

## L'HISTOIRE D'O. ORLAN, SACRED AND PROFANE

'Remember the Future.' - Orlan.

Orlan is O. 'The O in open. The O of other, as in the collective unconscious or obverse of ego. The religious O; the opening of lips; orifices; eyes; the double helix; the cell; the cold star; the O in chaos. "The Story of O".<sup>i</sup> She is Orleans - the maid, and Orlando, the man, Saint Orlan - the transexual saint; she is Or-long - the gold that lasts, a rich vein opened that runs deep into history, into art, a bearer of so many desires in the present. Never has a contemporary artist, transcending so many orthodoxies, so many 'isms' been so open to interpretation. Her oeuvre which uses the skin of photography, the projected screen, has become a matrix of meanings, of disciplines, of feelings. But Orlan retains her mystery. The postmodern body is above all a text; yet Orlan cuts through her own skin, submits to the knife to create that text. 'If the body is treated as pure text, subversive, destabilising elements can be emphasised and freedom and self-determination celebrated; but one is left wondering, is there a body in this text?' So speaks Susan Bordo, in Unbearable Weight (1993)<sup>ii</sup>. Orlan answers, hieratically 'This is my body,' and while as spectators we witness her virtual martyrology, we know that her operations on flesh and spirit are both real and metonymic -an emblem for so much pain. Bordo continues: 'The spirit of epistemological jouissance suggested by images of cyborg, Trickster, ... obscures the located, limited, inescapably partial and always personally invested nature of human "story-making".<sup>iii</sup> Orlan is reticent, but there is a history behind her story-making.

We know too well the roles of the nude, the muse and the model in art; the astonishing history of misogyny among princes, poets and painters; the history of sex war and its explosion in our century.<sup>iv</sup> 'Paris, capital of the nineteenth century' Benjamin declared; Paris, feminine city of the twentieth century. Paris, the city of André Breton's Amour Fou, mad love, and the Surrealist dream kingdom of women - from Kiki de Montparnasse to Schiaparelli, from Dali's Russian Gala to Leonor Fini. These women still haunt Paris, with their beauty, their flair, their desire. All were dangerously suggestive; few were profoundly subversive. 'Pauline Réage's Histoire d'O with Leonor Fini's fluid-drenched illustrations, posited the female creator's complicity within the problematics of 'mastery' and the sexual-political continuum.<sup>v</sup> As Orlan takes her place upon the surgical couch, bedecked in designer finery, her face painted as it awaits incision, one recalls the surrealist artist, Meret Oppenheim, prone and covered with fruit and food - a female banquet spread before the eyes of the Parisian beau-monde in 1959, at the International Surrealist Exhibition devoted to Eros. The transformation of her body into a cannibalistic feast was the embodiment of Eros as woman to be devoured. She signalled both the continuing fascination with woman as fetish and her own absorption within that fetishistic desire.<sup>vi</sup> While Oppenheim presented in later years her older face, magificently tattooed in one photograph; X-rayed to reveal skull, vertebrae, ringed fingers in another, Orlan prostrate,

adorned, tattooed for liposuction or surgery, half bondage-doll, half Odalisque, goes one further; she herself becomes master, perverts and challenges 'the beauty problem', and with a shocking literalism insists upon the knife and the cut.

Creativity and beauty were always at stake. Even now, as Francette Pacteau has elaborated in The Symptom of Beauty, beauty 'continues to be paramount in our postmodern, post-colonial and so-called postfeminist society', although 'to recognise beauty is to defer endlessly the question of its origin.'<sup>vii</sup> But its origin is at once its opposite; from Lang's Metropolis to Goldeneye, the beautiful woman has always her evil double, the woman-castrator; female beauty is but the counterpart of the 'monstrous-feminine,' the witch, the vampire, the killer who crushes men with her thighs. Those film heroines, however, ultimately place woman as abject - her abjection, not her power is symbolised by her position as victim, as bleeding wound, as blood, 'the fantastic semantic crossroads' (Kristeva) to which Orlan constantly returns, bent on corroboration and revenge.<sup>viii</sup> Official portrait with Bride of Frankenstein Wig, 1990, taken after Orlan's third operation, is but one demonstration of the fact that she is, indeed, beautiful. The compulsion for metamorphosis persists, however; Orlan insists that interrogation of the ideal, not the ideal itself is her aim; hers is a quest through martyrdom that strips away flesh, as meaning seeks itself in a terrifying 'mis-en-abyme'.

Beyond the double-edged heroines of surrealism and film - those fantasmatic worlds which so closely relate - I see Orlan as having heroic precursor figures in French art, in French sculpture, which offer a more specific national, female, spiritual and Catholic lineage via which to situate her now virtual and international art. Beauty versus ugliness, scarification and martyrology are the pointers. While much painting and sculpture of the early post-1945 period, the nudes of a Dubuffet or a Giacometti, were dark and scarred and gouged, the new cult of ugliness appeared simultaneously in Germaine Richier's bronzes. The impact of this ugliness inverted, indeed vilified the cult of female beauty, marking the terrible caesura of the second world war; now the scar and wound became personal stigmata, the world's ugliness fused with the wounds of woman's stripped body. Murielle Gagnebin has discussed both the fascination and the psychoanalytic roots of ugliness; its relationship to the surface and the skin: 'An inscription of time in the heart of an image, ugliness asserts itself indubitably as a "surface", eroded, withered, used not to say castrated.' Laedere - to wound - is arguably the origin of 'laid' (ugly) in French.<sup>ix</sup> Remembering perhaps her homonym, Ligier Richier, the great sixteenth-century sculptor of resurrected skeletons, Germaine Richier had herself photographed like a Pietà, an emaciated plaster Christ stretched across her knees; her existentially-inspired crucifix for the Church of Assy became an anathema. While The Hurricane Woman, 1948, is a pregnant force of nature, Richier's insect-woman sculptures are metaphors of entrapment, her wizened Mantis shrivelled and dry. It is to Germaine Richier, trained by Bourdelle in the tradition of Rodin, rather than Giacometti, that the tradition of postwar sculpture owes its

