The Textuality of the Body: Orlan’s Performance as Subversive Act

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Thesis submitted to Faculty at
Virginia Polytechnic State and University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a
Master of Arts in English

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Jan. 29, 2007
Blacksburg, VA

Key words: Feminism, Art, Performance.

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the performance artist Orlan uses feminist tactics of subversion in her presentation of the body as art. I enter the feminist debate over Orlan's work to indicate that the critics who consider the history of performance art produce more fecund discourse. At the same time, I encourage more discussion over the racial dimensions of Orlan's art, which I describe as de-colonizing her body's representation.
Acknowledgments

All images presented here are used with permission from Stephen Oriach, director of the documentaries *Successful Operation no. 11* and *Orlan: Carnal Art*. I would like to thank him for graciously allowing me to use his images.
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Chapter 1: Orlan’s Body of Work

A bruised face, spanning the colors of midnight, is swollen beyond recognition. A woman laughs, her face turned sideways giving the viewer a direct view of the cuts that make her ear look barely attached, as if it is about to float off in the river of blood surrounding it (See Illustration 1.1). These are the images with which Orlan chooses to represent herself. She usually looks disfigured both during her gruesome performances and after she has healed, at least in regards to how our culture perceives a normal body. By presenting such images as art, Orlan is commenting on the body as a construction. This commentary insists upon the textuality of the body in order to interrogate representation and question current traditions and ideologies, particularly those upholding femininity.
Illustration 1.1: Orlan’s open body (Screen shot Oriach Orlan). Permission granted by Stephen Oriach

Orlan is a French performance artist whose artwork focuses on her body and representations of it. The problem that Orlan has identified reflects recent feminist critical work that recognizes the representation of the female body as a tool of gender domination. These feminists and Orlan accept a Foucaultian notion of the body, in which the body is understood to be a surface for the inscriptions of culture rather than a biological entity. He writes, “[In the nineteenth century] the human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’ was being born; it defined how one may have hold over others’ bodies, not only so that the may do
what one wishes, but so that the may operate as one wishes” (Discipline 138). More importantly, these ideologies written on the body help maintain systems of control. In terms of semiotics, the kind of work being done by both Orlan and feminists interested in representation indicate to me that it is not the body per se that is worthy of investigation, but the representations of it. The signified matters little, but the signifiers and the way they articulate the signified are critical.

Orlan’s art questions (at times, terrorizes) many different social structures without replicating binary modes of thinking, which is why her work is informe. Informe is an act, similar to deconstruction. However, the critical difference is that deconstruction tackles binary structures by indicating that the oppositional agents are necessary to signification of the other and thus are not separate or actually opposed. Informe, on the other hand, creates a slip that suggests a third way in a binary system without affirming either extreme. Informe breaks down binary systems of logic by staying fluid and pointing out mythologies. Defying categorization means that defining what informe is is nearly impossible, but it is critical to note that informe, though difficult to define, does not
indicate an absence of meaning.¹ Orlan attacks the myths surrounding art history, femininity, beauty, and cosmetic surgery without conforming to a structure that forces her to choose an “either/or.” The “and” is a vital aspect of her work. It allows for varied interpretations, some problematic, and questioning of oppressive social structures by opening up their dichotomies to informe politics and producing a third way.

Orlan’s Early Work

In 1964, Orlan started her work of entering into patriarchal paradigms (such as art history, medicine, beauty norms, Christianity, etc.) to comment on them and subvert them (O’Bryan 1). Her first piece is a photograph entitled Orlan accouche d’elle-m’aime translated as Orlan Gives Birth to Her Loved Self (Orlan 9). In the photo, a young nude Orlan is seen from above giving birth to an androgynous mannequin (See Illustration 1.2). I see Orlan’s photo as a visual argument for multiplicity of identity and the eradication of gender roles. In this photo, Orlan is dually embodied: she is both herself and the other, man and woman. The androgy of the mannequin

she is giving birth to underscores her desire for her new self to be free from gender roles. To draw further attention to gender construction, Orlan posed on the sheets of her trousseau. The trousseau comprises white sheets traditionally handed down from mother to daughter, usually embroidered by the bride-to-be for use upon marriage (O’Bryan 1). Orlan is rebelling against this tradition by giving birth on the sheets, a misuse of a tradition that bolsters feminine passivity.

The title, Orlan Gives Birth to Her Loved Self, indicates that Orlan is making a claim of self-authorship. For Orlan, the first step to escaping feminine prescripts was to free herself from the cycle of male ownership: first owned, in a sense, by a father and later handed off to a husband. Rather than taking her father’s name, Orlan named herself. She revokes her familial obligation to fill the roles prescribed to a daughter (like the tradition of the trousseau) by giving birth to herself. Her work that follows extends from this desire to be her own woman.
Illustration 1.2: Orlan Gives Birth to Her Loved Self (Screen shot, Oriach Orlan). Permission granted by Stephen Oriach.

In her early work, Orlan’s goal was to use her body to question baroque religious iconography. The baroque period (17th century Europe) is associated with excessive ornamentation and high drama because churches were striving to make religion more interesting. The dramatic aspect was intended to provoke intense emotional reactions that coincided with the needs of the church. I see Orlan’s choice to focus on this particular period as enabling her to raise questions about how art history constructs the feminine, how Christianity constructs the feminine, and the
powerful ways these two systems can assist each other’s means.

During work on the baroque, Orlan frequently presented herself as the Madonna (see Striptease from Madonna to Whore, discussed later). My interpretation of her interest in the Madonna underscores two themes that I see throughout Orlan’s work. First is her interest in playing with icons: becoming them only to later destroy them, which I argue erodes, even if slightly, the meanings associated with them. Second is presenting herself as the Madonna, which prefigures her more recent goal to become a saint. I see this as an act of informe, as blurring the lines that establish the sacred/mundane polarity; and in this case, as opening up the realm of the sacred.

Orlan works directly on the representation of woman. She projects her alterations of her own representation to stir up questions about who established this system of representation. Why? In what ways do these representations produce woman as inferior and, more importantly, how can these representations be overturned? To my mind, Orlan manages to subvert the image and ideology of femininity. While she overturns many institutions, the subversion of femininity is the focus of her work. As she opens her body in surgery she likewise opens an
investigation into representations of women and the ways they produce gender domination. Most importantly, her art is not about the unfurling of feminine representation. Orlan’s art, her body, is the very undoing.

Gender Role Play

Orlan’s artwork argues for the eradication of the prescribed roles of masculinity and femininity. She has attended feminist rallies in which she marched with a sign that stated “Je suis une homme et un femme” which translates as “I am (feminine) a man and (masculine) a woman.” Orlan claiming to be both sexes here and she has purposely confused the French articles so that the masculine article attaches to the word woman and the feminine to man. Orlan’s statement calls attention to the construction of gender and the problematic role language plays in the construction.

Another example of her gender role play, which will be discussed in detail later, is her controversial use of cosmetic surgery. Though it is a notably female undertaking and generally used to make women look more feminine, Orlan has used the technology against its intended purposes. She has, since her surgical operations, been described as “extra-terrestrial” (Davis 29),
monstrous, “the most hideous of women” (Aguilar). The images she produces in this series challenge the discourse of femininity by presenting the female body as active, powerful, and full of agency.

**Struggle Against Patriarchal Scripts**

In her play with gender roles, Orlan often enters into patriarchal paradigms physically and symbolically in order to subvert them. In MesuRAGEs, Orlan used her body as a political unit of measurement to express her anger with the expectations levied against females/artists. Her goal was to perform her refusal of Protagoras’s idea that “man is the measure of all things” by answering the question: How many Orlan-corps fit into a selected space (Orlan 32)? To measure, Orlan lies down on the ground, marks a line in chalk above her head, moves to align her feet with the line, and marks over her head again. Often during the measuring process, she crawls from line to line (See Illustration 1.3). After finishing this task, she publicly removes and washes her tunic and bottles the murky water. To finish, she poses as the Statue of Liberty (note: another female icon), holding up the bottled water. She later seals the bottles as relics of what she sees as her
“dirty” work of forcing her female figure into masculine, institutionalized spaces.

Illustration 1.3: Lying down to mark an Orlan-corps during a MesuRAGE (Screen shot Oriach Orlan). Permission granted by Stephen Oriach.

Orlan stresses that her dress during these performances is symbolic of the second-class citizenship of women and the lacking importance of traditionally feminine tasks. Orlan again utilizes her trousseau sheets (they comprise her tunic) to subvert a feminine tradition that symbolizes the purity and passivity of women. She also chooses to wear heels, which of course, change the actual measurement of her body’s length and, it has been argued, symbolically insist upon her femininity. C. Jill O’Bryan explains, “The high heels signify the sexual identity
always activated when close to the trousseau. Sexualized femininity is forcefully present, not excommunicated from the scene... [she] must participate in the deconstruction of her form, which has also always been shaped by the Western cultural imaginary” (6).

What is most interesting about these performances is that Orlan does not merely put her body in the space, she measures it. Measuring takes a different focus that situates her in control; she is the unit, the ruler, the constant. Instead of Orlan focusing on the building, the building is focused on her and marked by her, for her. Indeed, her body eventually covers the space.

The act of measuring also changes the space. It creates a disruption in the daily flow of traffic. Though few spectators may know what she is doing, Orlan’s actions are nonetheless perceived as a threat. A simple symbolic task such as measuring Georges Pompidou Center (which is capable of holding 69 x 24 Orlan-corps) results in all kinds of nasty reactions from spectators, which is frequently an exciting component of Orlan’s art (O’Bryan 9). During several of her MesuRAGEs performances, Orlan was spat on and called such things as “a woman of the streets” (O’Bryan 9). Once the implications of this work are considered, these kind of reactions are almost
understandable: “She’s saying that the relationship between space and body is crucial, that the body can be an unmatched instrument of perception and knowledge (which is often overlooked)” (Orlan 35). I would add that the female body is most especially overlooked– or only looked at in certain, limited ways. The action is particularly significant for women, who have historically been powerless in these institutions and still cannot walk these public spaces with the same freedom that men have.

Much in the same way Orlan has attacked certain institutions and the meanings associated with them, she has attempted to unravel images of traditional perceptions of women. In her Striptease From Madonna to Whore, Orlan takes two of women’s most famous roles and blurs the lines between them. By beginning as the holy Madonna and stripping down to the image of the whore, these images become tied to one another, no longer clearly distinguishable entities for the spectator. I read this work as symbolically stating that the binaries that society prescribes for women are oppressive and simply cannot be tolerated. The Madonna is the whore; the whore is the Madonna. At the same time, she challenges the doctrine of the New Testament, which established the Madonna/Whore juxtaposition. The point, for Orlan, is that there is a
continuum of possibility for woman; in fact, her work suggests that even the continuum is limiting. There is endless possibility for women. Orlan’s striptease shows the breakdown of this continuum, while it strips the original images of their strength.

_Orlan’s Carnal Art_

Beyond her early work, Orlan has become most often recognized, perhaps notoriously, for her surgery-performances in which Orlan performs while a cosmetic surgeon operates on her. She videotapes and broadcasts the opening of her body during cosmetic surgery as art. She has entitled this overarching project, which has consisted of seven surgeries thus far, _Carnal Art_ or _The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan_. The term “surgery-performance” underscores her agency. It also draws attention to the _informe_ nature of the work: it is not simply a surgery or a performance, but always a blend of both actions.

Although she is getting cosmetic surgery, she does so in a way that avoids duplicating normative beauty standards and instead subverts them. Most of her surgery-performances could not be considered improvements by the Western eye; this is not her goal. Kathy Davis writes,
“Her operations have left her considerably less beautiful than she was before” (29). As previously noted, Davis goes on to describe Orlan’s appearance as “slightly extraterrestrial” (29). Orlan’s use of elective surgery can be read as a criticism of the cosmetic industry (that is certainly a part), but I see it as emphasizing the opportunities available to people once they escape the paradigm of binary reasoning.

Orlan bases her surgical alterations on famous historical Western art figures. Her criticism of the art canon is evident in her choices. In a sense, she is implying that she could be come the ultimate art object: a living representation of the most recognizable and beautiful women in the canon. However, the way she has incorporated these beauties into herself subverts the icon’s meaning and likewise subverts the intention of the male “Masters” who generated it.

Orlan selects an icon not for its perceived beauty, but for the stories of strength and power associated with it. Eventually, Orlan will possess the chin of Botticelli’s Venus, selected because of her association with fertility and creativity; the forehead of Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa who represents transexuality; the eyes of Gerard’s Psyche for love and spiritual hunger; and the lips
of Francois Boucher’s Europa because she “gazes with anticipation at an uncertain future” (Davis 26).

Orlan had plans to have her nose done to resemble the nose of Diana because she is associated with aggression and adventure, but some issues have prevented the performance (Davis 26). She had planned to invert the traditional rhinoplasty in order to get “the biggest nose technically possible” (Weintraub 81). She was planning on exchanging her cute button nose for a nose that quite literally extends halfway up her forehead. This alteration was going to take place in Japan; her ironic choice of place reflects her desire to break normative beauty codes. Japan is a country full of small nosed people, where people (by contemporary Western codes of beauty) have no “need” for rhinoplasty.

However, the plans for this surgery have not yet been completed as she had trouble finding a surgeon capable of completing the operation. (Orlan’s theories are ahead of the technology necessary to actualize them. While shrinking or shortening the nose has been essentially mastered, no one has considered how to make a nose larger as there is no market for such an operation. Another reason the performance could not proceed was that Orlan was
informed that she would have to be fully anesthetized, which undermines the goals of her project.)

