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I, Kelly Voss, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History.

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Valie Export, Gina Pane, and Orlan: Pain, Body Art, and the Question of the Feminine

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Abstract

The thesis deals with the work of a number of feminist European performance artists, Valie Export, Gina Pane, and Orlan, who started their careers in the 1960s and 1970s, challenged society’s disavowal of pain, and embraced the reality of pain as an inescapable part of the human experience. In the first chapter, I examine how the work of Austrian performance and video artist Valie Export (b. 1940) subverts traditional depictions of the female body in visual culture, and how her work shows that society, especially post-war Austrian society, is structured around that which it rejects: violence and pain. In the second chapter, I explore how the work of French-Italian performance artist Gina Pane (1939-1990) uses physical pain to address issues of social and psychological exclusion. In the third chapter, I analyze how French performance artist Orlan deconstructs ideals of feminine beauty in the Western canon of art history in addition to criticizing science and medical technology. The thesis contributes to the body of scholarship by exploring how methods of self-inflicted pain allowed these artists not only to acknowledge the feminine, but also to broaden their critique to larger social concerns.
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Introduction

In this study, I will examine how a small number of feminist European performance artists, who started their careers in the 1960s and 1970s, challenged society’s disavowal of pain and embraced the reality that pain is an inescapable part of the human experience. In particular, I will focus on the work of Valie Export (b. 1940), Gina Pane (1939-1990), and Orlan (b. 1947). I will explore the feminist import of these artists and how they played with pain, both mental and corporeal, in an effort to question contemporary society’s impulse to conceal, marginalize, and fear pain.

Furthermore, these artists utilized pain to reveal that the female body is socially inscribed in innumerable ways, particularly in relation to pain. Examples that convey this idea are as follows: Export’s 1973 performance piece Eros/ion, in which she rolled her naked body over broken glass, Pane’s 1971 performance piece Escalade non Anesthésiée, in which she was barefoot and repeatedly ascended a ladder-like sculpture studded with sharp metal spikes, and Orlan’s performative-surgery series The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan that began in 1990, in which she underwent a series of plastic surgeries with a minimal amount of anesthesia. Whereas feminist artists like Carolee Schneeman, around the same time, used their bodies to celebrate the feminine and the courage of the self, the former group of artists did not adopt such a complacent or self-congratulatory stance. Instead, these artists employed the excesses of the body and self-inflicted pain as crucial elements to create a different and more complex way of addressing how female issues relate to larger subjective concerns. They acknowledged the pain and discomfort that afflicts all humans, regardless of gender. Pain is an indispensable aspect of these artists’ work; at the same time, it is something that is typically obscured, deprecated, and feared in contemporary society. Thus, it is associated with the abject, or that which is designated by
society as excessive, uncontainable, monstrous, and subsequently excluded. Consequently, these artists played with pain and the abject, as well as their own bodies, and all the social connotations they entail, to not only engage in a discourse on gender, but also to show that gender and the human body exist within much larger and more inclusive social contexts. These works speak to both the feminine and the universal, not placing an exclusive emphasis on one or the other. They achieved this end by disrupting and subverting Western values related to the human body. Most scholarship about the work of these artists focuses on either the feminist or other social critique and theories evident in each individual work, but they rarely combine the two. Thus, I will argue that the elements of feminism, pain, and social criticism are inseparable from each other in a theoretical analysis of a selection of works by each artist. These artists play with pain in ways that never discount the feminine, but exceed it; they effectively move between the singular feminine and the universal in relation to the body.

To understand how these artists’ utilization of the female body as well as the transgressive social nature of pain and abjection set them apart from the majority of their peers, it is important to first examine predominant trends in the feminist body art of their contemporaries during the 1960s and 1970s. Betty Friedan's 1963 feminist manifesto *The Feminine Mystique*, which reveals the frustrations of archetypal housewives commonly serves as a benchmark for second wave feminism. The type of feminism championed by second-wave feminists is predominantly viewed as essentialist feminism. The philosophical definition of essentialism is as follows: "There is a specific set of characteristics or properties that an entity of a particular kind must possess."¹ When applied to feminist theory, essentialism implies that women, as a group, possess certain fixed traits; variations among women are discounted as secondary.

Consequently, the majority of work produced by feminist artists during the 1960s and 1970s predominantly focuses upon a celebration of the female body as a defining characteristic that sets women apart from their male counterparts. Gender was viewed as a fixed characteristic and definitive of an individual's identity. According to Sally Banes in her account of the artistic climate during the 1960s:

The predominantly male artists often seemed to adopt uncritically—even at times to salute—the dominant culture's representations of women both as a consumer and as a sexual object to be consumed. This was one end of the spectrum. Further along the spectrum were cases where such representations were made, but partly in ironic tones. Another point along the spectrum—often in the works of women artists—was the figure of woman as essentially different from, and thus superior to, the male. And still further along were the images of women imprisoned by their culturally assigned roles as domestic creatures, fashion plates, or bodies bereft of minds.\(^2\)

This passage reveals that essentialist feminist art was a direct response to the sexism that pervaded the art world. Feminist artists during this time period responded to this misogyny by attempting to set their bodies apart from the realm of male rationalism by celebrating women's femininity as a sort of positive primitivism, which was superior to male culture.\(^3\) In hindsight, this view of feminism appears dated, relatively unsophisticated, and difficult to take seriously. But taken in the context of the 1960s and 1970s, where women were primarily relegated to the home and other “feminine spaces,” these depictions of femininity were a radical way of asserting difference and autonomy.

When one thinks of essentialist feminism and feminist body art from the 1960s and 1970s, the names of Anglo-American artists and theorists first come to mind, such as Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Judy Chicago, and Carolee Schneemann. This state of affairs is due to the fact that in France and a handful of other European countries, the dominant form of feminist

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\(^3\) Banes, 221.
theory tends to be less concerned with political doctrine and more centered on philosophy and
theories of the body in general. Some European feminist writers—Simone de Beauvoir and
Helene Cixous, for example—have been accused of essentialism, their theories and approaches
are far more literary and diffuse than those of their Anglo-American contemporaries. The
concerns of these theorists extend beyond the realm of mere essentialist critique; the diffuseness
of their ideas allowed for their extension to other aspects of culture and human experience
inscribed within that society. Consequently, it makes sense that in this philosophical and
discursive climate, European feminist body artists used their bodies in ways that continue to
affirm female physicality to generate political and social commentary outside the realm of
feminist theory and discourse.

The fundamental divisions between Anglo-American and French feminist thought are
clearly outlined in a multitude of essays written by the feminist Norwegian scholar Toril Moi.
According to Moi, Anglo-American feminist theory advocates an empirical and essentialist view
of the female self. Moi argues that Anglo-American feminism constructs a conception of female
empowerment that is based upon binary oppositions. Moi generalizes that Anglo-American
feminism embraces the same inferences and methods as Western critical practice, which is firmly
indebted to patriarchal politics and culture. In her 1989 essay “Feminist, Female, Feminine,”
Moi stresses this idea in her discussion of Cixous’s reliance on poststructuralist thought,
particularly in the form of her debt to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and his
deconstruction of Western binaries:

Western philosophy and literary thought is and has always been caught up in this endless
series of hierarchical oppositions, which always in the end comes back to the
fundamental couple of male/female… For one of the terms to acquire meaning, she
[Cixous] claims, it must destroy the other. The ‘couple’ cannot be left intact; it becomes a general battlefield where the struggle for signifying supremacy is forever re-enacted.4 Anglo-American feminist theory is strongly informed by logocentric methods of thought, as it continues to pit the female against the male. Cixous advocates for the importance of deconstructing the male/female oppositional binary. For a unified female front to push against a unified male front is equivalent to propagating the Western patriarchal predilection for binaries. I would argue that the idea of Cixous asserts that Anglo-American feminism functions within and reaffirms the very system it seeks to undermine. Trying to empower women through a celebration of their inherent, or essential, qualities in opposition to maleness is tantamount to playing into patriarchal oppositions and does little to advance or expand upon feminist theory and concerns. Thus, one must focus on deconstructing patriarchal metaphysics and, by so doing, address larger and more inclusive social concerns, which are not solely concerned with gender politics.

Julia Kristeva, working from and expanding upon the French philosopher Georges Bataille’s (1897-1962) theories of abjection and transgression, refines the ideas of Cixous in her theory of femininity as marginality. According to Kristeva, femininity does not have a fixed definition. Instead, she views femininity as a position within patriarchal society. As Moi sums up, “If femininity then can be said to have a definition at all in Kristevan terms, it is simply as ‘that which is marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order.’”5 Femininity does not specifically refer to or encompass the experience of a particular gender. It is a more inclusive term that breaks down the gender binary and addresses more inclusive and complex social and political issues. According to Kristeva, if femininity does have a definition, it is relational and: “it is as

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5 Moi, 126.
shifting as the various forms of patriarchy itself.” Consequently, men and women can be equally marginalized, as long as they somehow lie on the margins of society or outside the symbolic order. Femininity is not a matter of essence, but of positionality. Moi expands upon this idea in the following quote:

… if patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the limit or border-line of that order… Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will in other words share in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position which has allowed male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos.7

Moi makes it clear that there is not an inherent biological aspect of women that imbues them with femininity and places them on the margins. Rather, their position in the social order is a patriarchal construct. Women are marginalized in Western binary oppositions and discourse, due to their familiarity, yet unknowability, from the standpoint of the patriarchs who construct dominant social discourses. I would argue that the same could be said for any other individual or group of individuals within a hostile society, regardless of gender.

Furthermore, the above passage relates Kristeva’s feminist theories to her theory of the abject. According to Kristeva, the abject encompasses that which erases or threatens the borders that society has erected. Abjection is that which: “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”8 It should be noted that the “identity, system, order” referred to belongs within the sphere of social constructs and “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” refers to that which fails to conform to such standards, subsequently threatening them. I believe that pain cannot be fully articulated or contained and, thus, falls within the realm of the abject. Pain is a reminder of the

6 Ibid.
7 Moi, 127.
excesses of the body. Society mandates that the body be covered and contained as one individual, without bleeding out into the world. By embracing pain, Valie Export, Gina Pane, and Orlan present the abject as a positive force; they make us rethink the division between the proper (contained) body and the improper (amorphous/oozing) body.

While the patriarchal urge to marginalize the feminine is not explicitly related to the abject, there are connections. That which exists outside the realm of patriarchal societal norms is placed on the margins of society in an effort to neutralize fear of that which is unknown and, thus, potentially imperiling to the status quo. A similar process occurs when one is confronted with the abject. Both phenomena are based on exclusion and fear as opposed to desire. In both cases, the marginal and the abject highlight the fragility of society or the human body. In effect, Kristeva’s theories challenge Anglo-American feminist claims and relate feminist theory to larger theoretical ideas and concerns. Such an approach is characteristic of French feminist theory and helps to explain how the three artists in the following chapters engage in feminist discourse and the abject body in a way that transcends gender boundaries and considers larger social issues.
Feminist Actionism

The work of Austrian filmmaker and performance artist Valie Export (b. 1940) involves elements of social and political criticism that are often extensions of her feminist concerns. To examine how these two elements are interrelated, it is first important to note that Export had her artistic beginnings during the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s. As the art historian Roswitha Mueller notes, this time has been evaluated as “one of the most tumultuous, creative, and vibrant periods that Western culture has ever seen, certainly rivaling the first decades of the twentieth century in Europe.” Consequently, Export associates herself with the avant-garde movements of the first half of the twentieth century as well as their extension and reformulation after World War II. Export was most closely linked to the Viennese Actionists, particularly in relation to her propensity for fracturing social, sexual, and cultural taboos, in addition to stressing the materiality of the human body.

However, Export’s fascination with technology and her use of the female body definitively sets her apart. Typically, the Viennese Actionists utilized the feminine form in a violently and basely misogynistic manner. While Export’s work includes political, visceral, and transgressive elements, in tune with the Viennese Actionists, her interests in giving voice to the marginalized body and subverting societal constructions of the human body, especially the female body, imbues her work with a further layer of meaning. In this chapter, I will examine how Export’s work not only subverts traditional depictions of the female body in visual culture, but also how it provides a critique of fundamental facets of the social order, especially postwar

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Austrian society, specifically addressing how it was structured around that which it rejected: violence and pain. Through her use of self-inflicted pain, Export’s work oscillates between feminine subjectivity and subjectivity in general, focusing specifically on the body and its relation to the social. To support this assertion, I will analyze her 1971 performance piece *Eros/ion* and her 1973 performance video *Remote... Remote...* and relate them to Kristeva’s ideas of the feminine and abjection.

In 1967, to announce her presence on the Viennese art scene and to counteract the male-dominated membership of the Viennese Actionists, including Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, and Herman Nitsch, the twenty-eight year old Waltraud Hollinger changed her name to Valie Export. She took this action in an effort to develop a new identity that was not linked to her father’s name, Lehner, or to her former husband’s name, Hollinger. She chose the first name of Valie and appropriated a popular cigarette brand, Export, as her last name. In this way, she eschewed tokens of patriarchal possession and converted herself into a brand identity. Immediately following this break with her past, she began to develop a body of experimental feminist art that continues to explore the links between personal identity, experience, and politics. While Export shared the Viennese Actionists’ tendency to use the human body as the primary material in her work as well their desire to challenge the norms of an anxious and repressive Austrian postwar society, she always considered herself to be on the margins of the movement. Export made her lack of an official association with the Actionists explicit in a 1982 interview, which appeared in *BOMB Magazine*:

I wasn’t in Vienna at the beginning of Actionism. When I came to Vienna I became friends with all these people, but I wasn’t doing things with them… I was very influenced, not so much by Actionism itself, but by the whole movement in the city. It

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was a really great movement. We had big scandals, sometimes against the \textit{politique}; it helped me to bring out my ideas.\textsuperscript{4}

This quote makes it clear that Export was more concerned with addressing social and political concerns in her work than she was with adhering to the tenets of a particular movement. Like the Actionists, she sought to provoke her audience and effectively confront the atmosphere of complacency and repression that had settled amongst the Austrian populace following World War II. This provocation was typically achieved through intentionally abhorrent and gruesome acts, typically focusing on the mutilation of the human body in a ritualistic manner.

