

DISSECTING THE SELF: THE REINCARNATIONS OF SAINT-ORLAN

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IMAGINE A WOMAN lying on a hospital bed. Her head, on a pillow, is turned towards a camera that is broadcasting her image to museums across the world. A surgeon must be present, for we see a gloved hand holding a scalpel that cuts open her left temple. Her face is marked with black ink: arrows indicate the direction in which the surgeon will pull and reattach her skin, and lines on her cheeks and forehead allude to her post-operative face. The woman's eyes are wide-open, and she smiles. Then she begins to talk to the camera witnessing her operation; this image is being broadcasted live to her audiences gathered in museums across the world. Under partial anaesthetics, she will lecture her audience on diverse subjects such as psychoanalysis and her own bodily transformation, yet she does not feel the surgeon's knife, nor the plastic, silicone-filled bags that will be inserted forcefully in her temples.

THE IMAGE JUST described is a scene from a live broadcast of Saint Orlan's physical and surgically-assisted transformation. A French, female artist, Saint Orlan staged a series of ten invasive cosmetic procedures, called *The Reincarnations of Saint-Orlan*, that would drastically reshape her appearance. Commencing in 1990, this series of operations includes liposuction, breast augmentation, and facial reconstructions. At the moment of writing, eight of the planned operations have been performed. Two are still to come. The desired end result of these operations? A face comprised of parts put together into an uneasy whole: her chin that of Botticelli's Venus, her nose that of Gerome's Psyche, her lips the lips of

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Francois Boucher's Europa, her eyes resembling Diana's eyes as painted by an anonymous member of the French School of Fontainebleau, and her forehead that of da Vinci's Mona Lisa. These iconic figures, of course, signify the male gaze and patriarchic notions of female beauty, yet Orlan has chosen these primarily for the mythical outlooks and attitudes associated with them: Diana as an adventurous goddess who refused to submit to men; Psyche, because of her spiritual beauty and desire for love; Europa, who looked to an unknown continent; the Mona Lisa for her androgyny (for the legend says underneath the top-layer of paint is the portrait of a man, perhaps of Leonardo himself); and finally, Venus, for the fertility and creativity she represents (Davis 2007:26).

MAKING PUBLIC WHAT happens in the operation room by means of the ever-present camera, Orlan does not shun a measure of artistic drama: All operations in the *Reincarnation-series* are carefully orchestrated events. The operation room is crowded with extras that play instruments, recite poetry, and wear costumes; her surgeons are requested to wear *haute couture* designed for this occasion especially; and she herself, at the centre of attention, stays in continuous contact with her audience.

ORLAN, IN SHORT, takes control. Using plastic surgery, Orlan asserts her status as an autonomous agent – an agent choosing what she wants to become, and how she is going to go about it. Her partial anaesthetics, however, metaphorically underscore her dual status as both object and subject: subject, in that she coordinates every aspect of her transformation; object, in that she is the one the surgeons are 'working upon'. As an illustration *in extremis* of the societal pressure put on women to keep their bodies in check, her deployment of plastic surgery demonstrates the considerable cost and suffering of conformity to these beauty standards. The audience, confronted with every bloody aspect of her surgeries, cannot escape the fact that these operations, like other elective surgeries, are dangerous and potentially life-threatening.

IT IS THESE aspects of her transformations that have startled feminist observers. The development of cosmetic surgery into an ever more popular practice in the 1980s has occupied many feminist critics, who suggested that cosmetic surgery is a new technology of oppression. They feared that the new possibilities for the surgical enhancement of one's appearance will disproportionately affect women, and not positively so: these new options are bound to increase pressure on women to conform to unrealistic standards of beauty as beauty is becoming less about *luck*, and more about *choice*. Most cosmetic surgeries, moreover, are nothing like plucking one's

