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Visions of Excess: Orlan's Operational Theater

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VISIONS OF EXCESS: ORLAN’S OPERATIONAL THEATER

By

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ABSTRACT

When French avant-garde artist Orlan elected to surgically alter her face during a series of performances in the 1990s, she provoked extreme reactions both within art criticism and the popular press. Rather than focus on the artist’s mental health or intentions, I hope to connect her corpus of performances since the 1960s to taboos imposed upon the body. By blurring the boundaries between sexualized and sacred bodies and evoking the horror of death through self-mutilation, Orlan defiantly breaks these taboos. My thesis relates Orlan’s deconstruction of religious, art-historical, and social constructs to Georges Bataille’s writings on taboo and transgression. My connection between his vast body of literature and Orlan’s performances centers on his formulations of eroticism and sacrifice, and his description of transgression as the blurring of binary forces. I argue that Bataille’s writings that describe transgression as a gateway to inner experience resonate with Orlan’s outrageous performances.
INTRODUCTION

Throughout the twentieth century, originality and rebellious innovation have defined avant-garde art, as signed urinals and dripped paint have shattered preconceptions of what art is and what it can be. While many artists have explored and exploited a seemingly exhaustive range of media, techniques, and subjects, a few continue to shock us on an almost primal level. Their work remains provocative not only for its originality, but also because it transgresses deeply instilled artistic and social values. French performance artist Orlan is one of these artists, and during her Reincarnation of Saint Orlan series, her work became literally “cutting edge.” During the execution of nine plastic surgeries spanning from 1990 to 1993, she controlled the radical alteration of her own body by permanently adopting features from five of art history’s most iconic representations of beauty.¹ She transformed the operating room into a stage for her burlesque theater of flamboyantly dressed surgeons and background dancers, and turned her flesh into her artistic medium. With the help of epidurals, the fully conscious and wildly costumed artist remained the director of a highly choreographed performance. Even as surgeons injected, sliced, and sutured her face, she continued to read aloud from psychoanalytical and literary texts, laugh, and interact with her audience. Although she assures us as viewers that she experienced only mild discomfort, there remains something deeply disturbing about witnessing the literal displacement of her face and watching her bleed.

Orlan’s transformation into a living sculpture has evolved from far less transgressive, or at least physically invasive, beginnings. Before entering the operating room, the artist originally used computer software to merge her portrait with art-historical icons of feminine beauty, creating a digital image reminiscent of a Galtonian composite.

¹ Sandro Botticelli, Birth of Venus, c. 1485-86, tempera on canvas, 67.9 x 109.6 inches, Uffizi, Florence; Leonardo da Vinci, Mona Lisa, 1503-07, oil on poplar, 30 x 21 inches, Musée du Louvre, Paris; Gustave Moreau, Jupiter and Europa, c. 1876, oil on canvas, 175 x 130 cm., Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris; François Gérard, Cupid and Psyche, c. 1798, oil on canvas, 73 x 51.75 inches, Musée du Louvre, Paris; Anonymous, Diana the Huntress, c. 1550, oil on canvas, 191 x 132 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Rather than use this composite as her final piece, however, Orlan literally incorporated the famous beauties into her own face during the *Reincarnation* series. The body of work which arose from this project is multilayered, involving internationally broadcast surgery performances, photographic documentation, and what the artist refers to as “relic objects,” which include her encapsulated flesh, photographic shrouds, and drawings in her blood (Figures 2-4). Of course Orlan herself remains the ultimate embodiment of her artistic act.

Because her artistic process is so radical and the documented images are so profoundly disturbing, Orlan’s *Reincarnation* series has provoked reactionary responses in both the popular press and critical scholarship. Perhaps more importantly, her ethically questionable act of permanent physical alteration has caused many critics in France and in the United States to ask whether it can be categorized as art. In 1991 a French psychology quarterly even devoted an entire issue to evaluating her sanity. My project does not concern itself with such questions. Rather than focus on the artist’s mental state or artistic intentions, I hope to connect her corpus of performances to socially imposed taboos surrounding the body. By blurring the boundaries between sexualized and sacred bodies or evoking the horror of death through self-mutilation, for example, Orlan defiantly breaks these taboos.

In her career-long quest to transform herself into the epitome of feminine perfection, Orlan has continuously challenged conventional definitions of this ideal. Like

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2 Sir Francis Galton was a nineteenth-century eugenicist, anthropologist, and photographer. Galton created photographic composites in order to discover a link between physical appearance and psychological traits within specific types, like the criminal or chronically ill. His method involved the limited exposure of several different portraits onto the same sensitized plate to produce a single composite of a group of individuals. He believed the generic figure created in his composites would reveal the truth of type. For an overview of Galton’s life and work see Nicholas Wright Gillham, *A Life of Sir Francis Galton: From African Exploration to the Birth of Eugenics* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001).


4 See, for example, Barbara Rose, “Is it Art? Orlan and the Transgressive Act,” *Art in America* 81 (1993): 83-195. Rose concludes that Orlan’s surgery performances can be classified as art because they possess “the two essential criteria for distinguishing art from nonart[:] intentionality and transformation.” Rose, 86.

her digital composites and surgeries, Orlan’s early performances sought a new model of femininity that would transcend the limitations of the female body imposed by religious and art-historical traditions. Beginning in the late 1960s she embarked on a series of performances that defined her body as a site of contention. Throughout her career she has deliberately blurred the established boundaries between “saint” and “whore,” suggesting that the ideal female, if the concept can exist, remains a bit of both.\(^6\)

Much of the serious scholarship on Orlan’s performance art focuses on these feminist goals. Such scholars as Barbara Rose, Michelle Hirschhorn, and Peggy Zeglin Brand interpret the surgeries as a direct challenge to Western representations of ideal beauty, both in art and in popular culture.\(^7\) The artist herself has spoken at length about her intended rejection of traditional beauty values in her press interviews and academic lectures and as the author of the “Carnal Art Manifesto.” Many other feminist scholars, however, have reacted negatively to the project and argue that by transforming herself into a more conventionally beautiful woman, Orlan buys into these very standards. Still others explore the ethical and social implications of permanently altering the human body through cosmetic surgery.\(^8\)

While I shall address these issues surrounding feminine beauty, I relate Orlan’s deconstruction of religious, art-historical, and social constructs imposed upon the female body to Georges Bataille’s writings on taboo and transgression. Bataille’s convoluted oeuvre of novels, poetry, articles, manifestos, and anthropological studies covers a dizzying array of subjects. Yet throughout this vast spectrum of topics, he continuously links theoretical, religious, and scientific systems in order to dissolve them. My

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\(^6\) Barbara Rose first discussed Orlan’s treatment of the duality between virgin and whore, an argument that has been picked up by Ince and others. See Barbara Rose, 82-83.


connection between his vast body of literature and Orlan’s performances remains focused on his formulations of eroticism and sacrifice, and his description of transgression as the blurring of binary forces. I argue that Bataille’s late writings, specifically those dealing with transgression as a gateway to inner experience, resonate with Orlan’s outrageous performances. They share a distinctive and calculated obscenity. Both also are concerned with binaries (ecstasy and horror, sacred and profane, beauty and filth, pleasure and pain) to an almost obsessive degree. While several scholars before me have noted the binary nature of Orlan’s performance work, I assert that her deconstruction of binaries surrounding religion, sexuality, and personal identity are Bataillean transgressions.

Although written decades before Orlan emerged as a performance artist, Bataille’s description of artistic representation as a sadistic act of destruction or alteration captures a key element of her work. In *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1957) he defines the creative act as one of violence and transgression. Orlan’s surgery performances, because they center on self-alteration and mutilation, are unquestionably transgressive. Forcing viewers to behold the opening of her body, Orlan evokes a horror that is not easily put into words. Bataille, however, provides a framework to work through this difficulty. By exposing his own fascination with violence and eroticism, he compels us to confront primal regions of humanity that are most comfortably kept repressed. My thesis participates in this confrontation by analyzing the unsettling aspects of Orlan’s work— and their effect on the viewer— in connection to Bataille’s writings on taboo and transgression.

Although I am distilling his notoriously complicated rubric, Bataille’s system is

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9 Kate Ince has also used Bataille’s writings to interpret Orlan and other artists she asserts are working within the “Carnal Art” movement, including Sterlac and a group of masochist male artists working in the 1990s. Her focus, however, remains on Bataille’s conception of the *informe*, or “formlessness.” Because of its usefulness in challenging traditional categories like the art historical canon, the *informe* has been explored by art historians in the past decade. See Kate Ince, “Thinking Expenditure: Bataille and Body Art,” *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/theory/politics* 46 (2002): 146-56. For an in depth treatment of the *informe* and its application to the history of art, see Yves Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997). My interest in Bataille as a method of looking at contemporary performance art centers on his formulation of eroticism and the transgressive act. Although Barbara Rose also describes Orlan’s surgery performances as transgressive, she does not mention Bataille.

based on two opposing realms: the sacred, which is basically everything that is subject to prohibition and evokes the horror of death; and the profane, which encompasses the taboos surrounding death and sexuality. While the subjects of taboos are sacred and inherently violent, the taboo itself remains a protective reaction against it. Taboos evoke the opposing reactions of fear and awe, but most importantly they compel us to obey certain inherent and social rules. They shelter us from the horror of the sacred and the impending death it represents. Bataille argues that the awareness of mortality drives all other human experiences. This consciousness of death results in a sense of selfhood and individual difference which he terms “discontinuity.” As the defining aspect of humanity, discontinuity becomes our primary method of defensive isolation. Despite this self-protective impulse, he argues that we long to return to the continuity of our primal origins. Erotic activities, in transgressing taboos, become one way to bridge the gap between individuals. As the specific tension between animality and humanity, eroticism remains outside the dialectic that orders human society. He argues that to experience eroticism requires both self-violation and social transgression: one must accept the interchangeability of sex and death.

Like Orlan, Bataille has provoked extreme polar reactions within critical scholarship. His preoccupation with filth, eroticism, and profanity has cast him as the father of transgressive literature, or, as André Breton famously put it, the “excremental philosopher.” Yet his dense body of literature, much like Orlan’s body of performance art, has become an object of almost fetishistic attraction in recent years. Since the 1990s, the decade in which Orlan completed her surgery performances, Bataille’s writings have enjoyed a resurgence of attention. His conceptions of the informe, base materialism, and transgression have been the topics of numerous symposia and publications in recent years. Rosalind Krauss and other art critics within the October group deserve much of the credit.

