

A Paper

Negotiating with Skin

BY YU-CHIEN WU

The French artist Orlan between 1990 and 1993 had her face re-figured in reference to five Western art history icons. These re-figurations were carried out in a series of nine surgeries entitled *Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN.1*² She has launched a radical revolution in terms of the conception of identity; however, there are also misgivings in response to her claim that 'skin is a mask of strangeness, and by refiguring my face, I feel I'm actually taking off a mask' (Prosser 61). Reflecting Orlan's concept of skin as a *mask* to the works of Nina Arsenault and BREYER P-ORRIDGE, I explore how the resistance to performative power is brought about during the negotiation with this mask.

In response to Orlan's assertion that skin equates to a mask, Jay Prosser points out that 'Orlan's image for the superficiality of her face only raises anxious question [*sic*] about the meaning of bodily matter for identity. If skin is a mask, where is the self in relation to the body's surface?' (Prosser 62). From a more eclectic point of view, Jill O'Bryan tries to allay Prosser's suspicions and emphasises the double-edged function of a mask: 'the mask is generally an object that can be worn or removed at will, it invents a complex register of identity; it conceals one identity at the same time that it reveals another' (89). Although O'Bryan makes a valid point, she does not explore the fact that the act of identifying skin with a mask encloses a complex array of power relations. Drawing on Judith Butler, I will unpack this analogy between skin and mask by re-formulating the relations between skin and identity in terms of performativity.³ Orlan performs the process of appropriating an image to be herself rather than projecting her interior self onto the surface, so that at first

1 According to Orlan, the 'suturage of bodies as images [is] followed by the suturage of bodies as identities'; this comment reveals the strategy by which Orlan makes herself over into a hollow representation through the intervention of surgical procedures. As a consequence, the currently prevalent viewpoint is that the work of Orlan fundamentally breaks down a series of binary opposites that for centuries have dominated the view of how the self is situated in the external circumstances, such as interior/exterior, subject/object and natural/unnatural.

2 See, for example, Jill O'Bryan (1997), Michelle Hirschhorn (1996) and Amelia Jones (1998).

3 It is not a novel idea to apply Judith Butler's theory to Orlan. For example, Kathy Davis alludes to the similarity in her discussion: 'her [Orlan's] performances resonate with the radical social constructionism of Butler and her celebration of the transgressive potential of such performativity' (107). However, Butler pays very little attention to the performative power of the mask itself, and the 'masquerade' is emphasised instead.

glance, her work seems to be in line with Butler's position that the internal essence is the *fabricated* effect that is actually a 'performatively enacted signification' (*Gender Trouble* 46, 185). Yet on closer inspection, an ontological split between Orlan and Butler appears: Orlan has her skin torn and lifted with blood spilled, whereas Butler's usage of mask corresponds to no physical root.⁴ Furthermore, Butler swiftly shifts her focus to the analogy of a masquerade, while leaving the matter of the mask untouched. I therefore suggest that if Orlan's performance includes any sense of performativity, it is because it brings into relief the performative mask, which calls for a rethinking of how body, skin and identity interact with one another.

To bring Butler's notion of bodily surface, which she refers to more in terms of its symbolic meaning, together with Orlan's corporeal practice, it can be said that the series of surgical procedures is the embodiment of performativity, which casts a light back onto the mask and makes manifest its normative power, rather than a performance that represents the flowing dynamics of identity⁵. Parveen Adams argues that Orlan's work reveals what she calls 'the emptiness of image,' because '[the face] becomes a mask without any relation of representation. [...] Orlan uses her head quite literally to demonstrate [...]: *there is nothing behind the mask*' (145). Yet the question remains: if the face becomes a mask that paradoxically reveals and conceals the emptiness behind, how does this mask carry out the task? It is important not to mistake the images Orlan creates after the operations for the metaphor of the mask, and therefore I suggest that the process of face alteration does not lead to the triumph of self-creation, but actually indicates a forced negotiation with the regulatory power that the skin possesses. I propose that there is no face of Orlan which never became a mask, that is to say, her face is a ready-made mask which has been, and been inscribed as, the seat of her identity. Inversely, if her skin had never been a carrier of identity, her project would have inevitably failed since it would have forfeited the grounds for its challenge, that is, the self captured in an 'inner/outer picture' (36-7). Therefore, her skin appears to be a performative mask whose power 'exceeds the performer,' in Butler's words (*Bodies That Matter* 234). In this sense, Orlan's act of putting on new figures⁶ should not be read as putting on new masks, but rather as *reciting* the famous portraits in art history in an odd occasion⁷. Thus I voice my reservations about Orlan's optimism that a mask can be taken off by refiguring the face. But the following discussion will show that the convertible function of a mask is not as important as the tricks that artists may well play in their performance in order to subvert the rigidity of their given identities.

