

ORLAN and Performative Sacrifice:

A Response to Alyda Faber and Carey Lovelace

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Much ink has been spilled in the analysis of ORLAN's *Surgery-Performances* (1990- 1993). As the artist acknowledges, "few images force us to close our eyes: death, suffering, the opening of the body," and her nine highly orchestrated surgical procedures of the early 1990s embody all of these images, rendering them highly challenging to observe and conceptually controversial.¹ Alyda Faber's contribution to this discourse outlines two provocative suggestions: that this quality of intolerability, the one that elicits a visceral response in viewers and causes the immediate urge to close our eyes, is one of a sacred nature; and that, through the Sainte-ORLAN facet of her identity, the artist's surgical performances are to be interpreted as the self-sacrificial acts of a parodic postmodern saint.² The idea, that by sacrificing her body ORLAN is able to experience or offer experience with the divine, certainly recalls many a saint's hagiography, which seems to fit within the Sainte-ORLAN facet of the artist's identity; however, even considering the sense of parody, imbuing Sainte-ORLAN with self-sacrifice or martyrdom seems to directly conflict with the artist's expressed intentions for her work. Or, if Sainte- ORLAN is a martyr by exemplifying excesses encouraged by "contemporary patriarchal capitalist societies," I'm not convinced the *Surgery-Performances*, dually titled *The Reincarnation of Sainte-ORLAN*, are the self-sacrificial actions.

Faber likens the effect of viewing ORLAN's surgeries to the experiences of French philosopher Georges Bataille, who sought to dissolve his self into nature around him by methodically and ritualistically remaining in the midst of bodily violation. Living consciously and constantly in such close quarters with death, Faber argues, granted Bataille a certain

¹ ORLAN, quoted in Alyda Faber, "Saint Orlan: Ritual As Violent Spectacle and Cultural Criticism," *TDR*, 46, No. 1 (Spring, 2002), 90.

² Faber, (2002), 85-92.

freedom, a euphoric sense of the divine in desacralizing the body itself.³ ORLAN's work, however, desacralizes the body to *challenge* the divine. In her first surgery-performance of the series, ORLAN reads from *La Robe* by psychoanalyst Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, which discusses the idea of skin as a burden forced upon us. *La Robe*, and by proxy ORLAN, considers skin a constant social conflict, the enemy of personal relationships, and a wildly inaccurate reflection of our true identities. Through these surgical procedures, ORLAN endeavors to control her skin and thus the reflection of her inner being, and in taking this control, assumes a God-Creator role. When an artist alters her canvas, she is a creator; when the canvas is a human being, does she become the Creator?

The cornerstone of Faber's argument rests in the assumption that ORLAN is against cosmetic surgery, or sees it as an excess of contemporary society; but as Carey Lovelace points out, the opposite is true. Lovelace notes that the artist is actually enthusiastic about future advancements in personal modification, and looks forward to the ability to "change our bodies as easily as our hair color."⁴ For Lovelace, this is a difficult sentiment to reconcile with ORLAN's feminism. (Perhaps a more easily digestible feminist explanation of the *Surgery-Performances* would be the one-dimensional protest of standards of beauty.) Unless the artist's comment was meant to be satirical itself, which given her commitment to the idea of body modification (in her work, and in often speaking publicly about this issue, most recently in Dublin at the *Future of The Body* conference in 2014), would make her entire identity parodic, the sentiment complicates Faber's argument. Entering into that line of thought—that everything could be parody—

³ Faber (2002), 87.

⁴ ORLAN, quoted in Carey Lovelace, "Orlan: Offensive Acts," *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), 13-14.

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significantly redirects this analysis, so ORLAN's words will be interpreted as expressed, moving forward.

ORLAN's advocacy of body modification severs the *Surgery-Performances* from Faber's notion of parodic sainthood; if the artist uses her constructed postmodern sainthood to reveal the dangerous excesses of society, she would have to authentically accept those excesses in the first place in order to embody them as a parody of self-sacrificial sainthood. Another complication arises in considering the identity of Sainte-ORLAN as a framework to explore the relationship between Christianity and the body, specifically the female body. In ORLAN's words, "Religion is always against women, and Christian art wants us to not touch bodies, to choose between good and evil. But all my work is about good and evil."⁵ Sainte-ORLAN is only a sacrificing saint if she acknowledges the evil and willingly endures it. On the contrary, Sainte-ORLAN does not

interpret evil as something to endure, but rather something that she lives with harmoniously with good.

Sainte-ORLAN challenges the representation of women in the history of Christian art; sometimes she acts as a foil to the artist's Black Virgin or impure woman, and sometimes she confronts the male gaze. It would be inaccurate to assign a sacrificial quality to this facet of the artist's identity, unless it's the performativity of sacrifice of which we discuss. In that sense, Sainte-ORLAN confronts Christianity again, and the idea of sacrificing the body for salvation or healing. Still, the critique returns to religiosity and Christianity, specifically, as opposed to being a primarily social critique.

⁵ ORLAN quoted in Stuart Jeffries, "Orlan's art of sex and surgery," *The Guardian* (July 2009).

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ORLAN's denouncement of pain also conflicts with the idea of self-sacrifice; if she perceives no pain, and endeavors to perceive no pain, how does she endure the pain for others or embody the pain of the act? In her *Carnal Art Manifesto* (1989), ORLAN outlines a clear distinction between her work and Body Art, which is hinged on and informed by pain. However, this painless self-sacrifice can be interpreted as a purely performative self-sacrifice, and then aligns with Faber's discussion of ritualized practices. She describes ritualization as "[ordering] the ambiguities and indeterminacies of experience into distinctions between good and evil, light and dark, spirit and flesh, above and below, inside and outside."⁶ For ORLAN, there is no ordering of these ideas, no boundary between, no distinctions to be made, because she lives and works in a state of dualities. The ritualized violence of cosmetic surgery is amplified by ORLAN's portrayal of it—she is without pain, which is the very idea that ritualizes the violence of cosmetic surgery in the first place. Instead of watching her experience the violence, we observe a woman socializing, reading, and posing throughout the procedures.

Lovelace sees the Surgery-Performances as very much in line with the rest of the artist's oeuvre, "involving a conflated and ever-unstable relationship between artist and role, that is the starting point for this ultimate 'change of costume'."⁷ In this respect, the surgeries themselves can be seen as purely theatrical, and not just their accompanying components (dancers, posters, costumes, etc.). Lovelace, who was present at the 1993 Sandra Gering Gallery live viewing of *Omnipresence*, the 7th Surgery-Performance of ORLAN's, sees the artist as a woman who has spent her career "generally being 'wrong'."⁸ Her tone in describing ORLAN's work as a constant

pushing back against boundaries, conventions, laws, and nature itself, suggests she

⁶ Faber (2002), 87.

⁷ Lovelace (1995), 18.

⁸ Ibid.

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struggles to trust the content or the authenticity of the work. For Lovelace, it seems that being devoid of an unambiguous narrative, ORLAN becomes difficult to understand completely, and her work veers into the territory of being about initial visceral reactions, as opposed to lingering reflection. Perhaps the visceral reaction is the language with which Sainte-ORLAN communicates, and that alone should inspire contemplation.

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