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11 Bolt-Irons, 286.
12 Ibid.
13 While Bataille was loosely tied to the Surrealist movement during the mid-1920s, he was often at odds with its dogmatic founder, André Breton. Breton waged this particular attack in the pages of his second manifesto, in which he expelled Bataille and others who he felt had digressed from the stated principles of the movement. See Breton, Manifestos of Surrealism, trans., Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972).
for this renewed interest. Arguably the most influential art critic since Clement Greenberg, Krauss challenges the formalistic approach to art history established by her predecessor. She often uses the writings of figures outside of art history—Jacques Lacan, Ferdinand de Saussure, or Jacques Derrida, for example—to make the visual, historical, and theoretical significance of art more accessible. With their shared interest in the unconscious driving forces of humanity and their mutual talent for vivid language, Bataille has become an increasing presence in Krauss’s writing since the late 1980s. A similar union of art, theory, and social criticism occurs in Orlan’s work. Like Krauss, the artist utilizes key concepts in Bataille’s writing to deconstruct social and political issues. While they are interested in different aspects of Bataille’s legacy—Orlan, in transgression and inner experience, and Krauss, in using the *informe* to challenge Greenbergian formalism—their use of his concepts ties their work to a larger cultural matrix. Bataille’s writings help to dissect the prevalence of corporeal subject matter and performances within contemporary art, and the impact such visceral work has on its viewers.

Although he has only recently been embraced by art critics within the United States, Bataille’s influence on scholars in his own country has been far more broadly reaching. His work profoundly shaped French intellectual thought during the second half of the twentieth century, with his deconstruction of Western norms anticipating the poststructuralist movement. Such major figures as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and

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15 For more on Krauss’s critical methodology and her status within postmodern scholarship, see David Carrier, *Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism: From Formalism to Beyond Postmodernism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 2002).

16 Krauss’s most notable work on Bataille centers on his conception of the *informe*, or formlessness. With her collaborator Yve-Alain Bois, she uses Bataille’s notion of horizontality to challenge the high-formalism of modernist canon and the impulse to categorize in general. See Bois and Krauss, *Formless*. For further information on Bataille’s relationship to modernism, see also Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986).
Julia Kristeva have all written receptively about his work.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, much of the scholarship on Bataille in the past two decades focuses on his influence on French post-structuralism. This connection within the scholarship between Bataille and the French intellectual scene of the 1960s and 1970s is helpful for my project, as Orlan’s career developed within this poststructuralist context. As a French artist working in Paris since the 1960s, her work is steeped in the prevailing rejection of hegemonic categories. Recognizing the intersection between the artistic and intellectual scenes as she was beginning her career, she writes, “Art was engaged in the social, the political, the ideological; a period when artists invested intellectually, conceptually, and sometimes physically in their work.”\textsuperscript{18} This merging of visual art and critical literature becomes central to her artistic practice, and she has read aloud texts by Kristeva, Foucault, and others during her performances.

The poststructuralist theorists who have influenced Orlan’s artistic thinking have also shaped the way that scholars write about corporeal performance. Most specifically, this scholarship continues to emphasize the binary oppositions between subject and object, Self and Other, and performer and audience that have come to be associated with post-structuralism. In her seminal work \textit{Body Art: Performing the Subject} (1998), Amelia Jones argues that Body artists since the 1970s have performed the postmodernist shattering of the subject. She describes the simultaneous emergence of corporeal performance and post-structuralism as “both an articulation and a reflection…of profound shifts in the notion and experience of subjectivity over the past thirty to forty years.”\textsuperscript{19} While I also emphasize subjectivity in my reading of Orlan’s work, I assert that this methodology is rooted in Bataille’s thinking. Arguments echoing his emphasis on discontinuity, or selfhood,

\textsuperscript{18} Orlan, \textit{This is My Body, This is My Software}, ed. D. McCorquodale (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1996), 85.
\textsuperscript{19} Amelia Jones, \textit{Body Art: Performing the Subject} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
pervade analyses of Body art, poststructuralist theory, and Orlan’s own writings, yet few scholars of performance art or Orlan’s work give Bataille more than passing mention.

Despite Bataille’s absence, his contemporary, Antonin Artaud, remains a major figure in scholarship on Body art. While Artaud unquestionably impacted the rise of performance art during the second half of the twentieth century, his theoretical influence has become inordinately emphasized over that of Bataille. Both writers disavowed the rationalism of bourgeois society and sought ways to transcend the limits of human experience through material and bodily actions. Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty,” a section of his seminal treatise *The Theatre and Its Double*, places him within the same theoretical sphere as Bataille. In the essay Artaud argues that performance must delve into the primal regions of humanity to expose and eroticize them, a goal that is closely in line with Bataillean transgression.\(^{20}\) He writes, “I use the word ‘cruelty’ in the sense of hungering after life, cosmic strictness, relentless necessity, in the Gnostic sense of a living vortex engulfing darkness, in the sense of the inescapable necessary pain without which life could not continue.”\(^{21}\) His “Theater of Cruelty” does not inflict pain, but rather it attempts to liberate the audience from the inherent pain of humanity. This description of cruelty as a psychological rather than physical asceticism recalls Bataille’s desire to approach the limens of human existence. While Bataille focused on the inner experience of the individual, Artaud challenged artists to work toward this goal by dissolving the barrier between audience and performer. Artaud writes, “It is in order to attack the spectator’s sensibility on all sides that we advocate a revolving spectacle which, instead of making the stage and auditorium two closed worlds, without possible communication, spreads its

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\(^{20}\) Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary C. Richard (New York: Grove Press, 1994). (While Bataille and Artaud both participated in Surrealist activities during the 1920s, both notably disagreed with Breton’s dogmatic influence on the movement and had disengaged themselves from the Surrealists by the end of the decade. The authors also share a convoluted writing style that challenges traditional signifiers and modes of representation. Believing that text weighs too heavily on meaning, Artaud called for a modern theater expressed through a hybrid language of thought and gesture. His theoretical vision of the “Theater of Cruelty,” with its series of difficult technical instructions and complex writing, reflects the organized chaos that he advocated in theatrical performance.  

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 84.
visual and sonorous outbursts over the entire mass of the spectators.”

Artaud’s call for the merging of performer and audience deeply impacted corporeal performance art during the 1960s. The Viennese actionists, an important early group, share his interest in the blending of visual art, theater, dance, and music. This avant-garde collective, which includes Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muhl, Rudolph Schwarzkogler and Günter Brus, placed the body at the center of violent ritualistic performances. Their staged enactments centered on their fascination with Dionysian festival, ritual sacrifice, and mutilation, incorporating the “visual and sonorous outbursts” that Artaud required. For the Viennese actionists, the body can be treated with such brutality because it is no different or more valuable than any other medium. Emphasizing physical aspects of performance that reject Western modes of rationality, their happenings are perhaps the closest embodiments of Artaud’s ideals. Much like Artaud challenged the conventions of theater, the Viennese actionists sought to create anti-art by eliminating the commodified art object.

Orlan also challenges modernist formalism by literally becoming the object of her work. Artaud shared this desire to create selfhood through the artistic act. In a statement that could stand in as Orlan’s own manifesto, he declared, “You will see my present body burst into fragments and remake itself under ten thousand notorious aspects of a new body where you will never forget me.” Not surprisingly, she cites him as a major early influence, and incorporated his texts into her sixth surgery performance, entitled Sacrifice. Perhaps Orlan sees a bit of herself in this deranged genius, for she too has been celebrated as a revolutionary and dismissed as insane. When she moved to Paris in 1980, she even

22 Ibid., 86.
23 During this performance, Orlan quoted a passage from Artaud’s radio play “To Have Done With the Judgment of God” in which he expresses his desire to liberate the body from the constraints of representation: “When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom.” For a transcript of the play see Susan Sontag, ed. Antonin Artaud Selected Writings (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 570-71. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari expand Artaud’s notion of the body without organs, signifying the concept with “bWo.” For them, the bWo signifies the virtual potentials of the body, rather than its physically expressed traits. For a notable discussion of Orlan’s interpretation of the bWo, see O’Bryan, Carnal Art, 96-98.
24 While he is often heralded as one of the most brilliant iconoclasts of the twentieth century, Artaud is also viewed a symbol of suffering and self-destruction. A diagnosed schizophrenic and professed drug user, Artaud was arrested in Ireland in 1937 and held in
chose a studio in Irvy-sur-Seine next door to the asylum where Artaud spent the last years of his life. Orlan’s connections to Artaud and his influence on performance art also tie her to the legacy of Bataille, as both writers occupy the same transgressive theoretical realm. While the Viennese actionists’ ritual enactments and Orlan’s surgery performances have been interpreted as Artaudian efforts to disrupt bourgeois sensibilities, these performances can just as effectively be connected to Bataille’s conceptions of the sacred and discontinuity.

My first chapter, entitled “Ecstasy: Christianity and Eroticism in Orlan’s Body of Work,” focuses on the sacred. I argue that Orlan’s clearest transgression is her synthesis of religious and sexual ecstasy. Her conflation of these traditionally distinct realms challenges the way in which Christian censorship of the female body has shaped the Western view of femininity. The Christian bifurcation of the feminine into saint and whore has been continuously reinforced by representations of women in art. By infusing sexuality into religious imagery, Orlan both illustrates and disrupts this dichotomy in her critique of religious and art-historical modes of representation. By describing how she assumed her identity as a saint decades before the Reincarnation series, this chapter details the evolution of Orlan’s transgressive goals.

While the first chapter provides a background of Orlan’s performance oeuvre, the second chapter, entitled “Horror: Violence and the Operational Theater,” further contextualizes her work and Bataille’s transgressive theory. Here I argue that Orlan’s Reincarnation series is violent, and hence transgressive, because the artist brutally alters her body and also because she threatens the protective barriers between her performance and its audience, plunging them into a sea of continuity. Bataille asserts that the most violent acts are not necessarily the most physically brutal. Instead, they challenge the impulse to maintain one’s sense of isolation. In confusing the sympathetic response to her work through her disavowal of pain, Orlan destabilizes the viewer’s discontinuity.

To demonstrate Orlan’s disruption of Selfhood, I open my argument to include Julia Kristeva’s re-reading of Bataille’s views on abjection. Kristeva, in approaching

French asylums for nine years. During his internment he suffered starvation and repeated coma-inducing shock therapies. These treatments left him crippled and emaciated, reinforcing his conviction that the human body is a flawed instrument of self expression.  

See Rose, 83.
Bataille’s theory from a feminist and psychoanalytical perspective, describes abjection as the horror evoked by a blurred distinction between the Self and Other. Two primary signifiers of the abject, she asserts, are the corpse and the maternal body because both remind us of our own materiality. I argue that the Reincarnation series complicates these signifiers, presenting Orlan as both a living corpse and barren mother. Including Kristeva’s treatment of the abject maternal body allows me to address Orlan’s role as a female artist more specifically than a discussion of Bataillean transgression could alone.