characteristically 'brutalised' aspect.<sup>x</sup> Richier's art involved working in metals and at the furnace face. In the new era of the 1960s, the Franco-american sculptor Niki de Saint Phalle, created monumental sculpture out of marginal sources, 'bricolage', an encounter between Duchamp's ready-mades and her children's toys. Yet Niki's Crucifixion, 1963, her shot and bloodied altarpieces and the crucially pierced and punctured, eviscerated surface of her works, situate her surprisingly, but convincingly as Richier's successor and another of Orlan's precursors. Niki de Saint Phalle, ex-fashion model for Vogue, was only too aware of the mythologies which structured the expectations of her age, mythologies - in Roland Barthes's sense - far more powerful than the problematic exemplar of female autonomy proposed by the already outmoded figure of Simone de Beauvoir. Niki's sculptures swarm with a virus of soldiers, spiders, reptiles, blood, guns, plane-phalluses, dead babies, like so many Arcimboldeque 'memento mori' figures of the war-ravaged 1960s. They may also celebrate pregnancy, fecundity, fruitfulness - but rage prevails; she continued her career by shooting the Venus de Milo, by shooting at Notre-Dame, by creating the mutilated figures, interchangeably Nanas, prostitutes and brides in the Altar of Women, 1963. The terrible and ambiguous power of the Church behind these stereotypes was omnipresent, as it would be for Orlan. Niki, like Orlan, reclothed her sculptures, offered them trousseaus, bridal veils; paraphernalia, ultimately rejected, which in no way protects the ultimate vulnerability of the skin.

Finally in this procession of noble women comes Gina Pane, Orlan's Italo-French contemporary, who, in the 1970s and 1980s took her sculpture away from the art object, that reified substitute for self and Other, and practiced her art on her own body, piercing, cutting, nicking the skin with thorns; using serial photography and film to recall these painful events. The images were like so many relics, relics all the more poignant now since her premature death in 1990. In her work 'land art' preceded her 'body art'; both were related to an 'arte povera.' A Franciscan attitude to self-abnegation and Sainthood was exemplified in the reliquaries of The Prayer of the Poor, 1989-1990. 'With these actions I wanted radically to mark the 'sign' of the body, of this "flesh". I was incapable of reconstructing an image of the body without presenting this flesh to the public, without a veil or mediation.' 'The artist was convinced', said Maria Vescovo, 'that communication was only possible through a rupture, an injury, the unique access road to the Other', like Georges Bataille or Simone Weil, the saintly French writer and mystic of the 1940s.<sup>xi</sup> Gina Pane's saints, however, Saint Francis, Saint Sebastian, Saint Peter, Saint Lawrence, constitute an unchallenged hagiography; the vicariousness of Pane's suffering distinguishes her acts from Orlan's exultant self-possession: 'Gina Pane thus relives the quickening wound of an otherness which was neither her own body, nor her subconscious, nor the other "me", but the Other, the neighbour, the stranger...<sup>xii</sup> 'Even if you inflict injuries upon yourself, if you search for stigmata on your body, it is love... You have looked at the saints: they, too, carry stigmata and talk to the blood...<sup>xiii</sup>

Orlan acknowledges not only Pane, but alternative sources of body art in Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and his notion of the 'body without organs'; the Viennese Actionists and American contemporaries such as Chris Burden. One must also note the resurgence of religious practices in the art of French contemporaries such as Jean-Luc Godard (Je vous salue, Marie, 1985), the writer Philippe Sollers, and artists such as Pierre Buraglio, Gérard Garouste, Jean-Michel Alberola. Before a discussion of 'Omniprésence', however, what is her story? She began her career in her home town of Saint-Etienne in 1964 with painting, poetry and theatre. Her first street performance took place when she was eighteen in 1965; with Hubert Besacier she organised a performance symposium in Lyons that lasted for five years. The events of May '68 soon involved her not only in feminist protest -but protest at feminist protest. French feminism was organised on militant marxist and separatist lines:<sup>xiv</sup> Orlan disrupted the seamless progress of events with her placards declaring 'Je suis une homme et un femme' - subverting grammar as she asserted the shifting possibilities of an unstable gender. Orlan's engagement with feminism - and its failure in France - together with her own psychoanalysis are evidently quintessential for her work. Psychoanalysis she sees now in some aspects as obsolete as Catholicism: both credos insist upon self-acceptance, the untouchability of the body and its irrelevance to dogma. 'These are primitive, ancestral and anachronistic ideas.'<sup>xv</sup> Yet equally important is the grand narrative of art itself as a repository of intellectually, spiritually and emotionally complex realisations. (No mere 'image bank' or 'appropriation' here). As early as 1968, she posed as a series of 'tableaux vivants' parodying the Venuses of Manet and Velasquez, yet she was always, insistently, herself.<sup>xvi</sup> Works of art were literally incorporated by her body and the body of her work; thus she incorporates herself into that same grand narrative, albeit her 'derisory barocco-kitsch' injects a critical aspect and some much-needed humour into the proceedings. (Not only do her madonnas often grin, the grin can liven up an operating theatre at the most excruciating moments.) Synchronic, 'postmodernist' accounts of Orlan's work today omit its time-impregnated axis which situates it at a crux of the old and the new. The relationship between sex and art, the sacred and profane is at the heart of the matter; her enthusiastic embrace of technology - 'the new 'trompe-l'oeil of our era' as she calls it - is simply the obverse of her relationship with a long tradition.