However, in their consideration of women, the Actionists predominantly complied with conventional sexual politics of the time. Women were passive objects who possessed little to no subjectivity or autonomy. The art historian Roswitha Mueller states: “The packaged, smeared, used, and abused bodies of women were central to some Actionist fantasies of destruction.”\textsuperscript{5} Not surprisingly, Export and a handful of other female artists took issue with this presentation and treatment of the female body. Consequently, she created a version of Actionism aptly entitled Feminist Actionism. According to Export, the primary purpose of Feminist Actionism was: “to transform the object of natural male history, the material “woman,” subjugated and enslaved by the male creator, into an independent actor and creator, object of her own history. For without the ability to express oneself and without a field of action, there can be no human dignity.”\textsuperscript{6}

Thus, Export advocated that women could remove themselves from their socially mandated object-hood by enacting their own agency, or gaining subject-hood through doing. As a result, Export simultaneously challenged the stifling stagnation of postwar Austria, while enabling the female body and endowing it with an aspect of transgressive, personal, and political agency.

\textsuperscript{5} Mueller, xix.
\textsuperscript{6} Mueller, 29.
These characteristics of Export’s work are due to her predilection for mutilating her body and placing it within asexual and brutally unconventional conditions.

**Bataille’s Base Materialism and Cultural Repression**

This desire to obscure that which discomforts the individual and collective society and reminds them of their fallibility is typified in Bataille’s examination of the big toe and its relation to the human body and cultural perceptions. In this brief 1929 essay, aptly titled “The Big Toe,” Bataille wonders why the big toe, the body part which allows man to stand erect and elevate himself above gorillas and other primates, is seen as base in comparison to other body parts, such as the head. Bataille continues along this path of thought and examines elements of the human body in relation to cultural and human ideals:

> The vicissitudes of organs, the profusion of stomachs, larynxes, and brains traversing innumerable animal species and individuals, carries the imagination along in an ebb and flow it does not willingly follow, due to a hatred of the still painfully perceptible frenzy of the bloody palpitations of the body. Man willingly imagines himself to be like the god Neptune, stilling his own waves, with majesty; nevertheless, the bellowing waves of the viscera, in more or less incessant inflation and upheaval, brusquely put an end to his dignity.7

From this passage, one can draw parallels between Bataille’s idea of the base human body and Kristeva’s theory of the abject. Bataille asserts that man aspires to elevate himself above the base temporal world and become godlike. Thus, the individual wishes to be able to “still his own waves” and exert infallible control over his life. However, the “viscera” of the human body frustrates and often overpowers human will and efforts, revealing the fragility of humanity. This idea can be extended to postwar Austria’s desire to sterilize its past and firmly control its present and future. For Bataille, the big toe exemplifies this situation:

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… one can imagine that a toe, always more or less damaged and humiliating, is psychologically analogous to the fall of man—in other words to death. The hideously cadaverous and at the same time loud and proud appearance of the big toe corresponds to this derision and gives a very shrill expression to the disorder of the human body, that product of the violent discord of the organs.8

Thus, the “hideously cadaverous and loud and proud appearance of the big toe” reminds humanity of its base and abject nature. These qualities undermine humanity’s self-constructed elevation and superiority, reminding it of its frailty and basely animal nature. Consequently, one can conclude that Export’s reliance on self-mutilation and viscera serves to erode and subvert the repression associated with contemporary Western society, particularly postwar Austrian society.

**Eros/ion (1971): The Female Body and the Function of Pain in Art**

An example of Export’s work that encapsulates these elements of social critique is her 1971 performance piece *Eros/ion* (figure 1). In this performance, she rolled her naked body over an area of broken glass. She proceeded to pass over a smooth sheet of glass, finishing up on a paper screen. This range of movement was repeated for approximately ten minutes. Mueller points out that the immediate physical trace of this performance, the blood stained paper screen, parallels the paintings created from French artist Yves Klein’s 1960 collaborative performance piece *Anthropometries of the Blue Period*.9 However, the artist’s relationship to the process and the sexual politics behind these two works could not be more different. In the *Anthropometries of the Blue Period* performance, Klein decided to no longer paint *from* models, but *with* models (figure 2). In order to physically manifest his idea, he emptied his studio of paintings and rolled his naked female models with his patented International Klein Blue paint. He then directed his models to press their bodies against the prepared canvases on the floor of his studio. According

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8 Ibid.
9 Mueller, 34.
to Klein: “They became living brushes... at my direction the flesh itself applied the colour to the surface and with perfect exactness.”\(^{10}\) Furthermore, he was pleased that he “stayed clean, no longer dirtied with colour,”\(^{11}\) in stark contrast to his paint coated female models.

While the end results of Export’s and Klein’s performances are aesthetically similar, they convey fundamentally different ideas. A comparison between these two works reveals a great deal about Export’s intent. In *Anthropometries*, Klein’s dominance over his female models was tangible. The models possessed little to no agency or subjecthood. They were present solely to fulfill the requests of the dominant male artist, fulfilling the archetypal role of the objectified and passive female. This situation stands in stark contrast to that in Export’s *Eros/ion*. Whereas Klein’s models served a predominantly submissive and visual role that conformed to the expectations of the male gaze, Export’s use of the female body actively subverted and confused that same gaze. In this work’s consideration and disruption of the male gaze, the ideas of the feminist film critic Laura Mulvey (b. 1941) can be applied. According to Mulvey:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form 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.\(^{12}\)

While this passage specifically refers to visual pleasure and representations of the female form in cinema, her ideas can be, and have been, extended to many cultural forms. It is also worth noting that Export was and continues to be immersed in the world of film. Several of her pieces, such as *Touch Cinema*\(^ {13}\) from 1968 and *Genital Panic*\(^ {14}\) from 1969 explicitly address the sexual

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11 Ibid.
13 *Touch Cinema* was first performed in 1968 and was performed several more times until 1971. In these performances, the body and screen became one. Export stood on the street wearing a box around her torso and...
politics of cinema by subverting the role of the passive female as an object that, as Mulvey puts it, “connote [s] to-be-looked-at-ness.” More broadly, this concern with challenging the dominance of the male gaze is demonstrated in Eros/ion, because Export showed her body in the way that she wanted to. Export conceived of and executed the action on her own terms. She was not beholden to a domineering male artistic presence, like the models in Klein’s Anthropometries. Thus, the sexually imbalanced split between “active/male and passive/female” is effectively undermined.

Furthermore, Export refuses to style her body according to the “determining male gaze” or to code her body for “strong visual and erotic impact.” By exhibiting her body in a viscerally unfamiliar situation, she consciously overthrows socially prescribed expectations of the feminine body:

Woman is forced to represent herself through jewelry, make-up, personality and as a bearer of fixed sexual symbols which are signs of a phallocentric society, in a way that does not correspond to her personal needs. Based on the system of biological differences, a sociological system of repression was erected, which woman can escape only by rejecting the body defined in this manner as feminine.15

By inflicting a series of cuts upon her body, Export disrupts and upsets the erotic anticipation of the male gaze. Additionally, by enacting the body as the bearer of self-inflicted wounds, or signs, the implications and meanings of the naked female body change. This shift is one of context. Her body is no longer passively open to erotic speculation and domination. Physical defacement does not fit into the “fixed sexual symbols of phallocentric society” that allow the heteronormal male gaze to objectify the female form. Moreover, self-mutilation is an aberrant

invited male passersby to reach through the curtained front and touch her breasts. This piece subverted the heterosexual male gaze by confusing the relationship between the object and the subject. Export confronted the spectator’s objectifying gaze with her own; she did not passively avert her eyes.

14 Export first performed Genital Panic in 1968 in an art house movie theater where experimental films were being shown. In this performance, she wore a pair of pants with a triangle removed from the crotch area. She walked through the rows of seats, while her exposed genitalia was at the level of the audience member’s faces. This action was a challenge to the conventional role of women in cinema as passive sexual objects.

15 Mueller, 36.
act that is typically vilified by contemporary society. The agency that Export enacts by inflicting these wounds on herself further places her body outside a “sociological system of repression” based on biological differences. Thus, she escapes the repression of phallocentric society and the male gaze by deliberately spurning and undercutting the socially prescribed symbols of sexual difference that facilitate the fetishization of the female body.

Even though Export subverts the male gaze, I believe that this piece is not entirely asexual. An important aspect of this piece is the implications of the title, which none of the existing literature seem to acknowledge. By splitting the word “erosion” in half with a slash and drawing attention to the word “eros” contained within it, Export juxtaposes erotic love with decay. Export presents her naked form and mutilates its surface with shards of glass, simultaneously presenting an image of sexuality and the body in excess. This action represents the double-edged sword of eroticism; Export shows how pain can be erotic. Engaging in a display of sexuality and masochism, she embraces her own sexual nature, while refusing to be subservient to cultural expectations, as pain confronts and identifies what the social excludes. In this way, Export shows that pain, destruction, and eroticism can be intertwined. This work is not merely about celebrating the gender and sexuality of the artist, it also presents a complex idea of sexuality and the freedom and affirmation of embracing pain and bodily excess.

Additionally, Export’s stress upon the disconnect between “fixed sexual symbols which are signs of a phallocentric society” and “the personal needs” of women highlights an overcoming of cultural norms. According to semiotic principles: “The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Since I mean by sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: the linguistic sign is arbitrary.”16

Although this passage explicitly connects semiotics to the discipline of linguistics, where it originated, it has been utilized in a variety of cross-disciplinary inquiries, especially in postmodern theory and art history. Semiotic thought asserts that the meaning attributed to signs is socially constructed and has no basis in essential qualities or truth. In relation to Export’s work and sexual politics, the signifiers are the fixed symbols, such as jewelry, makeup, long hair, a smooth and contained body, which represent the signified. However, these “sexual symbols” have nothing inherently feminine about them; they are social constructs of a phallocentric society. Export vehemently rejects these signifiers of femininity and female sexuality, changing the context in which the naked female form is typically viewed. She aggressively releases her body from socially mandated constraints and allows it to bleed out onto the paper beneath her, effectively challenging cultural expectations related to the naked female body.

In reference to Export’s more explicitly feminist works from the 1970s, the art historian Johanna Schwanberg states:

The female perspective evident here does not merely call attention, accuse or give verbal expression to passive suffering. Rather, it gives the work a voice that can… lift the veil from taboo subjects heretofore concealed by coercion, tradition and male-authored (art) history, without sacrificing self-confidence and sensuality.”17 (Time and Countertime, 243)

Thus, Eros/ion activates the female body and imbues it with a sense of agency, while subverting the traditions of phallocentric society and its conventional ways of looking at the naked female form. This passage also relates to another aspect of Export’s work, that of “lift[ing] the veil from taboo subjects heretofore concealed by coercion [and] tradition.” This idea of revealing facets of society that are typically obscured and repressed carries implications that extend beyond feminist theory and criticism. This element of Export’s work becomes more apparent when one examines

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the ramifications of viscera pain and self-mutilation in relation to Bataille’s and Kristeva’s theories of abjection especially in how it relates to marginalization.

**Feminist Performance Art and Kristeva’s Theories of Femininity and Abjection**

To recall a point made earlier: “If femininity then can be said to have a definition at all in Kristevan terms, it is simply as ‘that which is marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order.’”\(^\text{18}\) Thus femininity does not specifically refer to or encompass the experience of a particular gender. It is a more inclusive term that breaks down the gender binary and addresses more inclusive and complex social and political issues. Any group that is “marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order” can fall under the category of feminine. Consequently, femininity is contingent upon positionality, not inherent sexual characteristics. This idea is further emphasized in the art historian Pamela Lee’s assessment of Export’s particular kind of feminist practice: “Amidst the upheaval of the sexual revolution, the appearance of the body in this way was also an expression of the marginal condition of a desperate and oblique life.”\(^\text{19}\) While this passage refers specifically to feminist concerns, it can be extended to incorporate all marginalized groups, independent of gender. Women are just one of many groups who experience “the marginal condition of a desperate and oblique life.”

The aforementioned approach to feminist issues stands in contrast to that of the seminal American feminist performance artist Carolee Schneemann (b.1939). According to Schneemann, she meant to reveal the mythic nature of feminine self-liberation by: "giving our

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bodies back to ourselves."\textsuperscript{20} Schneeman compiled a body of work celebrating the female body and its separation and superiority to the male body and culture. I will argue that her 1975 performance piece \textit{Interior Scroll}, first performed in North Hampton, New York, exemplifies her desire to empower the female body through a form of identity politics (figure 3). In this piece, Schneemann stood naked on a table, painted her body with mud, and slowly extracted a paper scroll from her vagina while reading it. In explaining the theoretical implications of her work, Schneemann stated:

\begin{quote}
I thought of the vagina in many ways--physically, conceptually: as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the sources of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation. I saw the vagina as a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model: enlivened by its passage from the visible to the invisible, a spiraled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries, attributes of both female and male sexual power. This source of interior knowledge would be symbolized as the primary index unifying spirit and flesh in Goddess worship.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

After reading this statement of purpose, it becomes clear that Schneeman's goal is to set the female body apart from the world of masculine culture through a ritualistic celebration of the female body, evocative of "goddess worship."