eyebrows or applying lipstick. In contrast, they are invasive surgeries that may put women's lives at risk. What freedom or liberation is there, these critics of Orlan's *Reincarnations* have asked, in subjecting oneself to such drastic and invasive surgery? Other commentators, however, have heralded Orlan's performances as feminist statements of agency and determination. Using exactly one of the most ruthless technologies of objectification, i.e. cosmetic surgery, Orlan appropriates this technology and sets it to work for her *own* ends: a face which is, if artistic, by no means beautiful. In short, many feminist commentators have drawn attention to her use of plastic surgery and positioned themselves within a debate that attempts to evaluate whether this is a subversive or compliant gesture. It is within this debate that this paper is situated, as it will aim to evaluate whether Orlan's performances can be called feminist statements about the body, technology, and identity, and if so, what it is that feminism itself may learn from Orlan's performances. This paper, however, will also broaden this (rather narrow) focus on compliance and resistance, and concentrate on what her use of plastic surgery suggests about the relationship between ever more invasive forms of bio-technological advancement and the body. In addition, these concerns will be related to the notion of identity evoked in Orlan's *Reincarnations*. This paper will suggest that the most radically feminist aspect of Orlan's work resides in its engagement with both issues of technology and those of identity. This radical message, it is argued here, is comprised of a challenge to Humanist, Enlightenment notions of the natural body *and* of a unitary, bounded, and stable identity inhabiting that natural body. As such, this paper is situated within a debate concerning the relationship between art and (feminist) politics; or, what art can contribute to contemporary feminist thought and vice versa. It must be born in mind, then, that these social and political concerns are the context in which the following discussion of Orlan's *Reincarnations* is positioned.

Beauty is becoming less about luck, and more about choice

IN PART I of this paper, the relationship between Orlan's body and technology will be discussed in more detail. Her performances will be viewed in light of the philosophical and political challenges set out for feminists in Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) and Morgan's *Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women's Bodies* (1991). It will be argued that Orlan's performances are particular illustrations of Haraway's and Morgan's approach to technology and the (gendered) body. As such, these performances pose the kind of questions about the body feminists will need to consider in an ever more technologically advanced world. In

part II, the notion of identity put forward in Orlan's *Reincarnations* will be elaborated upon. Also discussed in part II is the way this notion resonates with Butler's (1990) critique of Enlightenment, humanist conceptualizations of identity. In part III, this paper draws together the concerns outlined in part I and II. Here, it will be argued that the particular subversive force of Orlan's *Reincarnations* resides in their simultaneous engagement with the related issues of the body and identity. This artistic engagement opens up imaginative spaces that can aid feminists in rethinking feminism's goals and strategies for the 21st century where older approaches to technology and identity are growing defunct.

I. TECHNOLOGY AND THE BODY-OBJECT

WITH THE RISE of plastic surgery as an increasingly popular practice, feminist theorising on its deployment proliferated. As a particular "technology of the gendered body" (Balsamo 1996), plastic surgery is generally taken to be a particularly powerful tool in the reproduction of standards of white, youthful female beauty. This technology, in the Foucauldian sense of the word, presumes a medicalising and objectifying *gaze*, which is "situated within apparatuses of power and knowledge that constructs

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the female figure as pathological, excessive, unruly, and potentially threatening to the dominant order" (Balsamo 1996:56). Cosmetic surgery has consequently been "viewed largely as an oppressive technology which colonizes women's bodies in a quite literal way, directly intervening in the body to mould in it accordance with the prevalent ideals of beauty" (Negrin 2002:21). Others, however, have objected that cosmetic surgery is not inherently problematic. Indeed, Morgan (1991) has famously insisted that cosmetic surgery may be used for explicitly feminist purposes. For one, cosmetic surgery draws attention to the constructed nature of ideals of female beauty. It may hence be deployed in an effort to critically denaturalise social constructions of femininity and masculinity by highlighting their performative aspects. Consider, for instance, Lolo Ferrari's augmented breasts: twice registered in the Guinness Book of Records as the largest in the world, they have never ceased to inspire a range of conflicting emotional responses in the media and the public at large: morbid fascination, pity, humorous enthusiasm, or even disgust. The ambivalence of these responses is not easily explained, especially when we consider the fact that Western culture, too, prescribes that 'the bigger the better'.

