BETWEEN THE FOLLY AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SEEING:
ORLAN, RECLAIMING THE GAZE

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ABSTRACT

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The female body is ubiquitous throughout Western art history, in various stages of dress and undress, and more often than not displayed in such a way as to bring pleasure to a male viewer. This male gaze objectifies women, projects standards of beauty and femininity and negates an individual identity by replacing it with its own assumptions. Though there have been female subjects throughout art history, by both male and female artists, who through posture, facial expression, or even textual communication have expressed recognition of and resistance to this gaze, it is the French artist Orlan who has provided one of its most striking and effective critiques. In her best-known and most controversial series, *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, Orlan continued to explore themes present throughout her early performance and photographic work and evident in her subsequent *Self Hybridizations* series, as, through plastic surgery, she appropriated the facial features of various Western art historical beauties. Orlan not only orchestrated the surgeries, designed the costumes and decorated the operating theater, but by undergoing only local, rather than general, anesthesia, was herself an active participant in the events, in the ambitious seventh surgery, entitled *Omnipresence*, even interacting with audience members around the world via live satellite feed.

Orlan’s critique of the gaze is unprecedented because not only does she herself become the art object, giving the formerly silent female subject of Western art history physical eyes to return the gaze, but because her use of her body awakens a visceral, empathic reaction in her viewers. From this position, she interrogates and reclaims the way that the male gaze has positioned women, on the four specific levels of objecthood,
femininity, beauty, and identity. Whereas the male gaze objectifies women, Orlan has intentionally turned her body into a work of resistant art. Orlan reclaims what it means to be feminine from a male gaze that equates femininity with passivity, and firmly rejects male-imposed standards of a single, ideal beauty. Finally, Orlan’s work challenges notions of a fixed identity, embracing fluidity and causing viewers to consider the relationship between their own exterior and interior selves.
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INTRODUCTION

An unseen overhead light source illuminates the woman’s forehead, nose, and cheeks, and her lashes, thickened with mascara, cast fringed shadows. Her delicately shaped brows arch slightly above eyes smudged with smoky liner. Despite her languorous, reclining pose, her eyes are wide and her gaze alert and direct. Lines trace the contours of the woman’s face: purple circles over her cheekbones, dots at the corners of her mouth, gentle curves along her nasolabial folds. The hair framing her face is indigo on one side, yellow on the other, and the curls at her left temple are stained and stiffened with blood. Her lip, curled back from her teeth in a whimsical smile, is pierced with a thick, long needle that enters at the bow and exits at the corner, leaving the surrounding flesh puffy and swollen. This is an anesthetizing syringe; the woman is undergoing surgery (figure 1).

The woman is French performance artist Orlan, whose unconventional artwork has been defying convention and provoking audience reaction since she was just a teenager in the 1960s. Throughout her oeuvre, she has explored notions of identity, femininity, and beauty in ways that have pushed the boundaries of art to the extremes, and has elicited debate from a wide and interdisciplinary range of scholars. Her use of symbolic objects, such as the sheets from her trousseau or crosses and other icons of Christianity, has been provocative, but it is her use of the

Figure 1. Orlan. Seventh Surgery-Performance, titled Omnipresence, New York. November 21, 1993.
object considered perhaps the most sacred—her own body—that has prompted the greatest reaction. In a series of performances in which the operating room became the studio, plastic surgery the method, and her own flesh the medium, she directly confronted ideas of beauty, femininity, and identity in the Western art historical tradition through her appropriation of the features of various paintings of idealized feminine pulchritude. This provocative series, *La Reincarnation de Sainte-Orlan*, along with her more recent *Self-Hybridations* series, which involves the digital manipulation of her photographic image rather than her own facial tissue, most clearly embodies a theme present throughout her oeuvre: a critique of the powerful, gendered gaze of Western art history.

Orlan recognizes this gaze, and utilizes her own body and image to confront the traditional ideas of spectatorship, ownership, and objectification inherent therein. She challenges its fundamental assumptions of the female body and women’s identity, questioning the rigidity of concepts such as femininity, beauty, and identity and responding with her own quintessentially postmodern critique. In this paper, I propose that Orlan’s unconventional artwork provides a uniquely effective critique of the standards traditionally imposed upon female bodies through the male gaze of Western art history, specifically interrogating the notions of a woman’s body as object and as site of femininity, beauty, and identity, in effect not only challenging, but even reclaiming, the gaze.
THE FEMALE BODY AND THE GAZE IN WESTERN ART HISTORY

Orlan’s body on the operating table, a needle through her lip, is the antithesis of most historical representations of the female in Western art history, or, for that matter, the airbrushed beauties ubiquitous in contemporary media. Her hair and skin are not polished and flawless, her eyes neither demurely downcast nor flirtatiously inviting. Her body, hidden beneath a black surgical gown, is not positioned for display or admiration. With her flesh pierced and prepared for impending incisions, she is actually difficult to look at.

It is not merely Orlan’s departures from the norms of representation that set her art apart, however, but her intentional embrace of and interaction with the male gaze of Western art history. The fact that her surgical work is difficult for the viewer to look at highlights the close connection between her work and looking, but it is a particular look, that of the dominant male reflected throughout Western art history, against which her work rebels.

The male gaze is a force that has shaped how women have been portrayed and perceived in Western art for centuries. It is not surprising that a society that for so many years limited women’s access to training, travel, and commissions would also control how women were represented, and that these representations would serve the needs and desires of the comparably more powerful men. Thus, women have been represented as beautiful and passively feminine, silent objects to be visually pleasing to a male audience and lacking a potentially offensive identity of their own.

British art historian John Berger proposes that this male gaze is identifiable in much of Western art, particularly in the treatment of the nude, through the presence of the (male) spectator. In particular, he defines the difference between “nudity” and “nakedness” as a factor of the spectator: “[The nude] is not naked as she is. She is naked as the spectator sees her” (50).
It is the judgments and interpretations of an unseen, but nonetheless present, spectator that define the female nude’s position, role, and status as an object to be looked at. Berger argues that the “principle protagonist,” the actor around whom all the action is centered, and the purpose of the painting’s creation, is never shown: the male spectator (54). The “image of the woman is designed to flatter him,” Berger writes, defending his assessment that these images were designed particularly to satisfy the male gaze with the assertion that if the myriad traditional female nudes in Western art history were converted to male ones, a “violence” would be done, “not to the image, but to the assumptions of a likely viewer” (64). That is, the shock felt by anyone viewing males, rather than females, in these traditional works, would reveal just how clearly the subjects must necessarily be women, styled for a specifically male spectator.