By taking body parts of these masterpieces and mixing them with her own skin, Orlan interrogates the realm of representation (indeed she becomes different representations), while she critiques the canon of art history. The contradiction of her appropriation is that the iconography of beauty, established by the masters of western art, becomes grotesque when materialized. She also becomes like Frankenstein’s Monster (a fact she is not unaware of) who was created by selecting the best and most beautiful pieces of corpses, but when brought to life was hideous.

In her The Digital Bride of Frankenstein photos, taken after one of her early surgeries, Orlan wears a bride of Frankenstein wig, a glove and large shiny ring (Orlan 110). She is poised and serene, gazing elegantly beyond the camera. This photo is coupled with what she calls a “Rectifying Insert” which is a picture of her in the midst of a surgery-performance. The beauty of her (surgically enhanced) plump lips is offset by both the wig and the photo of the surgery. This parody is a reaction to her critics, who complained about her “monstrous” dedication of her body to art (Orlan 110). While some may still find
Orlan beautiful, her Frankenstein reference implies the impossibility of reaching the goals of perfect feminine beauty even with the use of up to date surgical procedures.

Since all of her aesthetic alterations represent aspects of strong mythological women, the surgery-performances are designed around the deity that Saint Orlan is invoking on that occasion and often resemble a séance. The operating-stage requires careful preparation of appropriate symbolic props, texts (from which she reads throughout her surgery), music, and costumes. Each performance has a theme, including: “Carnal Art,” “This is My Body, This is My Software,” “I Have Given My Body to Art,” and “Identity Alterity” (Davis 26). Her stage design underscores the fact that what she is doing, first and foremost, is a performance and that she is the director.

Orlan controls the performance while avoiding pain by undergoing local anesthetic. Her autonomy is an essential aspect of her work. She maintains the contradiction of the passive patient/object under the surgeon’s gaze and the active performer/subject as she speaks throughout the surgery-performance (See Illustration 1.4). Furthermore, she directs these performances: even the surgeon must move according to her command. This act of agency is a feminist stance against the medical regulation of the body that
further upsets the power dynamic that correlates the female body with passivity.

Illustration 1.4: A close up of Orlan, mid-word while a needle punctures the skin of her cheek (Screen shot Oriach Successful). Permission granted by Stephen Oriach.

Watching Orlan speak, laugh, and move while her body is being manipulated with scalpels causes intense reactions in spectators. However, a critical part of her Carnal Art Manifesto is that she experiences little to no pain (n.paradoxa 12). Her avoidance of pain sets her apart from previous performance artists and allows her another criticism of femininity as establish by the Bible. According to Genesis, after Eve’s fall from grace she is cursed with pain during childbearing. Orlan’s avoidance of pain symbolizes that we are in an age where women do not have to experience pain during elective surgery, much less
during childbirth. By extension women are no longer cursed, no longer limited to the roles and characteristics prescribed to them in the Bible: the Madonna, the whore, or Eve.

Her cognizance during the opening of her body has an immense and varied impact on spectators. Kathy Davis recounts the crowd reactions to one of Orlan’s presentations in which she spoke while photos, just photos, of her surgical procedures flashed in the background (23). As Orlan speaks calmly, the spectators react in shock; one woman stood up and said, “You act as though it were not you, up there on the screen” (Davis 23). Spectators of the televised live surgical event have become irritated, many have left, and a few have even fainted (29). Although Orlan apologizes for causing the viewer to experience pain, she says this with an ironic twist as she feels that the artist and especially the viewer must be uncomfortable in order to “be forced to ask questions” (qtd in Davis 29).

In order to force this questioning, Orlan uses medical technology to reincarnate herself as a sacred being. Her word choice reflects her interests. Reincarnation means “becoming flesh” again (Zimmerman 3). The implicit argument is that Orlan has lost her body due to the
cultural inscriptions placed upon it; thus, she reclaims her body and her identity by becoming flesh once more.

The term reincarnation is a play on orthodox Christianity where “it refers to god’s word becoming flesh in Christ and therefore constructs the body as representing something transcendental,” which again highlights the transformative potential of the material body (Zimmerman 3). Furthermore, she inverts the Christian mythology where Christ represents the word “become flesh” so that Orlan represents the “flesh becoming” word (n.paradoxa 44). Where Christ was a holy being who was given a body to struggle with, Orlan is a human being, born into a struggle with her body, who is attempting to become holy.

The idea of reincarnation that Orlan relies on is the idea that one soul inhabits several bodies; however, she sees herself as capable of achieving this feat in one lifetime. Her rationale is that she transforms herself into the other, even from herself. She becomes an-other from her previous physical selves. These alterations are interesting in terms of psychology and art.

Psychologically, I am most interested in the conflict between Orlan as a subject and as an object. In the case of the surgical operations, the subject Orlan overtakes the object. The object has tried to confront the subject, but
the result is that the subject Orlan has completely possessed the object. Orlan stated that she once felt betrayed by both her representation as a woman and her DNA; I see her as actively attacking this problem by closing the gap between what she has and who she is.

The physical difference she experiences directly impacts her psyche (Orlan does not see the two as separate, but as a hybrid). The physical change she undergoes forces her to face a new reality. People perceive her differently, treat her differently; thus she will not only experience the physical difference via her senses daily, but she will experience it psychically through the mirroring of other’s conceptions of her. Thus, her identity changes with the changes that her body undergoes. After each surgery-performance, she becomes an-other and then finds a new normality in difference.

This “reclaiming” of her body is an affirmation that Orlan cannot escape the criticism of the panoptical male gaze. Since she cannot escape the gaze, she might as well direct it. To my mind, she puts herself in control of the dialogue by placing the conversation in a radical position. She has made a bodily statement foreign to dominant culture (though still inevitably within it), thereby making the people in opposition her subjects, to a degree. She has
created an art form that is built out of her body; she forces people to discuss her physical qualities, their political meanings, and ask questions about the structures that make her the "other". Orlan’s body project implies that though ideology constructs your body, with some creativity your body can also impact ideology.

Her choice of political problem is unique as she forces the unprecedented legal question of identity. Orlan has a post-modern sense of identity in that she sees it as "itinerant, shifting, changing" (Orlan 202). She has changed her name and her body in an attempt to reclaim her identity for herself. By posing the problem of multiplicitous identity, she is encouraging thought and discussion that defies traditional Western ideology. She is forcing the law to consider abandoning binary logic to make room for non-unitary post-modern conceptions of the self. Raising public and political awareness challenges the ideologies that established the mind-body duality: Christianity and the Enlightenment.

Traditional Christianity viewed the body as a core that housed the soul, while after the Enlightenment, Western thinkers maintained this general idea with a small shift; it viewed the body as a “mere container for the glory of the human mind” (Orlan 225). Though the body’s
significance is reduced in both cases, it was also dictated that the body should not be attacked, as it is the temple, so to speak, of the soul/mind. In asserting that “the body is but a costume,” she neither exalts nor reduces the body in relation to the mind, but sees the elements as a hybrid (Orlan 140). By accepting a Foucaultian conception of the body (a body marked thoroughly by culture), she subverts both the discourses of the Enlightenment and cosmetic surgery, both of which assume a natural—albeit defective, in the case of medicine—body.

Orlan’s use of Media

Orlan is first and foremost a body artist, but she also uses multimedia frequently in her art. She exploits the current trends and technologies of the media machine in two essential ways. First, Orlan uses technology to present the art that she has created (such as in the Entre-Deux series discussed later) such as video, photography, internet, satellite, computer graphic manipulation. Her use of technology to represent herself is important because Orlan’s Carnal Art cannot easily be displayed in traditional gallery spaces, as the original is her own body. She does exhibit herself at times, but for long-running displays it is important that she present some form
of documentation of her surgeries, rather than the “original.” The images she displays purposely raise questions: how have the images been altered? Where do the lines of virtual and reality cross? What is real in what we see? Again, Orlan navigates a blend of both extremes, so that neither is clearly distinguishable from the other, a tactic of informe art.

She raises such questions with her images to draw attention to the ways the female form is represented. In popular media, graphically altered female bodies are everywhere. All we see is perfection, though hours of editing have gone into the photos (not to mention hours of personal training, dieting, hair styling, etc.). Women’s ideas about their bodies are constructed by images that are false. Orlan places her work between “the madness of seeing and the impossibility of seeing” (Orlan 219). She designs images to show people her belief that sight and reality are only loosely connected, if at all. This is especially true in the case of surgical alterations, where what you see is both real and altered at once. Here, one can see the informe, the “and” that pervades her work. Nothing is “either/or”; nothing replicates opposition. The “and” is fluid, contradictory, and encompassing.
What is more intriguing is how she uses the public media to promote her work by making a spectacle of herself and how this has become a crucial component of her work conceptually. Orlan always records the event of her surgery-performances, but she broke new ground with the Omnipresence performance as it was broadcasted live world-wide. People watched in galleries around the world. Connie Chung and a slew of cameramen covered the event from the operating-theatre. The world-wide media coverage is what enabled Orlan to be omnipresent. As a result of the broadcasting, she was in many different places at once, interacting with people around the world. Orlan has also been on a number of European news and talk shows. She promoted her work in India by commissioning local artists to make billboards with her likeness on them. She wants the outside media to promote her project because then she can impact more people.

When she has finished her Reincarnation work, she will hire an advertising agency to run public opinion polls to decide what her new name should be: one that matches her new identity. This final step indicates that Orlan is aware that she has become, in many ways, a public figure. Though her work is not well known in America, she is widely recognized in Europe. Unlike most artists, she has become
a legend while she is still alive. She knows that the spectacle has power in the human imagination and has used the media hype to draw attention to this cultural phenomenon of how one woman has become a public body.

Not only is the opening of her body unique for television, but it is interesting how the media portrays a process that is usually very private: the slow changing of one’s identity. Because of the media hype, the relationship between Orlan as subject and as object is transmitted as public phenomenon. Here is another informe aspect, another dichotomy Orlan traverses: with the subject’s super consciousness exists the object’s super availability, making objectification difficult if not impossible. As a result, Orlan’s work has both a testimonial and symbolic value (Marranca 48).

Some people claim that Orlan is media-obsessed and desirous of celebrity status. However, her project could not have been as successful without the help of the media. A critical part of Orlan’s transformation is the very public nature of it. She has struggled with the objectification of the female body, which of course relies on (assumes) the availability of the body. In order to force questions about the representation of the female body, she sees herself as having to make her body available
in almost every way possible. This is her political strategy, as the availability of the female body is assumed, but when a woman makes her body available, almost forcefully so, discomfort frequently results.

This is a fact Orlan recognized and performed early in her career during The Kiss of the Artist, a public event where she offered her mouth to anyone who would pay her five francs. Making her mouth available in a public space is very different from the ways that media coverage of her surgery performances has made her body, inside and out, available.

In India, she was represented as Goddess of Kali on a billboard (Oriach Orlan). This is an apt representation as Kali is the goddess of war and the strong feminine (read: fertile) force in Indian art. In her traditional image, she has ten arms, eight of which are holding a traditional weapon. In Orlan’s hybrid with this image, she is holding her weapons: video cameras, tv’s, photographic equipment (Oriach Orlan). These enable her to bring her war on representation to another, more public, level.

**Beauty and Carnal Art**

Orlan defies and redefines beauty. She argues that beauty is a construct by showing how beauty standards shift
across time periods and cultures, while also projecting the “ugly” side of cosmetic surgery both during the operation and during her recovery (see Illustration 1.7). She shows close-ups of her fat sliding into hospital bags (see Illustration 1.5), the scalpels that cut and make her bleed. She makes no attempt to cover the non-socially acceptable, even disgusting, parts of surgery. She thus produces the obscene, the images that society says should not be seen. The grotesque way that she (re)invents herself pushes the boundaries of the viewer’s conditioned perception, which, while it reinforces the norm by causing such strong opposition to it, also serves to shake the viewer and cause commotion; therefore generating discussion. She makes her body her text, and as Barthes points out while we play the text, the text is also playing us. Orlan’s work affects everyone that has contact with it— even, dare I say especially— those who cringe and renounce it.
Illustration 1.5: Close up of fat removed from Orlan’s body (Screen shot Oriach Successful). Permission granted by Stephen Oriach.

Orlan turns the smooth face of cosmetic surgery and makes it look brutish and uncivilized. Because she stays awake, the operations look more like torture than cosmetic surgery on documentaries or shows like Dr. 90210 do. On those other shows, the face of the person under anesthetic is usually blurred or covered, resulting in a safe anonymity for both the person under the knife and the spectator. The camera is also generally further back, resulting in a comforting distance. The goal of these types of shows, to produce acceptance among audience members, is underscored visually by the filming tactics.

In contrast, the way Orlan films her performances produces disgust. For instance, she shows extreme close-
ups of liposuction (an act other shows cut short and pan far back to film). The thrusting of fat sucking tubes just beneath the skin’s surface looks like repetitive stabbing a la Hitchcock. It looks brut and inhumane as the tubes pull and distort the skin’s surface. See illustration 1.6 below.

Illustration 1.6: Orlan getting liposuction on her legs (Screen shot Oriach Successful). Permission granted by Stephen Oriach.