Why is the reception of her breasts, then, not mere (sexual) excitement but rather similar to the morbid fascination with which 19th century freak-shows were received? An explanation could be that the unsettling quality of Lolo Ferrari's breasts does not reside in their size per se, but in our uneasy realisation that the ideal to which they more than perfectly conform, i.e. femininity, is just as constructed as her breasts are. The hyperbole, to return to Morgan, might effectively destabilise our notion of what is desired and valued in women's appearances and raise exactly such a seemingly innocent question.

ANOTHER STRATEGY MORGAN argues in favour of are projects of "uglification" (Morgan 1991). If a surgeon can make our bodies appear smooth and slender, then the same techniques can surely be used to add wrinkles and layers of fat. If we are shocked even considering this option, she goes on, this testifies:

"To the hold that the beauty imperative has on our imaginations and our bodies. If we recoil from this lived interaction of the contours of our bodies and regard this 'mutilation', then so, too, ought we to shirk from contemplation of the cosmetic surgeons who de-skin and alter the contours of women's bodies so that we become more and more like athletic or emaciated (depending on what's in vogue) mannequins with large breasts in the shop windows of modern patriarchal culture. In what sense are these not equivalent mutilations?" (Morgan 1991:46)

In relation to Morgan's points, it should be noted that Orlan herself insists that she is not interested in acquiring beauty or being beautiful. Indeed, her current face is everything but. Moreover, she has repeatedly had difficulties finding surgeons who would perform the operations as the surgeons argued that her proposed operations "would not improve the appearance of their patient" (Vänskä 2002:163). To Orlan, the strategic use of cosmetic surgery is a way to undermine seemingly natural and eternal standards of beauty imposed on women's bodies. Although male-defined and as such signifying the male (painter's) gaze, the features of the mythical figures she is using do not conform to *contemporary* standards of beauty. Orlan's new face, resulting from their integration, is even less conformist. Her *Reincarnations* incorporate both aspects of hyperbole and uglification, and as such form a critique of standards of beauty and their pernicious hold on female minds and bodies.

CONTINUING, MORGAN (1991) argues that a feminist deployment of plastic surgery would also make explicit the exercise of power there where it usually hides itself from its own workings. As a practice surrounded

with both glamour and taboo, plastic surgery needs to be demystified – here, Orlan again responds to the calling. In contrast to the advertised ‘befores’ and ‘afters’ of plastic surgery, she draws attention to the messy product of *becoming*. Usually confined to the secrecy of the operation room and ideally leaving no traces, marks, and scars on the modified body, this (quite gruesome) process is at the heart of her broadcasted performances. Also, where waste products (fat, blood) of surgical intervention are hurriedly disposed of, Orlan auctions them off, hence investing them with commercial value. Adding a whole new layer of meaning to the phrase ‘the exploitation of the female body’, Orlan has used the money raised to finance her next operation(s). Plastic surgery, after all, is not cheap.

MORGAN’S CALL TO consider the possibilities for political action opened up by new technologies resonates with Haraway’s message in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991). In it, Haraway urges feminists to rethink the much-policed boundaries between human and machine, human and animal, and culture and nature. The cyborg is a hybrid of machine and organism, and serves as a ‘political myth’ pointing towards new routes open to feminists conceptualising the relations between the (female) body and technology in an increasingly post-modern era. The cyborg embodies an alliance of technology and organic matter and the political potential of such alliances. As such, it stands in opposition to the notion of the ‘natural body’, or the notion that there is a knowable, universal body we can speak of. The cyborg, then, may be a political myth, yet the ‘natural body’ to which feminist critics of technology refer is also an imaginary construct, Haraway (1991) insists. Rather, the ‘natural’ body only comes to life within historically specific matrices of power and knowledge. As such, Haraway argues that

“There is nothing about being female that naturally binds women together into a unified category. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices.” (Haraway 1991:155)