While quite shocking at the time, even among the art world, the artistic practice of Schneemann greatly differs from the diffuse and socially inclusive content of the majority of Export’s work. Schneeman is more concerned with celebrating the essential biological qualities of being a woman, while Export’s focus lies more in affirming pain and the moment as well as her relation to the audience. She emphasizes her genitalia and female qualities only as a position of marginality specific to her; her gender is an important aspect of her work, but it is not the definitive feature.

Even though Kristeva views femininity as a position of marginality, her formulation of abjection has a specific relationship to dominant social and psychological perceptions of the female body. However, her theory of abjection is not only applicable to women. According to Kristeva, the body of the mother forms the basis of abjection in that an individual rejects everything associated with the maternal body (blood, the placenta, the umbilical cord, and so on) in order to become a proper and clean self, separated from the mother: “The abject confronts us… within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of the maternal entity... Abjection, with a meaning broadened to take in subjective diachrony, is a precondition of narcissism.” By presenting the female body riddled with bloody wounds, Export confronts viewers with what they have repressed, the uncontainable excess of the human body, in order to form an individual ego and separate from the Other, or the abject mother.

Kristeva writes:

The abject is the violence of mourning for an “object” that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and judgments. It take the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego).

According to Kristeva, when experiencing the abject, one’s typical response is disgust mingled with jouissance or recognition. The individual wishes to return to the time before it separated from the maternal body and designated it as an abject other; however, everything related to this desire or drive has been repressed by socially mandated development and the formation of an individual ego. But when one is directly confronted with elements of the abject, as in Export’s Eros/ion performance, that ego is threatened with a figurative death. One is forced to acknowledge the breakdown of the border between life and death, or subjectivity and objectivity.

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23Kristeva, 15.
In other words, death infects life; the repressive impulses around which society is constructed are revealed. This dissipation of borders is demonstrated in components of society that reach beyond considerations of the abject maternal body. The fear of blood and other objects of abjection engendered by the maternal body translate into a fear of violence and a host of other societal and cultural deviations. Thus, Export’s performances simultaneously combine characteristics of feminist criticism within larger theoretical and social frameworks.

**Remote… Remote… (1973): The Body and the Social**

Whereas *Eros/ion* presents the artist as an isolated individual, Export’s 1973 performance video *Remote… Remote…* establishes a connection between the artist and exterior individuals, who stand in for the artist’s relation to the cultural whole (figures 4 and 5). Her use of aberrant actions touches upon issues of repression and more general concerns in society that extend beyond feminist concerns. Export used these actions to comment upon the state of Austrian society in the wake of World War II. In her 1973 performative video piece *Remote… Remote…*, Export is seated in front of a large police archive photograph of two children, who were abused by their parents and subsequently taken away, with a bowl of milk in her lap. Initially, the camera establishes a connection between the children and Export by zooming in on the pupils of their eyes and then on one of Export’s pupils. Next, she begins to cut her fingernail cuticles with an Exacto knife. While cutting one’s cuticles is often viewed as an archetypal feminine practice, it soon becomes clear that, in this case, it is a destructive action, not a cosmetic one. As Export carves deeper and deeper into the skin around her fingernails, she begins to bleed profusely. To wash away the blood, she periodically dips her fingers into the aforementioned bowl of milk.

According to art historian Letizia Ragaglia:
Remote... Remote... was conceived as a means for raising actions of self-harm to the level of a metaphor for the traumata we bear within us from infancy, and with which we are forced to live... Valie Export often engages in acts of self-harm in allusion to these collective injuries; thus her work becomes an indirect act of sociopolitical indictment.24

By addressing the “traumata we bear within us from infancy,” one can, once again, return to the links between Export’s work and Kristeva’s theory of abjection, particularly the abject maternal body. The trauma we all experience can be translated to represent the separation from the maternal body and the formation of a separate, individual self, while designating the maternal body as an abject other. Such an interpretation perhaps links Export’s work with psychoanalytic and specifically Lacanian concerns.25 This connection to Lacanian theory further emphasizes the constructed nature of everything, even early childhood development. Even at an early age, children become self-aware by realizing that they are part of something larger. This realization conditions and influences their development and subsequent behavior. However, in relation to this particular work, I am going to focus more on the cultural and historical implications of self-mutilation and marginalization.

To provide an example of the way that abjection is linked to the historical and the social, Kristeva considers Nazism and the Holocaust—the fallout of which had an immense impact on postwar Austrian society and, subsequently, Export’s oeuvre—within her theoretical framework:

In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children’s shoes, or something like that, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, for instance, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its

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25 The French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) theorized the mirror stage of human development in the 1930s. In this stage, an infant of approximately six to eighteen months acquire the ability to identify their own images on reflective surfaces. In short, during this stage, infants create a distinction between the ego and the subject. The ego corresponds to a fictional image of the self. The infant attempts to overcome its initial state of helplessness and its attendant negative emotions (anxiety, distress, and frustration, etc.) by investing its own image with the promise of becoming a more unified and whole self, like the adults surrounding it. This situation leads to alienation and a split between the actual self and the imagined self.
apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things.26

As previously mentioned, Export was very concerned with confronting and challenging the complacency of postwar Austrian society in her work. The traumatic past of the children featured in the police archive photos, as connected to the suffering we all undergo and repress after infanthood, parallels the anxious and repressive quality of Austria following the atrocities experienced and committed during Nazi occupation. The stagnation of Austrian society was due to the fact that it was a society based on fear and repressive social constraints. The dominant culture in Austria sought to forget and bury the violent and horrific past, effectively creating a society structured around violence. Export’s desire to jolt this society out of its self-induced anesthetic and amnesia is explicitly addressed in one of her later sculptures from 1998 (figure 6):

The monumental *Landschafts- Zeit- Messe, Gedenkstatte <Allentsteig,>*27 whose vast metallic surface has loomed above Allentsteig lake (Austria) since 1998, slices deep into collective memory leaving behind an indelible impression. It serves as a succinct warning never to forget the period between 1938 and 1941, when the local inhabitants were forced out of their homeland by the National Socialist Regime.28

While this passage does not specifically relate to *Remote... Remote...* or to the approximate time period, it is an excellent example of the social concerns that characterize a large amount of her work, including *Remote... Remote...* Thus, when Export slices into her cuticles or any other part of her flesh, one could also view this as a metaphor for a slice into the collective memory of society and force it to confront that which it attempts to extinguish or expunge from remembrance.

26 Kristeva, 4.
27 *Landschafts- Zeit- Messe, Gedenkstatte* is a large metal installation sculpture in Allentsteig that cuts through the earth on the riverbank of the municipality, which is situated close to an Austrian military training facility and a cemetery with over 3,900 graves of German soldiers who were killed during the final days of World War II.
28 Ragaglia, 234.
This driving desire to separate oneself from the past or memory, which ultimately shapes future growth, is explored by Kristeva in relation to human development in the context of the abject:

Essentially different from “uncanniness,” more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory. I imagine a child who has swallowed up his parents too soon, who frightens himself on that account, “all by himself,” and, to save himself, rejects and throws up everything that is given to him… He has, he could have, a sense of the abject. Even before things for him are—hence before they are signifiable—he drives them out, dominated by drive as he is, and constitutes his own territory, edged by the abject.29

Thus, in Kristeva’s theoretical framework, the development of a child based upon rejection, fear, and repression mirrors the process of a traumatized society to forget about a violent and devastating past. Like Kristeva’s figurative child, Austrian society attempted to save itself by rebuffing elements evocative of or associated with the past to “constitute its own territory,” or to rewrite history and the present. However, such a method ultimately results in a society structured around that which it fears, a society “edged by the abject.” Export’s work warns against this situation by forcing viewers to confront the pain and suffering of the recent past and the present.

These actions were typically not well-received by the Austrian public. Export recalled the backlash against her work by quoting a 1968 news article written in response to her performance piece Touch Cinema: “‘We don’t have witches now, we live in a modern time, but if we want witches, we must take Valie Export and burn her! She lets people touch her breasts, and she says, celluloid you can burn but Valie Export you can’t.’ There was a great campaign against me in Austria.”30 The discomfort and disturbance that Export caused amongst the vehemently conservative and repressed Austrian public is clear. This reaction underlines the

29 Kristeva, 6.
30 Indiana.
effectiveness of her work in provoking and confronting a society that represses that which threatens its conventions and has attempted to erase its past.

By analyzing Export’s artistic practice in relation to theoretical texts, such as Mulvey’s formulation of the gaze, Bataille’s base materialism, and Kristeva’s theory of the abject—which is indebted to Bataille, one can conclude that she engages with sexual politics in a way that extends to wider social issues. Her work is diffuse and complex, opening it up to a variety of discourses on topics such as marginalization, repression, and the structure of society. Her reliance on confronting the audience with self-inflicted pain and the excesses of the body pushes her work into these more ubiquitous realms of social criticism; these engagements with the audience connect her feminist messages to the aforementioned theories. Thus, while addressing political and historical issues, her critique encompasses and expands upon matters of gender and focuses on philosophy and theories of the body.
Images

figure 1: Valie Export, *Eros/ion*, 1971

figure 2: Yves Klein, *Anthropometries*, 1960
figure 3: Carolee Schneeman, *Interior Scroll*, 1975

figure 4: Valie Export, Still from *Remote... Remote...*, 16 mm., colour, 10 min., 1973
Figure 5: Valie Export, Still from _Remote... Remote..._, 16 mm., colour, 10 min., 1973

Figure 6: Valie Export, _Landschafts- Zeit- Messe, Gedenkstatte <Allentsteig>_, 1998
Chapter 2: Gina Pane
Pain, the Political, and the Personal


French-Italian performance artist Gina Pane (1939-1990) used self-inflicted pain to reflect on sexual politics as a corollary of her interest in civil unrest and marginalization. She was active as an artist from the 1960s into the 1980s, producing geometric abstract paintings and installations in natural settings, but she is best known for her masochistic “actions” from the 1970s in which she typically engaged in forms of self-mutilation. Due to her interest in current politics and events, many scholars have linked her to *Art Sociologique*¹ and the *Internationale Situationniste*² movement, which provided the ideological framework for the student riots of Paris in May 1968.³ In his 2011 essay, “Reviving the Collective Body: Gina Pane's *Unanesthetized Escalation,*” art historian Frédérique Bamguartner, cites Pane’s claim that the events of 1968 were a turning point in her artistic practice:

> Before May 68, all living forces in Paris were working intensely to be able to get beyond the 'Social Criticism Theory' in order to be at peace with 'real life'. In this broken, upset environment, creativity was emerging everywhere. The confrontation of mine with the

¹ *Art Sociologique* was an artistic movement that originated in Paris during 1971 and became the basis of an art collective, started by Herve Fischer, Fred Forest, and Jean-Paul Thenot, that merged aesthetics with sociological discourse. These three artists thought that art should engage the public, oppose traditional and commercially-driven art, and engender social change. This movement is widely seen as a response to the student riots of 1968 in Paris.

² The *Internationale Situationniste* movement started in 1957 and was active until its dissolution in 1972. The Situationists asserted that significant and far-reaching damage was inflicted upon individuals and society by the shift from first-hand fulfillment of desires to the expression of individuality through the consumption and exchange of societies. This experience of the world through commercial means is called the spectacle. Situationists sought to counteract this spectacle by constructing situations that caused people to reawaken and pursue authentic and first-hand desires.

³ Prior to the events of the May 1968 riots, multiple student protests and strikes had occurred as a result of class discrimination in French society. After the initial protest outside the Sorbonne on May 3, a series of other strikes followed, resulting in riots and police brutality, causing many artists and media outlets to sympathize with the protestors. This public support soon dissipated after the more militant and fanatical students gained more coverage. However, many working class individuals, such as factory workers joined in the protests. When the then president, Charles de Gaulle, agreed to an election, as per the demands of the protestors, revolutionary feelings amongst the students and workers faded. de Gaulle was eventually re-elected.
post-1968 public benefitted from a relationship that I could define as ‘Active’ and my work was not only looked at but lived.⁴

Pane’s use of the word “active” is essential in linking the shift of her work towards body art, or “actions,” in the early 1970s with its political implications, as the assertion of individuality following the riots was contingent upon tangible action. According to French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, as cited in Baumgartner: “Explanation does not interest the students anymore… They have come to a point where only action matters.”⁵ Shortly after the events of 1968, Pane staged what is considered to be her first masochistic “action,” *Unanesthetized Escalation* in 1971. Pane’s artistic practice was in a close dialogue with the political events of her time. Scholars such as Kathy O’Dell, Baumgartner, and Pawel Leszkowicz stress the historical and political implications of Pane’s masochistic actions, but never explicitly tie them to feminist critique; the relationship is only hinted at or mentioned in passing. The aim of this paper is to argue that Pane’s use of self-inflicted pain is essential to her conveyance of an extended feminist critique that includes historical and political issues that encompass gender, but also go beyond it; she does not privilege one concern over another in her body of work, effectively mirroring the theoretical and wide-ranging nature of French feminism. To support this argument, I will primarily draw on Kristeva’s idea of femininity as a social position, not contingent upon gender, and Elaine Scarry’s theories of the social and political implications of the body in pain.

Even though Pane was strongly influenced by similar ideas of social critique and political action, such as those espoused by *Art Sociologique* and the *Internationale Situationistes*, she never associated herself with either of the aforementioned politically motivated art movements, nor was she affiliated with a political party or activist cause. Pane considered herself to be part

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⁵ Baumgartner, 254.
of the Body Art movement of the 1970s, while stressing the significance of the sociological body in her work. It is difficult to definitively classify Pane’s work as part of one movement. From Pane’s fleeting and presumptive association with various intellectual and artistic groups, like the ones previously mentioned, one can conclude that her interests were too diffuse and far-reaching in their political and theoretical repercussions to be contained within the boundaries of any one of them. Pane engaged with a multitude of methods, theories, social constructs, personal experience, and historical events in her artistic practice that carry her messages beyond the realms of political and feminist commentary. In this chapter, I will argue that Pane’s performance pieces “Contraction”, Nourriture, Actualités, Télévisées Feu; Unanesthetized Escalation; and Sentimental Action engage with pain to generate a critique of political and historical events, as well as to subvert conventional depictions of the female body, to comment upon the theoretical implications of pain itself, and to externalize the shared pain of all individuals who exist on the margins of society. These pieces simultaneously convey historical and political issues and diffuse gender concerns through Pane’s utilization of self-imposed pain.