The dominance of the male gaze does not end with paintings of traditional Western nudes, however. Laura Mulvey suggested that the “male gaze” extends to contemporary cinema as well.¹ Women are a source of visual pleasure, or of beauty, in cinema, Mulvey proposes, but the enjoyment of that pleasure is divided unequally between what she sees as the active male gaze versus the passive female one. Ann Kaplan responded with her essay “Is the Gaze Male?” (1983), arguing that not only is the female gaze passive and the male one active, but that, “men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession that is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act on it” (121). In Kaplan’s view, therefore, a man’s gaze differs fundamentally from a woman’s because of the potential for action present behind it. Kaplan follows the question of whether the gaze “is necessarily male (i.e. for reasons inherent in the structure of language, the unconscious, all symbolic systems, and thereby all social structures)” with whether women could own the gaze; whether they would choose to, were such an act possible; and what it means to be a female spectator (130).

¹ “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975)
answers the title question of her essay by saying that at base “the gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the masculine position” (ibid). That is, though the gaze itself is not necessarily gendered, the position of being able to look, of wielding a gaze with power, is a particularly masculine one.2

Orlan, on the operating table, is confronting a gaze that exists not only in paintings of centuries-old nudes, but in the film and media of today. Rosalind Krauss sums up the dominance of this male gaze throughout Western art history well when she says, “Western art has been grounded on the figure of the woman standing for beauty, for nature, for truth, for eros; in short, the woman is a series of cultural abstractions pronounced through the medium of her mute body” (Krauss 1989). For centuries, that is, these women have been silent objects flattering to the male gaze and admired for their passive, feminine beauty, but lacking an identity of their own.

There have been exceptions, certainly, to this beautiful, passive stereotype. One thinks of the muscular violence of Artemesia Gentileschi’s empowered Judiths, or Manet’s Olympia, with her bold stare and unabashedly bare angles. Yet these women remain silent representations on a canvas, unable to speak for themselves. Feminist artists of recent decades, including Carolee Schneeman and Hannah Wilke, have used their own voices and bodies in revolt against the male gaze. Orlan’s, however, is a uniquely effective critique of the gaze because of her direct engagement with the models of ideal beauty in Western art history, her willingness to permanently alter her own body, and the visceral response that doing so elicits from her viewers, which in turn creates an increased awareness of the gaze as an act of looking.

2 In her book Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture (2005), Ariel Levy argues persuasively that in the post-feminist culture of the United States, women are faced with the option of being either an exaggerated, pin-up styled female, or of being a cartoon-like, leering male. That is, women may choose to be the objects of a society dominated by the male gaze, or may themselves participate in the gazing (by assuming the traditionally male position).
ORLAN’S OEUVRE

Orlan’s surgical performances, while arguably the best-known and most controversial of her oeuvre, are not without precedent in her earlier work. Rather, they are a continuation of the artist’s persistent interest in using her body to challenge norms and provoke conversation and debate. Orlan’s work has consistently focused on the ideas of beauty, identity, objecthood, and what it means to be a female in the art world, both as a creator and subject of art. These same ideas find expression in her surgical Reincarnation series. An examination of this earlier art helps to contextualize the later works.

Orlan was born in Saint-Etienne, France, on May 30, 1947, and given the name Mireille Suzanne Francette Porte (O’Bryan 23). According to Kate Ince, at the age of 15, the artist gave herself the name Orlan, which Ince relates to numerous potential associations, among them “‘Orlan-do the sex-changing hero(ine) or Virginia Woolf’s famous novel, Orlon the synthetic fibre, and the glossily advertised perfume Orlane” (1). Of her own birth and childhood, Orlan gives a mysterious, cryptic “poetic autobiography,” published on her Web site along with a “professional biography” to which she directs readers at the end of her own. Its jumbled text is hardly a literal or detailed account, or even a narrative, but does allude to themes significant in her work, tying them to her earliest experiences. It begins,

1947 Dripping, supersonic plane, Jean Cassou opens the Musée d’Art Moderne de la ville de paris, Action painting.... “the diable au corps comes out” : Birth of Orlan.... Transistors, lenses, breaking the sonic barrier, 47 beginning of life-risk of dying. Heat struck like an infant, refusal of extreme unction bath in freezing water ‘I chose freedom’ (Kravenchenko), no baptism...

Here she hints at the religious imagery of baptism (“no baptism” may help put into perspective her later baptism of herself as Saint Orlan) and “the life-risk of dying,” a risk that prompted her first surgery and inspired the later surgical performances. She goes on to describe her father as an

3 http://www.orlan.net//
“esperantist anti-priest, anarchist, libertarian, resistant; into electricity, rides a tandem with the mother behind him, pedaling hard...” and her mother, “the mother is a mother sews blouses from time to time/Both nudists in the camps.” Orlan would incorporate textiles and sewing into her own art, some of which has been read as an expression of her conflict with her more traditional mother.

Orlan began her artistic career when she was just a teenager in the early 1960s. The first photo (figure 2) given by editors Caroline Cros, Vivian Rehberg, and Laurent Le Bon in their “Chronophotology” of Orlan’s work is one entitled Orlan accouche d’elle-m’aime (Orlan Gives Birth to Her Loved Self), the first of a series of black and white studio photographs ranging from 1964 through 1967. The artist sits on a surface covered by a white sheet, reclining slightly. One hand supports her face, while the other caresses the androgynous mannequin to whom she appears to give birth. The authors write, “This work, which inaugurated the series of nude studio photos, symbolically constituted an attempt to give birth to oneself, to invent a new identity for oneself. This giving birth to herself—the first violation of natural laws that Orlan presented to the public4—followed her adoption of a new name, a nom de guerre: Orlan” (9). Subsequent photographs show the artist nude, in elaborate poses, and in later works accompanied by masks or by a large frame out

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4 This violation of natural laws would continue most notably with her surgical series, in which she would open the sealed vessel of the body, and dare to change her own appearance.
of which she emerges. In this series, Orlan’s young body can certainly be considered beautiful, but her strange, tangled poses and eccentric props suggest an interest, even in this very early work, of moving beyond traditional ideas of beauty.

Other later works included photography by itself or as the record of performances, and Orlan returned repeatedly to the sheets of her trousseau, “the fabric her mother had set aside for her married life,” works which “may be seen against the background of Orlan’s conflictual relationship with her mother, which became particularly fraught as her daughter reached the age at which she might have been expected to marry and ‘settle down’” (Ince 12). The sheets became a symbol of the domesticity—and implied passivity—that Orlan rejected, and subverted in her use of the politicized fabric. These linens were stained with semen, which was then carefully marked and embroidered to highlight it. They were used to form the flowing drapery and head covering of a Madonna or saint which was subsequently removed, in the series Strip-tease occasionnel à l’aide des draps du trousseau (Incidental Strip-Tease Using Sheets from the Trousseau), 1974-1975.