4 The mask for Butler is an imagined surface, a surface of signification, which makes sense at the level of the imaginary where the identification takes place. 'The mask is taken on through the process of incorporation which is a way of inscribing and then wearing a melancholic identification in and on the body' (*Gender Trouble* 67).

5 According to Butler, performativity distinguishes itself from performance in terms of its insurmountable nature that deprives the performers of volition (*Bodies That Matter* 234).

6 Orlan: 'I changed my face by putting a figure, i.e., representation, on my face.'(83)

In other words, Orlan chose these characters, 'not for the canons of beauty they represent... but rather on account of the stories associated with them'.

The way in which Orlan has enacted her resistance to the continuity between body, self and identity is to close the gap between them. This method runs the risk of reinforcing the distinction between inside and outside images⁸; however, this risk plays a crucial role in sustaining the mediation between the artist and her skin. In order to pulverise the coherence of body and identity, which is based on the illusion of an inner core opposed to an outer appearance,⁹ Orlan highlights the collapse of this differentiation at the risk of reiterating it. This unstable situation, in fact, opens up possibilities of reversal, which hinges on whether Orlan has been successful in her attempt to show that there is nothing behind the mask, thus cancelling our desire to find some hidden truth. In addition, Orlan has made herself Orlan and her body the art of Orlan.¹⁰ But as I said earlier, it is not possible to take off the mask as easily as she assumes. She demonstrates that it is a void that the mask is covering, rather than an inner authenticity, and thus, the power of the mask is crippled. With the skin taking on the dual role of regulated, and at the same time, regulating mask, the artist cannot choose what kind of mask to put on, but is pushed into a negotiation.¹¹ Although I adopt the concept of a comprehensive disciplinary power in my interpretation of the mask, I am not suggesting that we should be completely pessimistic in the face of gender regulation and the normalisation of beauty standards.¹² The mask is a third being that takes the place of the subject, belonging to neither the body nor the artist. Like a dealer in a gambling game, although never an objective one, the skin that receives the effects of disciplines and technologies interferes in the interplay between the body and its given identities. The artists enter the game with their strategies as their bargaining counters, and in the very process of negotiation emerges a specific kind of agency.

A similar ambition to dissolve the difference between an inner self and an external body, between the self of the artist and the object of art, can also be discerned in the work of Nina Arsenault, who underwent sixty surgical procedures to feminise and beautify herself but retained the male genitals. Challenging not only transsexual identities of male-to-female or female-to-male, but also the prevalent transsexual narrative that a right spirit is trapped in

8 'I thought that in our time we had begun to have the means of closing this gap; in particular with the help of surgery [...] that it was thus becoming possible to [match up the internal image with the external one]' (qtd. in O'Bryan 19).

9 It is argued and demonstrated by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*.

10 'In 1971, she rechristened herself Saint Orlan and embarked on performance-art pieces done in voluminous costumes with one breast bare, a project lasting nearly 20 years. Three years ago, she began the surgical project, "The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan". She would be a sculptor, with her flesh as her clay. [...] Several friends of long standing said they did not know her given name.' (Fox)

11 This reading is close to how Butler describes the power of gender performativity, but is here manipulated to serve a strategically different purpose. She says, 'insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of "man" and "woman." These are for the most part compulsory performances, ones which none of us choose, but which *each of us is forced to negotiate*' (*Bodies That Matter* 237, italics added).

12 Certain Foucauldian feminists, such as Cressida J. Heyes and Margaret A. McLaren, who defend and restate the idea of subjectivity and agency in Foucault's works, provide constructive grounding for my position.

the wrong body,¹³ Arsenault refers to 'the idea [...] of if I wasn't born in a man's body, I would be just like everyone else. There's this push to normalize trans identities and trans histories, and I want to be a part of that conversation because I actually don't think I'm normal' (*Fey*). There are two things I would like to point out in her self-portraiture: first, her post-surgical images with bruised face are displayed together with her pre-surgical photos and the exaggerated portraits.¹⁴ Second, a picture of her failed breast augmentation and visible penis renders her work a 'drag of the drag',¹⁵ a drag that dissolves even the line between real and fake. More sensational than a wig or breast push-up pads, the scar on the flattened left chest is a harsh eyesore, which mocks the truth of both the perfectly round right breast and the other sex organ underneath it.

In reply to the question regarding her penis, she says, 'it's not something I think about getting rid of. I believe I am a woman *inside*, there's no doubt about that. It's more important to be socially accepted as a woman and *look like* a woman' (*Sexy transsexual*, italics added). In order to shake the constraints of dominant gender identities, Arsenault negotiates with her mask, shuttling between two poles: it either conceals what she has, or it appears as what she wants. In a similar but not identical way to Orlan, Arsenault runs the risk of falling back into the trap of inner/outer and identity/body dualism when she claims to be a woman *inside*. However, taking together this account, the penis in the photograph and her hyper-feminine images creates her drag show, which troubles the relations between inner and outer, feminine and masculine, authentic and artificial at a subversive level, which means, the outside is feminine, fake but beautiful, the inside is masculine, real but bruised; the outside is of penis, wounded but real, the inside is of woman and of wound.¹⁶