Gina Pane’s Feminism and her Passion for the “Other”

Although most contemporary scholars, such as Baumgartner, tend to focus on the political and historical context of Pane’s “actions” from the 1970s, it is important to consider the feminist issues present in her work. The current desire to place Pane’s body of work within intellectual contexts apart from or beyond feminism testifies to the complex and multifarious ideas imbued within her work. The Polish-British art historian Pawel Leszkowicz accounts for this shift in perception of her practice: “Though her feminism is obvious, from a present-day perspective such a generalized feminism may cause meaning to be diluted and to disappear in the
universal." While this statement acknowledges the feminist implications of Pane’s work, it glazes over them in favor of more wide-ranging social and political concerns, implying that feminist critique is separate from, secondary to, a byproduct of these issues, or vice versa. Nowhere is it stressed that the two may be inseparable or inextricably linked through the limits of the body and pain in the case of Pane.

Pane’s work undeniably involves feminist concerns; however, as many scholars have already noted, feminist critique was not her primary agenda. Like Export, Pane utilized the agency of the female body, while subverting socially conventional ways of viewing the female form to comment upon social repression, institutional power, and all marginalized groups. Similar to Export, Pane viewed femininity as a position of marginality, not an innate characteristic dependent upon gender. Thus, Pane’s particular form of feminism fits within Kristeva’s view of femininity: “If femininity then can be said to have a definition at all in Kristevan terms, it is simply as ‘that which is marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order’.”

Thus, any group of people, regardless of gender, who exist on the margins of society, can inhabit the position of femininity. According to French art critic Anne Tronche: “Gina Pane felt a passion for the Other—a passion that she expressed in terms of a global sense of solidarity, reflecting both her political conscience and her ethical beliefs.” The “Other” in this passage refers to anyone who does not fit into the conventional roles of power within society; traditionally, these positions of power are occupied solely by the heterosexual white male. Pane extended this “passion” for the “Other” to an impulse to foster a sense of universality, or a

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“global sense of solidarity,” and, thus, equality. This desire to unify society is exemplified in her attempts to de-anesthetize her viewers and to return to a state of pre-language through the expression of pain, which unites individuals, as opposed to alienating them from each other by highlighting cultural or social differences; everyone feels pain. This interest in and “passion” for members of society designated as “Other” is exemplified by works in which she not only addresses the oppression of women but that of other marginalized groups, such as homosexuals, as in Sentimental Action. By addressing such wide-ranging and inclusive political and social issues, Pane called attention to and elevated those who are viewed as “Other.” Through pain, she aimed to highlight the pain associated with the label of “Other” and make viewers aware of their plight, effectively creating a sense of empathy between the viewers and the represented “Other” and creating a tentative sense of equality. Thus, the primary impetus underlying Pane’s “actions” from the 1970s is a diffuse and theoretical feminism, in unison with the tenets of French feminist thought.

“Contraction” (1973): Constructive Versus Destructive Femininity and the Body in Pain

While certain aspects of feminism are present in almost all of Pane’s work, the second segment of her 1973 Autoportrait(s) performance series entitled “Contraction” overtly addresses feminist concerns (figure 1). In “Contraction,” Pane stood upright and faced a wall, onto which, images of women painting their nails were projected. Her back to the audience and her hand covered with a white handkerchief, she mumbled: “They won’t see anything,” into a microphone, while cutting into her cuticles and lips. In retrospect, Pane claimed that this piece
was: “a total refusal to communicate.”9 However, according to the American art historian Kathy O’Dell:

It seems clear that she [Pane] was using irony here for the specific purpose of problematizing biocultural dualities. The natural color of the blood ironically duplicated the artificial color of the nail polish. Her denial of audience members’ ability to see what she was doing was made ironic by her simultaneous presentation of slides, which were used to entice the audience’s desire to see everything, including that which she was hiding. Finally, she made her own “refusal to communicate” ironic by prearranging with the cameraman to turn the camera on female audience members, thereby forcing them not only to observe the projected images of feminized aesthetics but also to apprehend their own reactions. So, in fact, Pane did communicate, and in a very sophisticated way. That is, she transferred the work of communication to the audience members, pressing them to negotiate the meaning of the piece for themselves.10

In this description and assessment of “Contraction”, one can conclude that Pane’s primary goal was to jolt the audience out of their complacency. However, she arrived at this effect by challenging and subverting binaries typically associated with feminine qualities. As mentioned in my discussion of Export’s Remote... Remote..., the act of pushing or cutting cuticles is perceived as an archetypal feminine activity. Like Export, Pane takes this action to its extreme and it becomes a destructive action, instead of a cosmetic one. This confusion of culturally mandated symbols of gender, particularly of femininity, is further conveyed in the way in which Pane deconstructs the implications of femininity inherent in red lips and nails. In accordance with semiotic theory, she underlines the arbitrary nature of socially constructed signs. In conventional methods of viewing the female body, there is no room for the depiction of imperfections, blood, or female autonomy. According, to Mulvey: “… she [woman] holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.”11 Thus, the female form is styled as passive and


10 Ibid.

contained to please the gaze of the heterosexual male viewer. At the time that Pane staged this performance, characteristics such as red lips and nails signified male desire and said little about women’s own desires or autonomy. Pane disturbed the expectations of the gaze by showing the fragile nature and excess of her body by inflicting wounds upon herself. Additionally, the fact that she actively cut into her flesh defied the desire and presumptions of the male gaze. It is important to note that she conflated her acts of self-mutilation with the act of constructing femininity by painting her lips red with her blood and by drawing a parallel between the red of her blood and the “artificial color of the nail polish.” Furthermore, Pane attempted to awaken the female audience members from their complicity with these actions by forcing them to “apprehend their own reactions” and thereby “pressing them to negotiate the meaning of this piece for themselves.” She was more concerned with engaging the audience and creating a discourse about challenging ideological presumptions than she was with celebrating the female body and blatantly attacking social conventions and structures, as were many Anglo-American feminist artists. I would argue then that this piece conveys a universal desire to awaken the populace from a supposed state of anesthetization in regards to a repressive society. Through her methods of conveying this concern, Pane’s political statement is inextricably bound up in a criticism of society’s oppressive and artificially constructed signifiers of femininity.

Another important aspect of “Contraction,” which was previously mentioned is Pane’s apparent refusal to explicitly communicate with the audience. This denial is significant in that it hints at how language breaks down in the face of pain, whether that pain is physical or psychological. The American scholar, Elaine Scarry, who writes extensively on the nature of physical pain and how it is used to justify war and torture in her 1985 book The Body in Pain, describes this situation: “It [pain] achieves its aversiveness in part by bringing about, even within
the radius of several feet, this absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the
reality of other persons.”12 This situation is primarily due to the difficulty of effectively
articulating pain. There is no effective way to fully convey the extent of one’s own pain to
another person. For the person experiencing pain, it is unequivocally present and certain.
However, for another person, that former person’s pain is elusive; they can only hear about it
secondhand in the form of spoken or written language and visual markers, which are incapable of
effectively translating or expressing pain. Scarry emphasizes this idea and its relation to war:

… the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural
construct the aura of “realness” and certainty… the difficulty of articulating physical pain
permits political and perceptual complications of the most serious kind. The failure to
express pain—whether the failure to objectify its attributes or instead the failure, once
those attributes are objectified, to refer them to their original site in the human body—
will always work to allow its appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power;
conversely, the successful expression of pain will always work to expose and make
impossible that appropriation and conflation.13

Scarry’s emphasis on the relationship between pain and war is especially important in analyzing
the work of Pane, because she frequently inflicts pain upon herself to comment upon or criticize
the collective numbing or paralyzing effects of war, particularly the Vietnam War. According to
Scarry, nations engage in war, as opposed to other forms of action that do not involve injury or
death, because the reality of the injured body is employed to “lend the aura of material reality to
the winning construct.”14 However, the failure to express individual human pain or to refer its
attributes to “their original site in the human body,” results in a perversion of power and debased
regimes that utilize pain or the threat of pain to repress its population. War is used to justify
and materialize abstract political aims and give them an “aura” of reality, no matter how relevant
or irrelevant. Such an abuse of power and failure to understand or communicate pain can also

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13 Scarry, 14.
14 Scarry, 21.
lead to an anesthetized and complacent populace, as the majority of its members are desensitized or unable to empathize with or apprehend the suffering of those directly affected by institutions, such as war. This oppression and numbing of the populace parallels Pane’s criticism of the marginalization and can be extended to members of society who suffer from institutions that ignore or support the prevalence of misogyny, racism, and homophobia, etc.


Pane responded to this collective anesthetization by using pain to, as Scarry says, “expose and make impossible” the conflation of pain with debased materialization and establishments of power. This aspect of Pane’s social and political criticism is exemplified in her 1971 performance piece *Nourriture, Actualités, Télévisées Feu* (figure 2). Prior to the performance, each audience member had to agree to the terms outlined on their invitations, which roughly stated that they deposit approximately two percent of their salaries into a safe at the entrance of the apartment. After depositing the prescribed sum, the audience members witnessed a performance in three parts. The first part consisted of Pane forcing a pound and a half of raw beef into her mouth, subsequently spitting it out. Then, the performance transitioned to Pane watching the evening news (featuring reports on the war in Vietnam) in a noticeably uncomfortable position with a bright light shining in her eyes. The performance culminated with Pane smothering patches of fire in a mound of sand with her bare hands and feet. The location of the performance is important, in that it anchored the action in typical and habitual activities and spaces; Pane chose an archetypal middleclass home, instead of a lofty art space, such as a gallery. Consequently, Pane aimed to cause her audience to reflect on their complacency and habitual comfort by making the definitive space of this repose, the home, alienating and
discomforting. In effect, she emphasized the incongruities in the complacency of seeking comfort and repose in a space where images of injured and maimed bodies were channeled on a daily basis.

According to O’Dell, by requiring audience members to pay a certain amount of their salaries to view her performance, Pane drew attention to her action as a capitalist transaction. In other words, she sought to awaken the audience to their speculation in the idea of a human being as able to be possessed for a price, or as something that can be exchanged, which dominates capitalist ideology. Thus, Pane sought to elucidate and disrupt the perception of the normality of viewing the human body as an object of contractual dialogue. Pane revealed and subverted this pervasive ideology through her terms of audience admission and her use of unsettling masochism. Her goal was to make it difficult for spectators to remain indifferent to social dynamics and institutions that place people in masochistic positions. O’Dell sums up the audience’s reaction to this piece: “Once the structure of the masochistic contract was exposed, however, it became difficult for viewers to remain numb or to consider normal the social dynamic that positioned individuals in masochistic roles.” Pane called attention to the contractual and masochistic implications of contemporary American and Western European society, which the majority of the populace becomes “numb” or complacent to on a daily basis. In effect, she combatted distantiation with the critical potential of masochistic alienation. She attacked and penetrated her viewers’ habitual comfort in an effort to modify their perceptions and behaviors. While this piece explicitly references the Vietnam War and the public’s attendant anesthetization to its effects, one can argue that Pane’s methods mirror those she employs to call attention to the marginalized and oppressed sectors of society. As previously mentioned, she

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15 O’Dell, 59.
16 Ibid.
frequently uses self-mutilation to make it difficult for people to remain complicit with the real life oppression, mistreatment, and resultant psychological and physical pain inflicted upon groups of people, such as women. Ultimately, this approach serves as a way to alert the audience of particular social abuses and incite them to overcome their socially conditioned distance and indifference.


Many of the concerns present in “Contraction” and *Nourriture, Actualités, Télévisées Feu* Feu appear in Pane’s 1971 photographic action *Unanesthetized Escalation* (figure 3). In this piece, a barefoot and bare-handed Pane repeatedly climbed a structure, which resembled a ladder. This structure had rungs which were outfitted with sharp metal protrusions, causing Pane to bleed profusely. This performance lasted for approximately thirty minutes, when she reached a state of exhaustion and was no longer able to continue. Despite this piece’s performative nature, it was not performed in front of an audience, but in Pane’s studio with only the photographer, Françoise Masson present. In accordance with Pane’s other performances, which took place in front of an audience, a *constat* (photo-documentation) was created with the assistance of Masson. In this particular piece, she viewed the production of the *constat* as more important than the presence of the audience:

... the *constat*, in Pane’s view, transmitted the performance most efficiently. In fact, she made clear that the *constat* was not separate from the performance; instead, it was part of her performative language, as it allowed her to guide more closely the viewer’s gaze in his/her encounter with the performance.  

While the audience was not present for this performance, Pane’s interaction with her viewers and their response to her work was more important than her feminist self-affirmation. She alternatively created performances where an audience was either present or not, depending upon

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17 Baumgartner, 249.
the structure of the piece and the message she intended to convey. This array of performative exhibition methods attests to the diversity of concerns present in her work. By only allowing viewers to witness her performance through a *constat*, Pane restricted the audience’s access to her work to “guide more closely the viewer’s gaze in his/her encounter with the performance.” The *constat* for *Unanesthetized Escalation* consists of sixty-nine expanded contact prints, which were attached to a wooden panel the same size as the ladder-like structure that Pane climbed. The actual ladder was placed next to the panel, only a few centimeters apart. The photos of the *constat* depict every step of her ascent and descent in excruciating detail. Each photo depicts a close-up shot of Pane’s hand or foot either making contact with or hovering above a rung outfitted with the sharp metal protrusions. It is significant that each photo only depicts a disembodied foot or hand. This fragmentation of Pane’s body hints at fetishization of the female body. According to Mulvey, whose essay, while describing dominant social forms presented in Hollywood cinema, has greatly influenced contemporary art historical discourse:

> Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis as visually ascertainable, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organisation of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus, the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified.