She became 'Saint Orlan' in 1971, and wrapped herself in costumes - white leatherette or black vinyl, as exhibited in Milan in 1972. How should the body itself as 'readymade' - a resurrected, Duchampian Etant donées - engage with Bernini's celebrated Saint Teresa in Ecstasy, the 'first postmodernist sculpture' ? Orlan's transformation of Bernini parallels the preoccupations of her generation with female ecstasy within the new 'écriture féminine'.

A violent and symbolic confrontation led to Orlan's snatching of the trousseau lovingly amassed by her mother; on those sacred sheets bestowed to symbolise the 'giving-away' of the daughter to another patriarchal nexus, Orlan exultantly, euphorically, received her lovers,

tracing their sperm trails with pen and then with a savage, enraged embroidery, again a détournement of the womanly skills she had been taught 'to please'. ('Thread the needle! ... Careful it pricks!... make a knot between your thumb and first finger...a big knot! ... as you make your bed you lie in it , my little one...' <sup>xvii</sup>). Occasionally, in time-honoured tradition, the sheets were cut up for canvases - 'toile' as linen, 'toile' as canvas - the word in French already invites a disturbing analysis.

Drapery itself, a second skin, was never innocent: the sixteen photos of the One-off striptease with trousseau sheets record an event performed in Lyons in 1976. Orlan was photographed, draped as a baroque virgin, one exposed breast suckling a swaddled bundle. One by one her garments - and bundle - were shed, along with maternity and modesty, like saintly attributes, until the naked and dishevelled Orlan was revealed, ecstatic, bare - finally assuming an ironic 'Venus Pudica' pose. <sup>xviii</sup> In 1977 at the International Contemporary Art Fair (FIAC) in Paris, she scandalised the public by offering a 'Baiser de l'artiste'- kisses for money at five francs a time. The Muse who is usually 'baisée' (screwed) has become the artists: the kiss on offer is a joke but also an aggression: 'Roll up, roll up, come to my pedestal, the pedestal of myths: mother, whore and artist' she cried. <sup>xix</sup> Her 'Art and Prostitution' exhibition, held at fellow-artist Ben's gallery, 'La Differance' in Nice, continued and completed the work on the trousseau. Three art dealers received invitations: 'I supply the canvas. Give me the paint.' Orlan wanted real (symbolic) sex with the dealers again upon her bed-sheet /'toile' - but they, bashfully, would not comply. The proposed 'baiser de l'artiste' turned into a 'statement of deficiency'. The large and undefiled sheet was spread on an easel, precursor of a triptych exhibition and finally the performance at the Neue Galerie, Ludwig Museum, Aix-la-Chapelle of 1978, entitled 'A documentary study: the head of the Medusa.' To quote Orlan: 'Using a huge magnifying glass to show my vagina (the pubic hairs on one half were painted blue) during my period, a video screen showed the head of the man or woman who was about to see, another showed the head of the men and women who were looking, and at the exit, Freud's text on the head of the Medusa was distributed. It read: "At the sight of the vulva, the devil himself flees"' <sup>xx</sup> Orlan's art is apotropaic, yet the abyss itself is always invoked.

During this period, Orlan's body, the 'Orlan-corps', became a standard of measurement, of comparison beneath comparisons. Orlan went on to use it to 'measure' art spaces and their physical and moral parameters. Her prone body replaced the foot or cubit of Antiquity, the measurements of Rome and Italy brought via the Renaissance to France. A 'measuring' took place in 1976 in Nice with the artist Ben, at the Pompidou Centre in 1977, in Aix-la-Chapelle at the Neue Galerie and in Strasbourg in 1978, and the following year in Lyon. The Musée Saint-Pierre, Lyon 'measured' in April, 1979, was in itself the transformation of a seventeenth-century convent, a cloistered quadrangle around a garden; Orlan used her body as a standard' - she used the word 'étalon', as Duchamp did for his Three Standard Stoppages - and

with a punning wit she claimed to make visible Le Corbusier's 'Module-Or'. Costume was important; she wore a robe she had sewn herself, over black clothes. After the sedate 'measuring', the robe was washed violently, energetically, like 'dirty linen in public' to free it from defilement. The 'maculae', stains, the sweat and dust-infused water (any Veronica-like imprint was wrung out in the wash) was collected in a bowl and then transferred to containers sealed with wax as relics. The Virgin, conceived 'immaculately', without stain, counters the tradition of the bride's display of bloodied linen after the wedding night; we are brought back to the central motif of the trousseau for Orlan. Her 'measuring' performances provoked violently sexual reactions: she was spat upon, insulted as 'a woman of the streets'; the trial of measurement passes through filth: 'L'épreuve de la mesure passe par la souillure.'<sup>xxi</sup>

