

## ORLAN ALTERMODERN

'Orlan: archipelago' *Orlan*, Simon Donger and Orlan eds. Routledge (heavily edited).

Can we grasp a history which transforms itself so quickly, which holds the stage through its very changes and spectacles – and an underlying history that is silent, certainly discreet, almost unsuspected by those involved - its witnesses and actors - and which persists valiantly against the obstinate usages of time?

Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée*[1]

Orlan was not born Orlan. Orlan created Orlan. In 2012, France celebrates the 1000th anniversary of Joan of Arc.<sup>1</sup> *Je suis une homme et un femme*, a man-woman, Orlan has notoriously declared. In her Issey Miyake costumes, with hair erect, glittering temple protrusions, extraordinary yellow glasses, perfect make-up, Orlan is well-armoured like her predecessor; she now rides on the crest of the altermodern.

Her life history is inscribed upon her body, a female body, a performance body; I suggest here that we pose her current achievements against a vision of Orlan through time, while investing her work in a new, recently-baptised 'altermodern' present. Another woman, another work of art springs to mind as I write: a female figure by Aristide Maillol, first exhibited at the Salon d'Automne in 1905 as simply *Woman*, then *La Pensée* (thought); finally known in all later versions as *La Méditerranée*, the definitive formulation of a modern neo-classicism.[2] While everything that was 'mediterranean' in the Basque artist appeared in its quintessence in this ample female form, and *La Méditerranée* haunted all Maillol's future production, his later female sculptures such as *The Mountain*, *The River* and *Harmony* created after 1937 were inspired by the body of Dina Vierny, his beautiful Jewish Russian emigré model. Vierny's origins were in fact the very antithesis of the geographical region Maillol's work was said to typify, with its age-old 'Latin' spirit.[3] Perfection was a hybrid.

And woman was a geography : politically unenfranchised, because evidently a space of nature, diffuse, oceanic. She belonged to the regime of the earth, not the vertical hierarchies of power, and was celebrated as such : from the beloved , the *fiancée* as closed garden, as sealed fountain in the biblical *Song of Solomon* (4 :12) to the mounds and valleys, the perfumed tender forests celebrated by the troubadours of *l'amour courtois* in France. To disrupt this mental and physical geography, to claim an equality – as the medieval poetess Christine de Pisan had done in the *Cité des Femmes* was to challenge the natural order of things. Orlan's career is but the latest turn of events inscribed within an immemorial time frame.

Orlan was born in Saint-Etienne, a city of arms, miners and industry not too far from Lyons, in 1947, nowhere near the Mediterranean. This was the very year that Fernand Braudel, a self-confessed man of the North, defended his thesis on the Mediterranean in Paris. Inspired by his teachers of the French 'Annales' school of history, *La Méditerranée* was a massive work which itself had more than a ten-year past when published in 1949.[4] It opted for the long perspective, *la longue durée*, in its consideration of a complex of seas, islands, peninsulas, shores and peoples. The Mediterranean , Braudel argued, meant a particular climate, vegetation, weather, that shaped a folklore and poetry, a particular and unifying cast of mind. This endured while geographical boundaries shifted, kingdoms rose and fell, the surfaces of land and sea were subject to seasons, storms and plagues, through time-scales calculated in reigns, years, months or days. The concept of the *longue durée* totally

challenged the narrow, event-based conventions of political history.

When Nicolas Bourriaud, the French curator of *Altermodern*, (Tate Britain, 2009), speaks of ‘a mutation of our perception in space and time in which history and geography operate a cross-fertilisation...’ he is speaking within a lineage of thought which goes back to that ground-breaking book. [5] Okwui Enwezor, also writing in *Altermodern*, explicitly cites Braudel in his complex discussion of modernities: ‘From *Grand* modernity to *petit* modernity; modernity as meta-language; the offshore, off-centre and procedures of relation; modernity, postcoloniality and sovereign subjectivity; supermodernity, andro-modernity, specious-modernity, aftermodern...’ So many modernities! Enwezor invites us to follow not only his curatorial and artistic voyages as gallery spectators or catalogue readers– the armchair travellers of the artworld – but to become intellectual navigators, across time, across art histories.[6]