One way in which the male viewer can escape this anxiety is by: “… instituting a complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.” Thus, fetishization is a strategy of viewing associated with the heterosexual male gaze. If the male viewer focuses on a part of the female anatomy not associated with a lack of the phallus, then castration anxiety is not elicited. Thus, fetishization, or fragmentation, is a way of signifying or accommodating male

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18 Mulvey, 6.
19 Ibid.
desire. Pane plays with this idea by fragmenting particular components of her body. However, she complicates and subverts the gaze by presenting the excess and abject nature of her body by emphasizing the pain and blood associated with her voluntary action. Consequently, Pane presented her performance via the medium of a constat in order to stress the feminist implications of this piece through the framing lens of the camera. While the majority of scholars tend to analyze this piece as a response to the Vietnam War and the student protests of 1968, the feminist connotations of this work are present in Pane’s mode of presentation. Thus, pieces such as this were not merely political and ubiquitous, but also personal and psychological. Pane imbued her work an impressive range of meanings and concerns. This aspect of her work is often overlooked. She was able to simultaneously de-anesthetize audience members and challenge the meaning behind typically feminine signifiers.

In addition to her expression of feminist concerns, Pane used abjection and self-inflicted pain to imbue Unanesthetized Escalation with a very specific historical and political commentary. As previously mentioned, she started performing masochistic “actions” in the early 1970s as a response to the student revolts of May 1968. Additionally, Pane intended her work to be a criticism of the conflict and violence surrounding the Vietnam War:

After fixing the metal ‘object-ladder’, studded with sharp metallic shards, to a wall of my studio, I climbed/escalated barefoot and bare-handed, up and across its full length.

Escalating-assaulting a position with a ladder- strategy, which consists of climbing the ‘steps’.

American escalation in Vietnam.

Artist- artists too escalate/ascend.

Pain- physical pain in one or several parts of the body.

Internal pain, deep, suffering. Moral pain.20

20 Baumgartner, 251.
This passage conveys Pane’s desire to conflate her personal pain with the pain of those affected by the Vietnam War. Her movement up the ladder outfitted with “sharp metallic shards” was meant to be an analogy for the controversial escalation of violence in Vietnam and the unrest it engendered. Pane’s sequential mention of “physical pain,” “internal pain,” and “moral pain” suggests the response she expected her work to elicit from viewers. I would propose that she intended to awaken her viewers from the state of numbness with which they regarded the war and those who were most affected by it. As with all of the other pieces discussed in this thesis, Pane’s use of masochism addresses political issues and oppression as well as the physical and psychological forms of pain typically experienced by marginalized groups in society.

**Sentimental Action (1973): Marginalization and Sexual Orientation**

Another work that uses self-mutilation to comment upon feminist concerns and social marginalization is Pane’s 1973 performance *Sentimental Action* (figures 4 and 5). This action consisted of three parts confined within three different rooms of the Galleria Diagramma in Milan. In the first room, three photographs of roses in silver vases were displayed on the walls. In the center of the floor, there was a black velvet square with a single white rose adhered to the middle. Pane inscribed a caption for this room, which read: “Dedicated to a woman by a woman.”

In the second room, a slide was projected onto the wall. The slide depicted a portrait of Pane from the waist down wearing a pair of white pants. In her lap, was a bouquet of white roses. In the third room, Pane engaged in a ritualistic performance. Radiating out from Pane, were a series of rings drawn in white chalk on the floor. Within each of these rings, the word “donna,” which is Italian for woman, was written. The audience, seated within these rings, was

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21 Leszkowicz, 6.
invite-only and composed entirely of women. In this performance, which consisted of a series of carefully orchestrated and repeated poses, Pane dressed entirely in white. She initially lay on the floor holding a bouquet of red roses, alternately pushing it away from herself and holding it close. She then assumed an embryonic position, while hugging the bouquet. She proceeded to remove the rose’s thorns and pressed them into a straight line along the interior of her forearm. She then removed the thorns, allowing her blood to trickle down her arm, and sliced the palm of her hand with a razorblade. She extended her bleeding arm to the audience, offering her blood to the women surrounding her. As Pane cut herself, the voices of two women were audible. These voices, one Italian and one French, read letters to each other, indicating a romantic relationship. These letters also narrated the death of one of the women’s mother. Her lover sent her a bouquet of roses as solace. Pane repeated these actions with a bouquet of white roses. The white roses, saturated with Pane’s blood, eventually turned red. The performance ended with Frank Sinatra’s “Strangers in the Night” played in the adjoining room.

On one level, these wounds were intended to display the fragility of the human body. However, Pane makes sure to point out that, in her work, self-mutilation always carries with it further implicit theoretical implications: “The wound? It lies at the centre of a process of identifying, recording and locating a certain malaise.”²² She visibly caused harm to herself to convey her own sense of discomfort or being unwell to her audience. This “malaise” can be translated to result from her social marginalization as a woman, particularly in this piece, which overtly addresses gender and feminist issues. I would argue then that Pane was creating a visible and external manifestation of the internal pain that results from being a woman and subsequently oppressed by society.

However, there is another layer of social criticism implicit in this work. While Pane explicitly addresses gender in this work, she perhaps also addresses the marginalization relating to sexual orientation. Pane identified as a lesbian and, thus, I would suggest that this performance communicated the psychological pain of the marginalization associated with being both a woman and a homosexual. This aspect of the piece is evident in the content of the letters that the two female voices read. Significantly, Pane causes physical pain to herself as the letters are recited, effectively communicating the suffering related to a relationship that is not accepted by society. It is also important to note that Pane bleeds onto a symbol of one woman’s affection for her partner, further emphasizing the pain and heartache attendant with society’s oppression of such relationships. Leszkowicz argues for this element of Pane’s artistic practice: “Pane internalized and exposed on her body the aggression towards homosexuals that exists in the outside world.”

Consequently, Pane used self-inflicted wounds to physically manifest and convey not only the pain of a particular homosexual relationship, as that pain can be extended to a more general experience: that of being a homosexual in a hostile society. Pane used a case study to make her performance more emotionally resonant and empathetic to the audience present. Thus, while Pane appealed to and commiserated the oppression of her gender through self-inflicted wounds with the other women present, she also attempted to convey the internal and unspeakable pain associated with those who experience marginalization based upon sexual preference. In a way, this fact supports the central claim of this paper, that Pane employed self-mutilation in her masochistic actions as a way to push the implicit political and social criticism of her work beyond feminist concerns. She explicitly engaged with feminist issues in this piece, while adding another layer of social criticism; she simultaneously incited her female audience members to ruminate upon their own situation and that of a typically marginalized group.

23 Leszkowicz, 10.
The ritualistic nature of *Sentimental Action* further enforces the idea that Pane intended to convey the pain of living as a lesbian in an unfriendly society. Many prominent homosexual artists after Pane frequently combined self-inflicted pain and elements of ritual to comment upon the oppression and suffering experienced by the homosexual community. Two of the most notable of these artists are the American photographer Catherine Opie (born 1961) and the American performance artist Ron Athey (born 1961). Like Pane, both of the artists used self-inflicted pain as a sign of the suffering resulting from external homophobic aggression.

Leszkowicz asserts that this anguish is exemplified in the self-portraits in which Opie ritualistically carves patterns or images into her skin. In particular, her 1990 photographic self-portrait entitled *Self-Portrait/Cutting* illustrates the violence and pain that is the cost of the love between two women in a homophobic society (figure 6). In this photograph, Opie serves as the center of the composition. She stands in front of a backdrop of decorative green fabric, her back to the viewer. On her back is a childlike drawing of two stick figures wearing skirts holding hands, while standing in front of a rudimentary representation of a house. Above them, an equally childish sun peeks out from a fluffy cloud. The childlike style of this image harkens to archetypal depictions of family that children first learn to draw. However, the entire image is rendered in flowing red lines, the blood from the razorblade wounds filling the canvas of Opie’s back. Consequently, this image speaks to the near impossibility of such a happy family, as society opposed it then even more than it does now. As Leszkowicz states: “The wound cut into the body is a home for the love of two women.”

While Opie does not explicitly cite Pane’s work as an inspiration for her own, as Leszkowicz states, there are many similarities that suggest she was familiar with and influenced by the latter. Leszkowicz states: “Both use performance and autobiography and raise the subject

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24 Leszkowicz, 5.
of lesbian identity. Moreover, both share themes of suffering, pain and relationships between women.”

Both women utilized ritualistic self-inflicted pain to comment upon the position of homosexual women in society, establishing ritualistic pain as an effective method of social criticism. It is very likely that Opie was familiar with this method employed by Pane in relation to gender and sexual orientation. Thus, one can conclude that Pane effectively conveyed her message about the suffering of women and homosexuals in a hostile society through her masochistic actions, as those same methods are reflected in the work of prominent younger artists who sought to communicate a similar message.

Likewise, Ron Athey, who rose to prominence around the same time as Catherine Opie, is famous for his use of masochistic actions to convey the pain of social marginalization associated with homosexuality. Diagnosed with AIDS at the age of twenty-six, Athey gained prominence in the early 1990s as a performance artist who specialized in shamanistic rituals of extreme corporeality. The early 90s was a particularly important time for this kind of art, as the nations was still reeling from the AIDS epidemic and the culture wars in America. At this time, naked bodies, sexuality, and body fluids were especially frightening. This method of extreme body art has been described by director of the Flynn Center in Vermont as: “a tactic to survive overwhelming sadness, anger, and despair.”

This strategy for conveying and coping with the pain and anger that homosexuals felt during this time is reminiscent of the work of Pane and Opie. Thus, one can conclude that Athey is undeniably, if not explicitly, influenced by the masochistic actions of Pane. This influence is most clearly manifested in the last scene of Athey’s 1994 performance at the Walker Center in Minneapolis entitled Four Scenes in a Harsh Life (figure 7). In the third scene, Divinity Fudge, a 300-pound black man in drag enlisted by

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25 Leszkwicz, 1.
Athey for this performance, was subjected to a series of deep cuts that Athey meticulously patterned onto his back. The blood from these wounds was blotted onto sheets of white paper and strung up over the audience on clotheslines. This action is frequently described as a reclamation of violence as ritual. Furthermore, this scene can also be read as an attempt to physically manifest the psychological and emotional wounds imposed upon homosexuals. By returning the physical traces of these wounds back to a captive and mortified audience, this performance can also be seen as an affirmation of resilience and a refusal to be passively marginalized. Obviously, this ritualistic mortification of the flesh parallels the work of Pane and Opie. However, as a man, Athey’s work does not possess the same gendered implications. Yet his methods of conveying the pain of marginalization based upon the social stigmatization of his sexual orientation are strikingly similar. Thus, one can conclude that by employing self-mutilation in her art, Pane actively and effectively moved beyond feminist concerns in her work to address the plights of other marginalized groups in her work.

By using pain as a way to critique particular historical events, primarily the Vietnam War, and marginalization based upon sexual orientation, Pane adds another critical layer to her work that both acknowledges and exceeds issues of the singular feminine. Like Export, Pane employs self-mutilation to comment upon the general anesthetization of her countrymen. However, her work contains a more personal dimension in relation to the pain of marginalization she experienced due to her sexual orientation. Ultimately, Pane uses pain to question and subvert Western ideas of gender, collective repression and anesthetization, and marginalization.
Images

figure 1: Gina Pane, *Autoportraits*: “Contraction,” 1973
figure 2: Gina Pane, *Nourriture, Actualités, Télévisées Feu*, 1971

figure 3: Gina Pane, *Unanesthetized Escalation*, 1971
Figure 4: Gina Pane, *Sentimental Action*, 1973

figure 5: Gina Pane, *Sentimental Action*, 1973

figure 7: Ron Athey, *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*, 1994
Chapter 3: Orlan
Pain, Technology, and the Contemporary Body

The Birth of Orlan and Carnal Art

Typically, those who have heard of the work of Orlan (b. 1947) misinterpret it as nothing more than a series of lavishly theatrical events. She is evidently best known for her infamous surgical performances. According to theatre scholar Sam Shepherd: “[The] rather general sense of her origins- a time when art and politics were connected- is something which has not received much elaboration by those who comment on Orlan’s work.”¹ Her early work, prior to her surgery performances, is often overlooked and does not usually figure into analyses and discussions of her art. However, her work as a whole demonstrates the crisis of modernity and its shift into and the shaping of postmodernism.² Consequently, I will attempt to show how these performances form part of a body of work that is a constantly developing and cohesive whole as well as how they link earlier body art to more contemporary issues. From the beginning of her career in the early 1960s, Orlan has displayed a notable interest in issues of gender and the body, evidenced in the 1964 photographic portrait Orlan Gives Birth to her Loved Self and in the 1974 performance piece Documentary Study: The Head of Medusa. I will argue that throughout the trajectory of her career, this interest has evolved and expanded to incorporate other social concerns, such as socially conditioned perceptions of ideal beauty, the industry and culture surrounding cosmetic surgery, technology, and the contemporary body.

