



Carnal Art: Orlan's Refacing

By C. Jill O'Bryan

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The French artist Orlan is infamous for performances during which her body is surgically altered. After nine such performance-surgeries, features from Greek goddesses painted by Botticelli, GÃ©rard, Moreau, and an anonymous School of Fontainebleau artist, as well as from da Vinci's Mona Lisa have been implanted into Orlan's face. During her surgical performances, viewers witness a material tampering with the relationship between the face and individual identity, the original and the constructed, an historical critique of the association of art with beauty and the female body.

Responding to Orlan's definition of her performance surgeries as "carnal art," C. Jill O'Bryan considers how the artist's ever-fluctuating reconstructions of her face question idealized beauty and female identity, persuasively arguing that Orlan's surgically reinvented face succeeds in both reinforcing and breaking apart corporeal subjectivity and representation. O'Bryan contextualizes Orlan's surgeries within the centuries-long history of public dissections and surgeries open to the public and of lavish anatomical illustrations created to draw the gaze into the opened anatomy to Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty" in the early twentieth century and contemporary works and performances by Cindy Sherman and Hans Bellman and Annie Sprinkle.

A compelling blurring of the line between feminist theory and art criticism, O'Bryan's close examination of Orlan's performance-surgeries complicates and reconfigures the notions of identity--and its relation to the body--at the very core of experience.

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Editorial Review

Review

Another study analyzing the work of Orlan! This is not a token essay about feminist politics but a lengthy analyses drawn from a PhD, which focuses on Orlan's writing as much as her oeuvre as a whole and her strategies as a postmodern feminist. C. Jill O'Bryan analyses and employs a wide range in her discussion, including Derrida's concept of auto-affection in which self-presence is lost; performativity; the carnivalesque and how Orlan's work negotiates, explodes and challenges binary oppositions of interiority/exteriority; self/other; beauty/monstrous femininity in her concept of 'woman-to-woman transexuality'. The book concludes with a performative dialogue which draws on and amplifies interviews with the artist from 2000-2001 conducted with Tanya Augsberg. What is refreshing about O'Bryan's account is the priority given to the artist's voice and strategy as an artist in contrast to so many texts on Orlan which have emphasized the body (as if it were a generic category) or the author's direct reaction to the work as image alone. -Katie Deepwell --n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal Families/Homilies, volume 16 2005

This is a very important book. Although the subject is the controversial, and in some peoples' eyes, shocking art of French feminist artist [Saint] Orlan, it is much, much more. The book is paradoxically enjoyable and infuriating at the same time. It is hard to imagine a more sensitive or empathetic exploration of Orlan's work. In other words, O'Bryan's analysis resonates harmoniously with her subject, neither denigrating nor eulogising her.

Carnal Art: Orlan's Refacing is meticulously researched and extremely well written-considering the epistemological difficulty of some sections of the discourse, it is an easy and pleasurable read. The text is accompanied with both black & white and colour photographs, some of which are not for the faint hearted. Even if you have no trouble viewing normal medical procedures, some of the images will probably disturb you, partly because of the context and partly because of the subject matter.

Orlan's art is somewhat hard to define precisely. She is, "...a multimedia performance artist who places her body into the center of beauty technology in order to expose and question those techniques of gender that simultaneously construct and discipline 'beauty-conscious' female identity" (p. 20). Most of her performances occur in a hospital operating theatre, involving deconstruction and reconstruction of her face, and essentially require equipment such as video cameras and film crews. All performances are transmitted to the public and are strictly controlled by Orlan, who is conscious during the procedures having only local anaesthetic. Having had facial surgery in an operating theatre with only local anaesthetic myself, I can assure the reader it is not something one would do for fun.

Orlan must be very serious and dedicated to her art or be very seriously mad to undergo these procedures. "Consciousness [in the operating theatre] is her [Orlan's] ultimate weapon against psychoanalysis. It allows her to preclude a diagnosis of psychological illness" (p. 104). The charge of madness has been raised by some of Orlan's more severe critics. I believe this is an important and valid question to ask. O'Bryan discusses this at various times throughout the book, and it appears that Orlan is very much in control of her life and her art. I do not think, from O'Bryan's discussion at least, that the charge of madness is valid. Not only for the abovementioned psychoanalytical reason (after all many insane people inflict severe pain upon themselves while consciously doing so), but specifically because Orlan's work, like many other artists, has evolved over a long period of time, involves steady considered planning and complex logistical organization.

