physical illness. In fact, Orlan described her household as containing two couples: mother and sister; father and Orlan. In an interview, she depicts the troubled relationship she had with both mother and sister:

The search for dust, that's all. Chronic mental crises, screams and chronic hysteria. She was a housewife, married, two children, normal. . . . We were always very distant. I used to assert myself when she used to telephone asking how it was going, only as she was hanging up. . . . It was necessary for me to tell her, “I'm sick,” for her to become interested in me. My sister always followed her example. She was always sick and is still *always* sick. When I call her, the only thing she talks about is her illness [*VST*, 1991, p. 14].

On one level, Orlan's art, with its emphasis on the female hysterical body, can be read as a direct response to French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot, who theatrically paraded women hysterics before medical students and high society at the Salpêtrière, the Parisian hospital where he worked and Freud trained, in the late 1880s. On another level, it could be said that Orlan became the “sick child” her mother needed her to be, the child who is repeatedly placed in a medical environment where her body is surgically manipulated and then allowed to heal. Like artists Frida Kahlo, Hannah Wilke, and Matuschka before her, Orlan uses the hospital setting to expose the medical objectification of female bodies. However, unlike these artists, whose work

brought physical and emotional private pain into the public domain by baring their scars from the ravages of physical illness and injury, Orlan was not physically wounded. Rather, like the hysteric, she takes a healthy body and turns it into a sick body, one that requires medical attention and one that alters the way she perceives herself and we perceive her. She rejects her mother for only attending to her when she is ill, yet she gains enormous attention by flaunting her wounded body and having us all react with horror, distress, and concern for her.

Orlan's seventh surgical performance is titled *Omnipresence* because it was sent by satellite to galleries around the world. Orlan *has* become omnipresent; she is everywhere, not to be ignored or forgotten. She is tended to by doctors and nurses and we, her audience, look on anxiously while she endures the knife. The repetitive quality of these performances reveals Orlan's attempt at mastery over what appears to have been an original situation with some traumatic significance. It is as if she asks us to engage in a reciprocal relationship patterned after the one she had with her mother. She seems to test the limits of whether she is lovable even—or especially—with her wounds.

Thus, despite her multiple conscious attempts to disown her biological family, Orlan's unconscious familial connection remains strong. In essence, she has created her own family romance through her art, a novel narrative in which she replaces her family of origin with another that better suits her. She changed her name from Porte to Orlan and chose parents from art history rather than her family of origin. Orlan's father is now the artist and her mother is the subject. Step-by-step, she removes features genetically inherited from her parents and replaces them with those from famous female art icons. She in effect rewrites her story, her face, and her self. These are her new parents whose features she literally inscribes onto her skin. She is now the daughter of Leonardo da Vinci and Mona Lisa, that of Botticelli and Venus, and so on. Both creator and created, masculine and feminine, unite in her, on her body, to produce its offspring: Saint Orlan, whom many believe to be monstrous but whom she has anointed a saint, a holy child.

TALKING HEADS

Although she likens her surgery to woman-to-woman transexualism, Orlan has stated that she is a manwoman or a womanman (“*Je suis une homme et un femme*”). Significantly, one of her early works (1989) involves her alteration of Courbet's well-known painting, *L'Origine du Monde* (The Origin of the World). Courbet's painting is a close-up of an anonymous woman's genitals, covered with pubic hair, legs spread apart. It is interesting, in the context of castration anxiety triggered by the sight of the female genital, that Lacan once owned this painting and had a special cupboard made for it to keep it hidden from view (Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L'Origine_du_monde). Orlan cunningly changed Courbet's original title to *L'Origine de la Guerre* (The Origin of War) and inserted an erect penis into what was once a uniquely female genital site.

As sociological and historical commentary, Orlan emphasizes the contrast between female creativity and male destructiveness. On a psychological level, however, the artist replaces the female genitals with the male phallus, thereby literally undoing—or reversing—castration. The naked woman with a large, erect penis declares her war with male theorists and artists who have deprived her of the power of aggression and the possibility to be all things at once.

Like the transsexual who feels himself or herself to have been born in the wrong body, Orlan, too, acknowledges a deep divide between her outward appearance and her inner self: “When I was young, I had a very different image of myself from my reflection. I was very rebellious yet, in the mirror, I resembled a cute, normal, banal girl. I was confused. I didn’t understand” (personal communication, March 29, 1999). She has expressed her belief that the surgeries succeeded in closing the gap between her inner and outer selves. Orlan describes how she transformed not only her external appearance but also her gentle, fragile, and fearful character traits into stronger, more aggressive, even violent, ones (*VST*, 1991, p. 17).