In her work the ideas of rebirth, taboos, and issues of sexual differentiation are constant elements. The name Orlan, which she adopted in 1962 at the age of fifteen, supports this

² Shepherd, xix.
assertion. Born Mireille Suzanne Francette Porte, Orlan claims to have changed her name to take on a new identity and no longer accept what she referred to as her current state of “slow death.” Additionally, the name Orlan is neither masculine nor feminine: “I am man and woman,” Orlan claims. Orlan’s subsequent artistic output reflects her desire to subvert gender categories, while reinventing herself and violating social norms. Orlan provides a visual account of the birth of this alter-ego in one of the first pieces she professionally produced. In her 1964 photographic self-portrait, *Orlan Gives Birth to Her Loved Self* (figure 1), Orlan appears in aerial view, sitting in the center of a black and white composition on top of a table covered with a white sheet. Her left hand is raised to her head in a gesture of contemplation, while she passively gives birth to an androgynous and inert body, a mannequin. Both the head of Orlan and the head of the mannequin are turned in the same direction, as if mirroring each other, underlining the idea that they are one and the same. This image depicts Orlan in the process of giving birth to herself, a violation of nature. With this image Orlan officially announced the death of her former feminine self and her rebirth as the artist Orlan, who subverts gender and natural laws. This image can be seen as both Orlan’s introduction to the art world and a prefiguration of the concerns she deals with throughout her career.

By examining the concerns addressed in her earlier work combined with the issues present in her later work, one can conclude that her artistic practice mirrors many of the strategies used by Export and Pane, yet she does not categorize her work as body art. Orlan emphasizes her distance from the body art proliferating in the 1970s and 1980s in the *Carnal Art Manifesto* (1989). This brief text explains the intent of her work and why it is distinct from the work of other artists who use their body as their medium and whose work may include elements

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3 Orlan: *Carnal Art*, (Flammarion; Bilingual edition, 2004), 9.
4 Ibid.
of masochism: “As distinct from ‘body art,’ carnal art does not claim pain as a form of Redemption or a source of purification.”\(^5\) According to Orlan, carnal art does not seek to preach to or redeem the audience or the artist. Instead, it aims to generate discourse surrounding the status of the body in regard to medicine, biology, and other possibilities for “defiguration” and “refiguration” offered by current technologies.\(^6\) Carnal art, according to Orlan, does not fixate on a terminal plastic result, but instead focuses on the modification of the body and the public discourse it generates. Due to her later emphasis on technology and anesthetics, Orlan is almost never linked to Export and Pane. However, like these artists, her work has a strong visceral quality that engages with and extends beyond feminist theory. One of my goals with this chapter is to explore how Orlan situates pain and how her methods are similar to or different from those of Export and Pane. My primary assertion will be that she bridges the concerns of the aforementioned artists with the predicament of the contemporary body in relation to technology.

Rather than embrace pain, Orlan asserts that pain is anachronistic and praises the use of local anesthetics and epidurals: “Pain is an anachronism. I have great confidence in morphine.”\(^7\) Yet she also applauds and stresses the importance of confronting and embracing the viscera of the body, which one is able to better comprehend when the agony of pain is removed through technological means; this conviction is exemplified by the fact that she broadcast her Reincarnation surgeries to galleries and museum as they occurred. Even though Orlan dismisses the relevance of pain, when taken in the context of her entire body of work, her increasing focus on elements of the excesses of the human body and the visceral process of surgery, rather than

\(^6\) Ibid.
the end result, allows her work to address issues that effectively move between the feminine singular and universal subjectivity. According to sociologist Victoria Grace:

Pain itself is of no interest to Orlan. She is clear with her interlocutors that she is not using pain in any masochistic way as a part of her artwork. She distances herself ardentely from those artists for whom this is their focus. She disdains forms of painful mutilation or self abuse as media for art. This is important. Her statement, however, that "pain is just an alarm system" and that it "has nothing to do with art or constructing anything" is anachronistic. Researchers in the field of pain no longer consider pain as "just an alarm system", and it is difficult to see how an embodied experience so imbued with the complexity of language and cultural meaning could have nothing to do with art. Admonishing pain, like admonishing death, strikes me as reductionist in a way that does not do justice to the complexity, subtlety and radicality of Orlan's art. The enigma of pain as unknowable to the other, her comedy of the anaesthetised, laughing, flayed body, is integral to Orlan's seduction of appearances in the surgery-performances.8

Grace argues that despite Orlan’s claims to the contrary, pain is an essential part of her surgery performances. Her engagement with pain is not as straight-forward as it is with practitioners of body art, but it is “integral to Orlan’s seduction of appearances” and the theoretical import of her work. However, her approach to pain is different than that of Export and Pane. Unlike her earlier counterparts, she is not nostalgic about the natural body and does not seek an authentic pain or pleasure. She is more concerned with exploring what happens when the body and pain are denaturalized. She plays across categories and questions what used to be viewed as authentic. However, she still holds onto the idea of the temporal or carnal body. Pain is still an indispensible element of her work, albeit in a different way. Through her use of surgery and local anesthetics, Orlan highlights the visceral nature of the body while creating an ecstatic and religious out of body experience. This religious ecstasy is underlined by the blissed out expression on Orlan’s face before and during surgery as well as her engagement with baroque imagery (figure 2). Pain (or the lack of pain) figures predominantly into Orlan’s later work, but the body she presents is no longer a site of truth or authenticity, as it is in the body art of Export

and Pane. Instead, she uses her body to explore issues of identity and simulation in the contemporary world.

In contrast to Orlan’s earlier feminist body art, her later carnal art uses elements of pain (or the absence of pain) and the abject to create art that is not only feminist, but which also addresses concerns of technology and the human body. In this thesis, I will contend that through the employment of pain, masochistic imagery, and surgical intervention as an artistic method, Orlan was able to effectively expand her practice and the social criticisms it conveys. With increasingly visceral and technological means, Orlan uses her body as a battleground to generate a discourse surrounding social, political, and ethical concerns. She moves from addressing issues of identity politics in relation to feminism and intersexuality, as per *Orlan Gives Birth to her Beloved Self*, to identity politics in relation to themes of post-humanism and the contemporary body.

**Documentary Study: Medusa’s Head (1974) and Hair Performance/Without Hair (1978): The Visceral Female Body and the Subversion of Western Conventions**

While body art was at its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, Orlan’s art focused on feminist concerns related to the socially constructed nature of gender. Orlan’s art from the 1960s is dominated by black and white photographs depicting the contortion of her nude body into defiantly awkward positions that counter conventional feminine poses. These photos are all composed in the same manner as *Orlan Gives Birth to Her Loved Self*, on top of a table covered in a white trousseau. It was in the 1974 performance piece *Documentary Study: Medusa’s Head* that Orlan put her trousseau to a more visceral or unsettling use. This work marks a noticeable shift in Orlan’s artistic practice towards an engagement and fascination with the excessive qualities of the human body in conjunction with feminist concerns of the essential female body.
In this piece, the audience members entered a large room, one after another. In the room was a huge frame onto which a white sheet was stretched with the words “Étude documentaire: la tête de Mêduse” surrounded by red, yellow, and blue marks. The red marks were created with blood. Harkening to the idea of women’s handicrafts, an embroidery frame was placed in the center of the sheet. At the center of this embroidery frame, the sheet was pierced with a hole. Behind this sheet, and visible through the hole, Orlan lay with her vulva exposed and dilated with spring clips. During this performance Orlan was menstruating and her pubic hair was painted blue and yellow. A magnifying glass was also placed over her vulva, allowing viewers to see her menstruating genitals in immense proportions. A video screen showed the head of the man or woman who was about to see what lay behind the sheet, while another showed the head of the person who was witnessing it. As audience members exited the room, a passage from Sigmund Freud’s 1922 essay “Medusa’s Head” was distributed amongst them. This extract contained the following sentence: “The Devil took to flight when the woman showed him her vulva.”

Such a longstanding and widespread reaction to the sight of female genitalia reflects the conventional ways that traditional Western artists throughout the ages have depicted female versus male nudity. Not surprisingly, the typical method of delineating female genitalia stands in stark contrast to the traditional method of representing male genitalia. In the majority of classical and Renaissance art, male nudity and female nudity are both common. However, male genitalia is frequently depicted in anatomical detail, complete with pubic hair, as per Michelangelo’s 1501-1504 marble sculpture David, while female genitalia is often obscured and void of pubic hair, as in Titian’s 1538 oil on canvas painting Venus of Urbino (figures 3 and 4). I would suggest that Orlan intended to call attention to and subvert Western customs of depicting and viewing the female nude, particularly her genitalia. By emphasizing the appearance of her

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vulva and framing it through a hole in the center of an embroidery frame, Orlan highlighted the discrepancy between the typical representations of the feminine, as emblematized by embroidery, and the natural visceral quality of the vulva, which also symbolizes the female. This juxtaposition of the conventional demure modes of art associated with femininity with the viscerally confrontational presentation of the menstruating female genitalia is particularly jarring, given the aforementioned traditional Western perceptions and expectations of human nudity and gender. Furthermore, by showing and emphasizing the reactions of the viewer, Orlan underscored the fact that she was subverting artistic conventions and audience assumptions.

While Orlan’s interest in feminist theory and the human body is evident in her earlier work, it is in *Documentary Study: Medusa’s Head* that she first noticeably embraced elements of the abject and visceral body in the service of social commentary. This method would continue to enrich and complicate the issues addressed by the majority of her subsequent work, culminating in her infamous series of plastic surgery performances.

Orlan’s desire to overturn Western artistic tradition is underlined by her recurrent use of baroque aesthetics. This is a theme that developed early in her career and continues into the present. In her 1978 performance piece *Hair Performance/Without Hair* at the Sammlung Ludwig Museum in Aachen, Germany, Orlan wrapped herself in the baroque drapery of her trousseau, the folds of which recalled baroque imagery of Madonnas and Saint Teresa, such as Giovanni Battista Salvi’s 1650 oil on canvas painting entitled *Madonna and Child with Cherubs* (figures 5 and 6). Initially, she stood on a pedestal, holding a paint palette covered with surgical tape. As the performance progressed, she slowly undid her gown, revealing a photographic dress that depicted her naked body. As she revealed the photographic representation of her genitals, she roughly yanked out her pubic hair, which had been previously shaven and attached to her
dress. She then pressed her pubic hair into the surgical tape on the palette. Using a paintbrush she held between her teeth, she painted on her pubic hair and triumphantly brandished the palette covered with pubic hair and surgical tape. In an earlier version of this performance, *With Hair/Without Hair*, which was performed at the Louvre in 1978, Orlan performed the same series of actions in front of Jacques Blanchard’s oil on canvas baroque painting *Venus and the Three Graces Surprised by a Mortal* (figure 7). Orlan’s blatant focus on female genitalia called attention to and created an obvious contrast to the depiction of the nude female figures in this painting, as the pubic area is consistently obscured. Art critic and curator Eugenio Viola asserts that she was aware of art historical trends and conventions in her work:

> Orlan’s work sets out from an extremely critical position, going against the Christian tradition that ‘rejects the body and especially the body-pleasure principle… It suggests a guilty body, suffering body, a body that needs to suffer.’ That is why all the saints and Madonnas that the artist presents are always ecstatic and exultant. A baroque declines in the feminine, as it were, and seeking to seduce.¹⁰

Orlan was attracted to the baroque for its subtly subversive nature in depicting moments of spiritual ecstasy that bordered on the sexual. However, she pushed this critical edge further and explicitly underlined the visceral nature of the female body and sexuality, which was frequently obscured or only hinted at in baroque art. Using her body as her canvas, she sought to generate discourse surrounding the gender politics inherent in the history Western of art. This interest in recognizing and celebrating the more “base,” or less demure, aspects of the female body became obvious in her 1974 performance *Documentary Study: Head of Medusa* and continued to shape and influence the trajectory of her subsequent work.

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¹⁰ Viola, 31.
**Documentary Study: Ectopic Pregnancy (1978): The Baroque Operating Theater**

Orlan’s newly expressed fascination with the visceral qualities of the body was augmented by a burgeoning attraction to pain and its social implications. Arguably, this interest entered into Orlan’s body of work in 1978 after she had to be rushed to the hospital during a symposium on video art. At the hospital, doctors operated on Orlan to save her life, as she had an ectopic pregnancy. Orlan took a video crew along with her to film the operation. She insisted that she remain conscious throughout the surgery, under the influence of a local anesthetic. As a result, Orlan watched her operation as a conscious spectator: “I wasn't in pain and what was happening to my body was of profound interest to me.”

This incident and its video evidence were turned into a performance, entitled *Documentary Study: Ectopic Emergency*.

Orlan drew parallels between what she witnessed in the operating theater and the baroque imagery she appropriated in many of her works. She viewed the surgeon as a priest-like figure and his assistants as fellow worshippers at a Catholic mass. The surgical light from above mirrored the divine beams of light that shone down on the figures of Bernini’s 1647-1652 baroque marble statue *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (figures 8 and 9). In this sculpture, Saint Teresa, who experienced spiritual visions, receives a visit from an angel. The angel holds a spear in suspension, level with Teresa’s chest, implying that it has already or is about to stab her, while her head is thrown back in what appears to be sexual ecstasy. This artwork premised on a conflation of pain, religion, and pleasure impressed Orlan greatly and would play a large role in her later work. In an interview with Stuart Jeffries from *The Guardian*, Orlan recalls: “For many

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11 Jeffries.
12 Saint Teresa described the vision which served as the basis for this sculpture in the following physical, even sexual terms: “… In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul content with anything but God.”– Françoise Meltzer, and Jas Elsner, *Saints: Faith without Borders*, (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 327.
years, I had appropriated baroque imagery in my work, especially in relation to Catholic art. So when I lay on the operating table, the parallels between the operating theatre and the Catholic mass were not wasted on me.”¹³ This event marks the point in her career when Orlan began to connect the concerns and methods of her earlier work with the issues of pain, or the numbing of pain, and technology that would define her later work.