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5 It is interesting to note that “in 1964 the average age at which women in France got married was 22.8 years,” and that not until a new marriage law was enacted in 1965 did a married woman “have full rights over her property, and... was also allowed to administer the household and education of the children” (Laubier 48). Orlan was coming of age in a time of transition for French women, and defining herself as independent of the traditions of her mother’s generation.
du trousseau (Incidental Strip-Tease Using Sheets from the Trousseau) (figure 3), progressing through “poses allowing her to play the role of various feminine myths” and culminating in the pose of Botticelli’s Venus. They also formed the garment in which she performed her MesuRages (Cros et. al 28), in which she measured traditionally male-dominated spaces including streets and institutions in “Orlan-corps,” or her own body-lengths.

Orlan’s color photography from the 1980s and 1990s demonstrates the degree to which she has been interacting with the male gaze of Western art history throughout her oeuvre. One of her lesser-known works is Origine de la Guerre (Origin of War) of 1989 (figure 4). This piece, a “photo-montaged fragment of a man (actor Jean Christophe Bouvet)” (ibid 104) is a direct quotation (and confrontation) of Gustave Courbet’s 1866 L’Origine du Monde (The Origin of the World) (figure 5). The latter, which now hangs in the Musée d’Orsay, features a close-up view of a woman’s spread legs and genitals. Orlan’s, a photograph taken by Georges Merguerditchian, mirrors the original in composition, scale, and tone, but substitutes a man’s body, complete with
erect phallus, in the place of the female of Courbet’s original. One cannot be sure whether spectators experience the “violence” Berger predicted for viewers of a masculine substitute for the traditional female nude, but the effect is undoubtedly striking, especially given the dominance of female, rather than male, nudes in Western painting.

In her 1990 series of photographs entitled *Peau d’âne (Donkey Skin)*, Orlan poses in front of brightly-colored solid backgrounds, alternately topless and in elaborate costume. She wears a hat, ranging from a pair of donkey ears to a bishop’s miter, in each. Jill O’Bryan explains that the title references a popular French fairytale by Charles Perrault, in which a beautiful young princess is forced to escape her stepfather’s kingdom to avoid becoming his bride, wearing the skin of his slain prized donkey to make her getaway and disguise her beauty thereafter. As O’Bryan points, this “mirrors a few motifs articulated in *La Reincarnation de Sainte-Orlan*: beauty and ugliness; and the idea that molding one’s own skin means shaping one’s destiny” (9).

Identity again comes into play in Orlan’s series *Drapery and Baroque*, which continues themes explored in *Strip-tease*, and expands on them using performances, photography, video work, sculpture, and installations. In this series, Orlan presents herself both as Saint-Orlan or the white virgin, with flowing white drapery exposing one breast; and as the Black Virgin, portrayed holding accessories including both crosses and toy guns. The main performance of this series

![Figure 6. Orlan, Le Drapé-le Baroque, performance, 1979.](image-url)
(figure 6) has been done in many locations in Italy and France, and always “followed a precise ritual” (Kerejeta 214). The performance, all in “slow motion,” and what Orlan calls “an enfolding and unfurling,” (Orlan, Speech 219) begins with a procession, in which Orlan, her face and breasts painted white, and wrapped in a gown which assistants can cause to “roll and flow,” is borne in, transferred to a plank, and then rises and spins, unfurling the drapery from her face and from the bundle in her arms. When unwrapped, the bundle is revealed to be a loaf of bread, red inside and with a blue crust, which she then eats before baring her breasts and crawling onto a red carpet into which she is subsequently rolled and carried away (Cros et al. 63-4). Comparing this series of Orlan as virgin-saint with her earlier works involving the stained trousseau sheets, or the performance *Le Baiser de l’artiste* (The Kiss of the Artist) (figure 7), which highlighted the commodification of art and artist in a distinctly sexual manner, Cros et al. write, “In short, and not without irony, Orlan played the binary roles of whore and virgin (both of which are negations of the maternal) in order to deconstruct them” (85). They note that she was “raised without religious instruction” (ibid), and Orlan’s “Carnal Art” *Manifesto* of the next decade has as one of its tenants atheism; yet Orlan states, “I have worked for twenty years on Judeo-Christian and baroque religious iconography, using my body and my image, which I love a great deal” (219). According to the authors, “her interest in the Baroque
aesthetic was not motivated by provocation,” but rather “offered a context for exploring how art uses imitation and artifice to solicit the senses, and provided a means to testing art’s capacity to suggest what lies beneath the surface of things” (85-6). Orlan would take this exploration of what lies beneath the surface to a new level with her surgical series of the 1990s.

Orlan’s work with photography and performance shows a clear engagement with the male gaze, but she gives her most compelling critique thereof in her series *La Reincarnation de Sainte-Orlan*. It was an experience of “the life-risk of dying” that Orlan mentions in her poetic autobiography that prompted her work with surgery. Orlan was in Lyon at a performance symposium “she had been organizing for five years... [when] she was rushed to the hospital because of an extrauterine pregnancy” (O’Bryan 13). The artist explains, “I had to be operated on urgently: my body was a sick body that suddenly needed attention. I decided to make the most of this new adventure by turning the situation in on itself, by considering life an aesthetically recuperable phenomenon: I had a camera and video and the photographs were shown as if had been a planned performance.” She alludes to this risk of dying when she continues, “Being operated on is beyond the frivolous and this experience was very intense.” Nevertheless, she continues, “I was certain that one day, somehow, I would work again with
surgery” (Kerejeta 219). Surgery became her most controversial medium, enabling Orlan to challenge and reclaim the gaze on a level that to that point had been unexplored.