Orlan’s Omnipresence exhibit, which she put together after her seventh surgery, depicts the grotesque post-surgery healing process. She chronicles two contradictory images presented in sets of two hung vertically. The top image is usually of Orlan in some alarmingly grotesque stage of the forty-one day healing process, which she
religiously photographs every morning (See Illustration 1.7). Directly below the picture of Orlan’s bruised face is an image she creates by taking a famous source of female power and beauty from all over the world and integrating it with pictures of herself. She takes both the socially unacceptable side (the “ugly” side) and the socially approved goal of plastic surgery (the “beautiful new you” side) and exhibits them both together, an iconoclastic exhibit in the plainest sense. She entitles each set of images “Entre-deux” or “In-between.” Orlan is quite literally “in between;” in between stages of healing, in between stages of surgical alteration, and in between a negative and positive conception of beauty ideals.

Illustration 1.7: Orlan after a surgery-performance (Screen shot Oriach Carnal). Permission granted by Stephen Oriach
Thus, she brings to the forefront the unacceptable aspects of cosmetic surgery. Her photography documents the very process that most people hide from, drawing attention to another hidden aspect of cosmetic surgery that feminists deplore—how plastic surgery appropriates a “natural” aesthetic. While the Western mind clearly sees the body as a site for improvement, the ideal of “natural” beauty remains. This is a problematic, if unrealized, contradiction. Many perceive that silicone breasts are in some way better (bigger, perkier), but overall women still want them to look “natural.” Likewise, women feel that wearing padded bras are, in some way, more false than breast implants; they are complying with the dominant aesthetic in searching for a “more natural” solution to reach toward impossible beauty standards.

Orlan’s art has been described as a dramatization of opportunity (Oriach Carnal). While feminists debate over her use of cosmetic surgery, she is suggesting new directions for the body she claims is obsolete. She frees herself from her DNA and from traditional representation by making her body say what it wants.

She is at war: she creates a text that attacks representation, art tradition, history, religion, beauty
standards, iconography and identity. She raises questions while refusing the oppression of binary logic system and mainstream ideology.

Organization

I have opened with a detailed description of the themes and meanings that are repeated throughout Orlan’s artwork. In the following chapters, I will further develop this analysis. The second chapter situates Orlan’s art in the context of performance art history, which reveals aspects of her work that would otherwise remain hidden. The third chapter outlines the feminist debate over Orlan’s work and indicates that feminist discourse would benefit from some awareness of performance history and theory. Without this background, much feminist writing presents an ahistoric and short-sighted analysis of Orlan’s work. The fourth chapter is centered on Orlan’s ambiguous use of race in her work and the many critics who have ignored this issue. The discussion underscores that performance critics would benefit from feminist and race theory. This borrowing from other discourses could provide new analytical modes for further interpretation and enable critics to work on untouched race issues. My final chapter
summarizes my analysis of Orlan and issues a call for more interdisciplinary work.
Chapter 2: Orlan in the Context of Performance

History and Theory

When analyzing the meanings of Orlan’s work, it is critical to understand that she is emerging out of a long tradition in performance art. Without this background, her artwork comes off as crazed and/or irrelevant rather than evolving out of a unique history that sets the stage (so to speak) for her surgery-performances. Sometimes her art falls in line with the history of performance art; sometimes it is a rebellion. Most often, Orlan blends differing extremes together. Either way, the context is absolutely essential to a deeper analysis of her work. Otherwise, much of the meaning of her project is lost, particularly in American feminist writing, where an awareness of performance art history is limited to smaller, more specialized groups.

This chapter is organized around principles that influence Orlan’s art and their historical evolutions. I focus only on the more recent European and American movements that have specific impacts on Orlan’s work.

Performance Art

The notion of performance art has itself evolved over time. The term “performance art” was not coined until the
early 1970s and is generally accepted as having an open-ended meaning. Ancient ceremonies, rituals, and traditional Greek and Shakespearean theatre have all been argued as in some way prefiguring current performance art. The evolution of performance art can also be viewed as an expansion of performance space, from the traditional theatre structure to more intimate theatres, to homes, to art galleries, to public spaces, to televisions, and even to operating rooms.

A cursory overview of the history of performance indicates that a dark and problematic political context seems to cultivate the most recent and radical movements of performance art. Political upheaval, depression, and dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs seem to fuel performance. Futurism was developed during the years just preceding World War I. Dadaism emerged as a direct reaction to World War I in the war’s center, Zurich, in 1916. Though Europe has not faced a catastrophic war since Orlan started her artwork, France struggled through the First Indochina war in Southeast Asia (1946-54) resulting in France’s departure from Vietnam. Almost immediately afterward the Algerian war started (1954-62). This war between France and Algeria resulted in Algerian independence; it is noted as one of the most important
decolonization wars in history. These wars have had a profound impact on the French psyche.

However, France is still facing the repercussions of this war. For instance, in 2003, the French government banned conspicuous religious symbols in public schools, meaning that Muslim women cannot fulfill their religious duty to wear the veil. Muslims all over France protested the secularism of the government. It is important to note that the veil issue is primarily a problem of representation, which is highly political. Orlan’s interrogation of representation reacts to the delicate problems France currently faces. She is rebelling against oppression of the female body (which, as the veil indicates, occurs in multiple forms); most specifically the ways the female body has become further regulated and oppressed as a result of recent technological innovations.

**Radical Impetus of Performance Art**

In several essays, eventually compiled into the book *The Theatre and Its Double*, Antonin Artaud (1895-1948) provided the philosophical foundation for the radical trajectory of the last 100 years of performance art and is critical to understanding the drive behind most performances, including Orlan’s. Artaud felt that the
Parisian theatre of the early 1900s needed to be changed drastically in order to alter the way people perceived the world at the time. While Artaud theorized most thoroughly about awakening a complacent public, performance was being used to upset spectators all over Europe at that time. For instance, public outrage was a goal of Futurist performance in Austria and Russia.

To enlighten the public, Artaud desired a theatre more like those from what he termed “pre-logical societies”: generally Eastern societies or other indigenous peoples with a strong sense of community. Though the term “pre-logical” may sound like a slight to these cultures, in Artaud’s eyes logic was something to be struggled against, and thus the term is complimentary. “Performances” for these communities relied heavily on spirituality, trance, and communion between actors and spectators. He called this the “true theatre”: performances that resemble what these peoples enacted as rituals. Only in this kind of theatre did Artaud see the opportunity to revitalize a disconnected and nearly unconscious populace.

Thus, he wrote the First Manifesto for Theatre of Cruelty in 1932. Artaud’s sense of cruelty does not necessarily have sadistic implications. What Artaud wanted to cultivate was a violent determination to shatter the false
reality that he found so disgusting. He wrote, “In the true theatre a play disturbs the senses’ repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt [...] and imposes on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic” (28). His “sacred” goal was to use theatrical spectacles to induce a sort of delirium, releasing the subconscious, and inducing inspirational trances. This theatre was to be action-based. Language was distrusted; its only use was to help put people into a dream-like state, usually by chanting and strange sounds. Artaud used action and sound in ways that aimed at a physical reaction, rather than a mental one. He felt the audience could then be led back to dreams and primitive instincts, which would liberate them from trance caused by civilization and capitalism. He saw the world as blood thirsty and inhumane, despite all claims of “civilization.” Artaud gave reason to the radical imperative behind performance art: pushing the boundaries of perception enables both artists and audiences to see the world with more clarity and experience life more fully.

Artaud denounced society at large and the theatre for relying too heavily on notions such as morality and logicality. He designed performances that he hoped would shake the viewer free from such limited modes of thinking.
In the context of Artaud’s theories, Orlan’s work is thoroughly theorized and potentially revolutionary, instead of bizarre. Likewise, Orlan designs performances that explode binaries with the goal of expanding oppositional structures to be more fluid. Sixty years after Artaud’s death, Orlan uses her art to battle a key foundation of both morality and logicality: binary thinking.

Orlan supports Artaud’s ideas, underscoring that art can change people’s perceptions and understandings: “Art can, art must change the world and is its only justification” (Orlan 215). Orlan’s statement indicates that she would not have undertaken her Reincarnation work if she did not firmly believe it could impact people’s perceptions of the structures that produce current discourses on the body and femininity. By opening her body, Orlan points to the problems with our “civilized” conceptions of beauty. My analysis is that Orlan’s surgery-performances (overall) discourage women from getting cosmetic surgery as she shows every side of the industry, making it look unappealing and crude, uncivilized. Perhaps most importantly, the end result of her cosmetic endeavors is unappealing to many people, as Orlan’s conception of herself as saint is not conventionally beautiful.
From Concept to Aktion

Understanding the impetus behind conceptual art, first officially defined in the late 1960s, is critical to Orlan's project. The movement signaled a move from the art object to the art idea. Where traditional art relied almost solely on a person's skill in rendering "reality" and/or aesthetic choices, conceptual art insists that information or philosophy form the basis for the art object (if there is one). Most contemporary art has some concept motivating it, even if it does not fall strictly into the category. Orlan's work is based on the concept of self-authorship, to greatly over simplify. Her art has other aspects of the conceptual art movement: namely, the emphasis on process rather than product and the social and/or political critique. Marcel Duchamp, who has directly influenced Orlan, is noted as being the precursor to the formally recognized conceptual art movement.

In 1917, Duchamp defined the term readymade. Duchamp grew tired of art's emphasis on the artist's eye and the skill of his hand. He submitted a urinal, a piece he entitled Fountain, to a gallery that ultimately rejected the piece. The fountain was the first widely recognized readymade, and is a prototype for conceptual art. The term
readymade means that the artist does not have to handcraft the piece; the object does not have to be unique or satisfy any aesthetic standards. The interaction between the artist and the piece is insignificant unless it influences concept. For Duchamp, merely placing the object in a new context such as an art gallery gave new significance to a piece that would have never been viewed as art in any other context. However, in gaining the status of art object, the piece forfeits its functionality. Though the Fountain had no unique aesthetic quality and it was not made with the intention of being art, the concept made the piece art and opened entire new realms of inquiry for artists.

The notion of a readymade helps explain Orlan’s relationship with her body and also points to why those without a background in art may be confused by her project. Orlan argues that the body is a “modified readymade.” This means that she perceives her body as an object, not unlike any other object. Like Duchamp’s urinal, Orlan’s body is the starting point, the basis of her work, ready to be manipulated. Thus, Orlan’s relationship to her body is depersonalized. One can also see this distance in Orlan’s language. She frequently says “the body” instead of “my body.” For instance, during the Omnipresence performance, she responded to a question about pain: “The body is
operated on. *It is not suffering,*” which is quite different from saying “My body is operated on. I am not suffering” (Oriach Carnal). She does not feel that it is her body, which is why the reclamation through art is necessary.

The point of her surgery-performances is to manipulate this object until it is wholly her own. It is critical that, of all objects available to her, it is her choice to focus on her body as the basis for her work. Not only is Orlan stressing that the body is a valid artistic medium, she is arguing that the body is malleable. The main connection between Duchamp’s readymades and Orlan’s body as a readymade is the visual indifference both employ: the aesthetic value doesn’t matter, the meaning and process are the focus.

During the 1950s and 60s, many artists were experimenting with blending different traditional forms to create art with greater impact. Live art created an environment by mixing many different art forms, a blurring of traditional boundaries that enveloped the spectator with the hope of impacting him/her more effectively. Traditional theatre also blended many different forms, but is significantly different. The key difference is that live art has no script and is thus capable of a different
kind of spontaneity. Like the conceptual movement, the
text or final product matters little. The action itself is
of primary importance.

The development of live art provides a key component
of Orlan’s performance-operations: establishment of an
atmosphere using different artistic forms. She blends many
different art forms together in one operating room: she
puts herself and the surgeons in costume, places meaningful
props around the room, puts paintings and billboards around
the room to create the environment for her operations.
This is one clear way she establishes her surgery-
performances as art: they take place on a well-designed
stage. She draws attention to this factor of her work by
calling her performance space an “operating-theatre.”

The films of her surgery performances indicate that a
lot of time and planning go into the operating-theatre.
The stage design is where one can clearly see the playful
side emerging in Orlan’s Carnal Art. In this sense, to
play means to act subversively and take a particular kind
of intellectual joy in upsetting the status quo. When
Orlan designs her operating-theatres, she plays by
undermining the sterile environment. Through overdone
costuming, extreme hair and makeup, cheap props, placing
large billboards of herself around the room, Orlan establishes a carnivalesque and absurd atmosphere. Even the filming and editing of the films indicate that her intentions are playful. In the film Carnal Art, there is a clear contrast visually between the philosophers or art historians discussing Orlan’s work and shots from Orlan’s operating-theatre. The academics are mostly shot in black and white against a black background. Sometimes, the light causes a slight blur, but otherwise the shots are clean and lack movement. See Illustration 2.1 below.


In contrast, Orlan’s surgery-performances give the spectator the sense that they are witnessing a sick carnival. The bright colors clash. The music is often unsettling with random screams. The filming further
visually compounds this situation, as the camera frequently shakes back and forth, zooms in and out quickly, or spins slowly around the room for a little longer than is comfortable for the viewer. Screens are often divided into at least four windows with different actions occurring in each (See Illustration 2.2). The audience is very rarely allowed to focus on one action, which can leave one feeling like they just got off Disneyland’s “Mad Hatter’s Teacup Ride”. Orlan is clearly being playful here, but her reasoning is sound. The shaking, blurry shots draw attention to the mediated nature of the images. What the spectator sees is not a crystal clear “reality,” but a visually disorienting world. More importantly, the resulting spectator discomfort has been theorized as having transformative potential since Artaud. Her filming techniques highlight Orlan’s interest in exploring the “impossibility of seeing” (Orlan 114).
Illustration 2.2: A screen shot from Carnal Art showing the many divisions and layers of images within the main screen (Oriach). Permission granted by Stephen Oriach.