From staining cloth with her body she started cutting it to pieces. From lacerated canvases she made series of assemblages and soft sculptures - kapok-filled cylinders, ripped sheets mounted on cardboard or wood set up vertically. Again in the principal contemporary art space in Lyons, seven stuffed pillows were suspended, like butcher's flesh on meathooks attached to high-tension cables. They were increasingly vast in scale (the last nine metres square), and displayed as '1001 reasons not to sleep'. Four huge artificial ears quartered with meathooks were set up in the four corners of the space, playing on the association between 'oreiller' (pillow) and 'oreille' (ear) in a boulimic and cruel revision of the Scheherezade myth. Each pillow was symbolically associated with the accursed trousseau, and increasingly large images of Orlan as Ingres's Grand Odalisque, corresponding to the pillow sizes, were projected onto them. These 'citation - situations' were the first phase of Orlan's self-transfiguration:

'For a moment I freeze my own reality  
and my living body  
On which I inflict the coldness of marble  
the density of an object.  
And for an instant I feel, in this complete alienation of my substance  
solemnity, ossification.

My will is to battle with myth  
To measure myself against it  
To mystify it in turn  
To appropriate its legend.

By espousing the work of art I cite  
I experience its narcissism.  
I steal its theatricality.

The spectator's gaze, reserved for Ingres,  
Is all for me.

The odalique was profaned, but literally reanimated; female representations in art - the imagery of masculine power - were reincarnated, in a live female body, shockingly naked. Orlan revived the 'aristic nude', giving it back the sexual charge lost as it became a historic icon. Her ambition:

To make the Odalisque glow with sweat.

To restore the scent of sperm to the sea-spray surrounding Venus

To pass from artefact to being.

The eternal, the petrified pose a mere point of departure.

ORLAN'S reality surpasses myth.<sup>xxii</sup>

Orlan's strength, her blasphemy towards Church and Art patriarchies, is premised upon her seizing of the trope Incarnation, fusing the divine and the erotic. Her self-knowledge surpasses of course the confused ecstasies of a Saint Teresa, Richier's hurt and bafflement at the rejection of her sacred sculpture, Niki's bleeding and bone-adorned altarpieces, the sad self-sacrifice of Gina Pane. Orlan's performance, 'Drapery - the Baroque', at the Palazzo Grassi, Venice in 1979 was extravagant, exultant: a living St Teresa prefigured Saint Orlan's future incarnations.

In 1980 she moved to Paris and took a studio in the industrial suburb of Ivry-sur-Seine, near both the asylum which once harboured Antonin Artaud, and the home of the philosopher Jacques Derrida. Apparently she began recruiting inmates for models in her early tableaux vivants, such as Saint Orlan and the Elders, a Caravaggesque video and performance piece. In 1981 in Portugal she ran up and down the streets, with a photographic representation of her nudity transferred onto her black dress<sup>xxiii</sup> - a minimalism, scandalously effective, that contrasts with 'Mise-en-scène pour une Sainte', the summit of baroque excess for the 'Made-in-France' exhibition in Lyons the same year. It comprised a performance, filmed, videoed and photographed in a chapel she created involving mirrors, columns with perspective effects, doves, a resin sculpture faked to look like marble, a video screen, lasers, holograms, a van-load of white plastic flowers, and fifty cut-out cherubs.... with the phallic/saintly Orlan as centrepiece, exposing her one, Amazonian, good-bad breast.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Already by 1983, the Lacanian psychoanalyst Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni published a chapter on Orlan's work in her book La Robe. Essai psychanalytique du vêtement, with its

sections upon cutting, the nude, the mask, the veil, the second skin. She used illustrations of the 'drapés' - the exotically-swathed Maroccans photographed by the veteran Beaux-Arts teacher Gaetan Gatain de Clerambault, so close to Orlan's Madonnas.<sup>xxv</sup> Orlan's implacable hatred for her mother (who was adored by her paralysed and impotent father) was described; the mother who wished to 'sell' her as a bride. Moreover, Lemoine-Luccioni pointed out the historical transexuality of saints and thus the existence of sacred ambiguities which complement the spectrum of profane passions. One passage became the ritual text to be read out during Orlan's public operations: 'The skin is deceptive... in life one only has one's skin...there is an error in human relations because one never is what one has...I have an angel's skin but I am a jackal... a crocodile's skin but I am a puppy, a black skin but I am white; a woman's skin but I am a man; I never have the skin of what I am. There is no exception to the rule because I am never what I have.'<sup>xxvi</sup> The robe is the mere envelope of the body - but beneath that our skin itself is a final envelope, with its own ego-dimensions<sup>xxvii</sup> -to be shed (Saint Bartholomew, Apollo flayed by Marsyas, Orlan - her very name a masculine disguise - opened up, as her face slips anamorphically from her skull).