Bataille’s continued influence on postmodern philosophy and criticism make his writing a viable source for looking at contemporary art, especially corporeal performance. Orlan is not the only artist to define her body as a site of contention, and my draws connections to other artists working in similarly transgressive ways. Turning to Bataille to make sense of Body art opens a dialog with other transgressive theorists. His logic of taboo and transgression helps to dissect Orlan’s radical disruption of social constructs surrounding religion, sexuality, and identity. By reading her work in connection to the transgressive writings of Bataille and poststructuralists including Kristeva, I hope to show that Orlan’s drastic alteration of her body is part of a larger trend in performance art since she began working in the 1960s.
CHAPTER 1
ECSTASY: CHRISTIANITY AND EROTICISM IN ORLAN’S BODY OF WORK

Orlan does not look like a patient, nor does she act like one. Wearing black tights, blue high heeled pumps, and a silver robe that exposes her right breast, the artist reclines seductively on her operating room table. She stares into the camera, smiling as if nothing were about to happen. Her eyes remain fixed on us while a surgeon, also dressed in flashy silver, slices into her mouth with a scalpel. His knife moves under her translucent skin. Each sawing pass distorts her lips, but her mouth won’t stop moving. Her eyes remain alert. Rivulets of blood obscure her lips as she keeps talking. Suddenly, she lifts her stiletto heels toward the ceiling. Bare breast, splayed legs, and the surgeon continues to cut. With a black cross in one hand and a white cross in the other, she waves them high in the air, inverting the white cross again and again as blood flows down her face. This frantic, disturbing spectacle is Successful Operation, the fourth in Orlan’s series of nine surgery performances (Figure 5).

While horrifying to witness, even in video documentation, Orlan’s performances brim with undeniable eroticism. Carnality remains the most obvious taboo associated with eroticism, and Orlan’s bared flesh and seductive poses are overtly sexual. Under Bataille’s rubric, however, the erotic encompasses far more. His broad category of eroticism includes activities as divergent as sex, war, crying, and laughter. He argues that these behaviors are not merely physical, but also intellectualized actions. In his introduction to Eroticism, Bataille refers to the erotic as “a psychological quest” to expose the very nature of human existence. For Bataille these activities reveal that the subjectivity, or discontinuity, that defines humanity strikes a fragile balance between repression and transgression. Human consciousness remains governed by taboos, while erotic activities expose and transgress them. Through her series of erotic performances, Orlan has challenged ways in which Catholic and art historical canons repress feminine subjectivity.

26 Bataille, Eroticism, 15.
The artist’s incorporation of eroticism into religious imagery is perhaps her clearest transgression.

For Bataille, eroticism encompasses the entire grey area between the sacred and the profane; it is the space between the binaries. Although his conception of the sacred is often misinterpreted in a strictly religious sense, he points out its Latin root, *sacer*, has two meanings: soiled as well as holy.  

Encompassing everything that is subject to censorship and prohibition, the sacred incorporates both the most transcendental and the most sordid qualities of human existence. He celebrates waste—sweat, blood, excrement, vomit, rotten food, and other filth—because it encompasses the aspects of humanity closest to its primal origins. This stratum of base material provides the clearest link between primacy and self-conscious human existence. Bataille argues that humans long to return to the unconscious intimacy of their origins:

We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is.

This undomesticated realm of primal continuity makes up a part of what humans experience as the sacred. Thus, while we regard the primal with nostalgia and awe, it also represents the terrifying world of the unknown, evoking the contradictory experiences of ecstasy and anguish. Eroticism allows us to explore the boundaries of our humanity by approaching the sacred, but Bataille warns that it is a perilous territory. “Erotic activity,” he writes, “by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental

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27 “Sacer” is the Latin word from which “sacred” and “sacrifice” have derived, and is usually used in a devotional sense. Yet in some post-Augustean texts, the word takes on a negative connotation as in “ego sum malus, Ego sum sacer, scelestus” Plautus *Bacch.* 4.6.14. Here *sacer* stands next to the words for “bad” and “wicked.” Bataille points out these dual meanings in a footnote of his essay, “The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade.” See Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allen Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 102.

continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea.”

In her effort to transform and transcend the limitations of her own body, Orlan has navigated these stormy waves, challenging the limits of human existence. Often through sweaty, dirty, or bloody procedures, her performances have demonstrated both high and low aspects of the sacred. She began exploiting the religious manifestations of the sacred decades before the *Reincarnation* series when she first declared herself a saint. “Orlan” in fact is not the artist’s real name, but a fictitious identity she gave herself in 1962 at the age of fifteen. In an interview with Maurice Mallet for *VST*, the psychoanalytical journal which sought to determine her sanity, she describes how she came up with her new persona. She recalls that she had been pursuing an acting career and, in search of a stage name, had been experimenting with different signatures. The “epiphany” came while she was making a payment to her psychoanalyst after an especially unproductive session: “As I was signing the cheque, I realized that I was signing, in very clear, precise, childlike writing, with a name which wasn’t my own…in which “dead” [*morte*] was clearly readable. So, as I was deciding not to be dead any more, I used just the positive syllable from the word, the letters O R.” Through this ever-shifting and enigmatic persona, Orlan has pushed the boundaries of discontinuity, suggesting that self-conscious human identity is a construct held together by taboo. Her performances challenge the traditions that govern these taboos, particularly religious and art-historical canons.

In 1971 the artist canonized herself as Saint Orlan, and throughout the following two decades she frequently assumed the guise of a traditionally represented saint. Often carrying a crucifix or other saintly accoutrements, she appeared in a series of photographs and performances, dressed flowing robes fashioned from her trousseau linens or from glossy leatherette. Illustrating and problematizing the Catholic division of femininity into saint and whore, her persona as Saint Orlan remained double-sided throughout her early installations and *tableaux vivants*. She has appeared both as the demure White Virgin and the more aggressive Black Virgin. Through these dual personas, Orlan criticizes the taboos instilled by Catholicism and Western modes of representation.

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29 Ibid., 22.
31 Quoted in Ince, *Millennial Female*, 1-2.
32 Ibid., 13.
As the White Virgin, her most frequently reoccurring role, Orlan drapes herself in billowing, ornate robes meant to recall Renaissance and high baroque representations of holy women. At times her White Virgin guise adopts the baroque spiritualized ecstasy of Bernini’s St. Teresa in a direct pastiche. In *White Madonna in Assumption* from 1984, for example, she swoons with arms held heavenward and eyes downcast (Figure 6). Although her robe’s reflective white vinyl enhances its formal comparison to marble, the performance remains conspicuously synthetic: the clouds in *Assumption* are fashioned from bubble wrap, and rather than rise into heaven, the White Virgin stands firmly atop a video monitor pedestal. This deliberate fakery points to a parallel artificiality within traditional modes of depicting religious subjects.

While the White Virgin mocks art historical and religious canons, her alter-ego’s criticisms are far more explicit. Clad in black vinyl, which carries obvious fetishistic connotations, the Black Virgin is decidedly confrontational (Figure 7). The White Virgin remains submissive and glances downward, but the Black Virgin defiantly meets the viewer’s gaze. Here Orlan’s adoption of religious dress and accoutrements defies traditional representations of saints. Although the White Virgin’s bared breast suggests a nursing Madonna, the Black Virgin’s seems far less innocent. Instead, her exposed flesh and aggressive stance suggest carnality and a rejection of maternity. In her catalogue essay for Orlan’s “Skai et Sky and video” exhibition in 1984, Gladys Fabre argues that this black-clad saint is a deliberate counterpart to Orlan’s canonical white Madonnas. While the White Virgin recalls art-historical representations of the Virgin Mary, the Black Virgin alludes to the Old Testament figure of Lilith. As Adam’s first wife, punished by God for her independence, Lilith remains a powerful symbol of feminine autonomy. By opposing this figure to the White Virgin, Orlan demonstrates the importance of binaries to her work from the onset of her career.

Orlan’s use of binary types, however, is never straightforward. While she clearly opposes the Black and White Virgins, the split here remains far more nuanced than that between good and evil or saint and whore. The Black Virgin remains one of her most complex characters; she is virginal, yet sexualized, an ancient figure in modern, synthetic

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33 Ibid., 17.
34 Ibid.
dress. As the Black Virgin, Orlan challenges the canonical saints of Renaissance and baroque art history by presenting an alternative conception of feminine virtue. In her exhibition catalog, Orlan wonders whether “the ludic arguments of this black pistol-holding virgin are not mentally killing the white virgin,” who perhaps “is approaching her own metaphysical death, from which she may be reborn anew, free from the history which weighs on her as heavily as marble.”

The Black Virgin, by celebrating independence and challenging traditional representations of saints, becomes a model for Orlan’s ideal female figure.

As the author of the “Carnal Art Manifesto,” Orlan defines her work as a rejection of religious dogma. She writes: “Above all, Carnal Art does not follow Christian Tradition, it resists it! Carnal Art reveals the Christian denial of the ‘pleasure of the body’ and exposes its weakness in the face of scientific discovery. All the less does it follow the tradition of suffering and martyrdom, adding rather than taking away.”

Despite her emphatic rejection of Christianity in her manifesto, her work since the late 1960s has remained deeply tied to the Catholic visual tradition. Her flowing robes evoke baroque representations of holy women, and her surgery performances continue to incorporate such iconic symbols as crosses, grapes, and pitchforks. By using these sacred images appropriated from art history, Orlan challenges Christian tradition from within. Her performances critique the manner in which censorship of the body has manipulated Western culture.

Despite their apparent disdain for religion, Orlan’s performances and Bataille’s writing are enmeshed in Christian tradition. Bataille was a serious student of Catholicism from 1914 to 1920 and at one point intended to become a monk. Although he eventually renounced Catholicism for a secular approach to inner experience, he continued to refer to the religion of his youth, if only to subvert it. Throughout his writings he argues that the erotic can only exist in a context where pleasure is repressed. Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that he considered religion to be the most fertile breeding ground for eroticism.

35 Quoted in Ince, *Millennial Female*, 17.
36 “The Carnal Art Manifesto” is an unpublished document; an English translation is available on the artist’s website: http://www.orlan.net.
37 For an adept analysis of Bataille’s view of Christianity as organized transgression, see Susan Marie Simonaitis, “Georges Bataille’s Understanding of Mysticism: The
argues that Christianity, more specifically pre-Reformation Roman Catholicism, prohibits transgression by enforcing taboo. “In the Christian world the taboo was absolute,” he writes, “Transgression would have made clear what Christianity concealed, that the sacred and the forbidden are one, that the sacred can be reached through the violation of a broken taboo.”

Bataille argues that Christianity maintains its moral control over taboos by conflating erotic release with evil. Catholicism’s major feat, he claims, is its bifurcation of the sacred into the “pure” and “impure,” defining the pure as the realm of God and relegating what it considers unclean or impure to the doings of the Devil. The Catholic obsession with the diabolical, he argues, serves two purposes: to repress the impure aspects of the sacred, and to deal with the problematic remnants of pagan ritual. These primitive festivals and rites once dedicated to non-Christian gods, now become associated with the Devil. He argues that “the evil to be found in the profane world joined with the diabolical part of the sacred, and the good joined with the divine.”

This division was also imposed on the body as pleasure and erotic release became conflated with evil and the diabolical.