Though Orlan is part of a recent trend in body art, it is important to note that the body has been theorized throughout the history of performance. The early theory focused on preparing the actor’s body for the stage, largely through exercises designed to control the body. Several movements (most notably Bauhaus) have tried, albeit in different ways, to turn the body into a machine. Orlan’s work is reminiscent of this trend, though it is different. She refers to herself as a “body-machine” and claims that the body (as we know it) is obsolete. However,
it is clear that what Orlan wants is not further external control of her body, but more freedom from it.

In Europe, examples of live art took painting outside of the traditional canvas and further towards what we now know as performance. In addition, artists like Piero Manzoni began to focus on the body as material with their work.

In the 60s, Italian Piero Manzoni was one of the first artists that used the body as material for art. He had grown tired of painting and wanted to free the canvas: empty it so that it had possibility, rather than filling it with colors and lines. He became interested in total space (space not limited by a frame), which led to his live art. Manzoni signed men’s and women’s bodies, claimed them as pieces of art for a specified time (dependent on how much they paid), and presented them nude in Living Sculpture (“Piero”). These works of art are another example of the body presented as readymade art material, a precursor to Orlan’s work. Clearly, this was an ironic work. Why pay people to model for you while you paint when people will pay you to merely sign them? No one had previously presented the body as art in such an obvious way. However, Manzoni did not stop at presenting the live nude body as
art, he also saw the mundane functions of the body as an artistic possibility.

Manzoni’s *Artist’s Shit* presented the grotesque and everyday happenings of his body as art. For this 1961 conceptual piece, he packaged ninety cans, each weighing thirty grams, of his own waste and sold it at the current rate of the price of gold. *Artist’s Shit* introduced scatological elements to art, while it rebelled the growing consumerism in Europe. By selling his feces, Manzoni shows how ridiculous it is to place the artist or art object on a pedestal; indeed all Manzoni needed to do to create this piece is an act all animals do daily. The fact that people paid the price of gold for his feces (and much more after the initial purchase) indicates the ludicrous status of the art object. This type of commodification was something Manzoni rebelled against even more severely in later work, but in this piece the criticism is evident. Here, we see direct similarities between *Artist’s Shit* and Orlan’s *Reliquaries*.

Equally grotesque, Orlan sells what is removed from her body during her operations—blood, fat, other tissue—as artwork. She calls these pieces *Reliquaries*, meaning a container used to hold holy relics, usually the remains of saints. Thus, Orlan is playing on Manzoni’s idea, but
going beyond a critique of capitalist commodification and art tradition to indicate that capitalism and Christianity have historically been mutually supportive. The structures bolster each other as sects of dominant ideology. At the same time, Orlan underscores that the body is sacred both during and after life, securing her position as saint in her own right.

Prefiguring Orlan’s surgery-performances are the “happenings” of the 1960s and 70s, which expanded performance space as artists took to public spaces and did seemingly unplanned public performances. Happenings are most obvious breaking point between traditional theatre and performance. In 1959, Reuben Gallery in New York was the home of the first major “happening” open to the public: Alan Kaprow’s 18 Happenings in 6 Parts. Much of Orlan’s early work has elements of the happenings movement and were certainly influenced by this new artistic possibility. Her MesuRAGES series are happenings with a more acute focus on body theory.

This is the series where Orlan uses her body as a unit of measure by crawling on her knees, laying down and noting how many of her full-length bodies fit into a particular building or area. She started this series at the Vatican in 1974. This MesuRAGE was fairly spontaneous and not well
planned, like many past happenings. Security guards intervened and almost ended Orlan’s crawling measurements. However, she convinced them that she was fulfilling a vow so that she could complete her performance (resulting in the title of this specific performance *This is Not a Vow*).

Location became an important consideration for the early happenings artists. An event’s meaning is altered by a change in location, which is why Orlan chooses buildings that are symbols of masculine power (some of which originally denied women entrance) to express her rage: New York’s Guggenheim Museum, The Vatican, The Centre Pompidou, and several other French museums. Orlan is forcing her body into spaces that either reject the female body or merely fetishize it. The female body, when used creatively, is threatening, as indicated by the Vatican’s reaction.

Orlan draws upon the European performance tradition of incorporating new technologies into performance. Many movements such as the Futurists, the Constructivists, Bauhaus all used the advancements of their time in their art. With each new technology are new social adjustments, politics, and possibilities (especially in the case of cosmetic surgery). Art must react to new technologies. Orlan has purposefully chosen cosmetic surgery as her tool,
a technology that did not exist even thirty years ago in this capacity, in order to raise questions about the uses of technology, and its impact on beauty and identity. She admits, “Certainly I was the first to use surgery. I am a woman of my time even if I try to step aside and to jar people and to poke them, and I’m trying to find the most eloquent tools to make my points” (“Beauty” 44). Up until Carnal Art, surgery existed in the realm of the extra-theatrical. Orlan has expanded performance space into the operating room to subvert the power of the medical eye.

Body theory developed further during the 60s and 70s as the Vienna Aktionists, like Orlan, used violent and extreme images to protest the fascism of the values of the time. The Aktionists too were heavily influenced by Artaud’s theories and wanted to enlighten spectators by provoking physical reactions. Like Artaud, the Aktionists were revolted with the narrow-minded glaze of life that most people were content with. Thus, they sought to purify society through these rituals. The Aktionists worked elements of bestiality, animal sacrifice, scatology, violence, and piss-showers into the realm of artistic exploration with the goal of resisting dogmas such as church, state, and family.
They were a direct reaction to the atrocities of World War II. As a result of WWII propaganda, texts became distrusted and scarce in the artistic community. While the pre-World War II art showed a proliferation of manifestos and texts, the Aktionists (for example) absorbed the texts into their bodies and performed their manifestos. For instance, they performed painful and grotesque rituals, more akin to Eastern or "primitive" societies in order to protest Christian morality.

The reliance upon or resistance to texts is yet another polarity Orlan traverses through her art. Her work is both based firmly in texts and is also wildly unscripted, another aspect of informe in her work. The texts she reads during her surgery-performances provide theoretical support, explain her motivations, or raise questions. However, the body (her main text), live, provides the variability of action, while the interaction with spectators via satellite provides a text that is changing. In fact, the body that is operated on is so unpredictable that it goes far beyond the level of unscripted free movement thereby producing suspense and fear in spectators.

The element of danger is a perceptible change between pre and post WWII art. While performance has always aimed
at expanding boundaries and challenging social norms, the intrusion of acts like self-mutilation only began to occur in a post-war context where danger is an ever-present reality. The atomic bomb, for instance, showed the world a new level of destruction and art had to respond accordingly. The luxury (and resulting thoughtlessness) of the preceding era came into question. Risk became essential to art, for without risk there was no meaning and no beauty.

The point, for the Aktionists, was to break art out of a frame so that it could be life. They created art, but carefully avoided creation of commodities in order to resist modern ideas about art. They chose the body as the focus of their work because of the belief that the body is the only possession one truly has in life. As a result, Aktions are more personalized for both actors and spectators. They felt that the body was lost in dominant society and they sought to resuscitate it, even if merely as an object.

The discourse on the body that they established saw the body mutilated, beaten, and tortured. In one of the most famous Aktions, it is rumored that Rudolph Swartzkogler sliced his penis like one would slice salami and bled to death as a result. While this Aktion (like
many others) was staged, the myth has survived a long time. The images are powerful and, regardless of what actually happened, still hold a place in the cultural imaginary. Perhaps it was the slow and deliberate quality of the Aktion that made it so powerful, the reason in what was viewed as an act of madness. Swartzkogler didn’t chop his penis off in a fit of lunacy, he deliberately sliced it into pieces. Without texts, the exact meaning of this piece is up for deliberation. However, it is clear that Swartzkogler’s work points to an ambiguous but persistent atrocity perpetuated at large by culture, as does Orlan’s.

Swartzkogler and Orlan share a similar rational and deliberate quality, while their actions insinuate, at least to the culture at large, some level of insanity. This contradictory combination has a chilling effect on spectators, who would be more comfortable labeling the artist crazy as a means of disregarding their work. Some people still insist upon Orlan’s madness, but further exploration of her art, her texts, and the history leading up to her work indicates that her project is well planned and executed. People tend to attribute art that doesn’t fully explain itself or art that isn’t obvious to insanity. With no mystery, art becomes feeble. An obvious interpretation, one without conflict, does not produce
questions or shake things up. Orlan must be clear about her goals and motivation to avoid total misreadings, but she leaves further interpretation to the viewers in order to make them think. Informe art brings up questions rather than answers; it provides little comfort or safety, as is the case with both Orlan and Swartzkogler.

Orlan is like the Aktionists in that she focuses on the body for the same reasons. Though she does not resist commodification to the same degree (in fact, she seems to embrace it), her main material is her body. Because the material for both the Aktionists’ and Orlan’s work is something deeply personal for most people, spectators react physically and violently to their art. Since gender is key to the political meanings of art, I feel it is imperative here to note that the initial group of Aktionists were all white men: Hermann Nitsch, Rudolf Schwartzkogler, Otto Muehl, and Gunter Brus. Gina Pane was the first self-proclaimed feminist Aktionist. Carolee Schneeman, Cindy Sherman, and Marina Abromovich also create body art with a similar drive, but with a different focus.

Marina Abromovich originally performed The Lips of Thomas in 1975 and again during her 2005 series Seven Easy Pieces. In the original performance, Abromovich sat at a table, ate a kilo of honey, drank a liter of red wine, and
broke the bottle. She then stood up, slit a pentagram in her stomach, whipped herself, and lay down on a cross of ice as a heater warmed her freshly lacerated skin. Spectators broke up the performance after about thirty minutes (Carlson par. 3). Her art continues with the theme of painful liberation from social constraints. Abromovich is confronting Christian morality, as can be seen in her flagellation, the symbol of the cross, and the consumption of honey and wine (an Orthodox ritual) (Carlson par. 4). Like Orlan, she uses her body as a battleground, a place to conquer sources of conflict and suffering.

Marla Carlson, who was present at the 2005 version, theorizes about the work: “Placing real physical pain within an aesthetic framework throws the spectator's ethical relation to the spectacle into question […] Abramovic solicits her audience's emotional engagement by offering up her pain” (par. 5).

However, a critical distinction between the previous body artists and Orlan is the way they theorize and use pain in their performances. Orlan manufactures a duplicitous response in that she accepts the Aktionists’ desire to make the spectator suffer, while she rejects the accompanying component: pain on the part of the performer. “[P]ain has the ability to brand the body as nakedly,
helplessly, female,” which is precisely what Orlan is trying to avoid (Garner 197). Instead, Orlan uses pain as a way to overturn the Christian notion of “pain during childbirth” (and all the mythologies associated with it) by avoiding it altogether. Her main goal is pain on the part of the spectator. Though this functioned for the Aktionists as well, part of their focus was pain as cleansing agent for the artist. Orlan seeks no purification and purposefully avoids such terms because they reproduce Christian ideology and its dualities. Her goal relies on the notion that perceived pain in the performer creates pain in the spectator, which leads to the spectator’s revelation of the embodiedness of both themselves and the performer (Zimmerman 4).

In fact, she intensifies the suffering of the spectator in comparison to the body artists who have to remain solemn and focused during their acts of self-mutilation. Orlan laughs, speaks, smiles, while her skin gapes open. She ironically apologizes, “Sorry for having to make you suffer” although that is precisely her point (Davis 29). She projects a flagellated body like the body artists, but the level and nature of her activity goes beyond inflicting pain: watching Orlan laugh is far more disturbing and eerie to the spectator than the mere pain.
Not only does she laugh defiantly in the face of her own pain, she takes pleasure in the spectators’ pain.

Orlan very purposefully breaks with the Aktionists when it comes to pain. Anja Zimmerman notes that the female body in pain replicates iconography of the pathologized female body. She writes, “In the iconographic tradition of representing the five senses, touch is not only associated with pain, but also represented by a woman” and is, thus, placed on a lower level of the hierarchy of the senses (5). She continues by critiquing female artists who utilize pain as a strategy to ‘‘give back’ to the body this seemingly lost materiality” (5). She argues that these body artists are unwittingly replicating the system they were attempting to critique by aligning the female body with pain for male spectators (5).

Abromovich’s Art Must be Beautiful indicates that Orlan and Abromovich have similar goals in their art. In this piece, Abromovich brushed her hair with a metal brush and a metal comb until her face and hair were damaged. Her actions, a beauty ritual that leads to her disfigurement, indicates the high level of stress put on women caused by the pressure to be beautiful. She is also saying that the artist herself (and her art) is placed under this pressure, a problem male artists rarely face, if ever. The female
body artists had a very different focus from the males and a tendency toward feminist expression. They had to; they live with the pressure of very different body projects and constructions, which would inevitably be processed in their art whether or not they were cognizant of it.