Orlan's show of 1990, Les vingt ans de Pub et de Ciné de Sainte Orlan, exhibited 'cloned' Orlan cinema 'posters,' based on Indian billboards, which were actually acrylic on canvas images for fake films. In Art makes your mouth water we can see juxtaposed with Orlan as baroque virgin, Orlan in Joan-of-Arc like body armour with the plastic pubic money-cage worn for the 'Baiser de l'artiste' performance in 1977; Sainte Orlan, Notre Dame d'Abondance, shows a black-clad Orlan with white breast juxtaposed with Orlan as white saint; the black and white theme recalling various past performances is repeated on posters - each divided symmetrically. Saint Orlan and Cult Objects, part of the Saint Orlan and the Elders series - purportedly advertises a film by 'Frédéric Mitterand'; the second episode produced by 'Hans Haacke' suggests irreverence, to say the least, for her older peers. The nine photographs reproduced for the event 'Peau d'Ane' - the asses's skin - of 1990 show a deliciously plump, generally topless Orlan in a variety of military, episcopal and animal headgear - a final Imaginary Generic. Successful Operations painting, shows how this rather pert and saucy individual will finally change her skin to become spiritualised. She will fuse into one facial image the chin of Botticelli's Venus, the nose of Gerome's Psyche, a Fontainebleau Diana's eyes, the lips of Gustave Moreau's Europa, and the brow of Leonardo's Mona Lisa - spirited women all, chosen not for their beauty, but for their legendary exploits Orlan insists; 'La Gioconde' as she is called in France, long deemed a self-portrait of Leonardo, adds the essential dash of transexuality. The new composite, computer-generated image, the impossible blueprint for an eccentric plastic surgeon - complicit with her programme for 'reincarnation' will bring the most up-to-date technologies back to the ideal and the Louvre.<sup>xxviii</sup> Yet as Joel Savary declared, through the bad-taste guilt and the flashy kitsch, surely a social critique is at work here: 'caress

that chin, touch those breasts, blush those cheeks, mascara those eyelashes'... From the enumeration that once was the province of the poem of courtly love, everything has become a catalogue of symptoms of contemporary crisis.<sup>xxix</sup> (Nothing could demonstrate the failure of the feminist enterprise better, in the late 1980s, than the state-condoned Minitel posters of women with banded eyes - a positive invitation to rape your electronic date - yet Orlan's pioneering online contemporary art magazine Art Accès Revue set up on the Minitel from 1984-1988 precisely demonstrates the fuzzy boundaries of her engagement with this new technology.

It was in 1990 - following the preliminary experiment, Chéri's bloc of 1986<sup>xxx</sup> - that Orlan embarked upon her 'operations', operations that involved the spirit as much as the flesh. The genesis of her decision - a local anaesthetic for an interuterine pregnancy in 1978, discussed at the time in a performance art symposium - surely involved not only an extraordinary fascination with what, as an artist she witnessed as a kind of living, speaking autopsy - but as a woman, an extraordinary ambivalence concerning the relationship between anaesthesia, aesthetics, psychic pain and its mastery. Excited by a Fluxus and happening performance in which Orlan participated at the Pompidou Centre in 1989, curators from Newcastle invited her to Britain. For the Newcastle Festival on May 30th, 1990, her 43rd birthday, she gave a performance 'The reincarnation of Saint Orlan' in All Saints' Church. No surgeon was to be found; nonetheless a declaration of intent, signed by a large number of participants, announced the operation programme: the first followed two months later in Paris. Entitled 'Art Charnel', the event took place in an operating theatre, where hundreds of white plastic flowers, a mounted photo of Orlan as Botticelli's Birth of Venus, three fluorescent wigs, a madonna's robe, costumes by Charlotte Caldeburg and more transformed sterile anonymity into an exotic 'theatrum mundi'. After the reading from 'Le Robe', liposuction from Orlan's face and thighs was performed by the surgeon Kamel Chérif Zahar, necessitating an epidural injection in the spine and a local facial anaesthetic. The fat was sealed in reliquaries of transparent resin moulded from Orlan's own arms and legs. Only six days later on July 27th, a second operation took place - with only one photographer, Joel Nicolas, after the surgeon's protests: a prosthesis was inserted in the chin. Together with Eugène Lemoine Luccioni's text, readings were given from Julia Kristeva's now canonical text on abjection: Pouvoirs de l'horreur, 1980. The third operation in September, 1990 - liposuction of legs, ankles, retouches to the face and eyelids, required - after the readings of course - a general anaesthetic at the surgeon's insistence (this provoked protests throughout the clinic). A video of the first operation was projected onto the operating table during the event; the texts of dialogues with surgeons who had refused to operate on Orlan were written on the walls. A scientific journal took up the discussion of the ethics, art factor and the 'madness' or otherwise of the event.<sup>xxxi</sup> In December a change of surgeon took place; operations were now conducted by the art collector Dr. Bernard Cornette de

Saint-Cyr. Silver-spangled Paco Rabanne costumes, a huge, painted 'cinema' poster in acrylic, trompe l'oeil marble basins and a profusion of plastic flowers, grapes, bananas and peppers were immortalised in video and colour photographs - a lobster constantly vying with Orlan's crucifixes (compare Dali, Meret Oppenheim, Niki de Saint Phalle). Fourteen resulting triptychs were exhibited at the Galerie Penin Hart, Paris, in April 1993.