Orlan’s constant innovation, her career spanning so many countries, cities, museum spaces, galleries, hides a secret, like the Mediterranean sea itself – or like Maillol’s hybrid female sculptures. While each exhibition and each new catalogue marks a series of real and intellectual voyages, and a specific moment in her career, her autobiographical secret is always ‘cut’ from her work, and, significantly from the myriad responses, the myriad critical readings that the work produces. It is this ‘cut’, this refusal, that fascinated Jacques Derrida, when considering the paintings of one of the artists to whom he was close. He remarked upon the tension between narration and the interruption of narration ... and the secret, the paradox of a painting ‘cut’ from the artist which nonetheless retains its autobiographical origins: “we must think of these two motifs simultaneously, an absolute emancipation from the painted object, and the autobiographical secret, the secret anecdote which it contains” . [7] Orlan’s case complicates this notion when the the body and the artwork are paradoxically identical. Orlan prostrate, adorned, tattooed for liposuction or surgery, half bondage-doll, half Odalisque, is also the artist and the master of her fate; she holds the stage through the very changes of her body and persona, through the spectacles she orchestrates, their products and residues in videos, photographs, sculptural reliquaries or Veronica’s veils. All announce ‘I was here’; ‘I change yet I am the same’; ‘This is my body.’ While as spectators we witness her virtual martyrology, we know that her operations on flesh and spirit are both real and metonymic. The compulsion for metamorphosis persists; Orlan aims not at the ideal itself, but the interrogation of the ideal; hers is a quest through multiple disguises, as meaning seeks itself in a terrifying *mise-en-abyme*. It is Orlan who, in her most famous operation-performances challenged the beauty problem, and with a shocking literalism insisted upon the knife. Once I wrote ‘the postmodern body is above all a text; yet Orlan cuts through her own skin, submits to the knife to create that text’.[8] We now might ask whether the literal ‘cuts’ upon Orlan’s body are the inscription of the refusal to deliver up her secret.... Derrida continues: ‘It is in the relationship between the secret and the symbolic that the links must be sought between the autobiographical and the other, the most secret autobiographical narration to others, the body of all possible readings, to create a pact with the community and with that ‘popularity’ we were speaking of.’[9]

One of the first phases of Orlan's self-transfiguration were the ‘citation - situations’ performances in Lyons; a photographic fusing in projected images of her own body and Ingres’s *Odalique* took place: her aim, she said was ‘to steal the theatricality, the spectator’s gaze. .. to surpass the myth’. The imagery of self-dispossession, of battle, of hardness and an unyielding struggle is striking:

‘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.

Orlan's incarnation as 'Saint', in its satire and postmodern irony was also competitive, battling, Promethean in the explicit act of theft, in the desire to seize the very trope of Incarnation from Christ, to fuse the divine with the erotic, break the taboo of separation between the sacred and profane -- the male as 'sacred', the female as 'profane'. Self-exultation is the principle (not a love-affair with Christ) in her appropriation of Saint Teresa's billowing, ecstatic folds, for the performance 'Drapery - the Baroque', at the Palazzo Grassi, Venice in 1979. Self-exultation nonetheless requires courage: to perform the exception, the condition of scapegoat, the female equivalent of *homo sacer*, at once parodic and redemptive. [10] It was an act on behalf of an 'unliberated' womankind of 1979; for those who lacked her courage, her desire, her braving of spectacle. And Orlan can take the charge of bathos – indeed she is a master of bathos, particularly in baroque mode - -with the smile which signals both the power of female laughter, and proximity to her contemporary, Hélène Cixous, whose 'Laughter of the Medusa' was first published in Paris in 1975.

But let us think of the past. Orlan began her career in her home town 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, for French feminism was organised on militant marxist and separatist lines. This is where Orlan's placards *Je suis une homme et un femme* were first shown; they asserted the shifting possibilities of an unstable gender. Orlan's engagement with feminism - and its lamentable failure in France - together with her own psychoanalysis are evidently quintessential for her work. She dismisses psychoanalysis now as she dismisses Catholicism: 'These are primitive, ancestral and anachronistic ideas.' [11]

I would argue that a Catholic analysis of Orlan's psyche within a *longue durée* might yield rich results. Concerning psychoanalysis, the secular, feminist advocates of the discipline as a tool to penetrate her psyche have relished Orlan's body, her operations, her incisions, her liposuctions even, her voice (it has changed), her dress via Christine Buci-Gluckmann's 'Baroque', via Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni's *La Robe...* The whole performative *oeuvre*, Orlan as Odalique, Orlan as *Medusa* with exposed and painted vagina – all has served as 'couch material' for psychoanalytic critiques. Yet the voice from the couch in classical psychoanalysis is always subject to another's mastery. Have these female analysts come any closer to her secret? Orlan will have none of it; she continues to fascinate.