As demonstrated by the White Virgin and Black Virgin personas, Orlan complicates the Christian binary between good and evil. By placing her body at the center of her performances, much of her early work rejects Christian morality and celebrates carnal pleasure in its stead. In 1968, a few years before she declared herself a saint, Orlan enacted a series of performances involving her trousseau, the white linen sheets traditionally intended for marriage. Rather than save the linens for her wedding night, Orlan invited multiple sexual partners to paint the sheets with their sperm. She then outlined the semen stains with messy embroidery work. This performance, entitled *Sewn Pleasures*, derides the tradition in which the bride-to-be embroiders her trousseau just before marriage (Figure 8). Orlan’s subsequent exhibition of the defiled linens mocks the bride’s traditional display of bloodied sheets after her wedding night to demonstrate her

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39 See ibid., 117-125.
40 Ibid., 122.
loss of virginity.\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Sewn Pleasures} challenges conventional realms of private and public, turning the privacy of sexual activity and the domesticity of embroidery into a publicly displayed trophy.

Orlan intended to include a similar performance/installation as part of her 1977 “Art and Prostitution” exhibition at Gallerie de la Difference in Nice. For this proposed piece, the “paint donors” for her sheets were not to be anonymous lovers, but instead three major gallery dealers in Nice. Orlan invited each of the dealers to have sex with her on the sheets as a performance element of her exhibition. Not surprisingly, all three men declined her proposition, but Orlan still included the unsullied sheets in her display.\textsuperscript{42} Even without the participation of the gallery owners, Orlan exploited the commodification not only of art works, but also of the artist herself. Her work reflects the marketing of the artist’s persona by such notable examples as Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, and Andy Warhol. But while these male artists sold their personalities, she demonstrates, female artists must also sell their bodies. In her call for participation from the gallery owners, she compares her role of as artist to that of a prostitute: “I have only one possibility and that is to sell myself. I have to confront this situation, so I will go ahead go see Mr. So and So and offer my body to him while showing him my work.”\textsuperscript{43}

Orlan’s comments here seem less surprising when viewed in the context of the 1970s art world. With rising feminist movements in both the United States and France, female artists increasingly turned to sexualized performances to challenge patriarchal views of feminine sexuality. Orlan and her contemporaries such as Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke were simultaneously celebrated and criticized for displaying their bodies both in and as their performance work. While I will discuss the divergent implications of Schneemann’s and Wilke’s work in my second chapter, much of the criticism surrounding their performances centers on their eroticized presentation of their nude flesh. Because the female nude has been represented throughout Western art history as chaste, performance artists such as Orlan, Schneemann, and Wilke risk trespassing into the realm of pornography when they sexualize their bodies.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 4.
Bataille argues that the female body has traditionally been a site of contention because it simultaneously represents both the sacred and the profane. Taboos surrounding sexual eroticism, he asserts, are symbolized by beauty and virtuous femininity, while the transgression of these taboos is symbolized by the prostitute. He describes that “the sacred or forbidden aspect of sexual activity remains apparent in [the prostitute,] for her whole life is dedicated to violating the taboo.”

This opposition of ideal beauty against sexuality pervades Western conceptions of femininity. According to feminist scholars Robin Lakoff and Raquel Scherr, beauty has become the defining aspect of feminine subjectivity; it is “the last great taboo, the anguish that separates women from themselves, men, and each other.”

Many feminist art critics have based their disapproval of female performance art on this very taboo by accusing notably beautiful artists of pandering to the male voyeurism they claimed to protest. Wilke, for example, has often been dismissed as a narcissist because she used her attractive body to solicit and circumvent the male gaze. In discussing Wilke’s work, feminist art critic Lucy Lippard recognizes the challenge inherent for female corporeal artists: “Men can use beautiful, sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces, but when women use their own faces and bodies, they are immediately accused of narcissism.” Yet despite her acknowledgment of the dilemma Wilke faces, Lippard ultimately accuses her of this very offense. She condemns Wilke for being more of a flirt

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45 Ibid., 133. His conflation of the prostitute with eroticism and transgression pervades his writings: “The prostitute is generally the figure of death under the mask of life in that she signifies eroticism, which is itself the locus where life and death become confused with one another.” See Bataille, *Accursed Share Vol. 1*, 147.
46 Quoted in Freuh, 146.
47 Some notable feminist criticisms are raised in an untitled review of *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, in which the author asks, “Would [Wilke] have displayed her body (and face) so blatantly were she not so beautiful? Also, can an erotically posed woman intent on making a political statement really communicate her message? Does she not just become another venue for the lascivious male gaze?” See *Woman’s Art Journal* 16 (1995), 68. For a discussion of the negative reactions to Wilke’s work as a feminist avoidance of beauty, see Joanna Frueh, *Erotic Faculties* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 141-45.
48 Quoted in Jones, 175.
than a feminist, arguing that her photographs are “politically ambiguous manifestations which have exposed her to criticism on a personal as well as on an artistic level.”

It remains difficult not to view works like S.O.S. – Starification Object Series as an illustration of obsessive narcissism. Although Wilke parodies the beauty standards imposed by the fashion industry, her self-asserted attractiveness remains rooted in these ideals. In each of the twenty-four photographs, Wilke teases the viewer with poses culled from fashion magazine advertisements (Figure 9; 1974-79). Her use of props, including sunglasses, stuffed animals, and toy guns, enhances the images’ commercial quality, and her emulation of fashion models is flawless: arching her back in carefree laughter, slinging her thumbs into belt loops while gazing coyly at the camera, or turning inward with a sultry pout. Tiny, vaginal sculptures fashioned from bubblegum adorn her bare skin, transforming it into an inert and decorative surface. The photographs present Wilke as both a self-assured artist and an object for sale.

Orlan’s One-off Striptease with Trousseau Sheets (Figure 10; 1979) recalls Wilke’s Starification Object Series, as both artists parody the depiction of ideal femininity: Wilke, within fashion advertising and Orlan, within art history. Orlan’s One-off Striptease demonstrates that the perceived dichotomy between saint and whore is not made up of opposites, but instead closely linked archetypes. For this photographically documented, live-action piece, the artist draped herself with her trousseau in the manner of a virginal Madonna. In the first image she appears fully clothed with the exception of one exposed breast. Because she holds what appears to be a swaddled child, she takes on the guise of the breastfeeding Virgin Mary. With this devotional connotation, her bared flesh appears virtuous. She then removed the sheets gradually, striking iconic Baroque poses in each subsequent photo until she stood completely nude in the stance of a Venus Pudica. In her final pose her once-chaste naked flesh now takes on a sexual charge. Her performance demonstrates the dichotomy between virgin and whore by juxtaposing the poses of saintly females (as they have been traditionally represented in art history) with the eroticism of a striptease.

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49 Ibid.
50 Ince, Millenial Female, 13-14.
Nowhere is the imposed split between virgin and whore more clearly illustrated than in her 1977 performance *The Kiss of the Artist* (Figure 11). As one of many performances in which Orlan presents herself as an object for sale, the installation allows the viewer to choose between her dual saintly and sexualized personas. The installation was set up on a platform with a bouquet of white lilies and two life-sized cut-outs of the artist’s body. One of these photos depicts the full-length figure of Saint Orlan in her flowing white robes, and the other depicts the artist’s nude torso. During the performance Orlan sat behind the image of her torso, which doubled as a kiss-vending machine: by inserting five francs into the slot between her breasts, the viewer/customer could watch his coin descend to the artist’s crotch, at which point she would leap down from her chair and bestow him with a kiss. Wailing sirens and a cassette-tape rendition of Bach’s “Toccata in B Minor” further celebrated the purchase. For the same five francs, however, the viewer could also quietly offer a candle to Saint Orlan. During this performance Orlan simultaneously represents the two Marys: the Mother and the prostitute, the private and the public woman.

Orlan’s irreverent treatment of religious imagery continues into the *Reincarnation of St. Orlan* series. The atmosphere of the performances itself disrupts the expected sanctity both of the operating room as a space and the religious theme of the project. With its wild sets, flashy costumes, and background performances, the site of Orlan’s surgeries seems more like a cabaret than an operating room. The set of her first surgery performance, for example, included an over-life-sized photograph of herself in the guise of Saint Orlan. Yet this seemingly pious image provided the backdrop for a male stripper’s erotic dance.

At times Orlan’s sacrilege becomes outright, as seen in her ritual manipulation of two crosses, one black and one white, during her fourth surgery performance, *Successful Operation*. For this performance, she dyed her hair half black and half white to further illustrate the split between her dual personas, the Black and the White Virgins. *Successful Operation* recalls an earlier tableaux vivant in which the Black Virgin wields a black and a white cross (Figure 7). In this photograph she holds the black cross upside-down suggesting the Black Virgin’s inversion of Christian tradition. In the later surgery

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51 O’Bryan, *Carnal Art*, 3.
performance, however, it is the white cross that is manipulated. The presence of an over-life-sized photograph of the White Virgin in saintly robes implies that it is her canonical image which Orlan seeks to alter.

The blasphemy associated with the inverted cross is not the only disturbing aspect of *Successful Operation*. As surgeons peeled back the skin from her lips, Orlan resembled a tortured saint suffering her passion. Photographic documentation of her faintly smiling mouth recalls Reformation depictions of the saints in ecstasy, magnifying the shock value of her irreverent actions. Orlan’s evocation of ecstatic suffering and her focus on transfiguration and resurrection draw obvious parallels between herself and Christ. Caroline Walker Bynum describes the *Reincarnation* series as “a Passion play for our time with all the drama, mystery and anxiety generated by the surgical procedure, followed by the triumphant resurrection of unscarred flesh.” Orlan carefully selects the props and settings in her operational theater to emphasize this holy connection. Surrounded by platters of grapes, the blood trickling from her mouth evokes the transformation of His blood into wine. She further alludes to Christ in a video created from footage of the surgery. The video presents a different still image of the artist’s face in each corner of the frame, forming a cross-shaped window in the center. Within this space, the viewer watches as Orlan’s lips are cut, injected, and sutured. Throughout the video she quotes Christ’s words before the Passion: “A little while longer and you will see me no more…a little while longer…you will see me.”

Despite these overt references to Christian symbolism, Orlan also evokes pagan ritual. The ritualism of the *Reincarnation* series, like that found in the manipulation of the crosses is congruent to Bataille’s view of religious practice as a transgressive act. In his *Theory of Religion* he argues that religious practice arose as a response to the human desire for the continuity of the sacred. Frustrated by the finite borders of existence, humans suffer from their paradoxical yearning to experience death while preserving life. Religious experience allows one to approach death vicariously. By attempting to transcend the profane world of reality, Bataille insists, religion is inherently transgressive. He describes

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54 Quoted in Clarke, 201.
the human longing to return to the original state of being, the non-existence or continuity of the womb. The rituals of orgy, festival, and sacrifice, which Bataille argues are the forbearers of Judeo-Christian religions, become one way to get closer to this goal. These activities temporarily dissolve the boundaries between individuals by allowing their participants to witness the annihilation of another while safely identifying with his suffering. Christianity, he would argue, takes the power of these transgressive acts while circumventing them. It surrounds these activities with taboos in order to create a rigid moral structure.

