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Constructing the Technological Body:

The Art and Politics of Orlan and Franko B's Machinic Theatre

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Introduction

The body – whether it is seen as being a material, substantive entity or dematerialized, semiotic sign, or even a technological abstraction – is always caught up in a discourse at the intersection of art, technology and body politics. Many critics such as Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard, who – indebted as they were to Antonin Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' and his depiction of a machinic body, the body without organs – view the body as a technological abstraction or semiotic system of signs, respectively.

In late industrial and postmodernist culture technological machines or visual apparatuses are read as prosthetic extensions of the body's capabilities. What is more, the boundaries

between bodies and machines, interior states of subjectivity and the external world, come crashing down only to be reconfigured in new ways, in 'stylized assemblages of bodies, mechanisms, and landscapes.' By drawing on 'the logic of the modernist industrial design of *streamlining*,' machine culture replaces the natural body with the naturalized body, and the machine itself becomes 'anthropomorphized and domesticated.'¹ The body itself is no longer seen as simply being an image or even a semiotic sign; it is an inner machine covered with outer skin.

This inside/outside divide has led to an obsessive desire to rip or tear the skin apart in order to see what lies underneath it. In her discussion of Gothic horror and modern horror movies, Judith Halberstam illustrates how the skin 'forms the surface through which inner identities emerge and upon which external readings of identity leave their impression.' In horror movies the viewers are provided with what Halberstam refers to as skin shows or 'a virtual skinfest' whose main focus is 'the shredding, ripping, or tearing of skin as a spectacle of identity performance and its breakdown.'²

A Baudrillardian Rendition

For critics such as Baudrillard, this description would hardly seem virtual in an era of post-industrial capitalism, where the wounded, fragmented or torn body can be found everywhere and is merely an abstract sign divorced from any anatomico-physiological setting, a mere symbol in 'a world where all value has been reduced to the symbolic exchange of signifiers and as a result is fated to 'indifference' and equivalence, or rather the loss of all value.'³

As one watches Orlan's Carnal Art documentary (2001), in which Orlan playfully recites excerpts from literary and psychoanalytic texts in front of a camera while a group of certified surgeons jab her with needles in order to perform 'reconstructive' cosmetic surgery on her

face by slashing across her skin, 'slic[ing] open her lips, and, most gruesomely of all, sever[ing] her ear from the rest of her face with [a] scalpel,' one is likely to experience an unsettling feeling of malaise, at the very least, or a sense of physical and/or emotional shock.⁴

Orlan uses the surgical object as a technological intervention into her own body in order to effect her self-transformation and turns her body into an abstract surface or concept, which is further mediatized by the photographic image – a medium of technology to which I shall shortly return. For the moment it is interesting to note that in Baudrillard's postmodern reading, 'the entire body becomes a sign which offers itself in the exchange of body language.'⁵ There is nowhere any sense of the body's organicity in this symbolic exchange of body language, that is, the exchange of signs which occurs between the body of a technological contraption (any device such as a machine or a car) or, in Orlan's case, the surgical instrument (if one takes the conceptual leap and is willing to make the transposition) and the body of the subject, not even when the body is impacted on, and thus transformed, by the technological or surgical object.

A Counter-Argument

To counterpose Baudrillard's postmodernist perspective is to revise the notion of the body as a semiotic sign within a semiological system of representation and to institute a traditionally western metaphysics of presence in its place. As Vivian Sobchack points out in her criticism of Baudrillard, a criticism which can be applied with the same cogent force to Orlan's surgical practices, 'there's nothing like a little pain to bring us (back) to our senses, nothing like a real (not imagined) mark or wound or artificial orifice to counter Baudrillard's postmodern romanticism.'⁶

The body is as much a subject as it is an object; it is all too easy to forget our lived and imagined sense ‘of the human body not merely as a material object among others, but as a material subject that bleeds and suffers and hurts for others because it can bleed and suffer and hurt for oneself’ (Sobchack). While Sobchack’s argument may read like a romanticized version of a nostalgic desire to recoup once more the body’s subjectivity, which (one may argue) has *always already* been disseminated and fragmented *via* artifice and technological practices, it is significant that she brings the notion of the material body to the fore once more. For Orlan cannot escape the body. The locus or site of action is precisely her body, on which she inscribes her own discursive text. There is no way to escape this impasse because her work is predicated on the very notion that there is a theory of the natural body which she must implode in order for her work to gain personal and political efficacy. The personal is always political and her attempts to institute the body’s explicit absence clearly do not imply its non-presence.