Orlan’s transformation is therefore more extensive than that of the transsexual, for her aim has been to change not only her sex but also her identity in its entirety. It demonstrates a new version of castration anxiety, one different from that in which girls lament their loss of maleness. Orlan is not striving to deny her femininity and become male, as the transsexual would; she is rebelling against all recognition of her bodily limits. Unwilling to accept the narcissistic loss symbolically represented by castration, she strives for a state of limitlessness, narcissistic completion, omnipotence, and primary creativity (Fast, 1984). “I have always sought to erase the limits,” says Orlan, “to transform reality into virtuality and vice versa” (<http://www.orlan.net>).

Thus, whereas most transsexual surgery focuses on genital reconstruction; Orlan’s surgeries are performed primarily on her face. Because the face is the key site of identity, it is not surprising that it is such a critical focal point in her art. When the skin is pulled away from her face (*Omnipresence*, November 21, 1993), it appears like a mask and highlights the perspective that we are all veiled creatures, that exteriority is a mere shell, a costume. It is also significant that Orlan’s face, like that of Medusa, with its dissections and transformations, is the body part that most frightens us. When he analyzed the terrifying aspect of woman, Freud (1922) focused on her “castrated” genitals rather than her face, the locus of her identity.

In 1996, Orlan collaborated with magician Paul Kieve and video artist Robin Rambau to create *Woman with Head . . . Woman without Head*, a performance piece in which techniques of illusion were employed to project Orlan’s disembodied head on a table. Questioned by her audience about who she is—whether she is mad—an original or a copy—she responds by reading from texts, including some by Antonin Artaud, the French artist whose writings on the *Theater of Cruelty* and a body without organs had a profound influence on her. Orlan literally becomes the woman who is only head, thereby subverting the traditional dichotomy characterized in Western philosophy and art associating mind with masculine and matter with feminine. She has us never forget that she is an intelligent and eloquent woman who controls what she is doing to herself and to us. The issue of castration, she appears to be saying, is about who we are and what we know. In the end, *it is all in our heads!*

And from her head emanates her voice, perhaps the single feature that has remained unaltered throughout all of her surgeries. Despite her claims that she has painlessly adapted to her shifting selves, she nonetheless asserts, “My voice is my security, I know that I can accept any failure because my voice will always remain with me. . . .” (Ince, 2000, p. 132). As a woman who once dreamt of becoming an opera singer, it is interesting that Orlan changes her outward appearance but does not relinquish her voice. Yet, she reads from texts and adopts the voices of others, both men and women. Interestingly, she confessed that her mother had tried to inhabit her voice (“she put her tongue inside of me”) by making her lie (personal communication, March 9, 1997). Preserving her own voice was therefore an important act of survival and defiance for her.

By reading and speaking the words of others, one might think that she is repeating her past, yet Orlan puts a new spin on things while retaining complete control. She chooses the words and changes what they mean by placing them within the unique context of her artistic practice, even including within her surgical entourage a person who translates the words into sign language. Orlan explains this inclusion as a reminder that we are all deaf at times.

THE PAIN OF ABSENCE AND THE ABSENCE OF PAIN

It is difficult to avoid viewing Orlan's art without reinforcing the stereotype connecting women with pain, masochism, and illness (Bonaparte, 1934; Deutsch, 1930). Orlan has said, "I want to make visual work for which one has a strong bodily reaction" (Lovelace, 1995, p. 18). It is easy to confirm that Orlan succeeds in her goal of producing brutally visceral work. During her surgeries, she performs with a Medusan vengeance.

We suffer an assault on our need to conceive of the body as a whole, sanitized, coherent, sealed entity when we watch Orlan's skin pulled away from her face or new orifices being created during her surgeries. We are confronted with what Vivian Patraka (1992) calls "binary terror," the panic unleashed when people are faced with the dissolution of illusory binaries, such as mind-body, sacred-profane, interior-exterior, subject-object, male-female, active-passive, and identity-alterity. Orlan's body is open, incomplete, and excessive in its flaunting of materiality and orifices. It is the end result of the unmirrored body that Lacan (1949) referred to as *le corps morcelé* (the body-in-pieces).