In the *Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* (1990-1993), the artist takes the notion of exploring “what lies beneath the surface of things” in a different direction, changing the surface to reflect the inside. She is the first artist to employ plastic surgery as an art form, and has undergone a series of nine surgeries—all of them carefully designed, orchestrated, and filmed—to appropriate the facial features of five famous art-historical beauties. Since she uses local, rather than general, anesthetic, she is a relatively active participant in the surgeries, adding what Michelle Hirschhorn calls a “during” to the traditional “before” and “after” of surgery (117). According to Jill O’Bryan, “La Reincarnation de Sainte-Orlan began on May 30, 1990, Orlan’s forty-third birthday, when she exhibited *Imaginary Generic: Successful Operations* at the Newcastle Festival in All Saints’ Church, Newcastle, England” (14). The plan called for a series of surgeries that would ultimately give Orlan (figures 8-12) “the chin of Sandro Botticelli’s Venus in *The Birth of Venus* (ca. 1480), the nose of Francois Pascal Simon Gerard’s Psyche in *Le premier baiser de l’amour a Psyche* (ca. 1820), the eyes of Diana in the anonymous school-of-Fontainebleau sculpture *Diane chasseresse*, the lips of Gustave Moreau’s Europa in *L’enlevement d’Europe* (ca. 1876) and the
brow of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503-5)” (ibid). Yet the goal of these surgeries was not to produce a unified, aesthetically pleasing, gestalt, but rather to draw attention to received Western notions of beauty and femininity. Of her choices, Orlan makes it clear that it is not her goal to resemble any of the beauties whose features she is appropriating. Rather, here she explains why she chose each model for her history:

Diana was chosen because she is insubordinate to gods and men; because she is active, even aggressive, because she leads a group. Mona Lisa, a beacon character in the history of art, was chosen as a reference point because she is not beautiful according to present standards of beauty, because there is some “man” under this woman. We now know it to be the self-portrait of Leonardo Da Vinci that hides under that of La Gioconda (which brings us back to an identity problem). Psyche because she is the antipode of Diana, invoking all that is fragile and vulnerable in us. Venus for embodying carnal beauty, just as Psyche embodies the beauty of the soul. Europa because she is swept away by adventure and looks toward the horizon. (Orlan, *Intervention* 319-20)

Orlan says, “These representations of feminine personages have served as inspiration to me and are there deep beneath my work in a symbolic manner. In this way, their images can resurface in works that I produce, with regard to their histories” (Orlan 220).

O’Bryan writes that the first performance, *Art Charnel*, took place two months after the announcement in Newcastle, on July 21, 1990, and that fat from the surgeries, which consisted of liposuction of the face and thighs, was sealed into limb-shaped reliquaries. The surgeon, Chérife Kamel Zaar, “protested the excessive decor and documentary equipment” of the first surgery, so at the following surgery, on July 27 of the same year, only one photographer was present. For the third performance, the “increasingly problematic” Zaar insisted on general, rather than local,
anesthesia, for the operations to retouch the faces and eyelids and to liposuction the legs and ankles. Zaar was replaced by a Dr. Bernard Cormette de Saint-Cyr for the December 1991 surgical performance *Opération réussie* (Successful Operation), in which Orlan’s lips were embellished. *Cloak of Harlequin* (figure 13) was performed on July 6, 1991 and the fat from Orlan’s thighs and feet was once again placed into reliquaries; the sixth performance, held the next February, consisted of liposuction from the face and belly. The seventh performance (figure 14), with feminist surgeon Dr. Marjorie Cramer, *Omnipresence*, was the most ambitious; it included inserting cheekbone, chin, and forehead implants, and was filmed by CBS and broadcast live from New York to multiple galleries and museums around the world. An eighth touch-up surgery followed a week later, and a ninth for reliquary-fat gathering and touch-ups occurred in 1993 (15-16).
Finally, Orlan’s more recent series *Self-Hybridations* (1999-2002) also explores notions of beauty, although in this case the critique of Western beauty is not achieved through comparison with Western ideals, but rather with those from Pre-Columbian and African societies. These beauty ideals Orlan collects from images of Pre-Columbian sculpture and masks (figure 15), as well as African masks and faces (figure 16), combining them digitally with images of her own face. Orlan views these works as continuation of her surgical work, just as the surgical work followed what preceded it (Ayers 176). As Peg Zeglin Brand writes of the *Self-Hybridations Precolombiennes*, “The guiding role played by feminine beauty in *Reincarnation* is replaced by genderless norms of beauty in *Self-Hybridation*: norms held by both men and women as well as by members of various classes within the ancient Olmec and Maya civilizations... To our eyes, she does not look beautiful. Yet she brings to our attention the power of beauty to emerge and operate within a culture, even one so far removed from our own” (291). The stylizations and deformations of another culture’s representation of beauty cause the thoughtful observer to
consider the stylizations and deformations in Western beauty. Interestingly, Orlan’s own earlier
performances highlight the extreme and invasive method through which some Western women
have sought to improve their appearances: plastic surgery.

Orlan’s work, from the earliest black and white self-portraits through her recent *Self-
Hybridations*, reveals a consistent challenge to the male gaze so dominant in Western art history.
Even as a teenager, she created self-portraits that rejected traditional standards of beauty and
femininity. In her *Drapery and Baroque* and *Donkey Skin* series, she explored notions of the
meaning of identity and how it might be changed by changing one’s appearance. In her
controversial *Reincarnation* surgical series, she pulled together these themes, herself becoming
the work of art in a way that allowed for her most effective interaction with and reclamation of
the male gaze.
RECLAIMING THE GAZE

It could be argued that most, if not all, visual artists are interested in attracting the public’s gaze—in having people look at their art. Orlan’s interaction with the gaze, however, is more complex than that of most artists, as in her case, part of her work is her own body. Like the proverbial “train wreck” from which one can’t look away, her work’s dramatic, visceral quality engages viewers in a unique and compelling manner not to be found in most painting or sculpture. Because in Orlan’s case the material of the work itself is the human body, common to each spectator who views her, there is a strong identification on a physical level. Orlan, aware of this, apologizes, “Sorry to have to make you suffer.” Later in the same speech she continues, “As my friend the French artist, Ben Vautier, would say, ‘Art is a dirty job but somebody’s got to do it.’ In fact, it is really my audience that hurt when they watch me and these images on video” (Orlan, *Speech* 219). Her work engages the gaze of viewers to the point where they may actually empathically feel the artist’s pain.

It is in part this unique involvement with the gaze that makes Orlan’s challenge of the male gaze in Western art history so effective. And, as she sees it, that challenge is central to all her work:

Art that interests me has much in common with-belongings to-resistance. It must challenge our preconceptions, disrupt our thoughts; it is outside the norms, outside the law, against bourgeois order; it is not there to cradle us, to reinforce our comfort, to serve up again what we already know. It must take risks, at the risk of not being immediately accepted or acceptable. It is deviant, and in itself a social project. Art can, art must change the world, it’s its only justification. (ibid)

A large part of what her work challenges and disrupts is the “tradition of using the female body to transport certain meanings that are different from those that can be articulated by the male body” (Zimmerman 28). Through the use of her own, female body, the historic site that has for centuries functioned as a “passive” surface for the dominant male gaze, and with which her
audience, themselves possessors of bodies, can identify, she demonstrates how pervasive, and limiting, this male gaze is.