Orlan reminds her viewers of the ritualistic origins of religion to break down traditional Christian taboos. Repeatedly, she conflates visual symbols from Christian and Greek rituals in her performances. She frequently presents herself as a Christian figure, but also draws associations with Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and excess. During *Omnipresence*, Orlan directed the implantation of large silicon bumps above each of her eyebrows. The implants not only recall the prominent forehead of the Mona Lisa, the stated intention of the surgery, but also Dionysian horns. With this connection, her surgery performances evoke ancient blood rites devoted to Dionysus. During such rituals, blood becomes the primary link to the sacrificial, and as Bataille argues, the transcendence of the body. Importantly, this transcendent experience applies not only to the victim, but also to the sacrificer. “The one who sacrifices is free,” he writes, “free to indulge in disgorging, continuously identifying with the victim…free to throw himself suddenly *outside of himself.*” The literal spilling of blood and opening of the body of another becomes a stand-in for the psychological shattering of the Self.

By presenting her lacerated body to the viewer, Orlan’s performances become self-sacrifices. She pushes this give-and-take relationship even further by making literal offerings of her own flesh. In July of 1991 she returned to the operating room to perform *The Cloak of Harlequin*. In this performance she again explored the dichotomy between saint and whore that defines her trousseau sheet series. The purpose of the *Cloak of Harlequin* performance was not to endow her with an ideal facial feature, but to remove

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56 Bataille, *Visions of Excess*. 
her body fat for the sole purpose of creating sellable reliquaries to finance her subsequent operations. Containing several grams of the artist’s preserved flesh, the reliquaries were encased in layers of heavy glass and welded metal and lit with fluorescent light. The twenty objects created after this performance bear the following engraved passage from Michel Serres’s *Le Tiers-Instruit*, each translated into a different language:

> The current tattooed monster, ambidextrous, hermaphroditic and cross-bred, what can make us see, now, under its skin? Yes, blood and flesh. Science speaks of organs, functions, of cells and molecules, only to admit at last that it’s high time we stopped speaking of life in laboratories; but science never mentions the flesh, which, quite right signifies conflation, here and now, in a specific site of the body, of muscles and blood, skin and hair, bones, nerves and diverse functions that inextricably binds that which pertinent knowledge analyzes.\(^{57}\)

Orlan explains that she hopes to continue producing similar reliquaries until every language has been represented, or until her body has been depleted of flesh.\(^{58}\) These material objects, she asserts, manifest the ideas behind the performance that created them. Despite her emphasis on the conceptual nature of the reliquaries, they remain commodified items. By creating these marketable objects, St. Orlan sells her body in the most literal sense, making her sacrifice less than altruistic.

The act of preserving her body as a sacred/sellable object recurs throughout Orlan’s work. She first exploited the concept of the Christian reliquary in her early series *Measurements*. In these performances Orlan used her own body as a marker of such physical spaces as a church, The Centre Pompidou, and various Parisian streets. Wearing a costume fashioned from her trousseau sheets, she stretched out onto the floor or pavement and marked the length of her body with chalk. She then walked to this chalk mark, laid down again, and made a second mark. Her procession continued through the length of the space, measuring it in a physical and intimate way. Requiring immense patience and

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\(^{57}\) Quoted in Orlan, *This is My Body This is My Software*, 327.

\(^{58}\) O’Bryan, 15-16.
endurance, this slow procession has drawn comparisons to Christ’s carrying of the cross. Orlan pushed this religious connection even further at the culmination of her performance. After reaching the end of the designated space, she ritually washed her sweaty, encrusted trousseau sheets, pouring the filthy water into individual containers to be displayed as relics. The *Measurements* series preserved traces of Orlan’s body both through these relics and the chalk lines marking her physical passage through the space.

While on one hand Orlan’s reliquaries parody the Christian fascination with holy bodies, on the other they equally mock the commodified art market. In this way her relics share an irreverent quality with Piero Manzoni’s *Artist’s Shit* of 1961. His series of “freshly preserved” thirty-gram tins were each labeled identically and meant to be sold for their weight in gold. Like Manzoni, Orlan imposes a ridiculously inflated value upon her bodily waste. Not only does the artist sell the byproducts of her performances to finance her surgical bills, she also presents them as gifts of great cultural significance. She bestowed Madonna—the pop icon also known for her irreverence and self-transformations—with several grams of flesh after both artists appeared on a popular Parisian television show. With their direct jab at the meanings and methods of artistic production, Manzoni’s canned excrement and Orlan’s preserved fat reflect the influence of Duchamp’s readymades. Proving that anything can be art if it is produced by an artist, Duchamp transgressed the taboos of artistic genius and uniqueness that had governed art production for centuries. Orlan has indicated her debt to Duchamp by describing her own body as a readymade to be altered and recreated. In her parody of the modernist readymade, Orlan’s relics challenge that which is held to be sacred, both in terms of religion and the art market.

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59 Mikaela Bobiy, “*Imatio Christi*: The Christic Body in Performance” (Ph.D. diss., Concordia University, 2005), 139.
60 Ibid.
63 As the title of her article suggests, Hirschhorn thoroughly examines Orlan’s relationship to modernist art through the artist’s “remaking” of her physicality.
Bataille writes, “Only a shameless, indecent saintliness can lead to a sufficiently happy loss of self.” By blurring the boundaries within this dichotomy, he argues, one becomes transgressive and moves closer to the sacred. Perhaps trapped by his own theory of limited transgression, however, Bataille never seems to completely escape from the Christian tradition he criticizes. Despite his opposition to Christian dogma, he remains intimately connected to it, much like Orlan remains tied to the canons of beauty and art history. Thus, both Bataille and Orlan challenge the conventions of religion and representation from within. Orlan shares his fascination with Christian binary between the sacred and profane as well as his desire to reduce human experience to a horizontal state by breaking apart these imposed divisions. By fusing sexuality with religious imagery and rituals, she challenges the conceptions of the body instilled by art-historical and religious canons.

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64 Quoted in O’Bryan, *Carnal Art*, 81.
Man feels a kind of impotent horror in the sense of the sacred. This horror is ambiguous. Undoubtedly, what is sacred attracts and possesses an incomparable value, but at the same time it appears vertiginously dangerous for that clear and profane world where mankind situates its privileged domain. –Georges Bataille

When discussing Orlan’s surgery performances, scholars often express their personal reactions in a way that resounds with the “impotent horror” Bataille describes as produced by the sacred. Michelle Hirshhorn, for example, writes that “there is something profoundly destabilizing about watching a woman’s face being sliced open, seeing her bleed, seeing medical instruments moving indiscriminately under her skin, that words alone would simply not convey.” Hirshhorn is not alone in her visceral reaction to Orlan’s graphic images. Critics agree that it remains nearly impossible to re-stabilize, to intellectualize the artist’s permanent alteration of her body, without first confronting the brutality of her process and its implications.

As with every other aspect of Orlan’s work, her treatment of violence operates on several different levels. While her surgery performances inflict a physical cruelty, the cutting and displacement of flesh and the resulting discomfort for her audience, her use of violence as a transgressive act remains far more nuanced. Because they are intentionally painful to watch, Orlan’s performances are meant to provoke a physical response, and she

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66 Hirshhorn, 112.
employs this violence to deconstruct social perceptions of identity. In this chapter I argue that the *Reincarnation of St. Orlan* series disturbs viewers both because of the artist’s alteration of her own body, and also because her actions threaten the protective barriers that isolate the individual audience members from one another and the performance. According to Bataille’s logic, the tension between Orlan and her viewers is the most violent aspect of her work. She reminds us that our own bodies and sense of discontinuity are vulnerable to attack, leading to the destabilizing feeling Hirshhorn describes.

A major goal of performance—whether through such traditional media as music, theater, and dance or more radical forms such as happenings and Body art—has been to unite the audience in a shared response. Increasingly, contemporary performance artists have taken a confrontational stance, forcing their viewers to respond to their provocative and often disturbing works. While performance artists have been challenging subjectivity through corporeal and abject performances for nearly half a century, Orlan transgresses these boundaries more radically than earlier Body artists. Her permanent alteration of her body makes her physical transgression even more drastic. By disavowing pain and mediating the space between her operating room and the broadcast images, she further complicates the relationship between her performance and its audience. Orlan’s denial of pain and her calm rationality during her surgical procedure makes it difficult to dismiss her as insane or masochistic. She admits only to the psychic pain caused by her initial choice to enact her surgical transformation. By emphasizing that thoughts can inflict a suffering beyond bodily pain, she shifts the focus of her performances from physicality to inner experience. In doing so, she dissolves the boundaries between the individuals in her audience, shocking them out of their discontinuous states and then uniting them through a sympathetic reaction.

To develop my analysis of Orlan’s challenge to discontinuity, I introduce Julia Kristeva’s formulation of the abject. Greatly influenced by Bataille’s conception of taboo and transgression, Kristeva credits him with linking the abject, the subject of taboos, to the prohibitions that create it, yet she reorients his logic from a feminist and psychoanalytical perspective. She places central emphasis on the feminine and maternal bodies, defining maternity as the origin of abjection. Kristeva’s writings provide a direct link between Bataille and Orlan’s work, as the artist has read selections from Kristeva’s texts during her
surgery performances. Perhaps more importantly, introducing abjection from Kristeva's feminist viewpoint acknowledges Orlan's position as a female performance artist more specifically than a discussion of Bataillean transgression could alone.

Orlan situates her work in the space between binaries, illustrating the ambiguities between sexuality and violence. Within Bataille's formulation, her artistic act itself remains inherently transgressive. In the introduction to Eroticism, he begins his discussion of violence and the erotic with a quote by the Marquis de Sade: "There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image." By introducing the image at the immediate onset of his theory, Bataille defines the creative act as one of transgression and describes it as a sadistic act of destruction or alteration. Violence, eroticism, and reproduction—both sexual and artistic—all occupy the same sphere within Bataille's theory of transgression, as each becomes a method of approaching the sacred.

Orlan is certainly not the first artist to associate violent images with eroticism. Bataille traces an expansive history of erotic art from Paleolithic to modern times through nearly two hundred photographic plates in his final book The Tears of Eros (1961). Within its pages he often relies more on pictures than written words to convey the interconnections between ecstasy and horror, and eroticism and violence. The book begins with pornographic sculptures and engravings from the Aurignacian period and then weaves through the art of antiquity, the Renaissance, and contemporary France.