It is the juxtaposition between images that is most disturbing: Orlan's body in repose and being cut on the operating table, while she remains awake and conscious, reading her texts aloud and smiling with an air of insouciance and histrionic *belle indifférence*. The artist claims that an impression of an autopsied corpse that continues to speak is created when she reads or answers questions while being operated upon (Orlan, 1996). This disconnect between the violence we witness to her body and her self-possession produces a disjointed and ambivalent response in us. More important, it invokes in us the reaction we imagine she should be experiencing. It is her audience, rather than Orlan, who responds with terror, repulsion, rage, fear, and anxiety, all inspired not only by the cutting but also by the graphic and concrete alteration of identity. Kauffman (1998) suggests that Orlan functions like the psychoanalyst as a screen onto which we project our loves and hatreds. I add that she employs projective identification to induce in us what she avoids experiencing. We not only identify with Orlan who is cut and bleeding; we also identify with the doctor performing the violence of the surgery.

Orlan seems to believe that she is not masochistic as long as she does not experience physical pain. Yet, some would regard her surgery theatricals as publicly humiliating situations and the suffering she imposes on her audience as sadistic. Even some of her early works convey a masochistic message. Long before her cosmetic artwork, Orlan performed *Mésurages* (Measurements, 1976), in which she literally crawled on the ground to use her body as a measuring stick for the lengths of streets named after famous men. How many Orlans would it take to measure Rue Victor Hugo, for example? After she finished measuring, Orlan washed her sweaty clothes in public and bottled the dirty water. Comparing her petite body to those of men considered larger-than-life could be interpreted as Orlan contrasting what men have (long streets, public acclaim, and, yes, penises) with what females have (apertures and sullied bodily fluids).

Whereas she denies that she experiences pain or that her work is masochistic or self-mutilating, Orlan does, nevertheless, emphasize that its focus is pain: “My work is not about standards of beauty alone; it is also on physical pain. . . . Carnal Art is not self-mutilation” (Brand, 2000, pp. 302–303). Notwithstanding her comments, Orlan quite deliberately makes her body the instrument of pain and a site of recognition evoking Christian iconography of martyrdom. If she does this in order to present a critique of it, it nonetheless involves a masochistic stance. Furthermore, Orlan’s claim that she experiences no pain is highly untenable. It is impossible to accept that anyone could endure surgery after surgery without extreme physical discomfort and pain. More important, Orlan denies that she experiences emotional pain related to the repeated psychological adaptation she necessarily has had to make to her newly constructed visage. She adopts Rimbaud’s paradoxical formula, “*Je est un autre*” (I is an other), to show how the seemingly contradictory poles of subjectivity and objectivity become subverted in an identity as scrutinized as hers. Hers is indeed an amazing ability to detach herself from her physicality. She has said that “being a narcissist isn’t easy when the question is not of loving your own image, but of re-creating the self through deliberate acts of alienation” (Kauffman, 1998, p. 67). I once pressed Orlan on the topic of emotional pain, to which she finally acknowledged that her emotional pain is to be found in her art: “My symptom is my art” (personal communication, July 19, 2005). And certainly the practice of her art has worn her. She alleges that she no longer wishes to undergo cosmetic surgery and has stopped this aspect of her art.

My work has always been hard on me. It’s difficult to sustain because it is a form of aggression against myself. Other people perceive it as a form of aggression against them and are therefore frequently very aggressive towards me. You have to be strong to withstand the reactions I get [McClellan, 1994, p. 42].

As in her Medusa project, audience reactions form an integral part of Orlan’s work. Her art would not be what it is without them. Yet, our reactions of horror and disgust, even concern and awe, it could be argued, all entail the contained projections of the mirroring response she seeks to the “monster beauty” she has created.

IS SHE MAD? IS IT ART?

Is Orlan inspired or mad? Is her art a vehicle to illustrate her psychopathology or is she an artist ahead of her time? Is she a hysteric, a narcissist, a fetishist, a scalpel slave and masochist, a sufferer of body dysmorphic disorder? Or is she a radical who is literally on the “cutting edge” of art by employing medical technology to transform her identity and applying feminist deconstructionist strategies aimed at a multileveled critique of female beauty, female identity, art history, violence against women, and Western culture in general?

Seen from a strictly feminist and postmodern sensibility (e.g., Ince, 2000), Orlan’s art is an aesthetic and social project that conveys serious messages about the many contradictory meanings assigned to the female body by art, religion, and medicine. Instead of debunking psychoanalytic theories of gender, castration anxiety, penis envy, and female development, Orlan flaunts them and plays with them. Most important, she challenges them, adds to them, and makes them her own.