Like the models in earlier paintings, Orlan is a female and an object of the gaze. Unlike a painted odalisque, however, she is not passive, but an active, controlling presence, rejecting traditional notions of femininity. Unlike a painted Venus, designed as a model of perfect beauty, her features, which she carefully selected, were not chosen to form an idealized gestalt. Unlike a reclining nude, devoid of an independent identity and existing simply to flatter her male viewer, she has her own identity, and resists the idea that her image (in a state of flux, through her operations and more recent digital transformations) would be able to adequately reflect it anyway. She is not the quiet, coy female of so much of Western art, and her very difference, her resistance of the gaze, indicates by comparison just how dominated by the male gaze so much of Western art history is. Through her work, Orlan challenges and returns the gaze on the levels of objecthood, femininity, beauty, and identity.

Reclaiming Objecthood

Orlan’s use of her body as the art object breaks several rules, most prominently addressing the objectification of women by the dominant male gaze of Western art history, but also the role of the object itself. In his 1965 essay “Specific Objects,” Donald Judd praises recent “minimalist” work that fits into the category of neither painting nor sculpture, which he calls “the new three-dimensional work” (824). He writes that being in “real space” frees art from the limits of painting, “get[ting] rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors—which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art” (827). In this new three-dimensionality, he says, “a work can be as powerful as it can be thought to be” (ibid). Robert Morris expands on that theme in his “Notes on Sculpture 1-
3” of 1966, noting the importance of size and scale in sculpture and how that affects the perception of the viewer, who understands the size of the object in relation to the size of his or her own body. He emphasizes this important interaction between the spectator and the object, writing, “it is just this distance between object and subject that creates a more extended situation, for physical participation becomes necessary” (831).

Yet Michael Fried famously rejects the viewpoints of Judd and Morris, returning with his own essay “Art and Objecthood” in 1967. He writes, “the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art” (838). He claims that “the success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre” and that “art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre” (843).

Orlan doesn’t fit easily into any of these theories concerning what the object should be. Although she exists in three dimensions, the question remains whether she is properly an “object.” And because she, as the work, is mobile, there is no fixed environment in which the viewer is to experience her. Though she comes from a performance tradition (including her slow-motion walks, mesuRages, and Le Drapé-le Baroque performances, in addition to her surgical ones), her modification of her own body has turned her into artwork as well as artist. As an artist/object that embraces the theatrical, she could hardly be more antithetical to the ideas of Fried.

Orlan confronts objecthood on another level when she addresses the historical objectification of women in Western art history. One of the effects the male gaze has upon women is to turn them into objects. As Berger states famously,

*Men act and women appear.* Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women
but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (47)

Berger reinforces that the gaze clearly exists, is necessarily male, whether directed by men or women, and it objectifies the women upon whom it rests. E. Ann Kaplan uses the language of psychoanalysis to describe how this process occurs in one form of Western art, film: “Feminist film critics have seen this phenomenon (clinically known as fetishism) operating in the cinema; the camera (unconsciously) fetishizes the female form, rendering it phallus-like so as to mitigate woman’s threat. Men, that is, turn ‘the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous’ (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star)” (121). That is, the woman portrayed is not fully human, with all the unpredictability, power, and therefore “danger” of a real person, but rather an object constructed for viewing and consumption. A woman on screen, as on canvas, is, as Berger claims, simply her image, with her identity defined by each spectator who views her.

Orlan, however, is not content to accept the status quo of women in Western art history as passive objects, commissioned, created, and enjoyed by men. She simultaneously embraces the object status of her own body—in *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* turning her flesh into the work of art itself—and allows the object to look back. On this transformation from artist into work of art, Olga Guinot writes,

Orlan is, above all, a living work of art created by someone who chose anonymity to explore the other side of the mirror. Just like Alice, she crossed the thin film which separates the real world from the imaginary and she herself became the artistic object.... Orlan will be the image, but also the material, the pigment and canvas. Artist, product, materials and result. At last, the physical barriers are eliminated and the circle closes. The extreme work of art has just been created, the absolute work of art, closed and complete. (204)
This decision to become “product, materials, and result,” a deliberate, carefully considered step for Orlan, follows logically from her earlier art, which drew from her photographed image if not her own tissue and blood, but does, as Guinot writes, mark a transition into an entirely different world of sorts.⁶

Orlan herself described her motivation to use her own body as her medium in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist:

I began thinking that, as a female artist, the main material and recording surface I had to hand was my body, which I had to reappropriate because I had been dispossessed of it, in a way, by dominant ideology. Because I was a woman, dominant ideology prevented me from living my personal life and my artistic life the way I wanted to live them. I thought working directly on the representation of my body—including its public representation—was much more interesting, much more problematic, and much more efficient politically—especially in those days—than hiding myself behind canvas and paint. (190)

As she explains in Orlan Conference, “I have always considered my woman’s body, my woman artist’s body, privileged material for the construction of my work. My work has always interrogated the status of the feminine body, via asocial pressures, those of the present or in the past” (Orlan, Speech 219). Orlan reclaims the female body from its passive status in Western art history, actively turning hers, as the art object itself, into a “site of public debate” (Obrist 199).

Reclaiming Femininity

In film critic Laura Mulvey’s view, although pleasure in cinema can be derived both from looking and from being looked at, there is not an even balance of power in the cinematic gaze. Rather, she argues, there is an “active/male and passive/female” split, in which men own and wield the gaze, and women are its passive recipients. “The determining male gaze projects its

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⁶ It is worth noting that Orlan was not the first artist to utilize her own body in her artwork, and that the “different world” being entered here is not entirely without precedent in the greater world of Western art. One thinks of the Viennese Action Artists and Americans Chris Burden and Carolee Schneeman, whose work centered around their bodies. What does differentiate Orlan’s work, however, is her strongly professed disavowal of pain, as well as the fact that the direct results of her performances—her own face and body—become the actual art object (an object that is, in turn, transformed into other objects of art through photography, digital manipulation, and even sculpture). She calls her art “Carnal Art” precisely to distinguish it from the aforementioned “Body Art.”
fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (40). Like Berger, Mulvey argues that women become objects (passive) onto which male fantasies (active) can be projected, once again anticipating an ideal male viewer. She identifies three particular looks in cinema—that of the camera, that of the viewing audience, and that of the characters within the film between each other—all designed to cater to the “neurotic needs of the male ego” (47) by reducing the threat that non-objectified women pose.