In conclusion, the reverse exists in the work of BREYER P-Orridge, which refers to the couple, Jacqueline Breyer, also named Lady Jaye and Genesis P-Orridge, in their project *Breaking Sex*. The project is based on the enigma that our DNA and the Self make up an endless circuit, to the extent that there is no way of deciding whether DNA is prior to the Self or the other way around, because sometimes the Self is imagined to be a consciousness inside the body, but at other times it is identified with the biological body (BREYER P-ORRIDGE). Lady Jaye and P-Orridge decided to¹⁷ cut themselves up so that they came to resemble each other more and more, so that a third being, which required both bodies, came into being (Doorne). The project included a series of facial surgeries, in which Lady Jaye had her nose and chin altered, Genesis P-Orridge had his cheeks changed, and both of them had identical breast implants. A point that connects this project to the works of Orlan or

13 Prosser approves of this transsexual ontology too (67).

14 'they have sculpted a beautifully nuanced visual and aural gender/sex landscape. Arsenault's strength as a performer takes on a Brechtian quality through a direct-address style.

15 According to Butler, 'the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed' (*Gender Trouble* 187).

16 'I know that because I came into the world in a biologically male body I was born with a spiritual wound. I don't know what to name that wound, but I believe that out of this wound springs many things –ideas, images, masquerades, fashion, self-portraits, stories I want to tell, performances I want to do. Being in this body has done something to my spirit.' (Arsenault *Fey*)

17 They call that action to wage a 'war to re-possess the self' (Genesis P-Orridge)

Arsenault is their defiance of the formula of body and self, but they took the challenge one step further: BREYER P-ORRIDGE, the neither male nor female third being, is a subject that incorporates a mask that cannot be created by either one of the couple on their own, although both of them are committed to it. The more alike they look, the more difficult it is to define where the skin of BREYER P-ORRIDGE ends, that is to say, the mask is tangible but never quite determinable. The unstable status of the mask in question is made explicit here, for the process of becoming one reveals the fact that BREYER P-ORRIDGE is an identity which has the ability to carve its body out even before the body comes into existence, yet this identity is manipulated by both Lady Jaye and Genesis P-Orridge into a state of permanent flux, in which the artists' agency to resist the dominant ideologies is retrieved. The process of negotiating with the skin makes manifest a transformative agency which is founded in the mask, a swing between having the image/(as) self and being the self/(in) image. To conclude, the artists are not so much manipulating the skin as negotiating with it as I have shown, and to rupture the skin implies more the attempt to implode the definable body than an act of cutting-up identities, the skin complicates the sense of self.

References

Adams, P. *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Difference*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Arsenault, Nina. "‘Fey’": a photo portrait.' *Nina Arsenault Official Website*. 7 March 2011 <http://ninaarsenault.com/2011/03/fey-a-photo-portrait-by-michael-chambers-2010/>

----- . 'Sexy transsexual Nina Arsenault on life, art and her penis' *Toronto Star*. 11 June 2010.

----- . ' "The High Priestess of Sodom": a photo portrait by Mitchel Raphael.' *Nina Arsenault Official Website*.<<http://ninaarsenault.com/2011/03/the-high-priestess-of-sodom-a-photo-portrait-by-mitchel-raphael/>> (2010)

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York and London: Routledge, 1993.

----- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 2007.

Clarke, Julie. 'The Human/Not Human in the Work of Orlan and Stelarc.' Ed. J. Zylinska. *The Cyborg Experiments: the Extensions of the Body in the Media Age*. London and New York: Continuum, 2002.

Davis, Kathy. *Dubious Equalities & Embodied Differences*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 2003.

Who Do We Think We Are? Representing the Human postgraduate symposium at the Centre for Creative Collaboration, Kings Cross, London. 19 March 2011.

Doorne, James. *Genesis P Orridge: Avant-rock legend, and the man so much in love with his partner, he devoted his life to surgery to look identical.*

Fox, Margalit. 'A Portrait In Skin and Bone.' *The New York Times* 21 November 1993. 23 August 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/21/style/a-portrait-in-skin-and-bone.html>

Heyes, Cressida J. *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalis(?)ed Bodies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Jones, Amelia. *Body Art / Performing the Subject.* Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

O'Bryan, C. J. *Carnal Art: Orlan's Refacing.* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

P-Orridge, BREYER. *Pandrogeny - an attitude discussed.* 14 February 2011 <http://genesisbreyerporridge.tumblr.com/post/410412155/pandrogeny-an-attitude-discussed>

P-Orridge, Genesis. (2010). 'BREAKING SEX: S/HE IS HER/E.' 8 March 2011. <http://genesisporridgearchive.blogspot.com/2010/07/breaking-sex.html>

Prosser, Jay. *Second Skin: the Body Narratives of Transsexuality.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.