Her overt acknowledgment and incorporation of baroque imagery is also important to consider. Philosopher and contemporary art scholar Christine Buci-Glucksman describes the baroque in the following manner:

There is from the start an opposition between full and empty, an excess of meaning and forms, or an emptying… There is therefore this internal bipolarity of the Baroque. The history of the Baroque is also the history of the contestation of power. From here comes this tension which carries the Baroque beyond the Counter-Reformation… On the one hand, a history turned towards a time wild with rage, towards a history of evil. And on the other, Prospero, magic, the aerial, elevation, lightness.¹⁴

In the baroque, opposing elements or ideas are present at the same time. This “internal bipolarity” leads to a sense of transgressive and intensity that is often associated with baroque imagery. This “contestation of power” or conventions is what allows baroque imagery to continue to thrive in the work of contemporary artists, like Orlan. Buci-Glucksman’s description of the baroque aligns with Orlan’s juxtaposition of the visceral elements of the body with spiritual ecstasy. As in Bernini’s Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, Orlan equates spiritual ecstasy and intensity with the simultaneous presence of pleasure and pain. This conflation of two seemingly opposite feelings becomes more explicit in her surgery performances where she frequently assumes a blissed out expression from the effects of local anesthetics. While this comingling of pleasure and pain is present in the work of body artists, such as Export and Pane, Orlan is more

¹³ Jeffries.
interested in reaching an out of body epiphany than she is in affirming the body as a site of truth. She combines pain and pleasure to reach a state of ecstasy that brings her outside of herself and goes beyond identity. Through this baroque religious ecstasy, I believe that Orlan attempted to create an out of body experience that removed the body from its instrumental and mechanical uses. This idea speaks to contemporary issues of the body and technology. There is no natural body; bodies are always using tools to shape themselves and form some sort of superficial identity. The body and its attendant identity is a simulation. This argument also supports the assertion that Orlan’s body of work is a cohesive and constantly developing whole, effectively bridging concerns of feminist theory, pain, and the human body in relation to technological interferences.

**The Black Virgin (1983) and the Deleuzian Body**

Orlan’s most explicit combination of baroque imagery with overt masochism is her series of photographic self-portraits entitled *Black Virgin Wielding White Cross and Black Cross* from her 1983 photographic series *Skai and Sky and Video* (figure 10). In these photographs, Orlan once again dons the drapery of a baroque Madonna figure. But this time, according to scholar Rocío de la Villa, the material of her baroque drapery echoes the shiny black leather aesthetics characteristic of the S&M community. In keeping with her earlier interest in baroque painting and sculpture, Orlan “plays with the notion of the hidden automaton—a *body without organs*, a desiring machine—and only shows the “carved” parts: the face, hands, feet and, only exceptionally, one of the breasts (retaking the iconography of the breastfeeding Madonna).” In this way, Orlan plays with the idea of fragmentation and fetishization, which objectifies the body

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16 Villa, 28.
and reduces it to a collection of individual parts; the individual as a whole is no longer recognized. As previously discussed in my chapter on Gina Pane, Mulvey argues that fragmentation and fetishization are common strategies employed by traditional Western filmmakers, and by extension artists, to depict the female form. Orlan subverts and complicates this idea. Villa argues that by calling attention to what is hidden and what is revealed in traditional Western representations of the female form, while also referencing the S&M community, Orlan links her interests in feminism and the excesses of the body with French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s idea of the body without organs.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the body without organs is a state after or before existence; this is an idea that they continuously develop in their three collaborative books: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Anti-Oedipus, and A Thousand Plateaus. The body without organs is a term that refers to the unhierarchical deeper reality that lies beneath the world of appearances: “The BwO is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and signifiances and subjectifications as a whole.”¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari also argue that everyone is in the process of becoming a body without organs without ever attaining it: “You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit.”¹⁸ Individuals constantly strive for and fail to become a body without organs and transcend cultural mandates and conventions. To fully understand this notion and how it relates to Orlan’s oeuvre, the human body needs to be understood as a whole, consisting of different components, or organs, that function individually for the benefit of the collective whole: I believe that this perception of the body can be extended to serve as a metaphor for the structures of society. Every individual in society functions as an organ contributing to the

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 150.
success of the whole. The role that each individual fulfills is often mandated by a superior organ or organism. An individual creates strife or societal disapproval if he or she refuses to fit into the role he or she is placed in. As soon as an individual is born into society, that individual absorbs the values and expectations of society. If that individual does not obey cultural mandates, then he or she is typically viewed as insane or perverse. Thus, individuals adopt the unnatural binaries of society, such as gender norms, to fit into society as a functioning organ. The collective whole “imposes upon it [the body without organs] forms, functions, bonds, dominant, and hierarchized organizations, organized tendencies.”\textsuperscript{19} Prior to and after existence, free from the constraints of society, the individual exists as a body without organs.

As previously mentioned, Deleuze and Guattari assert that everyone strives to become a body without organs, while still existing on earth, through different means, which result in different levels of success:

This is how it should be done. Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continua of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO.\textsuperscript{20}

In this passage, Deleuze and Guattari stress the importance of restraint in visualizing and working towards becoming a body without organs. Thus, I suggest that, experimenting with drugs and masochism brings an individual closer to becoming a body without organs. But excess and a lack of restraint could prove to be harmful. Deleuze and Guattari assert that one should


\textsuperscript{20} Deleuze and Guattari, 161.
view the body without organs as a horizon, not a goal. This idea ties together Orlan’s engagement with the visceral body, anesthetics, and religious imagery and ecstasy. I feel that Orlan combines these aspects in her work to attain a state similar to Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the body with organs. In this way, Orlan ultimately seeks to subvert social constraints, such as perceptions of the body and pain, gender roles and a definitive identity tied to the body.

For the purposes of my argument, the above passage is not so much important for its message of restraint than it is for its link between the idea of the body without organs to the S&M community, which is referenced in Orlan’s work. By combining her earlier focus on feminism and baroque imagery with the notion of the body without organs, Orlan strengthens her feminist subversions of cultural hierarchies and arbitrary signifiers of femininity. She also solidifies her interest in viscera, pain, and the human body, which would inform her infamous plastic surgery performances. Through the suppression of pain with local anesthetics, Orlan once again acknowledges the idea of the body without organs; she replicates a state prior to or after temporal existence. This idea of the body without organs is carried over in her surgery performances. Orlan describes her act of reading during surgery in the following way: “I read the texts for as long as possible during the surgery, even when my face was being operated on. As a result, in the last surgeries, this produced the image of a corpse during autopsy whose speech still continued, detached from the body.”

Orlan pushes her subversion of binaries even further to include that of life and death. She also creates a visual manifestation of Deleuze’s body. In this work, she presents an experience that goes beyond and outside of the temporal

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22 Orlan, “This is My Body... This is My Software,” *Orlan: A Hyrid Body of Works*, ed. Simon Donger, Simon Shepherd, Orlan (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 42.
By embracing the body without organs, she transcends the hierarchical power structures and perceptions of society.

**The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan (1990-1993): Collapsing Identity, Gender Distinctions, and Overturning the Role of the Passive Patient**

From 1990-1993, Orlan underwent a series of nine surgeries, collectively entitled the *Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan* (figures 11 and 12). The aim of these surgeries was to undermine and call into question Western ideals of feminine beauty. Treating her face as a collage, she had her features surgically altered to emulate classical beauties from the canon of Western art history. For example, she instructed plastic surgeons to give her the chin of Sandro Botticelli’s Venus from his tempera on canvas painting the *Birth of Venus* (1484-1486), the lips of Francois Boucher’s Europa from his oil on canvas painting *L’Enlèvement de l’Europe* (1747), the eyes of Diana from a sixteenth century Fountainebleu painting, and the forehead of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa from his oil on poplar wood painting (1503-1505), among others (figure 13). During these surgeries, Orlan remained conscious, only being administered local anesthetics to manage the pain. Each surgery was recorded and fed to live international audiences via satellite. This video footage was also shown in several galleries in Europe and the United States as well as the Sydney Bicentennial. Harkening to her preoccupation with baroque spectacularity, she redesigned each operating room as a theatrical studio. Each surgical performance was painstakingly choreographed. Renowned fashion designers, such as Paco Rabanne and Issey Miyake, provided costumes for Orlan to wear during each “performance” (figure 14). Poetry and philosophy were read aloud while music was played. Notably, passages from Kristeva’s *The Powers of Horror* were frequently recited, emphasizing Orlan’s engagement with the theories of femininity as a position and the abject mentioned in my chapters on Export and Pane (figure 15).
This detail is important, because it once again establishes Orlan’s interest in the indeterminacy of gender and the visceral body in relation to societal constraints and repression.

One of her last surgeries, the widely publicized *Omniprésence* (figure 16), which was performed in 1993, again reveals Orlan’s interest in subverting widely accepted beauty standards (figure 15). In this surgery, she had protusions, which were typically used to augment cheekbones, implanted in her brow to emulate the protruding brow of the *Mona Lisa*. Orlan’s protusions were much more prominent than those of the *Mona Lisa*; the end result appears as two symmetrical horns, which Orlan continues to sport and highlight with glitter to the present day. Instead of getting plastic surgery to adhere more closely to conventional and culturally mandated beauty ideals, she got plastic surgery to purposely subvert them. In a way, this action shows Orlan looking to the horizon of becoming a body without organs. She refuses to accept the role of femininity she was born into, which places a high value on particular expressions of beauty. She steps out of the expectations of this role and refuses to perform her defined function within the collective social organism, or society. She undermines and calls into question societal conventions and binaries. During this surgery she read from a text by literary critic Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni: “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.”23 I believe that by including a reading from this text, Orlan underlines her intent to dislodge the idea of the ability to possess a definitive identity, particularly one that is articulated by the body. The outside never reflects the inside and whatever is represented is constantly shifting and changing. Through these surgeries, Orlan does not achieve an ideal identity, but what could almost be viewed as no identity at all, emphasizing the futility of the assumption that there is a definable identity.

23 Buci-Glucksman, 10.
Orlan’s subversive intent is made even clearer when analyzing the deeper meaning of why she chose specific canonical images to emulate. While the figures she gets surgery to resemble were chosen for their embodiment of classical feminine beauty, Orlan claims that she also chose them for their mythic and symbolic connotations. I would argue that she chose Diana because she refused to submit to the gods or men, she is “active and even aggressive.”24 This fact further enforces the interpretation of Orlan’s surgeries as a work that subverts canonical depictions of the female form. She not only combines classical ideals of beauty to create an unsettling almost post-human visage, she also uses her body as a form of language. According to Orlan: “Dismantling the face is the same as breaking through the wall of the signifier and getting out of the black hole of subjectivity.”25 Orlan here seems to view the defiguration and refiguration of the face as a way to refute dominant oppressive cultural signifiers and transcend the need for an identity tied to the body. However, one could argue that she breaks down one set of signifiers and substitutes another. She conveys feminist notions of aggressive autonomy through the eyes of Diana. She writes: “Carnal Art transforms the body into language, reversing the Christian principle of 'the word made flesh', the flesh is made word.”26 Yet, “dismantling the face” also allows one to escape from the constraints of subjectivity, which is inherently linked with socialization and culture. Subjectivity is formed through an innumerable series of interactions with society and is not formed within a vacuum.27 By purposely refusing to adhere to the conventions and mandates of one’s own society, one is more easily able to open oneself up

25 Villa, 28.
26 Orlan, “Carnal Art Manifesto,” 123.
27 Subjectivity often differs from one culture to another. Different cultures form different experiences and perceptions of reality. This fact accounts for culture shock, where the subjectivity of one culture is incomprehensible to another culture.
to a more universal way of experiencing the world. This state of mind brings one closer to being a body without organs, prior to and after temporal existence.

Orlan’s appropriation of different facial characteristics of historic paradigms of Western female beauty is also one that challenges the boundaries of identity. Western humanism places a great deal of importance on the idea of individual identity and its basis in the natural human body. Orlan challenges this idea by taking her body into her own hands and replacing what is perceived to be real— the genetically determined body— with surgical fabrication. In this manner, Orlan questions the notion that there is a natural body, as all bodies use exterior tools or methods to fashion themselves in some way, albeit (usually) in less extreme terms. She also provides a critique of the contemporary body as fashioned and influenced by technology. Victoria Grace links these ideas to French philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacra:

Indeed, following Nietzsche and Baudrillard, there is no 'truth' behind the surface; no real behind the appearances; no substance to grasp, no God, no 'divine'. And for those deriving comfort from such metaphysical concepts, the real is cruelly seduced and abandoned. Through the surgical transformation of her face into a collage of the chin of Botticelli's Venus, the nose of Gérard's Psyche, the eyes of the school of Fontainbleau's sculpture of Diana, the lips of Moreau's Europa, and the brow of Leonardo's Mona Lisa, Orlan becomes a simulacrum.28

In this passage, Grace argues that Orlan’s imposition of a collage of supposedly ideal feminine features is less of an overt feminist statement than it is a criticism of the postmodern human body and society. Rather than attempting to subvert conventional Western notions of ideal feminine beauty and create her own manifestation of “the flesh made word,” Grace asserts that Orlan intended to disrupt the comfort that many find in the conviction that there is truth behind the surfaces. Orlan appropriates a series of characteristics, the value of which have been arbitrarily determined by social phallocentric constructs, in an attempt to prove that there is no deeper reality reflected in surface appearance nor behind that appearance. Her ultimate appearance has

28 Grace.
no origin in genetics or a concrete universal truth; the “ideal” characteristics she adopts are social constructs, as artificial and arbitrary as her surgically altered face. Orlan makes her body into a simulacrum and violently demonstrates the relevance of Baudrillard’s words in today’s society, which is inundated with varying degrees of surgical and non-surgical body modification: "the simulacra is never what hides the truth - it is the truth that hides the fact that there is none." Baudrillard claims that there is no inherent truth that the simulacra of outward appearances obscure; there is no inherent or genetically true identity. However, the presence of the simulacrum is the truth that hides the fact that there is no truth. Thus, Orlan, through her surgical performances and their results, unhinges Western ideology, which praises the autonomy and inherent truth of individuality. This aspect of her work carries further implications in relation to gender and the compulsion to celebrate gender difference, as there is no inherent truth bound up in gender or any other aspect of identity. Gender, like identity, is a fluid and constantly shifting construct, the absence of which is masked by outward appearances.