While Bataille's discussion of eroticism in the Neolithic and ancient works focuses primarily on the "little death" of sexual climax, with the advent of Christianity it takes on a more sinister charge. At this point the unbound eroticism of ancient art moves into a conscious state fraught with guilt and degradation. He writes, "In the history of eroticism, the Christian religion had this role: to condemn it. To the extent that Christianity ruled the world, it attempted to liberate it from eroticism." Accordingly, Medieval art, which was commissioned almost exclusively by the Church, depicted eroticism only as something to be condemned and equated with death. Although the representation of erotic activities has

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68 Bataille, Eroticism, 11.
69 See Krauss, The Originality of the Avant-Garde, 54.
71 Ibid., 79.
fluctuated throughout the centuries, he asserts that it has remained burdened by an awareness of impending mortality.\footnote{72}

This intersection of pleasure and death, Bataille argues, came to its boiling point in the modern era. The disturbing images in this final section include documentary photography along with media more traditionally associated with fine art. Bataille presents photographs of Voodoo sacrifice alongside André Breton’s \textit{Massacres} and Hans Bellmer’s dolls, but he saves the most horrific images of all for the very end of his book. Here Bataille reproduces four photographs depicting a torturous execution known as the “Death of a Hundred Pieces” (Figure 12). The subject, a Chinese man accused of murdering a Mongolian Prince, is shown in the final stages of being flayed alive. The executioners’ knives, which have already hewn off the victim’s arms and exposed his ribcage, brutally slice through his leg at the kneecap. Bataille describes the photographs as representing “the most anguishing of worlds accessible to us through images captured on film.”\footnote{73} Although it is difficult to imagine a more gruesome scene, the disturbing nature of these photographs lies not only in their terrible violence, but also in their portrayal of ecstatic suffering. Even as the victim endures the most excruciating pain, his upturned face conveys a rapture that transcends his horrific ordeal. These photographs haunted Bataille and came to represent for him his central thesis:

\begin{quote}
I discerned, in the violence of this image, an infinite capacity for reversal. Through this violence— even today I cannot imagining a more insane, more shocking form— I was so stunned that I reached the point of ecstasy. My purpose is to illustrate a fundamental connection between religious ecstasy and eroticism— and in particular sadism. From the most unspeakable to the most elevated.\footnote{74}
\end{quote}

Witnessing Orlan smile even as surgeons peel back her face inflicts the sympathetic

\footnote{72} The Renaissance, for example, saw a reappearance of erotic pleasure in art as engravings made art more accessible and catered to the tastes of the public. Yet even with this lighter portrayal of eroticism, Bataille argues, it remains laden with sadistic excess. See Bataille, \textit{Tears of Eros}, 82-3.
\footnote{73} Ibid., 205.
\footnote{74} Ibid., 206.
anguish that so fascinated Bataille in the “Death of a Hundred Pieces” photographs. Although she rejects pain in relation to her own body, Orlan does not spare her viewers any discomfort. Compelling viewers to observe the opening of her body, her performances are intentionally sadistic. In the “Carnal Art Manifesto,” Orlan insists upon the power of art as a disruptive force. Her description of disturbing art recalls Bataille’s conviction about the inherent power of violent images: “Few images force us to close our eyes. Death, suffering, the opening of the body, certain aspects of pornography, [for certain people] or for others, birth. Here the eyes become black holes in which the image is absorbed willingly or by force. These images plunge in and strike directly where it hurts.”

While she evokes these horrors, she makes sure that we do not close our eyes. Knowing that violent images ultimately have a desensitizing effect, she tempers her bloody procedures with carnivalesque sets and costumes, and consistently reassures her audience that she does not suffer. Orlan’s calculated balancing act makes her performances just tolerable enough to inflict their social critiques.

Although Orlan insists upon the authority of images in the “Carnal Art Manifesto,” she often relies on the spoken and written word to make her performances more accessible. Carefully selected texts serve purposes ranging from glossy endorsements to theoretical justification. For Successful Operation, for example, she had the slogan “jamais film aussi abject n’avait sonné aussi pur” written by a French advertising executive and displayed prominently on a banner above the operating table. Translating to “never has such a contemptible film also sounded so pure,” these words give her performance the sensationalized air of popular cinema. It is interesting that “abject” here translates to “contemptible,” as abjection becomes a major theme in Orlan’s shocking, even distasteful, performances. She returned to this theme explicitly in a later performance with a theoretical reading from The Powers of Horror, in which Kristeva describes her formulation of the abject.

For Bataille, the abject is the subject of taboos: base matter, sex, and death. Abjection becomes the process by which we shelter ourselves from these taboos, most

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75 Orlan, Excerpt from lecture, “This is My Body, This is My Software,” http://www.orlan.net (accessed October 21, 2006).
76 Adams, 142.
specifically from the threat of death. Yet Bataille argues that we can never be completely successful in this protective response, for while we are horrified by the prospect of dying, we remain inherently drawn to it. Kristeva’s system, like Bataille’s, is based on this binary opposition between repulsion and attraction. She writes that the abject remains outside of the division between Self and Other because it “does not respect borders, positions, rules. [It is] the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”77 The abject remains unknowable to the Self and threatens its subjectivity. In defining the abject Kristeva begins by listing signifiers that the Self disposes of in order to maintain autonomous existence: sweat, filth, blood, excrement, vomit, rotten food, and other waste. The second category of signifiers is the corpse, which forces the Self to recognize the limits of existence. Often appearing peaceful or at rest, the corpse recalls life while simultaneously reminding us of the inevitability of death.78

At once flayed and animate, Orlan becomes a living corpse during her surgery performances. By making this signifier of the abject even more ambiguous, she enacts Bataille’s desire to cross the border between life and death. He writes that humanity suffers from “the desire to live while ceasing to live, or to die without ceasing to live, the desire of an extreme state that Saint Teresa has perhaps been the only one to depict strongly enough in words. ‘I die because I cannot die.’ But the death of not dying is precisely not death; it is the ultimate stage of life.”79 Bataille argues that this fascination with death is the inner experience from which all other human experiences radiate: our awareness of mortality drives everything we do. The primary transgressive force of corporeal performance, then, lies in its perceived danger of bodily harm and the threat of death. Even without actual violence or death, such performances have an unsettling effect. The Viennese actionists, for example, never inflicted physical damage upon human bodies, yet their theatrical evocation of violence remains bizarre and shocking.

As one of the group’s most infamous acts, Schwarzkogler allegedly directed the amputation of his own penis. The performance quickly became legendary when a rumor spread that he had bled to death as a result of the amputation, but in reality, no mutilation

78 Ibid., 3
79 Bataille, Eroticism, 240.
ever occurred. The entire event was enacted with a prosthetic, and Schwarzkogler’s friend stood in as the model while he remained distanced from the performance as the photographer. Later, it was revealed that the actionists themselves had spread the rumor.\textsuperscript{80} By establishing themselves as the “bad boys” of the art world, the Viennese actionists cultivated their notoriety in a manner analogous to Orlan’s self-sanctification.\textsuperscript{81}

While the group’s \textit{aktions} usually incorporate such abject substances as blood, internal organs, or feces, Nitsch most notably shares Orlan’s interest in religious blood ritual as a means to transcendence. Much like Orlan becomes a saint in her self-reincarnation, Nitsch becomes either the martyr or high priest in a series of crucifixions and sacrifices. During his 1962 performance entitled \textit{Aktion}, Nitsch hung from the ceiling with his arms outstretched in a direct emulation of Christ and had participants splash his body with the blood and innards of slaughtered animals. In \textit{Aktion II}, which took place the following year, Nitsch replaced his symbolically crucified body with that of a disemboweled lamb.\textsuperscript{82}

By the time Orlan was beginning her career in the late 1960s, corporeal performances were becoming increasingly radical and often inflicted actual violence on human bodies. With the increased interest in performance art, fueled by the student protest movement and resurgence of feminism, also came a rise in risky and painful actions by a new generation of artists. For the first time, performance artists enjoyed acceptance by higher education art programs, and the development of video allowed their work to be preserved and disseminated. The threat of bodily violence enacted by the Viennese actionists became far more real as such performers as Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic, and Gina Pane placed their own bodies at the center of self-violations. For these artists the

\textsuperscript{80} O’Bryan, \textit{Carnal Art}, 27.

\textsuperscript{81} Although the group thrived on these fabricated legends, its members were actually more concerned with deconstructing the modernist myth surrounding Greenbergian formalism. They parodied the style of Greenberg’s poster child, Jackson Pollack, by transforming paint into blood and guts and the act of painting into an act of slaughter. Through their violent and expressive performances, the actionists sought to resurrect the body in an art world dominated by cold, emotionless abstraction.

\textsuperscript{82} Malcom Green, ed. \textit{Brus, Muehl, Nicsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists} (London: Atlas Press, 1999), 130-36.
body remained the only medium free from the conventions of representation.\textsuperscript{83} Like the Viennese actionists, Body artists often engaged in mutilation, but while the actionists staged scenes of violence, the Body artists did themselves actual physical harm. Sharing Orlan’s interest in self-sacrifice and alteration, their performances are perhaps closer to her surgeries than those of the Viennese actionists. The blood in Nitsch’s relics, after all, comes from barnyard animals rather than his own body, and the group’s \textit{aktions} as a whole are characterized by a profound fakery. Because the Body artists were the first contemporary performers to physically alter their own bodies for the sake of art, Orlan accepts them as her most direct predecessors.

The infliction of pain defines each of the Body artists’ performances. Chris Burden’s performance work, for example, remains characterized by an element of physical sacrifice which casts the artist as a martyr. He had himself shot and electrocuted, closed himself in a sack in the middle of a busy highway, and starved himself for twenty-two days on a platform in a gallery. In \textit{Trans-fixed} (1974), his most direct evocation of Christian martyrdom, he had himself nailed to the roof of a Volkswagen and driven around. Perhaps the most disturbing element of his performances is his recruitment of others to carry out the violent acts. By making audience members into accomplices, his work cannot be dismissed as that of a lone madman; it becomes a risky and illicit collaboration. In one such performance, Burden allowed participants to use his torso as a pincushion while he lay under a sign that read “please push pins into my body.”\textsuperscript{84} Crispin Sartwell describes that during this performance “the art viewer is identified not with Christ, but with Christ’s tormentors.”\textsuperscript{85}

On several other occasions corporeal artists invited audience members to actively participate in the infliction of pain or challenged them to intervene. One of the most mythologized of these performances remains Marina Abramovic’s \textit{Rhythm O} (1974) in which the artist endured six hours of torture at the hands of her audience members. For the performance Abramovic arranged seventy-two objects – including feathers, knives, and a loaded gun – on a table and invited participants to interact with the objects and her body in

\textsuperscript{83} Ince, \textit{Millenial Female}, 101.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
any manner they desired. Recounts of the ordeal cast Abramovic as a heroic martyr, sitting passively as audience members cut her clothing and pointed the gun at her chest. The performance, however, was not only a test of endurance for the artist, but also for the audience/participants, as each member had to choose how long to witness her suffering and when to intervene.

Such violent work imposes sympathetic pain upon the viewer, even without direct audience participation. Gina Pane, for example, acknowledges the impact of her self-mutilations on her audiences when she writes, “The public participated with their bodies but remained immobile. Their organs participated with my organs; there wasn’t a need for physical manifestation.” It would be nearly impossible not to respond to Pane’s scarifying performances sympathetically or at least with visceral shock and disgust. In one such performance, entitled Psyche (1974), the artist knelt before a mirror and methodically applied lipstick to her face. After painting her skin, she cut small incisions below each of her eyebrows with a razor blade, allowing her flowing blood to mingle with the lipstick along her cheeks. Pane echoes Bataille when describing her desire to create a new kind of body language through corporeal performance. She claims that art should return to “primitive elements […] such as] milk, fire, blood, and suffering [to] restore a vocabulary which can be easily understood.” Through his new vocabulary, Pane intended for her alarming performances to force her viewers out of their socially induced anesthesia, or in Bataille’s language, to bring them closer to primal continuity. In this way, she hoped that her physical suffering might create a positive response.