In July 1991, for the fifth operation, in addition to 'La Robe', a text by Michel Serres on Le Tiers Instruit, was engraved twenty times in twenty languages on glass plates which held recipients of twenty grams of Orlan's flesh: 'What can the common monster, tattooed ambidextrous, hermaphrodite and cross-bred, show to us right now under his skin? Yes, Blood and Flesh.'<sup>xxxii</sup> This text served as libretto for an 'opera', performed and danced by Jimmy Blanche to his own music. A ceiling video installation was derived from this extravagant event for the Sydney Biennale of 1992. Videostills show superimpositions within a cross, associated with the words of Christ at the Passion: 'A little time and you shall see me no longer...a little time again and you will see me.' The sixth operation of February, 1992 took place during a performance festival in Liège, used Artaud's concept of the 'Corps sans Organes' as its title. Artaud's key text was declaimed; three skulls provided a more lugubrious decor for this living 'vanitas vanitarum': lipsuction from the face and belly was the order of the day.

The grand finale was the operation series 'Omniprésence'. Heralded with an important retrospective article by Barbara Rose in Art in America in February, 1993, proclaiming a 'body of work that gives new meaning to the term "cutting edge"'<sup>xxxiii</sup>, Orlan's last operation series to date was conducted in New York in November of that year with a feminist surgeon, Dr Marjorie Cramer. Orlan, resplendent in a black pleated Isey Miyake dress received silicone implants in her temple, resulting in symmetrical 'horns', a brave new brow of Mosaic gravitas.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The operation (videoed for CBS news) was relayed directly to the Sandra Gering Gallery, New York, and by satellite to the Macluhan Centre, Toronto, the Multimedia Centre in Banff, Canada and Pompidou Centre in Paris, where a round table of intellectuals were filmed reacting (uncomfortably) to the event. The 'Omniprésence' was not that of the world, questioning, interactive at the site of incision, but a statement, of course, of Orlan's quasi-divine ubiquity. The Sandra Gering Gallery exhibited forty one pairs of computer composite photos paired with photos of recovery, equivalent to forty exhibition days (Orlan in the wilderness) plus a final face created with morphing software, and in addition reliquaries of human flesh in resin, and Dr Cramer's operating outfit - a displaced, empty shroud. It was a Passion Play for our times, with all the drama, mystery and anxiety generated by surgical procedure, followed by the triumphant resurrection of unscarred Flesh. A follow-up operation one week later in New York involved Sanskrit texts, 'Holy shroud' imprints; a ninth operation in New York took place to gather fat from lipo-suction to make neon and plexiglass reliquaries and add final touches; Saint-Sebastian decors and blown-up drawings made from Orlan's blood were novel

elements.<sup>xxxv</sup> Orlan is now planning an operation in the Nikolai Contemporary Art Centre, Copenhagen, and a retrospective in Cleveland, Ohio.

As with Yves Klein's performances, as with Christo's vast, more contemporary enterprises, the mastery is not just of self, but of institutions, collaborators, the coordination of a team, the filming and the photography of the event (one recalls those early photographers posing hysterics at the Salpêtrière) and above all the cooption of the surgeon and his - or her - sacred and ritualised art. The commemorative photographs - accompanied by the almost intolerable video presentation - freeze and aestheticise horror: Roland Barthes's famous essay on Striptease (from Mythologies, 1957) is pushed to the unthinkable extreme as Orlan becomes an écorchée for our times. It is real time and real space, so the capital-based clocks insist in 'Omniprésence', as they tick away upon the livid, limelight-green background, even when the event is virtualised and transmitted, edited, replayed, reexhibited. The deliberate recall of traditional 'before and after' photographs, the cliché not only of countless women's magazine, but already 'done' in high art (Warhol's early nose-job paintings), contrasts with our personal reaction to a vision of self-mutilation. We are witnesses at a tragedy which we are forced to experience empathically (transsexually for the male viewer), as an aggression on ourselves. Catharsis - even as challenged in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty - is rigorously denied. The silence of the photograph hides the fear; the speaking video is filled with the prestidigitation of deceiving technologies - pain or no pain? We witness the apotheosis of the horrible juxtaposition of helpless female and technology, the 'Future Eve' fusing with the 'machine célibataire' of the year 2,000.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Time rolls apocalyptically backwards as it rolls forwards. Orlan comes back, intact, in control. The convention of the close-up, exhaustively analysed in art and film history - the genesis of Picasso's late kiss-pictures and so on - are subject to Orlan's metaphorical knife as she brings us up to the surface of operation,<sup>xxxvii</sup> while she uses a variety of freeze frames behind which in palimpsest linger faint memories of Mantegna's Dead Christ, Rembrandt's Anatomy lesson. Orlan's work must be resituated within its recent French context, as I argue, and from a contemporary perspective she may be grouped with female artists who use photography and close-up (Cindy Sherman) or with artists who play with and distort the body or their body (Matthew Barney).<sup>xxxviii</sup> However, the references which look back so much further in time, which play so devastatingly with the tradition of the sacred and profane, are ultimately far more resonant. The disembodied hands photographed with the syringe or forceps become secular, transsexualised remakes of the buffeting of Christ; even the costumes, the draperies, the brilliant green and the contrast of red with the swathes of darkness, the clocks like so many suns in eclipse, have a touch of Isenheim about them. Orlan's appallingly battered face covered with a rainbow of bruises - the perfect text for the most subtle of psychoanalytic and deconstructivist analyses<sup>xxxix</sup> - is at once a Grunewald in close up for our epoch and the answer to all those Venuses, all those deceitful images of a tender Mars. Ultimately Orlan's desire is to usurp the

Creator, using human tissue as morph; the tissue and its issue: 'Je est un Autre' - I am an Other, sacred and profane, Alpha and Omega, Orlan is O.