CONNECTING HER CRITIQUE of the notion of the natural body politics, Haraway advocates here a highly contextual and responsible approach to technology. In short, it is argued that we need to move away from a Goddess-oriented feminism and its “anti-science metaphysics, or demonology of technology” (ibid. 181). Rather, we must recognise in technologies their potential as a source of power and resistance:

“Biotechnologies are the crucial tools for recrafting our bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social relations for women worldwide. Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations, that is, as frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings.” (Haraway 1991: 164)ⁱ

*ⁱThis, of course, is a partial reading of Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*; for the purpose of this paper I have concentrated on the ideas on technology and female bodies put forward in this piece.*

ORLAN’S PERFORMANCES, READ in unison with Haraway’s challenge to feminism, are forceful appropriations of the technologies of body modification. Struggling against “nature, DNA, and God” (Orlan in Clarke 1999:195) Orlan uses her body as a three-dimensional canvas with politically charged meanings inscribed on its surface. The technology seemingly most antithetical to a feminism reliant on the construct of the ‘natural’ female body, that is cosmetic surgery, is employed for her own, nonconformist ends, and as such poses a challenge to the more general application of cosmetic surgery as a tool of crafting bodies into conformity.

THE CRUDE, CARTESIAN logic underlying Orlan’s approach to the body can be viewed as another subversive gesture. In subjecting her body to a series of invasive surgeries, she seeks to unsettle the patriarchal view of the female as eternally confined to her body. Attempting to (violently) transcend her bodily confinements, Orlan is seen to fragment “the Cartesian mapping that equates the male gender with the mind and the female gender with the body, in order to rearrange its meaning polarized into one not encoded as a polarized structure” (O’Byran 2005: 98). The denial of one’s physicality, in other words, can here be considered a feminist strategy that unsettles binaries such as mind/body, ratio/emotion, culture/nature, which correspond, in Western culture, to the male/female dichotomy.

OTHERS COMMENTATORS, IN contrast, have interpreted her work as a radical *reinstatement* of her bodily materiality (cf. Ayers 1999; Goodall 1999; Clarke 1999) For instance, a separate work by Orlan draws together 41 photographs taken after her most intensive surgery. These photographs bear witness to the fact that her body resists her surgical ‘interventions’: they show a bruised and bloated face, her eyes barely able to peek through her swollen and purple eyelids. These photographs are juxtaposed with 41 computer-simulated images of Orlan’s face made prior to her operations. Each of these computer-simulated images is a different composite of the features of the mythical figures Orlan has selected and as such offers the audience an overview of Orlan’s 41 ‘possible faces’ after surgery. The juxtaposition of the 41 pictures of her face as it heals and the computer-simulated composites shows us where the body, repressed,

returns: “they reveal a gap between what is ‘made by the body-machine’ and ‘what is made by the computing-machine’” (O’Byran 1999: 51). This gap, in other words, is testimony to the body’s resilient materiality and the unpredictability of its behaviour when aggressively moulded into shape. Related to this concern is Orlan’s own hesitation to finalise her *Re-incarnations* by planning and undergoing the last two operations. When asked about this finale of her project, Orlan tells us:

“I want to get all the medical, artistic and financial arrangements in place, and that takes a lot of time to arrange. If I don’t manage it, well, bad luck! I think that I am an artist who’s given a lot, physically and intellectually and psychologically as much as financially, and so if I can’t do these operations under good conditions, I won’t do them.” (Orlan in Ayers 1999:182)

IN THIS PASSAGE, Orlan recognises that she has “given a lot” and that she might not finish the series of operations if the “conditions aren’t right”. Here, Orlan is forced to consider the physical toll of these operations, as well as her steadily aging body which might not be fit to undergo surgery anymore. Orlan’s consideration here mirrors the audience’s recognition that the (aging) body sets limits to surgical interference. These readings of her work stress how Orlan’s performances confront us with the *limitations* of utopian, modernist musings of acquiring control over nature. Despite her revolutionary call to technological arms, then, Orlan is as much a steadily aging body as we, other mortal humans, are. Or, to put it more crudely: even if humans can exercise a measure of control over their bodies with the help of technology, science has as yet to find a cure for our bodies’ decay and ultimately, death.