The examination of Orlan's art underscores critical differences existing between psychoanalytic and postmodern theories. Whereas many postmodern theories celebrate fragmentation and multiplicity, they disregard the body's history—the issue of embodiment, of neurological reality, of evolutionary structure and function. They also ignore the connection these fragmented and multiple states have to pain, trauma, narcissism, or damage to the self (Layton, 1999). Continual reinvention of the self, as with Orlan's project, is lauded as a postmodern brave refusal to be bound by traditional and cultural definitions of femininity, health, and beauty. Although this may be true, Orlan's early relationship with her family, especially that with her mother, predisposed her to use her body as a medium for both expression and rebellion. She found ways of using her art to transform her losses into artistic gains. Since childhood, she felt alienated from her family and from her physical self. Orlan disowned her family and any genetic resemblance she held to them through her cosmetic transformations. She lived out a family romance fantasy by changing her name and taking on the identities of goddesses and monsters. By showing the beast within, a beast born from the pain of not having been seen and from a wish to move beyond her body's limitations, Orlan ensures that her sacred child, her programmed self, her female body, down to its last drop of blood and ounce of fat, are responded to.

Assessing psychopathology in a creative person such as Orlan is not easy and, in my opinion, is undesirable. She herself has stated, "We often have to do crazy things without necessarily being crazy" (Orlan, www.orlan.net). Orlan agreed to be assessed by a team of psychiatrists who, in the end, found her lacking in severe pathology and devoted an issue of their scientific journal to their observations and conclusions (see *VST*, 1991). I believe that it is crucial, when examining the art of someone as innovative and controversial as Orlan, to be aware of both the defensive *and* the transformative functions of her art. Orlan's is clearly an individual as well as a social project. Some (Ayers, 2000) go so far as to regard her as one of the most important artists of the 20th century. Among other things, Orlan has shown how art is a process without beginning or end. The theatrics of the surgery and its aftereffects, depicted in images as well as body fluids, are all part of the indefinable moment of her art. Her body—a literal body of art—is an art product, yet it is one that constantly undergoes revisions and modifications. Orlan has brought the artist as artwork to a new plane.

Yet Orlan is also the castrated woman, par excellence. Her open wounds revisit Medusa's head, the uterus, the interior female body, the place of life and death (Clarke, 2000). Orlan purposely compared herself to Medusa to stress those aspects of femininity that are nearly impossible to gaze upon. As in the Medusa myth, Orlan has us meet head-on the fascinating and dangerous powers attributed to woman and her sexuality. Freud (1922) ascribed these powers to the female's castrated state. However, both the Medusa myth and Orlan's intentionally outrageous provocations demonstrate that in order to understand our reactions, we need to comprehend the complexities of castration in their larger social and unconscious dimensions.

Whereas Orlan revisits Freud's castration theory, she refuses to offer simple answers to the questions Who am I? What does it mean to be a boy or a girl? What does it mean to be human? For Orlan, the female body—her own—continues in the tradition of a passive, masochistic, castrated object that everyone can observe for his or her voyeuristic pleasure or displeasure. Yet she clearly takes the stand of defiant autonomy as a woman who will accept no less than total authority over her self-definition which, in her words, involves "multiple, evolving, mutating identities" (Brand, 2000, p. 305).

As she breaks down the boundaries between commonly held binaries of self–other, surface–depth, male–female, and castrated–castrating, Orlan’s work becomes abject and, as such, reveals the monster within. The place of the abject, according to Kristeva (1982), is “the place where meaning collapses” and “the place where I am not” (p. 2). Orlan’s refusal to relinquish control or to accept any restrictions placed on her body results in her rejection of facile definitions or categorizations. She prefers to replace the word “or” with “and,” which allows her to be all things at once in all places: “All of my work is based on the notion of ‘and’: the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the living and the artificial, the public and the private” (Ayers, 2000, p. 184).

Orlan’s art is fundamentally about crossing boundaries and breaking down binaries. She is who she is yet takes on features belonging to another and becomes a third who is altogether different from either that came before. She molds past and present and creates herself in forms that point toward the future. Her manwoman, mutant, cyborg, posthuman body—a body that connects the maternal, the monstrous, and the machine—goes far beyond the traditional conception of the castrated female. Orlan is what Ince (2000) calls the “millennial female.” Besides representing what we find frightening about our own body selves and our identities, Orlan is what we find unnerving about the future possibilities offered by technological and medical advancements to transform our bodies (think of the face transplant) as well as the fate of embodiment in an information age. Orlan’s body, and the fears and anxieties we project onto it, takes a monstrous form that Jacques Derrida (1995) ties to its futuristic leaning:

A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would be already a predictable, calculable and programmable tomorrow. All the experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous *arrivant* [p. 307].

Orlan *is* the monster of our future; she is the epitome of the project of transhuman transcendence. Her motto, “Remember the Future,” captures her insistence that we relentlessly move forward, no matter the pain, toward a posthuman stage that at present we can only barely glimpse.

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