Orlan's pact with an international community is now decades-long. She has accepted the challenge constantly to renew herself: the 'harlequin's coat' is not only a recent adventure (*Fact*, 2007) but the metaphor for her work. Where is the real Orlan beneath her multifarious disguises? Michel Serre's well-known quotation from *the Troubadour of knowledge* 'What could the running, tattooed monster – ambidextrous, hermaphrodite and crossbred – show us

now, beneath its skin?' in fact involves a horrific strip-tease, and functions as a metaphor for Secularism itself. The *dénouement*, going further even than the Emperor with no clothes, is to strip down to 'blood and flesh'. But the secret is retained: the Question, as we know from Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* is transcendent. And so is the answer: beyond any knife, indeed beyond any 'blood and flesh', scraped cell or petri-dish mess, whatever the experiment at the cutting edge of science - the hybrid fetus and marsupial cells mingled with Orlan's own for the *Harlequin's Coat* at *Sk-interfaces* (Liverpool, FACT, 2008).[12] Woman as harlequin, a chameleon body, as monster, engendering mother, vagina dentata, Eve fused with Serpent.[13] Orlan's theatre of monstrosity links to her being, as both anachronistic and a sign of the future. As Derrida said, 'The future cannot be anticipated except in the form of absolute danger. It is what breaks absolutely with what constitutes normality, and can only begin to form, to present itself under the aspect of monstrosity.'[14] Etymologically, 'monstrare' means not only to show (*montrer* in French) but to warn, (*teras*). [15]

Perhaps this why the exhibition *Altermodern* (Tate, 2009) is also monstrous; not merely a curatorial, transgeographical mayhem, cautioned by the pathos of a W. G Seebald or a Gustav Metzger, but full of presages whose material realisation seem overfamiliar : from Nathaniel Mellor's Rabelaisian, prosthetic *Giantbum* heads, Marcus Coates's balloon-headed *Sea Mammal* and hybrid-costumed *Firebird, Rhebok, Badger and Hare* to Franz Ackermann's pan-geographical 'mental-map' multicolour installations . Surely we have been here before? Or do they signify something beyond the visible? The divisions of museum space, white box and black box, the odd curve, with their all too material contents, seem like bathetic residues, in contrast with the curatorial and artistic adventures described: Darren Almond chasing the full moon in Huangshan, Okwui Enwezor chasing 'modernity as a metalanguage' across 'cities like Seoul, Busan, Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Hangzhou,Guangzhou, Hon Kong and Taipei etc.,....' or Nicolas Bourriaud chasing 'the space-time circumscribed by the *oeuvre* of a new generation of artists' tangled in a Moebius loop – his metaphor ( a loop which links back to itself, astonishing, multi- yet one-dimensional?) . Speed versus stasis – global politics versus the individual artist; space-time versus lifetime: the spectacular exhibition that marks but a[16] moment – the 'altermodern' moment, within the *longue durée*. Art is long, but life is short.

Orlan, now. Progresssively so much work has been retrieved and shown from her archives: I know Orlan, too, in a loop, and both forwards and backwards – over time from 1995, and backwards from the present, as new retrospectives reveal more and more of her past. I recall Orlan's recovery photos in *Hors-Limites*, at the Centre Pompidou in 1994; her magic performance, a decapitated speaking head on a table at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1996. Her *Self-Hybridation* piece on blue ground of 1998 (Orlan but not Orlan and a long, pre-Columbian / Mexican story of sculptures and of priests wearing the skin of sacrificial victims ) in the East Wing Collection at the Courtauld Institute; the hybridized Orlan-mannequin standing naked, with pricked skin decorations in *Partage d'Exotismes*, at the Lyons Biennale of 2001: Orlan in 'white' version and in 'black' version, literally being, fusing with the elusive 'Other'; confronting the essentially hybrid 'Other' of Anglo-American 'theory'.... Orlan's continual challenges to 'our' political correctness forces us back on ourselves, on a 'we', an intellectual, a feminist community that is ill-defined; the perfect sparring partner.

More memories: the *Luminous box* with pulsating walls in the Palais de Tokyo – a new frame for her operation photos and texts; the FIAC anniversary reconstruction of the *Baiser de l'Artiste*, 1977, as a complete installation with candles and lilies – alas not with Orlan kissing – at he FIAC art fair in 2007 at the Porte de Versailles. I recall the strong impression made by the small-scale black and white earliest performance photographs, *Corps-sculptures* from as early as 1964, with Orlan's young body massively *risqué*, contorted, masked, copulating with

the god Shiva, shown at the Centre Nationale de Photographie in Paris in 2004; the whole run of photographs with sperm-splashed material in embroidery frame, shown as the nine-piece *Embroidered Dissipations* 1968, at her sixtieth birthday retrospective in Saint-Etienne in 2008 and the photos there of Orlan 'selling herself in pieces' - photographed body parts, pegged and priced, in the Caldas de Raihna market in Portugal in 1976. These early, unknown works were shown together with the harlequin display of costumes and clothes from every period, making a gaudy carnaval of the notoriously cold, white, modernist museum. Orlan as carnaval: the festival preceding the goodbye to the flesh and its pleasures: Bakhtinian, polyphonic indeed, but also a spiritual moment linked to seasonal death and resurrection before spring,