THERE IS A decided tension between the two interpretations. One focuses on Orlan’s rejection of the patriarchal association that aligns the female with the body, and her attempts to transcend the flesh. The other concentrates on what emerges as a reinstatement of bodily materiality *despite* her masculinist desires to control nature. Seemingly inconclusive, this tension is exactly what is so thoroughly unsettling about Orlan’s work. In other words: Orlan explores rhetorics, paradoxical moves and ironic gestures, but does not attempt to resolve the tension that ensues. It is these ironic explorations that provide force to Orlan’s performances, as they resist being understood in a finite way. It is this irony Haraway (1991), too, pursues in creating the cyborg myth:

“Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all

are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method." (Haraway 1991:149)

PERHAPS, THEN, ORLAN'S performances are meant to do both: the attempt to deny her bodily materiality gains its power in a context in which women are associated with nature and the body; on the other hand, her body, damaged and bruised and only slowly healing, challenges the modernist and masculinist trope of control over nature. The force of Orlan's performances does not emerge *despite* these tensions but *because* of them. On another level, it could be argued that her performances confront us with our desire for a final explanation, for closure, for the fixing of meaning. Yet it is exactly this unresolved deferral of meaning that raises the most challenging questions about the relation between the body and technology and their relation in the future. It underscores both the possibilities facing us as well as their limitations: they represent freedom *and* constraint. Both, to paraphrase Haraway (1991), are bound in a spiral dance.

II. ILLUSORY IDENTITY

WHEN WITNESSING ORLAN'S performances, one of the first questions the audience is forced to ask is: *Who* would do such a thing to herself? Considering the fact that challenging beauty standards, objectification of female bodies, and the male gaze are all central themes throughout Orlan's earlier work as well, we wonder why Orlan would take such drastic measures to get her point across. Doubly disturbing, then, is that we hardly know anything about the *who* that is coordinating the performances. Aside from a robust body of work, there are few details known about Orlan's past. Information about her personal life is even scarcer. Although she used to give frequent lectures about her *Reincarnations* in museums across the world (her *Conférences*) Orlan never, however, reveals information about herself as embodied subject, the pain she feels, the suffering, or her doubts. She seems to eschew the "confessional moment" (Foucault 1976) in which the subject enters into that power-ridden relationship with a questioning interlocutor - in Orlan's case her audience. Her silence surrounding her personal life and especially her physical suffering can also be interpreted more specifically as a feminist strategy: it denies the audience to associate her with the figure of a sick or mentally ill woman - associations that have historically served to silence women and their bodies. (O'Bryan 2005:21). More important here, however, is the way her silence seems to suggest that we can only have access to Orlan's 'self' through her art, that is, her body. Her body, that theatrical display

of self-enunciation, must speak for itself. Of what self does her body, then, speak? And is there a self to speak of?

ANALYSES FOCUSING ON Orlan's 'self' put forward in her work have stressed the way Orlan's performances underscore the shifting and unstable nature of identity. The body and the face more specifically, they stress, serve as privileged site of the expression of identity in Western culture. Especially the face is taken to represent the interior self: "in our culture, the face is deemed the most precious characteristic of human identity" (Negrin 2002:32). Utilising this cultural trope, Orlan's performances can be interpreted as embodied statements about identity. Her body, being in constant transformation, evokes the notion of an identity equally unstable and unfixable. Supporting this interpretation is, for instance, the *duration* of Orlan's project and its delayed finale, which place her in a continual space of "inbetweenness" (O'Bryan 1999). Furthermore it has been argued that her name, Orlan, alludes to "*the synthetic – the material Orlon; to masquerade – the French cosmetic brand Orlane; to gender fluidity – the maid of Orleans (Joan of Arc) and Virginia Woolf's Orlando; and the malleability of gold (d'or)*" (Moss 1999 in Negrin 2002:33).