Another important aspect of Orlan’s performance-surgeries is the fact that she is one of the first artist to use plastic surgery to challenge its associations with rejuvenation and the embellishment of the ideal self. With these surgeries, she calls into question the role of the human body in our current society, and perhaps also explores how it may change and evolve in future generations through new technologies. In her Carnal Art Manifesto, Orlan makes her stance on cosmetic surgery clear:

Carnal Art is not against cosmetic surgery but, rather against the conventions carried by it and their subsequent inscription, within female flesh in particular, but also male. Carnal Art is feminist, that is necessary. It is interested not only in cosmetic surgery, but also

29 Ibid.
advanced techniques in medicine and biology that question the status of the body and the ethical questions posed by them.\textsuperscript{31}

As her statement shows, Orlan is not against cosmetic surgery. She is against normative standards of beauty and “the dictates of a dominant ideology that impress themselves more and more on feminine flesh… and masculine flesh.”\textsuperscript{32} Carnal art is concerned with the female body and its place within societal power structures, but it is also interested in how society increasingly pressures and imprints itself upon the male body. Consequently, one can conclude that Orlan’s surgeries acknowledge the feminine as well as the universal body. With her surgeries, she sought to deconstruct scrutiny and disciplining of female and male bodies with medical technologies. Even though Orlan conveys many feminist concerns in her work, she extends those to the male body. In effect, she scrambles up the fate of the female body with that of the male body.

The relevance of the ideas that Orlan’s work conveys to the male body is supported by the fact that male artists also engage with similar concerns. For example, another artist who explores the effect of technology on the human body is Cypriot-Australian performance artist Stelarc. Primarily concerned with extending the capabilities of the human body, the majority of his work considers the idea that the human body is obsolete. Stelarc’s performances range from suspension events where he hung his entire body from hooks piercing his skin to his infamous 2006 *Ear on Arm* project, in which he used a skin expander to create excess skin on his left forearm (figures 17 and 18). A biocompatible scaffold was then surgically inserted into his left forearm and the skin suctioned around it to create the shape of the ear. After all of these years he’s still perfecting the shape using stem cells and surgery to make the ear more prominent. In

\textsuperscript{31} Orlan, “Carnal Art Manifesto,” 123.
\textsuperscript{32} Bouchard, 63.
his work, the body becomes the object of physical and technical experiments that tests its limitations. According to Stelarc:

The skin has been a boundary for the soul, for the self, and simultaneously, a beginning to the world. Once technology stretches and pierces the skin, the skin as a barrier is erased… The desire to locate the self simply within a particular biological body is no longer meaningful. What it means to be human is being constantly redefined.33

In Stelarc’s artistic practice, the obsolete body refers to the centuries of prejudices and preconceived notions about the human body that prevents its enhancement through technological means. For Stelarc, technology defines what it means to be human. However, in the contemporary era, the body has failed to advance with the technology it produces; it has become inadequate. Thus, Stelarc, like Orlan attempts to bring individual experience outside of the biological and temporal body. Identity associated with the body is constantly being undermined and redefined. According to Stelarc: “our philosophies are fundamentally bounded by our physiology.”34 Thus, Stelarc views technology as a means through which to dissolve the limitations of the human body and expand our perceptions of the world. I believe that this aspect of his work can be related back to the idea of the body without organs and the desire to attain a higher level of truth or consciousness, apart from social and biological constraints. In conclusion, Stelarc’s work, while seemingly very different, tackles many of the same issues of the body and technology addressed in Orlan’s work.

In addition to the collapse of identity and gender distinctions, Orlan’s surgery-performances also capsize many conventions and procedures of the medical world, particularly in regard to surgery. In addition to subverting the end goal of plastic surgery, to be a more “ideal” self, she upsets the standard role of the passive patient who fully submits to the will of

34 Ibid.
the surgeon and his or her staff. Unlike most cosmetic surgery patients, she refuses general anesthesia and functions as a conscious and active participant in her surgery. She also controlled certain aspects of the operating theater, such as the costumes the surgical staff wore and the inclusion of music as a background track during the surgery. According to scholar Gianna Bouchard:

Orlan challenges the dominant gaze of the spectator by taking charge of the scene and animating her subjugated position as patient. Her direct reclamation of the passive surgical body arguably draws more attention to certain dynamics at stake in this work, as we look at Orlan looking at her own anatomization. Where the inscription of power on the anatomized patient or corpse is manifest in the literal cutting of the body, she subverts this, whilst simultaneously revealing its operations, by remaining conscious and active throughout.35

Bouchard argues that Orlan denies the spectator of the operation the voyeuristic pleasure of watching the inert and unresponsive body of the patient. According to Bouchard, she diminishes the spectator’s sense of power in viewing the anesthetized patient. This formulation of the gaze parallels Mulvey’s formulation of the male gaze in relation to the passive female form. The gaze of the medical institution in relation to the passive and infantilized is called the clinical gaze. While Orlan’s work subverts the male gaze, it also subverts the clinical gaze, empowering the patient.36 Additionally, by focusing on the patient, often regardless of gender, the clinical gaze in Orlan’s work relates to Kristeva’s idea of femininity existing as a position that encompasses marginalized groups in society.

Due to her mobilization of plastic surgery and refusal to condemn the practice, Orlan is often accused of being anti-feminist by propagating rituals of female submission. However, her

35 Bouchard, 65.
36 This component of her artistic practice links Orlan to photographer Jo Spence and performance artist Hannah Wilke. Spence, who battled breast cancer, used phototherapy to explain how she felt about her powerlessness as a patient, her relationship to doctors and nurses and her infantilization whilst being managed and processed by a state institution. In a similar fashion, Wilke also used photography in her Intra-Venus project to challenge her role as a passive patient subjected to the dominating clinical gaze.
work goes beyond such assumptions and she exorcises society’s systematic repression of female aggression of any kind. Instead of excising the masculine, she assimilates it. Increasingly, her work extends beyond concerns of feminine subjectivity and works to “struggle against the innate, the inexorable, the programmed, Nature, DNA (which is our direct rival as far as artists of representation are concerned), and God.” Her work is often viewed as scandalous by the media, because it forcefully and violently works against dominant ideas within society. Furthermore, one could argue that her work never ceases to disturb viewers because it never ceases to raise questions. It does not offer purification or salvation. Instead, it continually opens a multidisciplinary discourse that refuses to generate a definitive answer or scheme of ethics.

Images

figure 1: Orlan, *Orlan Gives Birth to her Loved Self*, 1964

figure 2: Orlan, *Omniprésence*, 1993
figure 3: Michelangelo, *David*, carrara marble, 17.0 ft., Galleria dell’Academia, Florence, 1501-1504

figure 4: Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, oil on canvas, 46.9 in. x 65.2 in., Uffizi, Florence, 1538
figure 5: Orlan, *Hair Performance/Without Hair*, 1978

figure 6: Giovanni Battista Salvi, *Madonna and Child with Cherubs*, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, Loyola University Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Kowar, 1650
figure 7: Jacques Blanchard: Venus and Three Graces Surprised by a Mortal, oil on canvas, 66 in. x 85.8 in., 1631-1633

figure 8: Gianlorenzo Bernini, The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, marble, life-size, Santa Maria della Vittoria, 1647-1652
figure 9: Gianlorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, marble, life-size, Santa Maria della Vittoria, 1647-1652


Figure 16: Orlan with forehead implants, post *Omniprésence* operation
figure 17: Stelarc, *Ear on Arm Suspension*, 2012

figure 18: Stelarc, *Ear on Arm Project*, started in 2006
Conclusion

After examining the ways that Valie Export, Gina Pane, and Orlan used their work to embrace the reality of pain as an inescapable part of human experience, one can conclude that their artistic practices have implications beyond the feminine singular, while still acknowledging it. By exploring a universal aspect of the human experience that is typically feared or repressed in society, these artists drew parallels between their own marginal positions in society and collective social repression, the personal pain that results from ostracization and oppression, as well as the relationship between the human body and technology. Kristeva’s theories of femininity and abjection is indispensable in linking pain to the excesses of the human body to cultural repression: it is designated by society as uncontainable, monstrous and potentially threatening to the social order.

Kristeva’s theory in relation to collective social repression is most applicable to the work of Valie Export. Export clearly engaged with feminist ideas in the way she challenged typical depictions of the female body in actionist art, a movement that she is often associated with. Rather than accepting the passive role of women as objects to be abused in the service of Actionist fantasies, Export and a group of other female artists established Feminist Actionism. Export utilized self-harm, as in Eros/ion, to assert her own agency and subject-hood through doing; she was not under the direction of a domineering male force. Furthermore, she effectively subverts the expectations of the male gaze by presenting a naked female form riddled with self-inflicted cuts. This infliction of pain has further implications when one considers Kristeva’s theory of the abject. Kristeva associates self-inflicted pain and blood with the excesses of the human body and everything that is considered to be marginal in a society. Marginalization occurs when society fears or wants to forget something that threatens to upset the established
social order. In *Remote... Remote...*, Export links the marginalized excesses of the body with the desire to repress painful memories. In Kristeva’s theoretical framework, the development of a child based upon rejection, fear, and repression mirrors the process of a traumatized society to forget about a violent and devastating past. Like the abused children in the archival photograph, Austria had experienced a traumatic past and was trying to repress its cultural memory, resulting in a collective complacency. With her work, Export sought to awaken Austrian society from its self-imposed anesthetis and acknowledge its past in order to facilitate future growth.

While acknowledging the political and the social, Pane’s work contains more personal elements than does the work of Export. Influenced by the student riots in Paris of 1968, Pane’s work possesses an undeniable political aspect, while also addressing the feminine. Works such as *Unanesthetized Escalation* engage with pain to generate a critique of political and historical events, as well as to subvert conventional depictions of the female body. This work speaks to both the fetishization of the female body and the subversion of that fetishization as well as escalation of violence in Vietnam and the French Public’s apparent disinterest or complacency towards such events. Like Export, Pane sought to awaken society from its complacency in relation to certain established perceptions. But Pane also used self-inflicted pain to convey the pain that those who are marginalized based upon their sexual orientation experience. By embracing ritualistic methods in *Sentimental Action*, Pane created the image of herself, as a lesbian, sacrificed on the altar of a hostile society. The use of ritualistic self-mutilation to address the pain of marginalization is also employed by homosexual male artists, such as Ron Athey. This fact supports the idea that, while Pane acknowledged the feminine, her methods and her work extend to other social issues, regardless of gender. Thus, Pane’s work is in line with
Kristeva’s idea that femininity is a position of marginality, not entirely dependent upon gender. In the case of Pane and Kristeva, the feminine encompasses other social groups and issues.

Orlan’s work departs somewhat from the work of Export and Pane in that she describes it as distinct from body art. She solidified this idea in her *Carnal Art Manifesto*. In this manifesto, Orlan claims that her work does not seek to preach to or redeem the audience or the artist. Instead, it aims to generate discourse surrounding the status of the body in regard to medicine, biology, and other possibilities for body modification offered by current technologies. Due to her notorious emphasis on technology and plastic surgery, Orlan is almost never linked to Export and Pane. However, like these artists, her work has a strong visceral quality that engages with and extends beyond feminist theory. Her earlier, and less known works, such as *Documentary Study: Head of Medusa* subvert and *Hair Performance/Without Hair* challenge typical Western depictions of the female form by emphasizing the visceral elements of the female form, like menstruation and pubic hair, that are typically obscured in Western society. Her interest in feminism is also apparent in her plastic surgery performances, as she questions Western standards of ideal beauty and makes them monstrous; however, the elements of pain and technology raise questions related to identity and the body’s growing relationship with technology. Furthermore, Orlan denies the spectator of the operation the voyeuristic pleasure of watching the inert and unresponsive body of the patient by remaining conscious throughout her operations. She diminishes the power of the spectator and the clinical gaze in a way that parallels how many feminist artists have subverted the male gaze. Consequently, work subverts the male gaze, it also subverts the clinical gaze. Additionally, by focusing on the patient, often; regardless of gender, the clinical gaze in Orlan’s work relates to Kristeva’s idea of femininity
existing as a position that encompasses marginalized groups in society. In a way, her cohesive body of work bridges the feminist body art of Export and Pane with more postmodern concerns.

These artists embraced what was and continues to be excluded by Western society in order to offer a critique of a variety of societal expectations and norms. They use their bodies and pain to not only explore issues of gender, but also the role that the discourse surrounding gender plays in more universal contexts. Through an analysis of specific works by these artists in conjunction with theories, such as: Kristeva’s ideas of the abject and marginality as a position (not dependent upon gender), Scarry’s exploration of the body in pain and its social connotations, and Deleuze’s formulation of the Body without Organs, one can conclude that feminism, pain, and social criticism are inseparable from each other in their artistic practices. These artists do not discount the feminine, they acknowledge and exceed it. Furthermore, the idea that an individual must not inflict pain on his or herself and go to great lengths to avoid suffering, be it psychological or physical, is pervasive in contemporary culture. I would suggest that this ideology, or compulsive desire to ignore the excesses of the body, prevents one from fully experiencing life. Perhaps the next step in researching this topic could be to examine the effect of this perspective on contemporary society in more depth and how artists can call attention to and critique this tendency in other effective ways.
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