During the Orlan: Carnal Art film, Orlan is incredulous that people react so violently to her work, when spectators see brutal acts of violence on television daily, either via news coverage or TV shows (Oriach). The difference in impact relies specifically on Orlan’s consciousness, which is constantly reinforced in her films by the presence of her voice. While televisions do project grotesque images, spectators feel comforted by the distance they feel from the image. For instance, many times on cop shows, the camera is panned far back or the face of the person is blurred out. Orlan is unapologetic about her body art and does not allow the spectator this safe distance. While it may seem that there is something eerie in her demeanor, it is actually that the spectator has to observe a demeanor at all in the “object” that is eerie. The level of her activity and her deliberative nature is what makes people sick.

This brief history of performance indicates that Orlan is not creating art that is entirely unique; many of the
ideas that form the foundation of her work have been circulating for at least 100 years. Likewise, her work is not as bizarre or crazed as some critics claim, though I contend it as the most radical body art currently being produced. These criticisms indicate that they are looking at Orlan’s performances as ahistorical events when in fact Orlan’s art emerges from a unique lineage of artists and theories. Her work is radical; it is challenging. However, this doesn’t mean that it isn’t contemplative, deliberate, and theoretically based. Reducing Orlan’s work by either ignoring the history of performance or choosing to focus on just one aspect (such as her “questionable” sanity or use of cosmetic surgery) negates the transformative potential of her art.
Chapter 3: The Feminist Debate of Orlan

In this chapter, I outline the general contours of the feminist debate on Orlan’s artwork, drawing particular attention to the focal points for two (occasionally overlapping) groups of feminist critics: those more heavily influenced by feminist response to cosmetic surgery and those focused on feminist art history. I then organize around the main debates framing the discourse to delve into the feminist interpretation of Orlan with further depth. Through this discussion, I will highlight the different ideas each group brings to the debate to demonstrate that an understanding of performance and/or art history yields more fecund discourse.

Feminists Focused on Cosmetic Surgery

Kathy Davis, a prominent feminist scholar on cosmetic surgery, discusses Orlan’s work in “‘My body is My Art’: Cosmetic Surgery as Feminist Utopia?” Essentially, Davis uses Orlan’s art as an example of why she takes issue with the feminist utopian response to cosmetic surgery. Davis’s research focuses on restoring women’s agency in their choice to undergo plastic surgery. Rather than viewing such a decision as complicity in their own oppression, Davis posits the choice as a more complex dilemma: “problem
and solution, symptom of oppression and act of empowerment, all in one” (24). Davis then explores the similarities and differences between “average women” who choose to undergo the knife and Orlan. In the end, she argues that Orlan and women who choose cosmetic surgery have very different experiences and perspectives. Orlan’s art and the utopian response to cosmetic surgery are ineffective for Davis because they ignore (even mock, at times) “the sentient and embodied female subject, the one who feels concern about herself and about others” (35). Davis does not write off Orlan’s project overall. However, Davis clearly dislikes Orlan’s detached air when she discusses her body/art and the resulting (potential) alienation for women interacting with Orlan’s art.

Another feminist scholar, Elizabeth Haiken, deals briefly with Orlan’s art in *Venus Envy*, a book on cosmetic surgery. Haiken presents a history of aesthetic body practices and demonstrates the significant changes in the American psyche that took place from the 1920’s on to initiate a vast and growing acceptance of cosmetic surgery. While Haiken’s focus is on the history of cosmetic surgery, she mentions Orlan on one page as an example of medical discourse’s ability to control and normalize women’s bodies. She writes, “Surgeons’ traditional emphasis on
artistry has come back in a particularly haunting manner” (296). She uses Orlan as an example of this “haunting” problem and removes her agency by placing the surgeon in control, a point I will return to in more depth later.

Feminists Focused on Art

Barbra Rose’s 2005 article “Is it art? Orlan and the transgressive act” places Orlan in the history of performance art to demonstrate that Orlan is indeed an artist, and to imply that she is not insane. She places Orlan in relation to duChamp, body artists, and the Aktionists to indicate the complexity of Orlan’s project and its numerous influences and predecessors. She writes with a feminist emphasis, yet she offers a different perspective due to her extensive background in art.

It is significant that Rose is the only writer who defines the term “art.” She has two criteria to distinguish art from nonart: intentionality and transformation, which she sees present in all of Orlan’s work. She argues that, because Orlan’s surgery-performances are real (which she contrasts to the Aktionists, who staged most of their work), people have a tendency to react by raising the question of if she is inspired or insane. In response, Rose argues that Orlan is
not crazed, in part due to the intentionality and transformation evident in her work, which also relies (to some degree) on the very real nature of her surgery-performances. Rose appreciates Orlan’s radical acts and seems to long for more art that is equally critical and disruptive. She writes, “The extremity of [Orlan’s] stance causes one to wonder if going on stage and smearing chocolate on one’s nude body may be a cop-out for both artist and voyeur” (a reference to Karen Finley) (88).

Rose also highlights that marginality and danger are crucial components of critical art and are present in Orlan’s work. However, in the discourse on cosmetic surgery, these components of Orlan’s art are problematic and intimidating. Rose uses her background in art to cite Orlan as an example of a problem in dominant modes of perception. She concludes that the nature and limits of art need to be reexamined (especially in terms of committed artist/committed lunatic and the art/medicine divide) and that critical art has been too easily accepted and integrated into the canon.

An expert in performance and art, Carey Lovelace provides the most thorough explanation of Orlan’s project paying particular attention to past performances and theorists such as Freud and Lacan. She finds Orlan’s art
fascinating because it enables one to be inside a taboo to watch it being broken and chart one's reactions to it. Another unique and powerful aspect that Lovelace notes is that Orlan combines a sense of danger with "Warholian irony" (15).

An important point Lovelace makes is that Orlan's art does not always translate well, particularly from a French to American context. Orlan's art is intrinsically French. On top of that, Orlan has developed this discourse (that becomes increasingly self-referential, as Rose notes) over thirty years of performance. Thus, it is complex and requires close attention to various traditions: Catholicism, idiosyncratic feminism, Duchampian methodology, Lacanian psychoanalysis. On the latter topic, Lovelace notes that Lacan's "stratum of signification is almost entirely lost in an American context" though his ideas continue to permeate French culture and heavily influence Orlan (19). The strength of Lovelace's analysis is in her attention to detail. Her knowledge of art history and the French psyche enables her to clearly explain Orlan's goals, interests, and motifs.

In "Saint Orlan Faces Reincarnation," Jill O'Bryan thoroughly articulates a theory on the complex connection between inner and outer self that Orlan enacts through her
transformations. O’Bryan places Orlan in the tradition of the modernist avant-garde, citing the Aktionists, Carolee Schneemann and Valie Export specifically. She notes the post-modern, the *informe* aspects of Orlan’s work; namely, that she avoids privileging extremes, managing somehow to slip and blur binary boundaries. O’Bryan quotes Lyotard to establish that Orlan’s art is post-modernist in this sense and then delves into “Orlan’s extraordinary presentation of the unpresentable interior” (“Saint Orlan” 54).

She first traces the philosophical traditions that are necessary to understanding Orlan’s relationship between inside and outside. O’Bryan starts with the Greek *eidolon* to establish that the interior image in Western history frequently resembles the exterior. In contrast (and hundreds of years later), she points to Rene Descartes who theorized that the mind and the body were completely different spheres, where the mind exists above both nature and the body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in O’Bryan’s eyes, argued that since perception is corporeal, experience is therefore located between mind and body; that the two overlap in complex ways, which O’Bryan sees as closest to the discourse that Orlan establishes on the body.

O’Bryan points out that Merleau-Ponty also discussed flesh as both separating and connecting inner and outer, a
theory that O’Bryan sees Orlan’s work demonstrating. She posits that since Orlan’s exterior is in a constant state of flux, the interior image is also illusory and shifting: “the interior image may be in a continual state of emerging, slipping between the physical inside of the body, the soul, and places of the mind—the psychology, the imagination, the intellect” (“Saint Orlan” 55). This is the strength of her analysis. The discourse Orlan creates on the relationship between inner and outer is complex and based in her body and experience. A critical part of Orlan’s project that O’Bryan highlights is that Orlan is always “enacting a potential future” which keeps possibilities open (“Saint Orlan” 55); remaining in a constant state of change means that the maximum potential of any image may still be realized.

A feminist exploring the intersection between cyberfeminism, the body, art, and technology, Rachel Gear’s investigation of Orlan focuses on how she is an example of both the problems and potential liberation associated with cyberfeminism. The strength of her analysis is that she is the lone feminist who problematizes Orlan’s use of race in her art. In “All those nasty womanly things: Woman artists, technology and the monstrous-feminine,” Gear first establishes that the image of woman as monster “is an
enduring trope in visual culture” (321). Gear appreciates Orlan’s art for calling beauty constructs into question and for producing a theoretic framework for understanding the body. Orlan’s art uses technology to demonstrate that the body (particularly the female body) is not a sealed entity with clear delineations between inside and outside, but a fluid liminal space that can be transformed. However, she also notes that the use of technology can be problematic, specifically in Orlan’s Self-Hybridations series.

In this set of digitally-manipulated photographs, Orlan blends images of herself with those of pre-Colombian and African societies, whose beauty ideals differ vastly from Western society, to the point that these beauty rituals look barbaric and uncivilized. Gear writes, “Orlan could stand accused of reproducing postcolonial stereotypes of the racialized and exotic ‘other’” (324). She clarifies two main problems with the series. First, it lacks any actual transformation; it is merely digital and thus lacks the depth of Orlan’s other transformations. Second, Orlan provides little information to give any depth to the images, which Gear points out is essential in a cross-cultural context. This analysis is unique in that it accounts for Orlan’s ambiguous use of race and how
technology can potentially enable both transformation and oppression.

Kate Ince uses her background in French studies to discuss Orlan’s project in relation to cybertheory and pertinent theories of psychoanalysis. By discussing body modification practices, she likens the skin to a form of dress, not a natural membrane, but as cultural as the clothes that cover the skin. Using Lemoine-Luccioni (one of the same authors Orlan uses) and Irigaray, both of whom revise French psychoanalysis in feminist directions, Ince argues that Orlan uses her body to suggest that a female imaginary is possible and in fact necessary; Ince insists that there should be a double-universal. She relies on Irigaray’s assertion that the imaginary is heavily gendered; even the body that shapes the social imaginary is symbolic and gendered. Ince claims the female imaginary “has been suppressed and not thoroughly theorized,” but is generally characterized by fluidity, fragmentation, and openness (127).

Ince sees the benefit of perceiving Orlan as a psychoanalytic case whose performances activate her singular relationship to the (male) imaginary. However, this perspective suggests an unrealized female imaginary. This is problematic because it indicates that the feminine
is considered a dereliction within the symbolic order and that it must be reappropriated within the masculine system to be accepted. For Ince, Orlan’s artwork interrogates this problem. Thus, she argues it is more fruitful to conceive of Orlan’s work as demonstrating the possibilities of a female imaginary and potential social transformation, than seeing her in relation to the masculine symbolic order. She argues that Orlan, by putting so much energy into her transformations, replicates Irigaray’s notion of the female imaginary as characterized by the kind of excess that causes jams or slips to occur in patriarchal representation.

Ince’s discussion of Orlan’s art as establishing a female imaginary coincides with what I have been calling Orlan’s acts of _informe_: this slipping between the binaries of masculinist logic, never affirming either opposing position. In this way, Orlan establishes a third route in a dichotomous system, which, in Ince’s terms, could be called the female imaginary.

Though Ince makes few references to art history (noting the body artists, and later Abromovich and Stelarc), it is evident that she is well-versed in visual arts. What her analysis offers that most others lack is a
background in French studies. With this knowledge, she connects Orlan to European theorists who inform her art.

Alyada Faber, a feminist theologian, focuses on Orlan’s parody of saintliness in her article “Saint Orlan: Ritual As Violent Spectacle and Cultural Criticism.” In an interesting twist from other feminists, she categorizes surgery-performances seven, eight, and nine as more radical and as forming a “mutant” body (86). She theorizes the pain in Orlan’s art via Bataille, a point I will return to later. She also notes that the ambiguity of Orlan’s body project can lead to contradictory readings. For instance, while Orlan claims to be “desacralizing” cosmetic surgery by making it a public phenomenon, Faber contends that Orlan is, at the same time, resacralizing it by deepening the already ritual aspects of surgery and by creating images that provoke awe and horror in spectators “to elicit the sacred dimensions of the experience” (87).

In her definition of ritual, Faber insists upon the primacy of the body in any ritual experience. The individual embodies and then interprets the ritualized act in a dichotomous fashion: as good/evil, dark/light, spirit/flesh. Orlan’s rituals are contradictory in light of Faber’s definition; she maintains the focus on the body, but never interprets the act in a polarized fashion.
Faber characterizes Orlan as a postmodern saint, a saint of depravity, meaning that “Orlan invests her body with the kind of plastic significance that contemporary patriarchal capitalist societies encourage, a parodic saintliness that reveals the debility and pain of such a body, and not a saintliness meant as a model to imitate” (88). She thus distinguishes the type of saintliness that Orlan embodies from the traditional ideal. Most importantly, this saintly bodily discourse “disrupts patterns of religious meaning limited to a redemptive order, and intimates a sacred meaning for embodied experiences of negativity, disorder, pain, violence and bodily disintegration” (91). Orlan thus avoids the dichotomy of redemptive acts and makes room for negative bodily experiences to be construed as sacred and valuable.