Limited acts of violence such as Pane’s are central to maintaining the social order that Bataille describes. He writes that humanity “would cease to exist the day it became something other than what it is, entirely made up of violent contrasts.” Although we as humans have decisively separated ourselves from the guiltless predatory violence of animal nature, this primal intimacy holds an even greater fascination. Attempts to return to

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88 Ibid, 33.
continuity through sacrificial acts of violence require the negation of the individual, shocking us out of our discontinuous (and safely predictable) states. Bataille argues that while such acts inflict anguish, they also bring a glorious sense of attainment. While he does not advocate a complete regression to the archaic sacred, he states that limited acts of sacred violence—festival, religious ritual, and performative acts such as Pane’s, for example—circumvent more destructive impulses. Modern warfare, genocide, and murder, he asserts, also arise from the human desire for the sacred. Periodic breaks through limited sacrifice allow humanity to approach this goal without dissolving into total chaos.  

Yet Pane and other Body artists who hoped their performances would instill social change inevitably faced a negative response from their viewers. Pane recognized that despite her efforts to jolt her audience from passivity, her work ultimately had a desensitizing effect. She writes, “Most spectators admit feeling the action the first time totally, the second time less, and the third time hardly at all.”  
This professed anesthesia often turned to outright hostility as her work became more public. Pane describes the antagonistic reactions in her visitors’ logs as “a lesson in porno-slander.” Rather than uniting her viewers in a state of primal continuity, her violent performances reinforced the protective barriers between herself and her audience.

One can argue that Pane faced even greater skepticism and hostility than her male counterparts. Because the feminine body remains so enmeshed in taboo, female artists who expose, eroticize, or alter their own flesh risk being dismissed as narcissistic or insane. Even when they do not inflict actual violence upon their bodies, female performance artists face these criticisms. Much of the feminist disapproval of Hannah Wilke, for example, lies in the perceived submissive, even masochistic, role of the artist. 

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91 Stephano and Pane, 22.  
92 Ibid., 26.  
93 For an in-depth interpretation of the sadistic male gaze see Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16 (1975): 6-18. This article sets up gendered spectatorship roles within classic Hollywood cinema, casting the viewer as a voyeuristic male and the female actor as an object to be look at. Mulvey argues that despite being a victim of the male gaze, the female also takes pleasure in her perceived beauty. Although rooted in film theory, Mulvey’s article has been widely reproduced in anthologies of art criticism and has helped shift the theoretical approach to visual culture towards a psychoanalytical framework.
In a pun reflected in the series’ title, the bubblegum sculptures affixed to Wilke’s skin in *Starification Object Series* become a pattern of scarification. When interpreted as such, these scars reinforce a potential reading of the artist as victim. Smiling with apparent pleasure, Wilke becomes a willing participant in the violence.

With varying degrees of success, Orlan has attempted to circumvent the criticisms often aimed at female performance artists. She has repeatedly been accused of vanity: when she literally offered her body for sexual consumption in her early performances and, most vehemently, when she altered her physicality through plastic surgery. She counters that “being a narcissist isn’t easy when the question is not of loving your own image, but of re-creating the self through deliberate acts of alienation.”94 In one of these acts, she documented and exhibited her healing process following her seventh operation, *Omnipresence* (1993). The series of forty-one unflattering self-portraits accentuates her bruising and swelling, aspects of cosmetic surgery that are most often hidden from public view. In several other photographs taken after her surgery, the artist adopted clichéd poses and props associated with representations of beauty. In *Women Resemble the Moon, My Eyes Resemble Flowers*, she poses in front of the New York skyline, clutching a bundle of narcissus flowers to her chest (Figure 13; 1993). While she throws her head back and parts her lips, the would-be allure of the portrait is offset by her swollen cheeks and heavily bruised eyes. Orlan emphasizes the grotesque reality of her operations to thwart accusations of narcissism, but she falls into the same trap as Wilke. These photographs, when separated from their surgical context, end up making Orlan look like a victim.95

As the director of her surgery performances Orlan much more effectively dissociates herself from this masochistic interpretation. She remains in almost total control of her body and its transformation, successfully confusing the traditionally gendered roles of art production and spectatorship. Taking this active stance reverses the conventional relationship between the pleasure-seeking gaze of the male viewer and the passive masochism of the female subject. Orlan’s control over her body and often

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94 Quoted in Rose, 83.
95 Orlan’s *Women Resemble the Moon, My Eyes Resemble Flowers* bears a striking resemblance to Nan Goldin’s photographic self-portrait, *Nan, One Month after Being Battered* (1984), which documents her bruised face after being beaten by her boyfriend.
uncomfortable subject matter align her surgery performances with many of Carolee Schneemann’s confrontational performances. During *Interior Scroll* (1975), for example, Schneemann disrobed, ritually painted her body with mud, and read aloud from a scroll which she slowly unfurls from her vagina. In reading the scroll’s text to her audience, she conflated her material body and sexuality with her mind and subjectivity. Like Orlan, Schneemann challenges pleasure-repressing taboos that limit the body. Although both artists have been accused of exhibitionism, their unabashed self-possession and groundbreaking discourses on female sexuality make their work difficult to dismiss.

Orlan’s most successful tactic against critical accusations, however, remains her disavowal of pain. She makes the violence to her body visible, but negates it by refusing to suffer. Were she to openly suffer during her performances, she would risk being dismissed as hysterical, insane, or a masochist. Jill O’Bryan describes Orlan’s denial of pain as “a carefully calculated antihysterical act” that legitimates the permanent alteration of her flesh.97 Despite her connections to the Body artists, Orlan vehemently rejects their self-inflicted violence. She practices a form of self-alteration or mutilation, but carefully establishes distinctions between her work and that of her precursors. She wrote the “Carnal Art Manifesto” specifically to differentiate herself from artists who suffer for their work. “Contrary to Body Art, which is a different matter altogether, Carnal Art does not long for pain,” she writes, “It does not seek pain as a source of purification, does not conceive of it as a redemption.”98 By divesting herself from pain, Orlan shifts the focus from her own body or questionable sanity to broader social criticism. Her antihysterical stance, O’Bryan argues, allows Orlan’s work to be placed into the realm of serious art.

Bataille also recognizes the association between masochism and insanity in his essay from 1930, “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh.”99 He situates automutilation in opposition to religious sacrifice, claiming that “this demented part of the sacrificial domain [is] the only one that has remained accessible to us, to the extent that it belongs to our own pathological psychology.”100 Yet while automutilation is

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96 Jones, 2-3.
97 O’Bryan, 91.
98 Orlan, “Carnal Art Manifesto.”
100 Ibid., 67.
the “absurd and terrible” action of madmen, he argues, it is impelled by the same yearning for inner experience that drives sacrificial rituals. Both practices are attempts to throw “oneself or something of oneself out of oneself” and approach continuity. Acute pain, both self-inflicted and through sacrifice, becomes for Bataille a means to rapture.

Despite his near obsession with the intersection of pleasure and pain, as most clearly illustrated by the “Death of a Hundred Pieces” photographs, Susan Sontag argues that Bataille does not delight in the victim’s excruciating ordeal. Rather, she writes, “he is saying that he can imagine extreme suffering as a kind of transfiguration. It is a view of suffering, of the pain of others, that is rooted in religious thinking, which links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation—a view that could not be more alien to a modern sensibility, which regards suffering as something that is a mistake or an accident or a crime. Something to be fixed. Something to be refused.” Indeed, Bataille admits that his conclusions could not be reached by most people’s limited inner experiences. Most would turn away from violent images such as the Chinese torture with disgust and anguish before ever realizing their transcendent capacity.

Orlan’s surgery performances illustrate Bataille’s connection between ecstasy and horror, but they do so within the modern sensibility Sontag describes. In Regarding the Pain of Others, Sontag argues that one of the defining aspects of modern life is the pervasive distribution of photography via the internet and television. Mass media permits a nearly overwhelming opportunity to vicariously witness atrocities committed throughout the world. Yet these photographic images are ripped from their contexts, creating a fragmented and anesthetized view of reality. Orlan’s performances operate on a similar level: they are mediated to become accessible to the viewer. This safe distinction between the operating room and her broadcast images is central to Orlan’s project. For if her evocation of pain became too real, it would become intolerable for the viewer. Instead, the images remain oddly detached, inflicting a confused mix of disgust and sympathy. Raising more questions than answers, Orlan’s violent performances force the viewer to confront the malleability of the body and its presentation through images.

101 Ibid.
103 See Bataille, Tears of Eros, 207.
Orlan demonstrates a remarkable capacity for self-reflection, remaining calm and rational even as her body is opened and exposed. She has stated that pain, or the lack thereof, is central to her process because the trauma of witnessing an open human body shifts this self-contemplation onto the viewer. During an interview in 1998 with Robert Einright for *Border Crossings* magazine, Orlan emphasized the transgressive power of pain by describing her ideal surgery performance:

I intend to have myself cut completely open and to show the inside of my body. I would be lying smiling, absolutely conscious and just showing the inside of my body without any pain. And when you open up like that to the world, you are creating a wound which has also sexual and erotic connotations. This would be another stage, the stage of self-mirroring and the mirror brought up to the world. Then, after everybody will have looked into my body, I will simply have it closed back.  

Orlan describes her disavowal of pain through scientific advances as a rejection of Christian morality. Pain, she argues, is central to the Christian understanding of taboo, and she refuses to repent for her carnal trespasses. Most specifically, she rebuffs the notion that painful childbirth is an expected price to pay for original sin. She writes, “Carnal Art considers the acceptance of the agony of childbirth to be anachronistic and ridiculous….Henceforth we shall have epidurals, local anesthetics, and multiple analgesics! Hurray for the morphine! Down with the pain!”  

Despite her celebration of modern medicine in this statement, Orlan rejects many of the obligations that science places upon the medicalized female body. Tanya Augsberg contends that the artist subverts the expectation that the female patient remain docile and complacent. While Orlan may allow surgeons to incise, stitch, and reshape her flesh, she ultimately remains in control of the artistic process. As the director of her own recreation, she demands to be


105 Ibid.
"recognized at all times as more than just a body."\textsuperscript{106}

Kristeva shares Orlan’s belief that social perceptions repress female subjectivity. She argues that Christianity and science offer the only real discourses on femininity, and that both reduce it to the maternal function. While Christianity conflates maternity with the sacred, she argues, science conflates it with nature. Within the religious view, the blurring of the interior and exterior body presented by childbirth epitomizes the abject and signifies both the soiled and holy aspects of the sacred. Thus within this discourse, the maternal body is either exulted or reviled. Kristeva asserts that the scientific view is equally limiting. By relegating maternity to biological functions, this model denies it any real cultural agency.