'I believe that the body is obsolete...We are at the junction of a world for which we are no longer mentally or physically prepared.

My work is a fight against the innate, the inexorable, the programmed, nature, DNA (which is our direct rival as artists of representation) and God!

"I have given my body to art", for after my death it will not be given to science but rather to a museum to be mummified: it will be the main part of a video installation'.<sup>xi</sup>

Saint Orlan offers the kiss of the Medusa to art, science and religion.

Saint Orlan makes fire explode from her ass.

Saint Orlan brings a great rabbit out of her sex. It will run about on the green fields of the drawing board.

Saint Orlan, always spiritually sound, lets forth a flight of doves.

Saint Orlan gives birth to light, to light, to light.<sup>xli</sup>

## NOTES

i. Adèle Olivia Gladwell Bridal Gown Shroud, London, Creation Press, 1992, p 124.

ii. Susan Bordo: Unbearable Weight. Feminism, Western Culture and the Body, University of California Press, London, 1993, second edition, 1995 p 38-9.

iii. Ibid., p 228.

iv. From the eleventh century 'querelle des femmes', to Christine de Pisan, from Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's Sur la Superiorité des femmes, 1509 to Rabelais' Le Tiers-Livre, 1546 for subsequent virgins, witches, pilloried wives - see 'Histories of France and of Feminism in France' in New French Feminisms ed Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, London, Harvester Press, 1981, p 10 ff and iconographically, La guerre des sexes, ed. Laure Beaumont Maillet, Paris, Biblioth\_que Nationale, 1984; Der Kampf der Geschlechter. Der neue Mythos in der Kunst, 1850-1930, Kunstbau

Lenbachhaus Munich, 1995; Feminin-Masculin. Le sexe de l'art, Paris, Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1995.

v. See Pauline Réage [Dominique Aury]: Histoire d'O (1954), illustrated with watercolours by Léonor Fini, Editions Tchou, 1968, and John de St Jorre: 'The Unmasking of O', The New Yorker, August 1st, 1994, pp 42-50.

vi. See Marjorie Garber: Vested Interests. Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety, New York, 1992, p 126-7 on female fetishism and fetish envy.

vii. Francette Pacteau: The Symptom of Beauty, London, Reaction Books, 1994, pp 15 and 21.

viii. Julia Kristeva as quoted in Barbara Creed: The Monstrous Feminine. Film Feminism, Psychoanalysis, London, Routledge, 1993, p 16.

ix. Murielle Gagnebin: Fascination de la laideur. L'en deça psychanalytique du laid, Lausanne, Editions Champ Vallon, 1994, p 259 (1st edition 1978).

x. See Sarah Wilson: 'The Second Sex', part of 'Paris Post War: In search of the Absolute', Paris Post War. Art and Existentialism, 1945-1955, London, Tate Gallery, 1993, pp 42-3.

xi. Maria Vescovo in Gina Pane, Troyes, Cadran Solaire, 1990, p 103.

xii. Ibid., here my own translation from the French version, p 44.

xiii. Maricla Bobbio, letter from Rome of 12.6.89, *ibid.*, p 131.

xiv. See the militant feminist reviews such as Le Torchon Brule, analysed by Claire Duchén in Feminism in France from May '68 to Mitterand, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986. They evidently use the model of contemporary neo-marxist reviews, themselves revised from French Communist Party models; hence a problematically class-based appeal and aggressivity of tone.

xv. 'Orlan: Conférence', translated by Carol Ducker for Women's Art Magazine, May-June, 1995, p 9.

xvi. See Les Tableaux Vivants, L'Art et la Vie, 1968, six photos scored and marked with crosses - recalling another famous contact-sheet - illustrating Heidi Reitmaier, 'Editorial', Women's Art Magazine, May-June, 1995, p 4.

xvii. Wall text from 'Etude Documentaire no 4, 1975: 'La broderie - le clair-obscur', based on an Orlan-corps action; this part 'Action-repérAGE de tâches de sperme sur les draps de trousseau.'

xviii. Strip-tease à travers les draps de mon trousseau, Espace Lyonnais d'Art

Contemporain, 1976, sixteen mounted photographs, 1.75 x 1.35 m Collection : Nouveau Musée de Villeurbane.

xix. Quoted in Orlan: 'Ceci est mon Corps.. Ceci est mon logiciel. Sainte Orlan benit les nouvelles technologies', undated, unpaginated typescript. Hubert Besacier's texts 'Face à une société de mères et de marchands' and 'Action-Prostitution' became part of the performance. The triptych for the exhibition 'Orlan-Deschamps-Bigeard-BoseArt, Lara Vincy Gallery, 1978 showed the 'Baiser de l'Artiste' in three phases: Sollicitation and kiss; Swallowing and visible descent of the money; Plastic pubis filling up with money.

xx. 'Orlan - Conférence' translation by Carol Ducker, op. cit., p 6.