WHAT THESE CONNOTATIONS have in common is the emphasis on transgressed boundaries, malleability, and change – which stands in radical opposition to the Humanist notion of the unified and stable self. Symbolising the opposition between the conflicting notions of identity is the contrast between Orlan's grotesque body in the operation room, protruding into space and opened up, and the static and bounded classical body it presumes as its antithesis. (Vänskä 2002; cf. Russo 1995) Orlan's changing and 'inbetween' body suggests a phoenix-like self that is unstable and constantly in flux – an association that is provided force by the name of her project: *Reincarnations*. Dying and coming to life again, collapse and expansion, and not once but over and over again: this is the Self Orlan's body seems to reveal.

UPON CLOSER INSPECTION, however, we find that Orlan's performances destabilise, again, the parameters of our thinking about the relationship between identity and appearance, interior and exterior. We assume, in other words, a "doer behind the deed" (Butler 1990) – a doer, moreover, whose identity is reflected or expressed in the transformation of her body. Unsettling as the observation may be that Orlan's identity does not conform to our notions of a unified and stable self, we find comfort in the way it presents itself to us through the changes in her exteriority. Yet this cultural understanding of the relation between inner

self and outer appearance collapses, too. This point is best illuminated examining the role the skin plays in Orlan's performances.

ORLAN'S SKIN SYMBOLISES the boundary between inside and outside: it delineates where the interior self ends, and where the external world begins. When cut open, however, her skin does not simply reveal her interior, nor does it function anymore as that which represents the inner self. The camera in the operation room does not capture the person manipulating her skin, her canvas; all it registers is thin layers of yet more skin lining her muscles. Exposed to view, her interior *becomes* exterior. Remaining is only exterior, surface, and appearance:

"At this point of separation, the interior, no longer serving as the interior, is eliminated (as waste) from the identity of the body. The identity of the individual, portraying the self to the exterior, is transferred to that encasement which remains exterior, the skin." (O'Bryan 1999: 59)

ORLAN'S SURGERIES, THEN, first play into the cultural trope that treats the body-exterior as representational of the inner self. Yet at the same time, the distinction between the two collapses. Behind skin is yet more skin; behind exterior, more exterior. Orlan's body, in short, has no real 'depth' - there is only surface. In collapsing interior and exterior Orlan's performances challenge the oft-assumed relationship between substantive identity and surface-appearance, which informs what Butler coins the "expressive model of identity" (1990). This expressive model of identity refers to the (Western) notion that an inner core of selfhood is expressed on the surface of the body. In Orlan's performances, this relationship is shown to be bogus; there is effectively no interior. What remains is surface and exteriority without a hint of the doer behind the deed. It is in this sense that Orlan's performances confront us with how "*acts, gestures, and desire produce the effects of an inner core or substance, [and] produce this on the surface of the body, through a play of signifying absence that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause*" (Butler 1990: 185). As such, her performances allude to the *illusory* nature of identity: or how signs and acts on the body-surface work to create an illusion of an inner core. This inner core is not the organising cause of acts with and on the body-surface, but the *effect* of those gestures. In Butler's words: "the substantive "I" only appears as such through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own workings and to naturalize its effects" (1990: 197).

Behind skin there
is more skin;
behind exterior,
more exterior

WHAT EMERGES FROM Orlan's performances is hence a double critique of identity. First, Orlan's work questions the Enlightenment notion of a stable and bounded self by juxtaposing this notion with the image we derive from her fluid, in-between body: that of a changing and unstable inner self. Second, this trope is turned against itself and further destabilised: where we gratefully held on to the "expressive model of identity" (Butler 1990), Orlan's work again resets the parameters of our thinking in collapsing the distinction and relationship between interior and exterior self. It is in this regard that her performances are particularly subversive: they oscillate heavily between evoking a self, however unstable, and the deconstruction of that self at the moment of its appearance. Again, it is in this oscillation that a final ambiguity, or irony, resides.