Anja Zimmerman, a feminist art critic, provides a theoretical and historical background for Orlan’s self-imposed bodily violence. Her discussion grounds Orlan’s art in performance history in ways that inform the feminist debate. For instance, she states that aesthetic and extra-aesthetic discourses are frequently intertwined in body art. She provides a historical background that demonstrates how particular aspects of medical discourse (particularly those focused on visual representation of the inside of the
body), used aesthetics to further the depth of the medical gaze.

This historical perspective enables one to perceive Orlan’s choice to use cosmetic surgery as entering into a visual discussion focusing on investigation of the inner body in a subversive manner (rather than utterly bizarre or only using cosmetic surgery to foster hype). Zimmerman also uses this basic argument to suggest that Orlan manipulates power relations so that she is situated equal to or above the surgeon. Zimmerman likens the artist to the surgeon because they both use their power to direct the gaze as a power over the body (47). Instead of being an example of expansion of the medical gaze, Zimmerman posits that Orlan inverts the surgeon’s power.

She discusses Gina Pane (a radical 1970s body artist and self proclaimed feminist Aktionist who sliced her face, body, and feet with razor blades during performances) in relation to Orlan to describe how pain and violence influence the spectator differently in different contexts. In contrast to Pane, Orlan’s use of pain rebels against the tradition in art that Zimmerman sees as a metaphor for the powerlessness of the body in the field of vision.

History is critical here. Zimmerman argues that the tendency of female body artists during the 1970s to present
the body in pain was initially theorized as an act of rebellion, as signifying a more rigorous and independent act. However, she continues to argue (using Pane as her example) that representation of female body in pain actually reinforces the very ideology that feminists attempt to undermine; namely, that of the passive feminine body that signifies the basest sensory function in an art historical context. The female body represented both touch and pain in art history. Zimmerman explains, "And while Pane’s work aims at subverting these visual and theoretical traditions of ordering sensual perception according to a rigid hierarchy, her strategy misses the effects of the historical developments that influenced those attributions to the respective senses" (32). In Zimmerman’s view, Pane offers a contrast to Orlan, drawing attention to the difference in impact on the spectator witnessing (respectively) the female body in pain, and the female body representing pain. I will return to Zimmerman’s theorization of pain and the spectator in more depth later.

Theorizing the Skin

In the feminist writing on Orlan, skin is seen as the envelope that holds the body, as connecting, but separating inner and outer, as a sight for bodily modification, a
cultural rather than natural bodily construct. Gear’s contribution to this discussion links Orlan’s investigation of the indeterminacy of the body’s materiality to Elizabeth Grosz’s notion that female embodiedness resembles a mode of seepage, arguing that the skin serves as a liminal space that can exchange information between inner and outer. Similarly, Lovelace uses Lacan to describe the impact of Orlan’s flagellation. Lovelace cites Lacan’s view that lips and eyelids are like cuts on the body, edges that differentiate organic functions from the body itself (49). Witnessing cuts in the face violates the boundaries between public and private, visceral and human. According to Lovelace, Lacan’s theory of the grotesque ensures that Orlan’s grotesque body is always in the “act of becoming” (18).

Ince, with her focus on body modification and cybertheory, notes that the skin has recently become a site of investigation and manipulation. She points out two significant differences in the way skin is being treated: first, skin is no longer natural, but is as cultural as clothing choice; second, skin is no longer a mere container for the body as it has become involved in cultural practices of modification. On the latter point, Ince explains “Given its most radical interpretation, it
completely rewrites the textuality of dress, allowing the body ‘itself’ to be read as a kind of multilayered outfit of clothing” (115). This quotation directly correlates with the story of the harlequin’s striptease that inspired Orlan’s fifth surgery-performance.

O’Bryan’s discussion on skin builds on Ince’s as she likewise postures skin as cultural and modifiable. However, O’Bryan further develops the role of flesh in identity formation. She notes that skin connects and separates inside and outside, forming a complex and multiplicitous relationship situated in the skin. O’Bryan explains that Orlan’s constantly shifting identity is enabled through her skin: “Her identity is then of one who has exacerbated a state of flux (with surgery) in a live (and therefore already continually changing) human body, to create a portrait of physical evolution which may reflect a constantly fluctuating interior image” (“Saint Orlan” 54).

Orlan’s Controversial Medium

While the debate over Orlan’s medium may seem like an unnecessary argument, it is significant because it indicates the different focuses of feminist critics. For instance, Rose argues Orlan’s medium is media imparting her focus on technology in art. While I disagree with her
assessment, her reasoning provides an important point of Orlan’s work. Rose describes the interplay evident in Orlan’s visual discourse: “Her critical method is based on a sophisticated feedback system, a vicious circle of echoing and self-generating images, spawning a progeny of hybrid media reproductions” (89). As a result, spectators have a difficult time deciphering meaning because they are not on steady ground. In contrast, O’Bryan asserts, “her flesh is her medium” after citing Lemoine-Luccioni’s text La Robe on skin that Orlan reads at the beginning of her surgery-performances (“Saint Orlan” 50). O’Bryan’s interest in the function skin plays in Orlan’s identity play is thus underscored. I agree with O’Bryan as I choose to focus on Orlan’s embodied transformation, rather than on the technologies that are her tool. On this topic, it is interesting that no one argues that Orlan’s medium is cosmetic surgery, when so much of the discourse is focused on that point.

Race in Feminist Discourse

Race is overwhelmingly ignored in the feminist discourse on Orlan (which is why I return to the topic in the following chapter). A mere three critics even make mention of race and only one interrogates Orlan’s use of
race in her art. I found this to be an interesting omission because feminists have been attempting to incorporate race more significantly in their critical discussions, since the 80s backlash against “white-washed” feminism. Rose mentions Orlan’s use of an African striptease dancer during one surgery-performance and her plans to incorporate a classical Indian dancer in a future performance. However, for Rose these references merely point to Orlan’s interest in reincarnation and the Cult of Kali, not to the meanings behind the racialized body. Likewise, Davis dedicates one sentence and a note to Orlan’s play with race in her art.

Davis claims that Orlan’s identity play is radical because she is willing to experience surgical transformations. As an example, she writes, “What happens to the notion of ‘race’, [Orlan] wonders, if I shed my white skin for a black one?” (30). In the adjoining note, Davis references John Howard Griffin’s Black Like Me in which a white man darkens his skin to experience African-American life in the mid 1950s, which results in his untimely death from skin cancer. Davis begins the note with an air of condescension: “Obviously Orlan has not read [this book]” (36). She never goes on to support this assertion, nor does it seem to apply. If Davis is implying
that Orlan would not need to undertake embodied racial transformation if she read this book, she is undermining her previous assessment explaining that Orlan’s art is radical because of her physical involvement in identity play. Furthermore, to say a work of literature negates the need for similarly motivated visual art ignores the inherent differences in these forms of representation. This is especially clear when one considers Orlan’s extensive documentation and penchant for visual subversion.

Davis’s assertion makes me wonder if Orlan had read *Black Like Me*, would Griffin’s experience (and early death) deter her from her surgical transformations or encourage her to problematize race constructs more thoroughly? The only other telling portion of Davis’s note is when she states that Griffin’s experiment “was anything but playful,” implying that Orlan’s project is more playful than serious. Davis suggests that there is an unclear problem with race in Orlan’s art, but she cannot articulate the problem beyond a note suggesting that Orlan read a book (rather than forage a new experience or identity).

In contrast, Gear presents an insightful discussion of Orlan’s use of race in her *Self-Hybridation* series. She claims that the images composed of Orlan and ancient beauty rituals from non-Western societies lack depth.
Furthermore, the images could be viewed as promoting racist postcolonial discourse. To reiterate, her main issue is that “sameness is asserted across boundaries of ethnicity, gender, and cultural practices” (324). Without any context, the images reproduce anxiety and fear of the Other in a Western postcolonial culture already predisposed to notions of barbarism.

**The Agency Debate**

Agency became a troublesome topic in feminist discourse on cosmetic surgery in the 90s. At stake was whether women actually had any agency at all in their decision to get cosmetic surgery. With numerous external pressures to look a certain way (the entertainment industry, the cosmetic industry, and significant others to name a few), feminists are at odds over how much women’s choices are co-opted by an ideology that makes being pretty a requirement. Thus, the question of agency became an issue of contention for feminists writing about Orlan’s art, especially the earlier critics who were trying to make sense of her radical acts. However, everyone— with the exception of Haiken— that discusses the topic argues that Orlan exhibits much agency through her project. This is, of course, articulated differently among feminists.
(Zimmerman, O'Bryan, and Lovelace do not even bring up the issue; to my mind, this is due to the privileging of art history over feminist discourse in their texts.)

Haiken is skeptical of Orlan’s agency. She writes, “Orlan has had surgeons use her face as a sculptural medium” when she mentions Orlan as an example of the medical gaze’s expansion of power (italics mine 297). Her word choice indicates that the surgeons are active; they have used Orlan, negating much (if not all) of her agency. Haiken provides no explanation of Orlan’s work other than the aforementioned caption that is placed under a photograph of Orlan during a surgery-performance. In the image, Orlan is (actively) speaking into a microphone while a surgeon (dressed in sequins to match her) bends over her open side.

Lovelace, who underscores the complexity of Orlan’s work and its difficulty in translation, would disagree with Haiken’s glaze over Orlan. Though Lovelace does not weigh in on the agency debate, she would likely agree that one sentence is not enough to understand Orlan’s project or gain any interpretive insight. Haiken’s hasty characterization, in contrast to Lovelace’s analysis, lacks the depth of any real interaction with the artist, art
history, or the French psyche. In fact, it resembles a knee jerk reaction to any use of cosmetic surgery.

Rose and Gear also completely disagree with Haiken, arguing that Orlan has full agency, though they see this agency manifest in different aspects of Orlan’s work. Rose writes, “During the process of planning, enacting and documenting the surgical steps of her transformation, Orlan remains in control of her own destiny” (italics mine 87). She argues that Orlan has used her face; her body is her medium, not that of the surgeons. The surgeon is merely a technician, more akin to the person who is in charge of a theatre’s lighting than the artist acting in and directing the performance. Rose’s characterization is more radical than Gear’s, as Rose goes beyond commenting on the performance to state that Orlan is squarely in control of her destiny. Gear agrees that Orlan is in control of her art, noting specifically “the constant presence of her voice reinforces her central position during the performance” (323).

Though Davis does not directly discuss Orlan’s agency, she does underscore the agency of average women who choose cosmetic surgery in her research. Furthermore, Davis likens Orlan to the average women who choose cosmetic alterations. The rationale for both Orlan and average
women is that cosmetic alteration is a way of taking control over a situation that they previously had no control over (31). It is a complex choice, but Davis argues that all women, Orlan included, have some agency in their decision.

Ince makes a very interesting contribution to this discussion stating, “although [Orlan] intends, plans and choreographs her surgical performances, the different body she is left with after each operation is not something she can totally control” (113). Thus, while Orlan has agency in both her choice and her performance, she has little control of her body’s reactions during the healing process. This idea doubles as a criticism of the obsolete body, as well as navigating the issue of agency in Orlan’s art.

However, for O’Bryan this lack of control during healing is an exciting and critical part of Orlan’s self-professed “woman-to-woman transsexualism” (“Saint Orlan” 53). O’Bryan writes, “During her performances, one does witness a corporeal metamorphosis, which explicitly links her body to her identity—most specifically, her body is being surgically manipulated and after surgery her body heals itself” (“Saint Orlan” 53). For O’Bryan, the process of healing after the surgery elongates the period of physical instability. The skin is the site of
transformation that continues to change shape, size, and color throughout healing. The slow changing of the body in turn provokes Orlan’s identity change via a mirroring of her (new, mutable) self.

Theorizing Pain in Orlan’s Art

Discussions of pain in Orlan’s work have the most to gain by incorporating considerations of performance art. While Davis comments on the painful nature of Orlan’s art, she does not go beyond the surface of the issue. Pain is portrayed as having an overwhelmingly negative impact on the caring and embodied woman. Davis’s discussion of the spectator’s pain is comparatively under-theorized. She provides a quote from Orlan stating essentially that the viewer must experience pain to be forced to ask questions and leaves the discussion at that (29).

Orlan’s renunciation of pain is perceived as masochistic by Ince and alternatively as feminist strategy by Tanya Augsburg. Augsburg notes that the question “Do you feel pain?” (one Orlan faces frequently) much like “Are you insane?” is a way of undermining her ability to make decisions about her body (qtd in O’Bryan Carnal Art 21).

As previously noted, Lovelace theorizes pain according to Lacan’s notion that a grotesque body is in the act of
becoming (18). Orlan shatters spectators’ understandings of the boundaries between inner and outer by producing images of her flagellated face.

Faber uses Georges Bataille to theorize pain in Orlan’s art. She explains that for Bataille, “the flesh in its aversive pain and its domestic abyss of possible death is a violating, horrifying, joyous encounter with the sacred” (87). Faber continues her comparison of Bataille with Orlan, arguing that by putting his body in close proximity to death, Bataille asserts himself as a sacred figure in his writing, as does Orlan through the violent spectacle of her surgeries. Faber presents a different theoretical framework to understand Orlan’s painful performances, connecting Orlan’s subversive art to a history of violently martyred saints.