Kristeva’s model presents a more complex view of the maternal body by placing it at the center of subjectivity. She argues that the tension between the Self and the abject centers on maternity. The mother, as the origin of life, represents the major anxiety of humanity by reminding us that because we are born, we inevitably must die. Yet the maternal body denotes for Kristeva an even deeper struggle for individual Selfhood. For her the impulse to discard the signifiers of the abject originates in infancy, when the child’s identity is not yet differentiated from that of the mother. As the child strives to develop individual subjectivity, or discontinuity in Bataille’s language, he or she must establish Selfhood against the mother. Kristeva writes that the child must “separate, reject, ab-ject” the mother by casting her as the ultimate Other.\textsuperscript{107} This separation marks the point when the child first accepts prohibition and taboo. From this moment on he or she resists the signifiers of the abject because they recall this original traumatic break.

The theme of maternity as the center of subjectivity has been present in Orlan’s work from the onset of her career. Her first photograph \textit{Orlan accouche d’elle m’aime} is translated both as “Orlan Gives Birth to Herself” and “Orlan Loves Herself” (Figure 14; 1964). The image first appears to depict the artist giving birth to her androgynous double. With Orlan’s nude body wrapped around this adult-sized mannequin, however, it also resembles an erotic embrace. This early photograph embodies the themes of narcissism,

\textsuperscript{106} Tanya Augsburg, “Private Theaters Onstage: Hysteria and the Female Medical Subject from Baroque Theatricality to Contemporary Feminist Performance” (PhD diss., Emory University, 1996): 387. Emphasis in original text.

\textsuperscript{107} Kristeva, 13. Emphasis in original text.
renewal, and malleable identity that would define Orlan’s subsequent performance work. The *Reincarnation* series continues this process of rebirth and was inspired by a nonviable pregnancy the artist suffered in 1979. While participating in a performance art symposium in Lyons, Orlan had to be rushed to the hospital due to complications from an extra-uterine pregnancy. Rather that focus on her acute pain during this ordeal, she decided to take advantage of the opportunity that her medical crisis afforded. Determined “to make the most of this new adventure by turning the situation on itself,” she invited a camera crew to escort her to the hospital and document the surgery. She then sent the footage back to the conference, submitting it as her performance. The indelible experience of witnessing her body being opened and exposed provided the impetus for her radical self-reinvention.

Jolting her spectators from the safety of discontinuity, Orlan’s performances remain on the outer limits of avant-garde art. She conflates each of the major signifying groups in Kristeva’s formulation—base matter, the corpse, and the maternal body—presenting her body as both a living corpse and barren mother. In making these signifiers of the abject even more ambiguous, it is no wonder that her work shocks and disturbs her viewer. She forces us to confront the things that we are conditioned to reject, inflicting a destabilizing anguish. Yet there remains a seductiveness about her performances that makes them difficult to ignore. Despite our impulse to preserve individual difference, Bataille argues, we long for the intimacy of continuity, for the shared experience of “existing in the world like a wave lost among other waves.” By inflicting sympathetic pain, Orlan dissolves the barriers between herself and her viewers, compelling us to abandon the security of discontinuous existence, if only for a moment.

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CONCLUSION

I met Orlan briefly while visiting Art Basel, Miami, in December of 2006. It would have been difficult not to notice her, since her glaringly bright clothing and usual appearance created a palpable stir of curiosity. The artist wore a black and neon yellow jumpsuit that complimented her jet black lipstick, and styled her hair in the half black and half white bob that appeared in many of her surgery performances. Over fifteen years have passed since she began her Reincarnation series, and her surgically plumped features have begun to sag. Yet she continues to emphasize the results of her operations with dramatic makeup, even applying yellow glitter to her prominent forehead implants. As I pushed my way through a crowd of gawking onlookers, I hoped to glean something about this enigmatic figure beyond what I had read. Although I did get to make a fleeting introduction, the artist was quickly swept away by a member of her entourage. “Doesn’t she look wonderful?” the assistant asked as she steered the artist toward the door.

Despite an impressive body of insightful scholarship surrounding Orlan’s work, it seems that the question, for many, remains rooted in how the artist looks. She has challenged the Western, male-oriented ideals of feminine beauty throughout her career, yet she remains closely tied to, even trapped within this same discourse. Bataille argues that transgression remains inherently limited because it “does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it.”110 Because erotic activities, such as Orlan’s performances, are defined by the taboo that creates them, it remains impossible to fully escape from these boundaries. Bataille’s theory of limited transgression captures a key element of Orlan’s work. By working in the medium of cosmetic surgery, she reinforces commercial beauty standards even as she fights to expose and deconstruct them.

Much has been made in feminist scholarship about Orlan’s selection of the constituents that make up her surgically altered face. She claims to have chosen the five component figures of her new persona not for their physical beauty, but for their historical and mythological significance. Diana, for example, was chosen for her aggressive

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110 Bataille, Eroticism, 63.
character and leadership qualities and Mona Lisa because the masculine face of Leonardo is known to be hidden under her portrait.\textsuperscript{111} Yet something about this claim does not quite work. Orlan’s selection of parts from different models recalls the practice of the Greek painter Zeuxis who, unsatisfied with any single female model, selectively painted the most beautiful features from five different women.\textsuperscript{112} Her parody of the fragmented female body may be an intentional criticism, but it still serves a fetishizing purpose.

If viewed primarily as a critique of Western beauty standards, Orlan’s project remains inherently flawed. If instead one considers the project an effort to dissolve the barriers between individuals through acts of transgression and violence, then her critical power increases tremendously. By reading her performances as attempts to approach the limits of human experience, I have demonstrated that Orlan’s disruptive goals go far beyond issues of feminine beauty. Orlan’s challenge to the taboos imposed upon the female body by religious and art-historical canons of representation force her viewers to reconsider their own perceptions of individual Selfhood. While her performances are corporeal and visceral, she consistently shifts the focus from her own body to the inner experience of her audience. In doing so her work remains uncomfortable for her audience, not only because of its graphic nature, but also because it threatens discontinuity.

Within this thesis I have sought to connect Orlan’s body of work to the legacy of Georges Bataille’s writings on eroticism and violence. Although I have focused on a single artist in making this correlation, Orlan is not alone in her desire to deconstruct taboo through corporeal performances. While the permanent alteration of her flesh casts Orlan as one of the most radical avant-garde artists, her project is part of a much broader interest in contemporary art to challenge notions of self-identity. Bataille’s system of taboo and transgression provides a viable framework for examining this shift. He emphasizes the centrality of prohibition and taboo in defining our views of the body. Reminding us that the humans are excreting, consuming, and mortal beings, he calls attention to corporeal realities that are more comfortably repressed. For Bataille, the body oscillates between this visceral materiality and immaterial subjectivity.

\textsuperscript{111} O’ Bryan, 18.
\textsuperscript{112} Rose, 83.
Throughout the later half of the twentieth century, the movement toward subjectivity in art has centered on corporeal performance, for as an art object the human body refuses to stay fixed in an objective role. This constant state of flux inevitably affects the viewer. Since the 1960s, corporeal artists have compelled audiences to participate in their work by evoking reactions of shock, disgust, or compassion. By placing their bodies at the center of their performances, they remind us that artists, and we as spectators, are more than disembodied beings. We cannot view the opening of Orlan’s body or the image of Chris Burden’s bleeding flesh, for example, from a disinterested position. In forcing these universal reactions, corporeal performance artists emphasize inner experience over the limitations of physicality. They break down the discrete boundaries between individuals, and, in doing so, bring their audience members closer to the ecstasy of continuity. The thread that unites each of the divergent groups of corporeal performers is their Bataillean desire to move toward the sacred by experiencing something outside of themselves. Orlan approaches this goal by challenging the very notion of selfhood, indicating that the ways in which we define ourselves are socially constructed.

Orlan reveals the centrality of physical appearance in forming and conveying our sense of self. By radically changing her own physicality through the alteration of her skin, she claims to have become a transformed person. She emphasizes the importance of the body’s surface as a means of separation and exclusion. Skin reinforces discontinuity by preserving what the artist would argue is our false sense of individual difference. Yet she simultaneously demonstrates that outward appearance is merely an arbitrary covering, and her radical physical alterations challenge the social construction of Selfhood. Before each of her surgery performances, she reads an excerpt from the Lacanian psychoanalyst Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni’s *La Robe* (Figure 15). The book, which was partially inspired by his sessions with Orlan and contains a full chapter detailing her early performances, describes the skin as costume:

113 In a tongue-in-cheek parody of the constructed nature of Selfhood, Orlan compares identity to an advertising slogan. She writes, “When my operations are finished, I will solicit an advertising agency to come up with a name and logo; next I will retain a lawyer to petition the Republic to accept my new identity and my new face.” See Orlan, “Intervention,” in *The End(s) of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press. 1997), 326.

Skin is deceiving… because one never is what one has…I have the skin of an angel but I am a jackal…the skin of a crocodile, but I am a poodle, the skin of a black person but I am white, the skin of a woman, but I am a man; I never have the skin of what I am. There is no exception to the rule because I am never what I have.\textsuperscript{115}

With the actual displacement of Orlan’s face during \textit{Omnipresence}, the seventh performance in her \textit{Reincarnation} series, Lemoine-Luccioni’s metaphor takes on a whole new meaning. Her skin literally becomes a mask (Figure 16). As the most extensive and radical surgery, endowing her with horn-like bumps meant to recall the Mona Lisa’s prominent forehead, \textit{Omnipresence} was also the most widely broadcast. Viewers in New York, Toronto, and Paris were invited to call in to interact with the fully conscious artist throughout the entire procedure. Their shock remains palpable even in video clips today.\textsuperscript{116} One woman, with the shaky voice of someone who has obviously been crying, continues to ask, “Are you in pain?” Part of this disbelief lies in the audience’s inability to accept that Orlan, lying flayed and bleeding on the operating table, does not suffer. Yet the true horror for the spectator, it seems, lies in the possibility that she will become completely unidentifiable– that she will cease to exist. The lifting of the artist’s face confronts the viewer with the possibility that identity is malleable, even erasable. We are forced to see the face as a mere covering, but are still unable to peer behind it to determine who she really is. This is Orlan’s ultimate achievement. As an ever shifting and enigmatic figure, she refuses to be unmasked.

\textsuperscript{115} Quoted in Orlan, \textit{This is My Body This is My Software}, 317.

\textsuperscript{116} The viewers’ reactions range from stunned silence, to seeming outrage, to emotional outpourings. See \textit{Omnipresence} video clip in Orlan et al., \textit{Orlan, Multimedia Monograph} (Paris: Jeriko, 2000).
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

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Figure 8

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Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 14

Orlan, *Orlan Gives Birth To Herself, and She Loves Herself*, 1964, black and white photograph, 81 x 76 cm. with frame. Collection of the Artist. Published in O’Bryan, 2.
Figure 15

Orlan, Reading from *La Robe* by Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, 1990, Cibachrome, 110 x 65 cm. Published in *Orlan: Carnal Art*, 123.
Figure 16

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Stephanie Tessin received an honors BFA in Sculpture and a minor in Art History from Pennsylvania State University in 2004. She continued to pursue her interest in Art History at Florida State University, where she will receive her Masters in 2007. Stephanie is currently employed at the Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts and serves dual roles as the museum’s Special Projects coordinator and the administrator for the Art-in-State-Buildings program for the State of Florida.