Technology as Promise

Orlan’s wounds themselves have been begotten from the perverse union of the body with technology. As such, they may perhaps be read as being part of a new semio-gnosis, of which Orlan is the ‘messiah.’ Wounds are simply signs which circulate in this new semio-gnosis. There is no question of transcendence, that is, the wounds on the body are not transcendental signifiers; they are more like ambivalent signs in a constant play of signification, a neither/nor system. However, there is a problem with assuming the obsolescence of the body. Even though Barbara Rose claims that Orlan’s use of mediated technology creates ‘a sophisticated feedback system, a vicious circle of echoing and self-generating images’ which

spawn 'a progeny of hybrid media reproductions,' there is always the possibility that this system will break down with the weight of its sensory and imagistic overload.⁷ What is more, to see 'cuts in the face violates our sense of separation between the visceral and the human.'⁸

At the same time, one also wonders how Orlan's alleged claims of negating rather than reclaiming the body can serve feminist ends. Orlan disavows any physical and emotional pain involved in her surgical performances. If she implodes any notion of a natural and living body, her experience is (re)created *ex nihilo*, leaving us to wonder wherein lies the truth of her experience since it is clearly not to be located in materialist frames of reference.

Orlan taps into the anxieties others may possess about the impact of technological and medical advances. She also explicitly celebrates these advances in technological progress as a welcome stepping-stone towards her road to self-transformation. Ironically, however, Orlan's photographic images during her live performances are constant reminders or relics that bear witness to the very real possibility of her death rather than transformation as she is 'captured' by the camera. Her constant attempts to expose her interiority through the use of technological devices are bound to fail at the outset. For as Derrida reminds us in *The Gift of Death*: 'No manifestation can consist in rendering the interior exterior or show what is hidden.'⁹

In a sense, although Orlan attempts to imitate Greco-Roman art, which could be seen perhaps 'as a mimetic form of self-formation,' her radical reformulation of the body by reconfiguring its porosity is obviously closer to more modern machinic models of the body than anything else.¹⁰ The modern body is vulnerable, exposed and permeable. At the same time, it is connected to technological devices, becoming a 'prosthesis' of the machine. The body becomes, or rather it *is* a machine, or in Artaud's terms 'an over-heated factory.'¹¹

For Orlan, modern technological advances in cosmetic surgery, eugenics and virtual reality have now shattered any notion of a natural body as being nothing more than a precarious fantasy. However, as many critics have claimed, Orlan makes her body the site of action and through surgery transforms it ‘into language.’¹²

Yet it is easy to read the body that changes as being a sign of monstrosity. Many spectators can easily get a sense of unease when they see Orlan allowing surgeons to jab her face and transform it with technological instruments. We may, in fact, get a similar feeling when watching Franko B’s performances. In his performance *I’m Not Your Babe* (1996), performed at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, the Italian artist Franko B has his body painted white like an achromatic ghost or cadaver. Standing stark naked before his audience like a mute canvas or body-object, he strikes a beatific posture and kneels as a catheter in his arm drains his blood to the canvas floor. Some of his own blood, drained prior to the performance, is also poured onto him. More cuts are made onto his body by invisible hands off-stage ‘as (the) blood wells from the “stigmata” of his wounded forearm’ and drips down onto his body canvas and the stage. He then lies down in a pool of his own blood. Finally, ‘he is bound and suspended upside-down’ in the posture of an inverted crucifixion as the audience watches him in stunned silence.¹³

Franko B has also used hospital equipment such as bandages, calipers, syringes and operating tables in his works. In his *Mama, I Can’t Sing* performance (1995/6), performed at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts, his thorax and back are cut by invisible hands and he is then bandaged. In one sequence he ‘appears as a mummified body swathed in bandages, cramped in calipers, and caged like a dangerous beast’ while in others a catheter is seen protruding from his penis as he walks around the hospital setting with a drip.¹⁴ All of these

visual images serve to emphasize the vulnerability of the body, as well as its passivity towards its own 'medicalized' and instrumented status.

In a sense, Franko B's performances could elicit this exacting 'medicalized' and clinical gaze. As he lies down on the operating table and allows the white-clad assistants to cut up and dissect his body, he becomes like a passive or 'mummified' object which is surgically invaded and yet accepts and receives this invasion and instrumentalization of his body. Like silent clinicians, the spectators can dissect Franko B's naked body under their 'clinically' accurate gaze. They may not be privy to some of the gory details involved in the dissection, but they are there throughout the entire duration of the performance, silently observing the bloody spectacle. The effect is further compounded by the creation of a hospital-like setting, since hospitals are places which are traditionally associated with disease and contagion, even death, as well as by the technological presence of synthesized soundtracks to remind the audience of the beeping of machines and heart monitors.