This equation of a the male gaze as active and the female gaze as passive passive/active is another assumption of the male gaze that Orlan turns on its head. As an artist, she has taken a decidedly active stance, whether measuring traditionally male institutions using her body or utilizing plastic surgery to determine her own facial features. Focusing on her own, feminine body, Orlan gives new meaning to the role of femininity in art history, from her challenging medium of plastic surgery to her dismissal of traditional feminine passivity. Her use of plastic surgery, a controversial, and decidedly active, medium, provides an even more emphatic challenge to the male gaze.

Plastic surgery is itself a gendered subject. It is, in the vast majority of cases, performed on women. In 2004, 83% of subjects of cosmetic surgical patients were women (American Society of Plastic Surgeons 1). However, for the same year, 88% of the plastic surgeons were men (American Medical Association 2004).7 Orlan herself says, “Cosmetic surgery is one of the sites in which man’s power over the body of woman can inscribe itself most strongly” (Orlan, *Intervention* 324). Feminist theoreticians have traditionally been skeptical of this gap.

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7 In 2004, *Physician Characteristics and Distribution in the U.S.* listed 6,075 male plastic surgeons and 777 female plastic surgeons.
questioning whether a woman’s option to undergo this sort of elective surgery is “liberating, oppressive, or both” (Friedling 127). Melissa Friedling writes that for feminists, this elective surgery has been interpreted within the framework of a dominant patriarchal society that establishes oppressive ideals of beauty and femininity. “Such ideals have prompted feminist concern about the controlling technological (male) gaze that subjects women to invasive forms of surveillance and punishments and asserts the right of law over women’s desires” (ibid). She continues that “Orlan’s work has been understood both as dangerously participating in the very male-dominated institutions that she critiques and as an epic feminist polemic on the self-inflicted mutilation of women’s bodies in the name of beauty” (133). And beauty, which will be discussed individually in the following section, “is central to femininity, whereby Woman as sex is idealized as the incarnation of physical beauty,” writes Kathy Davis (51). Davis continues that this system, which equates femininity with beauty, centered in the body of the female, gives power to some groups while marginalizing others: “In Western culture, dominant discourses of the body enable privileged groups—notably, white, bourgeois, professional men—to transcend their own material bodies and take on a god’s eye view as disembodied subjects. They become the ones who set the standards they can never hope to meet” (ibid). That is, these men, powerful bearers of the male gaze, set beauty standards for the female body. Even though they themselves possess human bodies, it is only the body of the woman that these men hold to rigorous standards. A woman’s body becomes the primary site of her femininity, and as such, must necessarily be beautiful.

Orlan, through her use of the active medium of plastic surgery, challenges a gaze that equates femininity with passivity. She uses this controversial medium, which some feminists protest has primarily been used as a weapon against women, to exercise active control over her
own body. The opening of her body reveals one that is human, not just female, and effects visceral, empathic reactions from men as well as women, suggesting that the body is not solely the purview of women or a site primarily of femininity. Orlan’s work, centered on her own, female body, also rejects the notion that femininity must entail beauty.

Reclaiming Beauty

“Beauty in things exists in the mind which contemplates them,” wrote the Scottish philosopher David Hume⁸, and although Western art history may have delighted in it and modern science may have revealed more specific details about it, beauty remains a difficult concept to define. Evolutionary biologists suggest that beauty is primarily an indicator of fertility, and that traits such as a clear complexion and symmetrical features suggest the presence of good health and, accordingly, fecundity (Grammer and Thornhill 1994). Michael Cunningham’s (1986) research suggested a tripartite definition of beauty, based on subjects’ preference for photographs of women who displayed the “neonate features of large eyes, small nose, and small chin; the maturity features of prominent cheekbones and narrow cheeks; and the expressive features of high eyebrows, large pupils, and large smiles” (925). The first facet of this definition is interesting in its correlation with the Lorenz theory of beauty, which proposes that beauty may be defined as the possession of childlike features and expressions that are in turn provocative of a protective instinct (Fournier 133). The second facet indicates the sexual maturity and therefore fertility of the bearer, while the third facet may be interpreted as suggesting a level of alertness or intelligence which would also indicate greater evolutionary fitness.

Although science may define beauty as a combination of features that advertise the bearer’s fertility, beauty in Western art history has traditionally been used as an indicator of the female bearer’s character. This became especially important in the Renaissance, a moment in

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Western art history that has been characterized as having a particularly close relationship with beauty. The Neo-Platonic philosopher Marcilio Ficino wrote that “Anything that lacks all beauty lacks all essence; and anything that possesses the whole beauty has the whole essence, because the first essence and the first beauty are identical” (Kristeller 163). Alberti, in his treatise on painting, advises artists to “make all the parts true to his model but also to add beauty there; because in painting, loveliness is not less pleasing than richness” (92). For followers of a Neo-Platonic philosophy, the job of artists was not merely to represent the material world they saw, but to portray the higher Forms of the unintelligible realm, imbuing the former with greater beauty.

Just as earthly, material objects represented the true Forms, so beauty was considered a representation of its bearer’s moral and spiritual condition, and a necessary attribute for the virtuous woman. What exactly defined beauty was not based on the appearances of real Italian women, however, but on literary sources, such as Petrarch’s descriptions of his beloved Laura. In his *Delle Bellezze Delle Donne* (1548), Agnolo Firenzuela pieced together a feminine beauty (including golden hair, a high forehead, and slightly rosy ears) taken from many separate girls and idealized into one perfect woman.

One of the clearest examples of how this was manifested in the art of the time was in marital portraits. In her essay “Women in Renaissance Florence,” Dale Kent outlines the role of females in this masculine-dominated society as primarily “to serve as the vessel[s] by which...lineage was maintained” (28). Women, who existed in Christian tradition both as potential temptresses (i.e. Eve, responsible for man’s fall) or the epitome of holiness (the Virgin Mary) were excluded from civil life in the interest of ensuring “their purity and that of the blood line through which property descended” (26). Portraiture traditionally commemorated a high-
status woman’s marriage, and reflected not only her wealth, but her virtue, which “translated
above all as chastity, but also included the qualities of obedience, modesty, and silence that
would ensure sexual innocence before marriage” (Woods-Marsden 64). The sitter was generally
posed passively in profile, therefore, and individual features mattered much less than the
suggestion of the aforementioned attributes of wealth and chastity. These virtues were
represented through her dress and adornment, but also through an idealized beauty.