There are one or two parts in this book that are infuriating and tend to mar an otherwise excellent scholarly

work. These are when O'Bryan seeks the support of other feminist writers and quotes them at length. Specifically, (briefly) quoting Straayer, "I suggest that most if not all women do want to be men..." (p. 101)-a totally unsupported, unscholarly feminist, stereotypical speculation. Further, Doane, "Most specifically, it is the possession of the male gaze" (p. 104). This discussion concerning Orlan temporarily obliterating any reference to her gender when the skin of her face is removed by the surgeon (and shown at extreme close-up), does not only prevent possession by a male gaze but prevention of any gaze, including for example, her mothers' or a female best friend. A little further on O'Bryan recognises this herself, "What is represented [by the face] is the fragility of identity" (p.106).

The book has an Introduction (Shape-Shifting), seven chapters as follows: 1-Orlan's body of Work; 2-Looking Inside the Human Body; 3-Between Self and Other; 4-Interior/Exterior; 5-Beauty/The Monstrous Feminine; 6-Penetrating Layers of Flesh: Carving in/out the Body of Orlan; 7-A Few Comments on Self-hybridations . Finally-EXTRACTIONS, a Performative Dialogue "with" Orlan. This section while rather short is a pithy discussion between O'Bryan and Orlan.

This is a provocative book, raising important questions and challenging status quo prejudices on many fronts. Some of these include-the validity of the feminist psychoanalytical critique; the validity of many aspects of feminism itself; the authenticity of privileged bourgeois artists (such as Orlan) taunting the very bourgeois society that enables her to create her art; the efficacy (as art) of extreme (unnecessary?) bodily modification when in many countries essential life saving surgery is unavailable. These above questions, some raised unintentionally throughout *Carnal Art*, are what makes the book so interesting and important in addition to the exposition of Saint Orlan and her art. -Rob Harle --Leonardo Review, August 2005

The work of the French artist Orlan defies facile description, but in her book *Carnal Art: Orlan's Refacing* (2005), author C. Jill O'Bryan does an admirable job of discussing the artist's work and its conceptual foundations in a style that is both scholarly and accessible.

Although Orlan has been working with photography and performance art since the 1960s, it is her series *The Reincarnation of St. Orlan*, begun in 1990, that has drawn the most attention and debate. In this series, plastic surgery became the method and Orlan's own tissue the medium as she underwent a series of operations to appropriate the features of various Western art-historical icons of feminine beauty, ranging from Botticelli's *Venus* to da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Orlan orchestrates the surgeries, arranging costumes and decorations, and because she undergoes only local, rather than general, anesthesia, is also an active participant in the "performances." Her most ambitious and well-known surgery-performance, *Omnipresence* (1993), in which she received her distinctive forehead "bumps," was videotaped and broadcast live to galleries around the world, where observers were able to participate by faxing and phoning in questions to which the artist responded.

O'Bryan opens *Carnal Art* with a discussion of Orlan's performances, and goes on to locate them within the tradition of the Renaissance anatomy theater and contrast them with the "body art" of recent decades. She also dedicates a short section to the artist's more recent *Self-Hybridations* series, in which Orlan digitally combines images of her own face with those of African and Pre-Columbian masks and photographs, in an exploration of non-Western beauty ideals.

O'Bryan focuses on the conceptual framework of Orlan's work, exploring how it has investigated concepts that are generally seen in diametric pairs -- self / other, before / after, interior / exterior, beauty / the monstrous -- and how it creates tensions by occupying the middle ground between each of the poles. She examines concepts of the body such as the implications of turning it into an object and for looking inside it, its role in the formation of identity, and the relationship between surface and the contained. In particular, she discusses how women's bodies, and faces, are represented as bearers of a male-constructed "beauty" and

recipients of the male gaze. O'Bryan considers the mythical figures of Medusa, Baubo, and Marsyas and what they reveal about identity and the gaze in Orlan's work. The author draws from an impressive array of scholars, utilizing film, feminist, and psychoanalytic theory and citing, among others, Derrida, Lacan, and Luce Irigaray. She concludes the text with a fictitious "performative dialogue" with Orlan, comprised of quotations from various sources, including personal interviews.

Carnal Art is an intelligent, well-written discussion of Orlan's work and, at just under 200 pages, a relatively short read. Despite the highly theoretical nature of the material, O'Bryan's tone is engaging and her writing clear. Illustrated with black and white photos throughout and a central section of full-color plates, the book is by no means an exhaustive study of Orlan's oeuvre, but an excellent choice for anyone interested in a thoughtful discussion of the theory behind Orlan's art. -Ceri Meyers --intelligent agent vol. 6 no. 1

About the Author

O'Bryan is an independent scholar and artist who has written and lectured widely on Orlan in particular and body art in general.

Users Review

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