Gear argues that the only pain experienced is on the part of the spectator, which frequently forces them to avert their eyes. Citing Griselda Pollock and Barbara Creed, Gear asserts that the act of looking away is the spectators’ attempt at reconstructing the boundaries between self and screen. Orlan’s art “profoundly tests these boundaries,” especially in a social context that privileges separateness over sameness and boundaries over
continuity (323). The Western context further provokes the spectators' fear of losing one's boundaries or oneself.

Anja Zimmerman makes the most thorough and interesting addition to the debate over pain due to her awareness of the goals of recent performance art. She writes, “pain still is the medium by which the spectator can be reached best. At the same time, what Orlan induces is not the confrontation with the pain deliberately endured by the artist, but far more the spectator’s own reactions to pain’s representation” (37). Thus, Zimmerman asserts that Orlan’s denial of pain serves a particular function.

For Zimmerman, the point is not whether Orlan entertains masochistic thoughts or not, but how the representation of pain influences the spectator, which I think is a much more productive and interesting point. Zimmerman argues that witnessing pain is the best way to shock viewers from their conditioned responses in a time when people are jaded by the ubiquitous nature of images. At the same time, she notes that Orlan breaks with previous feminist body artists who performed their own pain. Gina Pane, a feminist body artist popular during the 1970s, is Zimmerman’s focus in this discussion. Pane and other artists during the 1970s unwittingly promoted the same ideologies they were rebelling against by presenting the
female body in pain. Pane rebelled against a masculine culture that marks the female body as passive or Other in comparison to men. However, through Zimmerman’s analysis of the iconographic tradition, she argues that the female body in pain visually correlates with the sense of touch, which is the lowest on the hierarchy of the senses and has traditionally been represented by a woman. By avoiding pain, Orlan steers clear of the pitfalls associated with the female body in pain.

The feminists with a background in art or performance produce a discourse that escapes the stalemate that results from the debate over cosmetic surgery (in general and in relation to Orlan). An attention to performance enables feminists to better articulate Orlan’s complex body project and the multiple meanings and theories involved with it. However, most feminists have missed the way race is articulated in Orlan’s work, which is a monumental oversight.
Chapter 4: Theorizing Race in Orlan’s Art

While some critics have proposed otherwise (see Rose), I believe that Orlan’s medium is her body, which is not only female, but white. Cosmetic surgery, her tool for the Carnal Art series, is a notably white upper class female endeavor (although is starting to spread to other groups). Even her occupation is defined by a Western art world that is still mostly white and male dominated. Orlan has thus entered a white masculine discourse in several capacities to raise questions about the ways both race and gender are articulated. Though her discussion of race is ambiguous at times in contrast to her discussion of gender, this makes multiple analyses possible.

In the 1990s, feminists started theorizing about the relation between gender, race, class, and other social markers with the concept of hybridity, which means conceiving these categories as meaningfully and mutually constitutive, always part of representation, and never standing alone. Previous theorization of race and gender replicated an additive structure, where one was first a woman and then black (or vise-versa). Intersectionality as a framework enabled feminists to incorporate race into their critical practice, but the approach suggests a fixed grid, nonetheless. Hybridity proposes that gender and race
construction are embedded within each other, and shift according to different situations, rather than constituting separate spheres of inquiry. By not privileging one social marker over another, the hybrid approach allows for a deeper, more fluid analysis as these categories clearly are integrated in the production of one’s representation. In “Toy Theory: Black Barbie and the Deep Play of Difference,” Ann duCille explains the hybridity of race and gender. Through her exploration of the politics of bodily difference exhibited through Barbie, duCille exhibits the strengths of hybrid theory: by analyzing race and gender as mutually constitutive, one can better see how these social markers work together to form a particular representation (38). This framework allows for further depth in analysis.

Thus, via this notion of hybridity, one’s representation consists of a blend of markers of both gender and race. In Orlan’s work, the interrogation of gender inequality is conscious and theorized, while her privileged race is not clearly explored. This is an interesting inconsistency, especially when exploration of representation is the goal. It seems even more necessary when your skin, both gendered and racialized, is your artistic medium.
The theory of hybridity underscores my point that Orlan should more explicitly address the issue of whiteness in what I perceive as a more thorough feminist approach. However, it is important to note that she is, though seemingly unconsciously, commenting on whiteness in a subversive way. I will return to the analysis of her performance’s discussion of whiteness after I discuss the ambiguous ways other races are utilized.

Orlan’s artistic tool, cosmetic surgery, emerges from a particularly white context. Despite recent moves to become more sensitive to ethnic concerns, aesthetic surgery is still replicating a Eurocentric view of beauty standards. It started in the West by whites for whites. The beauty industry replicates the additive campaign duCille dislikes by “adding” more ethnic features to the array of possible white-washed alterations. A recent web article promoting cosmetic surgery explains, “With increased awareness about ethnic concerns and new procedures that cater to the inherent differences in darker skin, people of all ethnicities can finally consider changing their nose or lips or eyes, without removing a piece of their heritage” (“Growing Trend”).

General histories of performance make note of few influential black artists (see Goldman’s popular
Performance Art text). I discovered a lone black male body artist named Sherman Fleming, and no black female body artists. This isn’t to say that there are no black female artists interrogating the representation of their bodies (Kara Walker, for instance) or performing in some way. But it is interesting that no black female artist has been compelled to give her body to art, or be widely recognized as a Body Artist.

While Orlan establishes a subversive discourse on whiteness, her use of other races in her work is ambiguous at best. Only one other person has noted the potentially problematic way that Orlan employs other races in her work. Rachel Gear notes that “The ethnographic aspect of these images [in Orlan’s Self-Hybridation series] is a new development in Orlan’s practice and one that is fraught with danger” (324). Her reasoning is that these digital alterations lack the materiality of her surgical transformations. Gear would agree that this series employs the otherness of these cultures in superficial ways since no cultural or historical context is presented save perhaps the title of the piece, which serves to reinforce the otherness of these beauty standards. Each photograph is titled “Self-Hybridation” with an addendum making a general
reference to the culture she has blended with her photo, such as Pre-Colombian or African.

While Gear’s critique is founded on the fact that Orlan is a Western white woman performing monstrosity, I believe the problem goes beyond that of Orlan’s cultural position. The fact that Orlan presents these photographs to audiences made up almost entirely of Westerners means that she removes ancient (labeled as primitive) standards of beauty from their context and then presents them for the Western gaze. It could be read as replicating colonialist scopophilia, like that fascination that led to the exhibition of the Hottentot Venus all over Europe. Gear states “Orlan could stand accused of reproducing postcolonial stereotypes of the racialized and exotic ‘other’” (324). While I applaud the informe aspects of Orlan’s work, this is an area where a lack of clarity causes problems. Another example of this ambiguity occurs during her fifth surgery-performance.

“In the fifth operation/performance, Orlan dressed up in a harlequin’s hat and robe, and invited [black] dancer Jimmy Blanche to perform a strip-tease while she undertook surgery, thus creating a carnivalesque atmosphere” (Orlan 126). In this operation, Orlan seems to be making a comment on race. She is appropriating a text from Michel
Serres, *Tiers-Instruit*, which inspired this operation-performance. In Serres’s allegory, a Harlequin wears a multi-colored costume that represents melting-pot societies because each piece has a different origin (Orlan 200). The Harlequin is named king of the earth and moon. His earthly constituency becomes disenchanted with him and he realizes the only way to gain their affection is to do as they please: undress before them. Orlan explains, “But like an onion— he peels off a whole series of cloaks, one after another. All the cloaks are of different color and different material, and after he finally takes off the last cloak the audience sees that his skin is made of different colors and his body is tattooed all over” (Orlan 201). She goes on to explain the significance of this story: “‘Flesh’ recombinates what specialized science dissects.’ So scientific knowledge chops what is called flesh into little pieces. Harlequin’s cloak is that flesh” (201). Her presentation of this story turns from a comment on the racialized body to a criticism of science and the medical regulation of the body, which imparts her focus in the project.

During this performance, Jimmy Blanche, a black male actor and dancer, performs a strip tease, replicating that of the king in the story. He removes a gold metal bustier
in his stripping, which Orlan puts on before she receives her epidural. This symbolic act creates a connection between the performers. The bustier implies that Blanche is both man and a woman. His passing of the bustier to Orlan signifies that she is also the harlequin: both male and female, black and white. Orlan then raises a black and then a white cross as they begin to cut her skin. She also wears the ridiculous multi-colored harlequin robe and hat to signify the king in Serres’ text. Most critics discuss these facets of the fifth performance merely as creating a “carnivalesque” atmosphere as they subvert the normally sterile site of the operating room (Orlan 126). They do not read it as a comment on racialized bodies. This oversight reflects Orlan’s aforementioned interpretation of Serres’ text. Whatever her actual intent in using a black male stripper or the image of the harlequin, her representation of the racialized body is not being written about—by the artist or most of her critics. It becomes clear that Orlan considers race, but that the role race plays is under-theorized in her own writing about her work.

Another example is in her play with the connection between body and identity. Orlan muses over what happens to the idea of race if she exchanges her white skin for black (Davis 30). In other words, what impact would black
skin have on her representation, her public reception, and her sense of self? However, her work in this department has yet to go beyond the question. Kathy Davis wrote about Orlan’s interest in skin color, but like many feminists, Davis leaves the question of how this identity play functions in Orlan’s work unexamined. I think, were it possible, Orlan would be willing to publicly engage this initiative and it would result in more questions posed and more thoughtful feminist theorization of the role skin color plays in representation and identity.

The ambivalence of Orlan’s use of other races is problematic, but there are other valid readings of the Self-Hybridations series that are more positive. As many scholars have noted, this series points out the constructed nature of beauty. Beauty ideals are not universal, but change in different times, places, and cultures. Her uses of more bizarre rituals, from a Western standpoint (such as shaping the skull, elongating the neck, wearing a plate in the bottom lip, and ear stretching), serve two purposes. Firstly, they maintain continuity with the grotesque aesthetic she has employed over time. Secondly, the pictures make a clear point about cosmetic surgery, an obvious parallel established by blending in Orlan’s surgically altered features. What is communicated is that
this type of “primitive disfigurement” is no different from the socially acceptable array of cosmetic alterations available today.

Orlan has, however, loosely conceived of another project that would interpret race based on the story of the harlequin. She explains, “The idea is to take cells from my skin and dermis and hybridize them with skin and dermis cells from black people… first from someone with black skin, since I’m working on the series Self-Hybridations Africaines and that’s what interests me most. But I also aim to do it with people with skins of different color, in order to create a patchwork effect” (Orlan 200). It sounds like this project would lead to a literal version of the harlequin’s robe. While she seems to be making an attempt at undermining constructs of race, her goal, texts, and methodology remain unclear. However, my reading of these images is that her art is evolving beyond female body regulation as it is understood in the West and is beginning to tackle the meanings of a racialized body. This project replicates her early work on destroying the mythologies of female bodies, drawing attention to race as a construction, much like gender or beauty norms. Since she is appropriating Serres’s text, it seems she is arguing that underneath our skin, no matter the meanings associated with
it, we are all flesh and bone. Underneath all those mythologies exists the Body without Organs, bodies free from social inscriptions (to borrow language from Artaud, Deleuze, and Guattari). The concept of the harlequin disrobing in layers likewise correlates with her theory that one has multiple identities in a solitary life. While this is a step toward more explicitly theorizing race and dispelling traditions of representation, Orlan’s stance remains muddled.

In the Self Hybridation images Orlan creates, she is de-colonizing her own white body. Colonialism white-washed other cultures, continents, and bodies. Orlan is reversing her own white-washing by making herself appear extraterrestrial. Just as in the Entre-Deux series, where she hybridized her image with the images of iconic white women of art history, she takes beauty norms from other “primitive” cultures, hybridizes them with her own appearance, and presents them fearlessly for the Western gaze. She thus compromises her own representation as a white woman by making multiple images of herself as an-Other: both from herself and from women.

Aime Cesaire, a prominent French scholar, writes of the horrible impacts and insidious nature of colonization in Discourse on Colonialism. He dispels the popular myths
that have become accepted as rationalization of past problems and foundation of current rhetoric for colonialism (spreading “civilization,” “education,” “progress”) and insists that this kind of treatment of other cultures is dehumanizing for both the colonized and the colonizers.

In reading Cesaire’s discussion of European (and, more recently, American) colonialism, I could see obvious connections to the ways in which the body has been muted, altered, controlled: colonized, so to speak. I have to make a distinction immediately: I do not see the impacts of bodily regulation and European-American colonist endeavors as being comparable. Colonization wiped out entire civilizations using a variety of deplorable tactics. However, it is not the severity or the result I am interested in. I see connections between the ideologies of colonization and body regulation; body regulation is a part of colonization. Thus, having noted the differences, I investigate the cause and then tactics to subvert and rebuild.

First, both bodily regulation and historical (and current) colonization are deeply ideological. This is very complex, in that ideologies impact both the oppressor and the oppressed in ways that they, more often than not, are entirely unaware. Cesaire shows that colonizers erected an
acceptable and affirming (albeit twisted) ideological structure to alleviate their guilt and disguise their actions from the world. Cesaire claims that colonization appeals to human’s basest and most disgusting instincts. On the part of the oppressed, after some initial confusion, debate, and conquering, they (forcibly) internalize what has become the dominant ideology, even though it is degrading to them.