Orlan, then, seen from the long perspective, the *longue durée*, is particularly French, true offspring of *La pucelle*, Joan of Arc: Orleans - the maid, and Orlando, the man, Saint Orlan, the transexual saint. Orlan: her sonorous name 'Or-longue' suggest gold that lasts, a rich vein opened that runs deep into art, into the past. A woman whose body bears the long history of her years and her operations, painted, coiffed, clothed in and multitudinous disguises. She holds the secret – but possesses, like her predecessor, an indomitable will – a will to change, to travel, to explore new territories, new media; above all a will never to divulge.

Orlan, altermodern: *femina viatrix* rather than Bourriaud's universalist *homo viator*.<sup>[17]</sup> Nomad, *transporteuse* of signs, exchange-based in all her experiments (what else is a kiss?) and her operations of all sorts that have always required teams of participators, so often working cross-nationally. 'And just as alterglobalisation does not seek cumulative solutions to the steamrolling effect of economic globalisation – rather a concatenation of singular responses within models of sustainable development – altermodern has no desire to substitute for postmodern relativism a new universalism, rather a networked 'archipelago' form of modernity.'

Orlan, *Méditerranée*; sea and shore and archipelago.

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[1] Fernand Braudel, preface to the second edition (written 1963), *La méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen, à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1966, p. 12.

[2] See Dina Vierny, *Maillol: La Méditerranée*, Les dossiers du musée d'Orsay 04, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1986.

[3] The splendid. Dina Vierny, originator of the Musée Maillol- Fondation Dina Vierny in Paris died on January 20th, 2008.

[4] Braudel's *La méditerranée...* was first published in 1949; see *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, abridged by Richard Ollard, London Harper Collins, 1995

- [5] Nicolas Bourriaud in Bourriaud ed., *Altermodern*, London, Tate Publishing, 2009, np.
- [6] Okwui Enwezor, 'Modernity and postcolonial ambivalence', *ibid.*, np.
- [7] Derrida in 'L'Atelier de Valerio Adami. Le tableau est avant tout un système de mémoire' (Armelle Auris ed.), *Rue Descartes*, 4, 1992, p. 152-3, (my translation).
- [8] Sarah Wilson, 'L'Histoire d'O, Sacred and Profane', *Orlan*, London, Black Dog Publishing, 1996, pp. 8-17.
- [9] Derrida, *op. cit.*
- [10] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (1995), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998.
- [11] 'Orlan: Conférence', translated by Carol Ducker for *Women's Art Magazine*, May-June, 1995, p 9.
- [12] See Michel Serres, 'Secularism', preface, *The Troubadour of Knowledge (Le Tiers instruit*, Paris, 1992); Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997, with Orlan, 'Harlequin Coat' in Jens Hauser ed., *Sk-interfaces, Exploding Borders – Creating Membranes in Art, Technology and Society*, FACT and Liverpool University Press, pp. 83-89.
- [13] See Mariotto Albertinelli, *The Creation*, c. 1513-15 (with Serpent-Eve), London, Courtauld Institute Galleries. See also Sarah Wilson 'Orlan-Chimère: la belle dame sans merci', *Arts de chair*, ed. Daniel van der Gucht, *La Lettre Volée*, Brussels, 1998, pp. 99-105.
- [14] Jacques Derrida: *De la Grammatologie*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1967, p. 14.
- [15] 'Monstra, ostenta, portenta, prodigia appeluntur quoniam monstrant, portendunt et preodicunt' Cicero, *De divinatione* in Gilbert Lascault: *Le Monstre dans l'Art occidental*, Paris, Editions Klincksieck, 1973.
- [16] Jean-Hubert Martin's *Partage d'exotismes*, Biennale de Lyon, 2001, marking an essential stage between *Magiciens de la Terre* and *Altermodern*, received little critical attention in the English-language press. See Andrew Budge, 'Reviews', *Third Text*, vol 16 no 1, 2002, pp. 87-102.
- [17] Dr Peter Stewart warns the author (20/2/09) 'viatrix seems unattested in antiquity except as a name... *homo viator* can happily cover a woman, unless you want to emphasis her femininity'. I do! (Herein lies the problem of Republicanism in France...)