III. FUTURISTIC IMAGININGS

THIS PAPER HAS attempted to outline the various political dimensions of Orlan's work, most notably those that pertain to debates surrounding technology and the body, and identity. Here, part I and II are connected to each other and their combination evaluated. The question this paper aims to answer here is what imaginative spaces are opened up by Orlan's performances, and how these spaces allow us to rethink feminism's future in the 21st century.

AS EXPLAINED IN part I and II, Orlan's performances can be read as thoroughly destabilising gestures. As described in part I, Orlan's performances hyperbolically emphasise how technology is part and parcel of the ways in which women's bodies are acculturated. The tension between Orlan's desire to transcend her material confinement and the 'return of the repressed body' in all its physicality also illustrates the limitations to our cultural predisposition to mold, shape, and modify our bodies. Yet Orlan's work does not only undermine notions of the natural body. In part II it has been argued that her work also challenges culturally specific ideas of identity as a unified and stable self existing prior to signifying practices on the body. As such, these gestures are interrelated: the unified self inhabiting a natural, bounded body constitutes the Western trope of selfhood and embodiment. Orlan's performances, in contrast, confront us with a shifting, changeable identity or essence indistinguishable from its appearance – it is effectively all appearance.

POLITICALLY, ORLAN'S PERFORMANCES are hence both a project of utopian hope and of dystopian warning. The hope they embody lies in

their enthusiastic engagement with technology and the possibilities for self-transformation it represents. Furthermore Orlan's work, in exploring the tensions between technology and the 'natural' body, engages in utopian imaginings about identity. The self she puts forth in her work cannot be fixed; rather, it will cyclically destruct and resurrect again. For Orlan, the destruction of the self or self-enunciation equals self-invention. It is in this sense self-destruction may work in politically liberating ways, namely, as strategies to escape arbitrary, imposed identities, such as 'woman', 'black', or 'gay' (or perhaps even our identity as 'human').

THE OPTIONS FOR surgical intervention in the remaking/demaking of the self are, however, limited. As well as having a financial price most people will not be able to pay, these technology-assisted options for self-transformation are not infinite but bound both in time and space. In time, because human lives characteristically end; in space, because the protruding, opened-up body needs sustained medical care the medical profession is hesitant to give to those not in immediate mortal danger. These limitations are not mere petty, practical concerns but symbol-

ise both the pragmatics and politics of such self-transformative or *self-deformative*, post-modernist yearnings. For the broader questions Orlan's performances raise are: *how*, technically, the possibilities for continual self-invention may be realised; *if*, ethically and aesthetically, we find such continual self-transformation worth risking our lives for; and last, *who* are the ones that will end up benefiting from these new technologies. These three questions connect the spheres of technological advancement, ethics and aesthetics, and distributive justice. It is in these connections that tensions emerge in academic theorising as well as political and social practice. Contemporary debates concerning plastic surgery as well as genetic engineering and medical practices that make lives longer (but not necessarily better) all revolve around these central questions: namely, what can be the use and misuse of these practices? How can we make them serve our most important ends? What are our most important ends? And *whose* ends are they anyway?

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THE LAST QUESTION is of particular relevance to those feminists who have often maintained that women's choices to undergo plastic surgery is motivated primarily by a wish to conform to standards of beauty. They furthermore maintain that those standards of beauty are defined by men in the interest of men. Such a stance, however, is bound to render

women dupes of a system of cultural representations, and furthermore regards individual motives for undergoing plastic surgery as mere 'false consciousness'. This approach, then, cannot take into account women's own renderings of their bodies and is bound to gloss over a host of issues playing a role in women's decisions to opt for plastic surgery, for instance, greater self-confidence or better chances on the labour market (cf. Davis 1997). Another point this stance cannot easily take into account is the emergence of surgical interventions aimed at enhancing the sensory perceptions of the female body, for instance, G-spot amplification or the surgical tightening of the vagina after childbirth. Such developments are sometimes considered symptoms of a hyper-sexualised culture, inflected by a backlash against feminism, that asks of women not only to be sexually objectified but also to *revel in that objectification*. On the other hand, such procedures do offer women tangible benefits, be it in terms of success on the labour market or in the bedroom. The question for feminists, then, is who benefits most by the proliferation of such practices while taking into account women, too, derive pleasure from participating in a system that renders their bodies in want of medical intervention. Orlan's performances call for exactly this kind of contextual and emphatic conceptualisation of technology. In addition to symbolically highlighting the dangers of such modernist desires to mould and shape nature, her enthusiasm in the appropriation of plastic surgery underscores the potential *pleasures* of such technologies.ⁱⁱ An anti-science stance will simply not help feminists in crafting strategies to deal with this proliferation of biotechnologies – technologies that might, after all, help us live more pleasurable lives.