xxi. Alain Charre: 'Orlan. Mesurage d'Institution, Notes à partir du mesurage du Musée St-Pierre de Lyon, avril, 1979.' The original monastery measured out by Carolingian monks was reconstructed in 1657 by Roger de la Valfenière. See also Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni: La Robe, Essai psychanalytique sur le vêtement, Paris, Le Seuil, 1983, pp 141-2. 'Mesurages' took place at the Guggenheim Museum, New York in 1983, and again at the Pompidou Centre in 1984.

xxii. Orlan in collaboration with Hubert Besacier, for the 'Mesurages' symposium, 1979 (my translation slightly modifies the original).

xxiii. Live Art and Performance Festival, Cladhas da Rainha, Portugal, July 1981.

xxiv. See Francette Pacteau's interpretation of Melanie Klein in conjunction with the poetic 'beau tetin' as the first 'blason anatomique' in courtly love poetry, The Symptom of Beauty, op. cit., pp 65-7, and Dominique Gilbert Laporte: 'A une Amazone...' Orlan / Lea Lublin Histoires Saintes de L'Art, Lacertidé, Cergy, 1985.

xxv. A contemporary passion: Gaetan de Clerambault's photographs have figured recently both in Jean Clair's Venice Biennale centenary exhibition 'Identita / Alterita', 1995, and in Féminin-Masculin, Le Sexe de l'Art', Centre Georges Pompidou, 1995.

xxvi. Eugénie Lemoine Luccioni, La Robe, op. cit., p 95; p 122-3 for the transexuality of saints, citing Louis Réau, Iconographie de l'Art Chrétien, Paris, PUF, 1959, (of course the mythicising of gender differentiation is at the root of the Old Testament Genesis and subsequently the Kabbalah). See also Chapter XI, 'Orlan', pp 133-145. Quotation translated by Carol Ducker, op. cit., p 8.

xxvii. See Didier Anzieu: The Skin Ego, Yale University Press, London and Newhaven, 1989.

xxviii. Compare the five elements with the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis's portrait of the legendary Helena - based on the most beautiful parts of five selected virgins...

xxix. 'Joel Savary: 'Sainte Orlan, Symptôme et éventail' in Les vingt ans de Pub et de Ciné de Sainte Orlan, Centre d'Art Contemporain de Basse Normandie, p 19.

xxx. See Chéri's Bloc, nine photographs of 1986 reproduced in Les Vingt Ans de Pub et de Ciné... op. cit., p 23. Orlan is painted, sports feathers and a special costume, her flesh is marked up for surgical cuts like a piece of butchery; as she lies on an operating block; her feathered headress becomes replaced by a garish mask, like Boiffard's fetishised photos reproduced in the periodical Documents of the late 1920s.

xxxi. Dr Cherif Zahar described the first three operations in Bétuel-Fiebig: 'Orlan or lent' and 'Document: Texte pour l'Operation d'Orlan' in VST, Revue Scientifique et Culturelle de Santé Mentale, no 23-24, Sept-Dec, 1991 - a cross-disciplinary psychoanalytic study completely dedicated to Orlan.

xxxii. Translation as text appears (capitalised), in part on relic.

xxxiii. Barbara Rose: 'Is is Art? Orlan and the Transgressive Act,' Art in America, February, 1993, pp 82-87, 125.

xxxiv. Moses is conventionally represented with ray-giving, sacred 'horns.'

xxxv. Precise details of Orlan's nine operations (and a tenth corrective operation that took place in Paris to remove a cheek implant) the respective decors and outcome in terms of exhibitable materials - often confused in previous accounts, have been prepared by the artist with a view to her major forthcoming retrospective exhibition in Cleveland, Ohio.

xxxvi. See Keith Grint and Rosalind Gill eds., The Gender-Technology Relation, London Taylor and Francis, 1995 with extensive bibliography, and Rachel Armstrong: 'Post-human evolution' Artifice no 2, London, 1995, pp 53-63. For the history and genealogy of the 'machine célibataire' in twentieth century art (Jarry, Ernst, Duchamp, Fritz Lang etc.) see Les Machines Célibataires, Paris, Musée des Arts Decoratifs, 1967.

xxxvii. See Ann Price's excellent essay on Orlan's 'primal attack on "ocular desire" ', her precursor Georges Bataille etc, 'Orlan', Artifice op.cit., pp 44-51.

xxxviii. See Positionen zum ich. Kamerabilder, Kunsthalle, Kiel, 1994 and Suture - Phantasmen der Vollkommenheit, Salzburger Kunstverein, 1994.

xxxix. Besides the work of Parveen Adams, see also Silvia Eiblmayr: 'Suture: Fantasies of Totality' in Suture - Phantasmen de Vollkommenheit op. cit., pp 3-16, together with the extract from Kaja Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1983, op. cit., pp 40-42, which refers to Jacqueline Rose: 'Paranoia and the film system' Screen, vol. XVII, no 4, 1976-7 and Jacques-Alain Miller 'Suture - (elements of the logic of the signifier), Screen, Vol XVIII, no 4, 1977/78.

xl. 'Orlan-Conférence' translated by Carol Ducker, op. cit., pp 9 -10.

xli. Mise en scène pour un grand Fiat, 1984, in Orlan. Art Accès Revue, (retrosepctive

of Orlan's Minitel review), Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam exhibition brochure, June, 1987.