The contradiction between word and action/impact is key to colonialist discourse. An example is that, in many colonialist efforts, bringing “education” to people was a goal colonists were proud to hail. However, what education actually meant was in some cases literally stealing children from their parents and cultures. The boarding schools used multiple tactics (body regulation being one) remove the child’s respect and understanding of his or her culture, generally rendering the children useless to their community when they returned home. Cesaire defines colonization as a “bridgehead in a campaign to civilize barbarism, from which there may emerge at any moment the negation of civilization, pure and simple” (40). On a smaller scale, our current body projects can be seen as a way to eradicate the “barbarism” of the female body and regulate the inside and the outside of the female. Shaving
is a perfect example of this type of regulation of the female body; it has become such an expected norm that not shaving seems barbaric.

What is most interesting to me are the ways in which, in both cases, colonizers are capable of introducing a discourse (usually upholding the ideal of “progress” at any cost) that in time becomes accepted in the colonized, manifests itself both in thought and action, in such a way as to destroy those who came to accept it. For all races of women and the historically colonized, the ideologies become self-policing, a position often associated with Foucault. This internalized oppression is perhaps the most significant aspect of colonization because it ensures replication, which it is critical to note derives its power from the representational component of colonialism.

Secondly, these two types of colonizing are both, at the roots, representational. To say representation causes oppression would be a vast oversimplification; however, it is an enabler on an ideological level. It is the representation of the Africans as savages that enabled European leaders to enter their land, drain it of resources, and trample whole cultures underfoot. It is likewise the representation of white women as frail and emotionally-charged that enables their further degradation.
Neither of these representations necessarily have any truth to them. Truth doesn’t matter, for the function of representation is deeply embedded in ideology—the ideology of those who create the representation and who most certainly have much to gain by its maintenance.

Cesaire establishes an equation that explicates this problem: “colonization = ‘thingification’” (42). Colonization means taking an embodied subject and degrading him or her to the level of an object. As Cesaire explains, this “thingification” is the result of destroying all that is sacred. This process occurs during the construction of any female body as an object. Agency, materiality, diversity, emotion, self-worth is all wiped out as women try to emulate the plastic models on magazine covers.

Furthermore, it is critical to note that the representation of the inferiority of females of all races and racialized bodies is enabled via physical difference. If there were no perceivable visual difference, I wonder, would the ideology of inferiority fall apart? While under these circumstances, I imagine the representational aspect might be slightly more challenging, inferiority could still be rationalized in terms of fabricated internal or cultural difference. However, the difference is physical and this
is an important aspect of colonizing discourse, as Sander L. Gilman demonstrates.

Gilman’s “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature” discusses nineteenth-century art and science and how both portrayed and stigmatized sexualized female bodies. He recognizes the importance of visual culture, uncovering the almost subconscious ways Western culture has learned to think about race and gender. Gilman provides an in-depth examination of the conventions upholding nineteenth-century art, medicine, and literature, and the connections among these mythologies. He uses the nineteen-century fascination with female sexuality of all races to show how Western thought is propagating sexist ideology, especially in its representations of the female form.

Gilman establishes the “ubiquitous” nature of the black figure in European art as signifying sexual activity, usually of the deviant kind (228). Through a discussion of links between icons of female sexuality in European opera, narrative art, and visual art, he is able to assert, “By the eighteenth century, the sexuality of blacks, both male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality in general” (228). By positioning a white woman in relation
to a black woman (whose sexual deviance is understood), the artist becomes capable of implying sexual deviance of the white woman.

Gilman demonstrates perceived sexual and physical deviance of black females through an examination of medical texts. Physicians (indeed the society at large) posture the Hottentot as the essence of black people in general and therefore positions blacks as the antithesis of nineteenth century white social norms. The combination of her body’s display over most of Europe and her perceived physical difference from European whites led to the reduction of the Hottentot’s figure to the iconography of her sexual parts; her viewers were only interested in her larger buttocks and the possibility of other genital anomalies. The Hottentot woman becomes visually related to the white prostitute and deviant lesbian through perceived disease and physical difference.

Gilman’s article discusses the racist iconography of black females in canonical works of art during the nineteenth century. While some aspects of the representation of black women eventually merged with that of the sexualized white woman, the significance of the black woman depicted in art remained different from that of white women, due in part to the display of the Hottentot.
Most importantly in relation to Orlan’s work is the fact that different races are still connected to each other, degraded alongside each other, or perhaps emancipated with each other, through images.

Gilman’s article shows how historical representations of women, although shifting, are still producing a degrading discourse. Cesaire argues that, although current colonization may look different, the same cycles are occurring. He writes, “colonialist Europe has grafted modern abuse onto ancient injustice, hateful racism onto old inequality” (45). Colonialism continues, with a new face, and is enabled by beauty standards that are increasingly out of reach. While I am mortified at the thought of women endangering their lives and spending their capital to get bigger breasts, many people see this as completely acceptable. It has been normalized in the dominant system and accepted through many years of female “thingification” and internalized oppression.

Another key implication of Gilman’s work is that one cannot discuss the representation of white women without discussing that of black women (or vise-versa). Orlan’s extensive work confronting negative perceptions of white women in European art could include other, more troublesome, portrayals of different colors of women.
Otherwise, her artwork falls short of fully understanding (and subverting) the systems affecting the construction of white women’s bodies. However, since representations of white women are tied to those of black women, Orlan’s work can be read as overturning the ideology that constitutes images of both black and white women.

Though she is never explicit about race, Orlan criticizes systems of privilege. It could be read that in making herself “uglier,” she sacrifices her privilege as a white woman to a degree. Since darker races of women are frequently treated as the other, always in comparison to whites, in altering her white skin, Orlan is pointing out not only problems with beauty ideals, but with the comparative and alienating nature of them. For instance, while black women’s beauty ideals may differ somewhat, they are still viewed overall in relation to whites. As Gilman’s article points out, at least in a Western context, the representation of blacks was constructed as a contrast to whites to imply the superiority of the white.

The implications of black female images also emerge from a different history, slavery in the US and the Hottentot Venus in Europe being major influences. A black woman finds herself navigating a delicate balance for part of her appeal results from a fascination with the exotic
(part of the Hottentot’s legacy). This is a mediated component; a black woman cannot be too exotic, cannot be too black if she wants to become accepted in more widespread and mainstream audiences. A prominent black feminist, bell hooks, uses model Naomi Campbell as an example of this “cross-over appeal” as she “embodies an aesthetic that suggests black women, while appealingly ‘different,’ must resemble white women to be considered really beautiful” (125). She also explains how this mediation occurs in the magazine industry in general, “[Fashion magazine editors] chose biracial or fair skinned black women, particularly with blonde or light brown long hair. The non-white models appearing in these catalogues must resemble as closely as possible their white counterparts” (124). hooks goes into further depth discussing the meaning of popular representations of black women, namely their heightened sexuality and availability, accessibility, and deviance (117).

What hooks is explicating is that white women were upheld as the standard of virtue and beauty historically and much of that ideology still remains today. In altering her appearance in unacceptable ways, Orlan subverts this representation of pristine white females. From the perception of dominant society, she is rebellious, a “bad”
white woman as she does not treat her body properly. Her innocence comes into further question, it seems, as she chips away at the integrity of her body. Her body is available in ways that no body, regardless of skin color, has been. By blurring the public/private boundary and showing images of her flagellated body, she is subverting the “wholesome” and virtuous representation of white women.

Due to the racist history that depicts black women as more resilient, Orlan’s lacerated white skin makes a more poignant statement by overturning the expected fragility of the white female. In fact, after watching a surgery-performance with a male colleague, he exclaimed, “Damn! Orlan is a tough woman!” Arguments about pain aside, one is struck by all that Orlan endures during her performances.

By extension, she is also toying with the juxtaposed representation of the durability of black women and frailty of white women. This is the very ideology that Terri Kapsalis’s Public Privates: Performing Gynecology from Both Ends of the Speculum argues made experimenting with early gynecology on American slaves without anesthetic an acceptable practice. Not only does Orlan portray the abject body, she also interrogates the unity and solidarity of the body. Of course unity is the norm for all body
types, but it is an expectation for white bodies, which are rarely presented as diseased or “othered.”

Orlan critiques the canon of art history by taking models of western white beauty and subverting them by mixing them with her skin. The contradiction of her appropriation is that the iconography of beauty, established by the masters of western art, becomes grotesque when materialized. (She does this purposefully and makes this apparent via a pictoral reference to herself as the “Bride of Frankenstein.”) She has been described as looking “extra-terrestrial” implying that she does not even belong on this earth (Davis 29). She may still have whatever the remaining benefits of white skin, but she has made herself freakishly different from all other white women and thus she becomes, at least partially, An Other. Not only is her difference immediately visually recognizable, it is psychologically subversive. The fact that her perceived disfigurement was Orlan’s choice further upsets the expectation of white women’s passivity and acceptance, particularly in conjunction with beauty norms.

I have presented different interpretations of the way race is incorporated into Orlan’s work. Orlan’s use of other races is under-theorized in her own analyses and, as a result, occasionally can be read as replicating
colonial/racist discourses. However, this ambiguity opens doors for multiple readings, some of which I have provided that deviate from traditional ideas of what it means to be a white female. In Orlan’s criticism of beauty ideals, in her active self-de-colonization, she is subverting the representation and ideology of whiteness and the ways whiteness, as the standard of the ideal female body, shadows “otherness” on different races.

Cesaire defines the enemies of decolonization as:

[All those who, performing their functions in the sordid division of labor for the defense of Western bourgeois society, try in diverse ways and by infamous diversions to split up the forces of Progress— even if it means denying the very possibility of Progress— all of them tools of capitalism, ... all henceforth answerable for the violence of revolutionary action. (italics mine 55)]

This mentality is pervasive in Orlan’s work of subversion and self-reclamation. Cesaire helps us to see that the violence against the spectator is necessary to enlightenment and change. As Cesaire points out, a tragic result of colonization that has worldwide impact is that “extraordinary possibilities [were] wiped out” (italics original 43). Though no art can reverse the horror of
colonial endeavors, at least through “dramatizing opportunity” and de-colonizing her own body, Orlan questions the ideologies that maintain different forms of oppression (Oriach Orlan). Her recent work has evolved beyond questioning the regulation of the white female body toward exploring the meanings of racialized and colonized bodies.
Chapter 5: Final Analysis

Orlan’s artwork is feminist. Her subversion of female representation and the correlating gender roles is an important feminist task. She openly confronts feminist issues such as bodily regulation, beauty practices, cosmetic surgery. Feminists have argued that the female body is pathologized in its representation (see Zimmerman, Davis). Orlan overturns this representation by taking such pleasure in the opening of her body. She laughs while she is being operated on, while her skin is cut, while she bleeds. This disrupts the viewer’s understanding of power relations as Orlan becomes both the object for surgical intervention and active subject, actor and director. Orlan’s manipulation of power dynamics is purposefully shocking in order to dramatize opportunity.

Watching her surgery-performances is not supposed to be comforting. Orlan disrupts ideologies so basic the viewer might not even know he or she believed them. Orlan wants the spectator to ask questions and the best way to encourage this behavior is to produce a visceral response in the viewer. Artaud theorized that by encouraging bodily responses, the intellect (the distrusted headquarters of dominant ideologies in the body) could be ignored, allowing room for enlightenment. Zimmerman also points out that a
bodily response allows the viewer to experience his or her own embodiedness. By promoting questioning, Orlan is encouraging the spectator’s activity (and hopefully some growth), which is also a feminist strategy.

While this impact on the spectator is purposeful and necessary, it is not always effective. The problem is that people become so disgusted by Orlan’s art that they annex it from their minds. The severity of the image may cause the audience to unintentionally linger on Orlan, but some will not actively think about her work. They will not appreciate it; they will not seek out meaning. Orlan still has an impact in these situations, but the impact is limited.

Another problem of her project is that she is unsuccessful in reaching those she most wants to influence. I have called this group the average consumer for lack of a better term. Despite her extensive use of news media and the way in which her operation-performances stir up frenzy, her message is most frequently misconstrued in these sources. She is defacing (if you will) our contemporary standards of beauty in such an extreme way that even when she is there to explain her purpose, the conversation is generally ineffective. Popular media outlets force Orlan to answer questions that do not relate to her project at
all, so she ends up talking in circles, trying to explain the most basic components of her art.

In overturning her representation as a white female, Orlan plays with the connections between her representation and that of other races. I have argued that she de-colonizes the representation of her body extensively. Since white women are held up as the epitome of beauty and virtuosity in comparison to other races, Orlan’s subversion of her whiteness impacts the construction of other races as well.

Race is under theorized in Orlan’s writing; it is troublesome that only one other critic has noted the problematic ways Orlan uses other races in her work. With the transformative potential of Orlan’s art and the extent of her subversion of the expectations and limitations of the white female body, Orlan should be more thorough and active in her dismantling of the racialized body. More interdisciplinary criticism would yield more fecund discourse by raising more questions and getting outside the basic feminist issues prompted by Orlan’s art.

While Orlan must enter the patriarchal paradigm in order to subvert it, the discourse that Orlan establishes on the body never affirms either end of a duplicitous system. Instead, she slips between the two extremes,
establishing a third way that I call an act of informe and that Kate Ince has called a female imaginary. If I were pressed to find one word to sum up the main principle of Orlan’s art, I would choose “and” to signal the informe aspects of her work. She carefully avoids establishing limiting structures, opting for more fluidity and multiplicity of choice. Her work indicates that there are feminist ways to further explore problems that have resulted in a stalemate in the discourse, while Orlan also indicates the variety of opportunity available to the mind that breaks from binary thinking.
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