generations & geographies in the Visual Arts

FEMINIST READINGS

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Chapter Seven

Orlan: artist in the post-human age of mechanical reincarnation:

body as ready (to be re-) made

Michelle Hirschhorn

Introduction

I first noticed the man in the purple coat, gazing confrontationally through two pieces of a broken mask which had apparently once been of a woman's face. 'How far would you go for beauty?' wryly questioned the words printed beneath the image on the back cover of the paperback. Hmm, I thought, and flipped it over to continue reading inside:

> 'Jamie Angelo: a man obsessed with perfection. He's a genius, a sculptor in human flesh. Using the most advanced technology and his artistic flair, he can create age-defying beauty from the plainest of materials. Women famous for their looks all over the world owe their success to him. Movie actresses, television stars, models and socialites revolve around him in New York's glittering highlife, desperate to ward off age and ugliness.
>
> But despite all his skill these women are not perfect. Jamie dreams of the ultimate female icon: a blend of Marilyn, Marlene, the Mona Lisa – and some indefinable extra quality – to create a masterpiece.'[1]

Despite the move from Dr Frankenstein's dingy lab to the hippest artist loft in SoHo, and the periodic interjection of contemporary art and philosophical theory, the basic story here is nonetheless one which is all too familiar. Man, driven by his desire to discover the absolute truth of beauty, desperately attempts to reconstruct, and thus control, the female form. But when the recreated form cannot sustain the illusion, when it can no longer contain the corporeality of matter, then horror, monstrosity and destruction ensue.

I came across the novel *Beauty* while researching the work of French multimedia/performance artist, Orlan. In her current project, *The Ultimate Masterpiece: The Reincarnation of St Orlan*, she utilizes the technology of plastic surgery as a medium with which to articulate self-transformation. Sculpting in her own flesh, she has taken art into the operating theatre and quite literally taken 'matter into her own hands'.

In the spring of 1994, shortly after she gave a presentation at the ICA in London, several newspapers and magazines responded with articles which bore rather catchy titles and large colour photo spreads depicting carnivalesque scenes that were taking place inside operating theatres. Intrigued by the highly sensationalized and largely hostile accounts, I decided to investigate this curious woman and her unorthodox practice. As I began searching the *Art Index* and the pages of numerous art journals for some sort of critical analysis or historical contextualization of Orlan's work, I was disappointed and somewhat surprised by what I *didn't* find. Not only had she been constructed as an aberration in the popular press, and therefore denied credibility as an artist, but seemingly she had been substantially excised from the corpus of contemporary art history as well.

What I *did* discover, however, is that Brian D'Amato, the author of *Beauty*, is himself an artist (who has exhibited in New York and Paris) as well as a regular contributor to *Flash Art*. Sensing an obvious influence for the story, I looked to the pages of *Beauty* for a point of reference. But amongst all of the contemporary artists, dealers, galleries and theorists whose names crowded the text, Orlan's was clearly missing. Hmm, I thought again; Orlan began her surgical interventions in 1990. *Beauty* was published in 1992. From the references made to Renaissance portraiture and the computer-generated composites of female icons, to the very use of plastic surgery as a means of artistic expression, it seems a bit dubious, if not highly suspicious, to assume that someone as apparently well informed and on the 'cutting edge' as Brian D'Amato, could not have been aware of Orlan's enterprise.[2]

Why are there no references to Orlan within the pages of *Beauty*? Perhaps an explanation can be found in precisely that which differentiates Orlan from Jamie Angelo, the story's main protagonist, and the familiar story line itself: her position as both creator and created. By directing the reconstruction of her own body, she problematizes the traditional gendered relationship between the active male subject position as artist/creator and the passive female object position as matter awaiting transformation. Orlan's surgical reconstructions are certainly not an attempt to 'ward off age and ugliness' (she has never had a conventional face-lift). On the contrary, she questions the very basis of self-perception and bodily identification when she says 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'.[3]

The Reincarnation of St Orlan began in 1990 when Orlan underwent the first in a series of seven planned cosmetic surgery operations/performances required for what she envisions as total self-transformation. Using her own body as medium, she has devised an elaborate orchestration in the operating room which combines Baroque iconography, medical technology, theatre and mass communication networks to critique the male-defined notion of idealized female beauty, and to challenge prevailing western concepts of identity. By insisting on local rather than general anaesthesia, Orlan remains cognizant during the operations so as to maintain control throughout the process. She choreographs and directs each performance, which features the reading of psychoanalytical and literary texts, interactive communication with an often international audience via fax and live satellite telecast, music, dance and outlandish costumes, frequently designed by a famous couturier, such as Paco Rabanne (Figure 7.1).

She carefully chose the images of five famous Renaissance and post-Renaissance representations of idealized feminine beauty as the basis for her project, not only for their physical attributes, but each one for its particular mythological or historical importance. She chose the nose of an unattributed School of Fontainbleau sculpture of *Diana* – because the goddess was aggressive and refused to submit to the gods and men; the mouth of Boucher's *Europa* – because she looked to another continent and embraced an unknown future; the forehead of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* – because of her androgyny; the chin of Botticelli's *Venus* – because of her association with fertility and creativity; and the eyes of Gerome's *Psyche*, because of her desire for love and spiritual beauty. Each operation was planned to alter a specific feature of Orlan's physiognomy, and she generates computer composites which combine her own features with those of each icon for the surgeon to use as a guide.

Orlan's practice is shocking, often contradictory, and quite troubling, particularly because the issues she confronts run much deeper than the skin and morphology. Her work raises serious questions concerning identity, societal taboos against opening the body, the mind/body dualism, the often acrimonious relationship between women and technology, the limits of art and language, physical pain, representations of the female grotesque, myths of femininity, private and public domains, the long legacy of colonization that western medicine has exerted over female bodies, as well as the historic relationship between art and life that is inherent within the tradition of avant-