ⁱⁱ *Then again, their pleasure might arise not despite danger, but because of it.*

FURTHERMORE, ORLAN'S COLLAPSE of inner and outer, interior and exterior, urges us to rethink appeals to authenticity and identity that still exert immense influence on feminist politics today.ⁱⁱⁱ As such, Orlan's work aligns itself with the critiques launched on second wave feminism that has too heavily focused on the assumed universality of the category 'woman'. Despite its appeals to sisterhood, the identity politics originating in this conception of a universal, female identity were often of concern to white, middle class, Western women only. For instance, the heavy focus on anti-conception and abortion and later, cultural representations (in the infamous pornography debates of the 1980s) worked to exclude and alienate women of colour, lower class women, lesbian women, and transsexual women. Moreover, the (Western) feminist movements displayed a decidedly ethnocentric bias and glossed over regional (power-ridden) differences between women. Working with a naive assumption of shared oppression on the basis of a shared identity, i.e. that of 'woman',

ⁱⁱⁱ *These notions of identity and authenticity also structure, and provide force to appeals to ethnicity that nation-states increasingly have severe difficulties to contain. See also Appadurai's Modernity at Large (1996).*

Western, feminist identity politics have done (symbolic) violence not to the patriarchy alone, but to the Other woman – poor, black, ‘native’, lesbian, or otherwise. In short, the identity ‘woman’ worked to oppress women as much as it allowed other women to claim a voice in politics (cf. Fraser 1995, Mohanty 2003).

IT IS WITHIN this political context that a variety of critiques on this notion of identity emerged: often classified as poststructuralist, these critiques focus on the power-ridden relations in which identities are constructed and enforced, and on the painstakingly performative dimensions of what we conceive of as identity (cf. Butler 1990, Fraser 1995, Gamson 1996) This context is also that which adds particular force to Orlan’s critique of Enlightenment notions of identity. Orlan’s version of identity is one that collapses at the moment of its tentative emergence and is hence an identity ill-suited to base sustained political organising upon. As such, it provokes us to rethink the notion of identity as much as that of political action. The Enlightenment notion of identity glosses over temporal shifts and ‘processes of becoming’ in human beings themselves. When relied upon for political strategies, moreover, this notion of identity has worked to silence those that it assumed represented, again erasing difference. In contrast, the notion of identity put forward in Orlan’s work calls for different modes of life or liberation than the older forms of politics based on the rational, autonomous, and fixed subject. In doing so, her performances are inquisitive steps into a territory in which identity may not be the prime source of political mobilisation – a sphere in which Enlightenment notions of identity might not mean much to us anymore. For politics at large, but feminism especially, these are important inquiries as identity politics are growing increasingly defunct. Orlan’s artful celebration of new selves, or of new technologically assisted forms of being human, hence evokes questions we will need to reconsider if we are to come up with viable strategies of political action. Although she never provides a definite answer, Orlan opens up a space to imaginatively think about the most pressing issues feminists will face in the 21st century: technology and its ever-increasing reach on human bodies, pains, and pleasures; and the shape of politics when identities are not only theorised to be bogus, but *lived as if they were*, too.

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<http://www.orlan.net>

Orlan's personal website offers a wealth of links to articles about the Reincarnation, as well as information about earlier and later projects. The biographical information in this paper is derived from this site.