The concept of obligatory beauty for women in Western art history may have been a
particular focus in the Renaissance, but it certainly didn’t end there. Manet’s *Olympia*, a
particularly defiant icon in art history who refuses to cooly avert her eyes, as do most of her
predecessors in Western paintings of female nudes, but levels them on the spectator in a direct
gaze, was criticized for her lack of pulchritude. T.J. Clark, in “Olympia’s Choice,” writes,

> There was something about *Olympia* which eluded [the critics’] frame of
> reference.... *Olympia* was “informe,” “inconcevable,” “inqualifiable,”
> “indéchiffrable”; the picture “ne s’explique pas.” “The least handsome of women
> has bones, muscles, skin, form, and some kind of color,” whereas Olympia had
> none; she was “neither true nor living nor beautiful.” (emphasis mine, 92)

It was one thing to paint a courtesan; it was inconceivable not to make her beautiful.

Orlan, as an inheritor of an artistic tradition that represents women as primarily beautiful
(and therefore virtuous) objects and only secondarily as individuals, and born into a society not
only obsessed with physical appearances, but seemingly able to surgically achieve any
appearance it desires, embraces and disrupts the debate. She is both artist and artwork,
employing a medium that is utilized almost exclusively to “help” women attain ideals of physical
perfection. Yet, her own goal is not a unified, beautiful whole, but rather to comment on the
male-dominated standards of beauty in Western art history and in contemporary society. In a
1998 interview with Peg Zeglin Brand, Orlan said,
A lot of women are very self-conscious; they want to look like the most beautiful women, like the supermodels we see on commercials or in magazines. So, when the critics hear ‘cosmetic surgery’ in relation to my performances, they inevitably assume that I want to be the most beautiful woman, that I want to do as Michael Jackson does, or Cher, or I don’t know who. (Brand 299)

She goes on to describe the surgeons who told her the precise angles and geometry necessary to make her face beautiful. In her words, “They would tell me: ‘This way is fine, you will be attractive; otherwise, you aren’t fuckable.’ Really! Plastic surgeons didn’t really understand what my intentions were, and I had to go to the States, where I met a woman surgeon, a feminist [Dr. Marjorie Cramer], to get what I wanted” (ibid).

As Brand explains, Orlan’s goals are very different, and her motivation for undertaking these surgeries runs much deeper than achieving the prettiest face surgery can provide. Instead, Orlan is using beauty ideals to reveal and challenge the way women “[submit] their autonomy to the preferences of men.” (297). Orlan’s use of the medium of plastic surgery for a cause other than its traditional one of “beautifying” brings to the forefront questions about who defines what beauty is and who controls how that is manifested in the bodies of women. By revolting against received notions of what is beautiful (and therefore “fuckable”), Orlan directly confronts the dominant male gaze and reclaims beauty as a woman’s autonomous decision concerning how she wishes to look.

Reclaiming Identity

Orlan has dealt with notions of objecthood, simultaneously becoming her own art object and rejecting the objectification of women in the Western art historical tradition. She has questioned notions of femininity, rejecting its equation of passivity by employing the controversial and gendered medium of plastic surgery. She has worked within contemporary and traditional ideals of beauty, rejecting the false standards promoted through the dominant male
gaze. And finally, I argue, she reclaims the notion of identity. Julian Zugazagoitia sees this as central to her work, viewing it against the philosophies that have preceded it:

At the heart of Orlan’s project is her investigation of modern conceptions of identity and the self. One of the harbingers of modernity is inscribed in an image of Leonardo, where it is man—and no longer God—who is at the center of the world. Another is Kant’s interpretation that all knowledge starts with experience but not all depends upon it. Orlan radically questions the understanding of these theoretical forms by enacting their principles, and substitutes them with her most immediate and unique experience, that of her individuality and her body. Consequently, her physical exterior is the measure of the world and her skin is the subtle mediation between the Me and the other, the thin, sensitive border that becomes the medium for the recording of history. (215-6)

Her body, in a deviation from Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophy, becomes no longer the site of a fixed identity, but the site of her own experience, with an outer shell that may be modified to fit its contents.

It follows from Berger’s observation that the female nude in Western art was clothed in the expectations and interpretations of the (male) viewer—and styled expressly to flatter him—that her own identity would be of very little consequence. Whereas Western art history is full of paintings of beautiful, anonymous women, anonymous males (and especially nude ones) are far rarer. As noted earlier, even Renaissance marriage “portraits” needn’t bear any real resemblance to the sitter, and any identity the subject appeared to possess was primarily a factor of the men to whom she belonged. Identity was assigned, and fixed, by the male viewer of the symbolic female.

Orlan, however, resists a male gaze that assigns and fixes identity. She is neither a passive subject, submissively posed and designed to flatter, nor herself an unchanging canvas. Through much of Western art history, and in particular during the periods from which Orlan drew the features she appropriated, mimesis was a primary goal—the triumph of the artist “truthfully” representing the world around him. The image stood for the object, just as beauty
stood for truth or goodness. Yet Orlan disrupts this correlation, subverting the assumed relationship between image and truth, signifier and signified. She embodies what Parveen Adams calls “the emptiness of the image” (the title of Adams’ book):

In this sense Orlan’s work undoes the triumph of representation. During her operation Orlan’s face begins to detach itself from her head. We are shocked at the destruction of our normal narcissistic fantasy that the face ‘represents’ something. Gradually the ‘face’ becomes pure exteriority. It no longer projects the illusion of depth. It becomes a mask without any relation of representation. In turn this disturbs a fundamental illusion concerning the inside and the outside, that the outside provides a window onto what is represented. (145)

Orlan calls into question the ability of any face to represent fully its interior contents, the possibility of any true representation. By questioning the trustworthiness of a face to truthfully represent the personality, character, or essence of its bearer, as well as the “triumph of representation” itself, she raises the question of whether anything can stand for another. Jill O’Bryan goes as far as to suggest that when Orlan’s face, site of identity, is flayed during surgery and becomes “a mass of indecipherable, unknowable, unpossessable interior body stuff” that “our gaze, and in particular the male gaze (in which females also participate), cannot possess this close-up of the female” (105). Her made-visible viscera is no different from that under the skin of each viewer; she becomes everyone and no-one. Orlan, her own identity apparently disappearing and reappearing in altered states, works to reclaim from the Western male gaze the notion of the mute female body identified by Rosalind Krauss. Herself far from mute, she is a living demonstration of the futility of establishing a fixed and concrete relationship between signifier and signified, of the image “standing for” anything. Flattering no male viewer, she defines her own identity.

Finally, Orlan reclaims notions of identity by introducing the concept of deconstructing the self. According to Philip Auslander, Orlan’s work “contributes to the definition of a post-
humanist self, a self for which identity is mutable, suspended, forever in process” (quoted in O’Bryan 31). The idea that with changes to the exterior may be wrought changes on the interior is both a parallel to the rejected notion that the exterior necessarily and truthfully represents the interior, as well as (in true Orlan fashion, rejecting an “either/or” dichotomy and instead embracing the “and”) the suggestion that if one’s exterior does not reflect the way one feels on the inside, it can be changed to provide a better fit. Orlan says that she was influenced by a text from Lacanian psychoanalyst Eugénie Lemoine Luccioni, which she read at the beginning of each surgery performance:

Skin is deceiving... In life, one only has one’s skin.... There is a bad exchange in human relations because one never is what one has.... I have the skin of an angel but I am a jackal...the skin of a crocodile but I am a poodle, the skin of a black person but I am white, the skin of a woman, 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. (quoted in Orlan, Intervention 317)

About this difference between what one is on the surface and what one feels to be on the inside, Orlan writes, “in our time we have begun to have the means of closing this gap... with the help of surgery, it [is] becoming possible to match up the internal image to the external image” (ibid 318). Orlan reclaims identity not only by refusing to accept the external image as a fixed and accurate signifier, as does the dominant male gaze, but by changing her own external image to better reflect what she feels inside. Eleanor Heartney summarizes the effect:

Orlan challenges deep-seated convictions about the relationship of body and identity. She has elected to undergo a series of operations, not for the socially acceptable purpose of becoming more beautiful, but to pursue a radical definition of freedom. In doing so she confronts conventional ideas about the order of nature. She forces us to consider the idea that, if our bodies are an indispensable part of who we are, sufficiently radical changes to the body may turn us into someone new. (228)

Orlan’s repeated challenges of notions of the self, particularly as represented by the bearer’s external image, cause us to ponder the true nature of identity: whether it can ultimately be fixed;
whether parity between interior and exterior is possible (or necessary); and what effect, if any, changing one has on the other. I argue that Orlan’s work attempts to reclaim identity from the male gaze and returns it to the individual, the woman, to whom it belongs and who alone can answer the questions about her own self.
CONCLUSION

I have argued that Orlan’s controversial artwork, particularly focusing on her surgery performances, but necessarily interpreted in the context of her entire oeuvre, is effective in its attempt to reclaim the gaze from the hegemony of male-dominated Western art history, on the levels of objecthood, femininity, beauty, and identity. However, not all her critics are as convinced. Roberta Smith, art critic for the New York Times, wrote in her review of Orlan’s “Omnipresence” exhibition at the Sandra Gering Gallery in Soho in 1993, “[Orlan’s] work represents a small step for Conceptual art, and a big step for feminism—both in the backward direction” (Smith 1993).

No art is immune from misinterpretation, and Orlan’s controversial surgical series is no exception. Smith continues:

Maybe the world is ready to witness a little plastic surgery as art. The problem is, nothing Orlan does is very interesting to look at or think about. It's sensationalist, and also too close to real life, not the least in its mindless acceptance of socially imposed ideals of beauty. The distance between undergoing surgery in hopes of looking like Vanna White and submitting to it to resemble a high-art, highbrow ideal like "Mona Lisa" is ultimately only a matter of taste, the underlying element of self-loathing and self-destructive perfectionism remaining the same. (ibid)

Smith appears to view Orlan’s work as merely histrionic, and not even shocking: banal, in fact. And although her critique directly contradicts what has been argued here, it does reveal some potential weaknesses in Orlan’s work and pitfalls for viewers. Based on the medium of plastic surgery alone, one might assume that Orlan’s goals are merely aesthetic, and even that she is buying into a system that has been historically antagonistic toward women, forcing them to adhere to impossible ideals of beauty. Therefore, for viewers to have the fullest experience of Orlan’s work, they must read at least some of Orlan’s description of her procedures and goals, a
requirement that some may consider elitist. Smith may be alluding to as much when she calls Orlan’s use of an art icon like the Mona Lisa “high-art” and “high-brow.”

Orlan’s work may be difficult to view (the artist herself has apologized to audiences, “Sorry to have to make you suffer”) and to interpret, but I would argue that it is hardly the backward step for feminism and Conceptual art that Smith suggests. Rather, Orlan is patently feminist, proclaiming her resistance to the historic male gaze of Western art history and taking ownership of her own representation and identity, even through the controversial and challenging medium of plastic surgery. Her art is interesting and effective in its unique ability to provoke a multitude of potential questions for the thoughtful viewer, particularly as he or she considers his or her own body. Questions of pain and identity arise: Why would a person intentionally open her body? Would I be the same person if my external appearance changed? There are also questions of ethics and morality: Is it wrong to use such potentially dangerous methods in the pursuit of art? Is the body sacred, and if so, is this a violation of its sanctity? It is this unique interaction with the viewer and with the history of art that makes Orlan’s work effective and an advancement of Conceptual art.

The dominant male gaze of Western art history is one that tends to reduce females to objects, equate femininity with passivity and a lack of agency, expect women to be beautiful as representative of virtue, and deprive them of an identity other than that constructed for them by the male viewer. Orlan, through her photographs, her performances, and most specifically, her surgical series *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, directly confronts this gaze. She reclaims objecthood, both embracing her body as her art object and at the same time, as a powerful female figure, refusing to simply assume the feminine role of an object like that historically granted to women as the subject of Western art. She reclaims femininity, actively and capably
demonstrating that femininity is more than mute docility, and using the gendered medium of plastic surgery to point out the way it has been used to promote false standards of femininity. She reclaims beauty, resisting the idea that women are required to be beautiful and asserting women’s autonomy to look however they desire to look, “beautiful,” “monstrous,” or otherwise. And finally, she reclaims identity, choosing to construct her own rather than have it assigned and fixed to flatter any male spectator, and challenging the “triumph of representation” by morphing her own features to reflect a fluid and changeable identity.

Orlan’s work may not single-handedly change the world, but she is introducing concepts that are causing people to think about the world and about received notions and concepts inherited from the Western art historical tradition. Along with a growing number of other feminist and postmodern artists, she challenges the status quo and prompts discussion, using her body as “a site of public debate.” Her work is not always easy to look at, and it has been and likely will continue to be misunderstood. However, it is addressing the understanding of Western art history in a unique and vital way. Orlan’s work, which she claims “stands between the folly of seeing and the impossibility of seeing,” is reclaiming the gaze.
WORKS CITED