Franko B uses his body to communicate. Through the semiotic element of language he expresses his bodily drives, the experience of having – and even feeling – a body. Through bodily gestures and the technological whirrs and bleeps Franko B is able to bring his body to life and make it materially and linguistically signify. Between soma and psyche, biology and representation, the semiotic and the symbolic, lies the potential for transforming flesh into language and for turning bodily pain into a linguistic register.

Franko B, like Orlan, uses machinic and technological devices to impinge upon and stretch the body's boundaries. The body's mediation with technology both transforms (even cancels) it and prosthetically extends its possibilities *ad infinitum*. Like other performance artists such as Stelarc, who uses the most advanced robotic technology to refashion his body, Franko B

collapses the material body into the abstract body-machine-image complex by merging life and machinic processes. Especially in works such as *Mama, I Can't Sing* he asserts 'the inseparability of materialities of communication and forms of violence in machine culture.'¹⁵ All performance art starts at the body. Franko B works with his body in order to mutilate and transform it with the machine technology near the operating table. Arguably, it is not the body which becomes obsolete but all fixed and rigid social constructions which surround the body and attempt to inscribe and define it within set parameters of sex, gender and identity. Thus Franko B's wounds, formed by technology, open out an infinite plenitude of future possibilities; they are inexhaustibly iterable; they are also erotic, visual, religious and enigmatic signifiers which are endlessly meaningful and constantly circulating in the symbolic, technical economy of his performances.

Certainly it may be difficult to identify with a performer who 'invades' upon his body with technical and surgical implements – and does so out of a personal choice. At the same time, however, the mediation between the body and the machine in performance opens out infinite possibilities, many horrific, others more promising. As Chris Gray points out in *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Postmodern Age*, 'the proliferation of cyborgs is the promise of monsters, the promise of possibilities. Horror is possible, perhaps inevitable. But resistance, even joy, should be just as possible.' Blurring and transgressing boundaries between machinic and life processes, the body and the machine, is both dangerous and exciting. Yet it can also be liberating, particularly if we are able (ideally) to 'choose the borders we inhabit and transgress.'¹⁶ By seemingly making this transgression a self-conscious choice, Franko B forces us to consider our own individual choices and liberties.

Conclusion

The works of bodily-based performance artists who use technological devices to impinge upon their bodies can inform our understanding of what potential monsters and infinite potentialities lurk or breed beneath our technological and psycho-social landscapes. As Richard Sclove remarks in *Democracy and Technology*, the political choices we make can lead to ‘a more democratic technological order’ which enhances, even multiplies, our individual freedoms:

It is possible to evolve societies in which people live in greater freedom, exert greater influence on their circumstances, and experience greater dignity, self-esteem, purpose, and well-being. The route to such a society must include struggles toward democratic institutions for evolving a more democratic technological order. Is it realistic to envision a democratic politics of technology? Isn't it unrealistic not to? ¹⁷

Certainly Sclove's vision is idyllic, even nostalgic, but not impossible. Performance artists like Stelarc and Orlan are already using machines and the latest robotic technology to redesign their bodies, whilst Franko B has already tested the limits of his body through fluid blood play in performance and through the use of technical instruments. While sublating the boundaries of sex and technology, body and machine, may be dangerous, there are also many liberating possibilities, and modern technology may actually benefit us in the future as well, ‘provid[ing] us with hitherto undreamed-of means for tapping our own psychopathologies.’¹⁸

New techno-sexual possibilities may loom in the near-future horizons of the technological landscape. By exploring *our* possibilities we may even find that they are endless and positively limitless. Who knows what the future holds, what monsters and angels lurk within

its unfathomable realm? We can only dream or surmise. And Ballard sums it up better than I can: ‘Over the profiles of [our bodies] now preside the metallized excitements of our shared dreams of technology.’¹⁹

¹ Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 1998), 242.

² Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 141.

³ Geraldine Harris, *Staging Femininities: Performance and Performativity* (Manchester: MUP, 1999), 74.

⁴ Davis provides a comprehensive overview of Orlan’s body art, citing one of her lectures given in Amsterdam in 1995 where she projected images on screen of herself and her surgical wounds to an assembled audience. Kathy Davis, “‘My Body Is My Art’: Cosmetic Surgery as Feminist Utopia?” *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999): 454-465.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, “Two Essays: “Simulacra and Science Fiction” and “Ballard’s Crash,”” *Science Fiction Studies* 18.3, (November 1991). Net web page: <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/ baudrillard55art.htm> [accessed 11th July 2011].

⁶ Vivian Sobchack, ‘Baudrillard’s Obscenity,’ *Science Fiction Studies* 18: 3 (November 1991). Net web page: <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/forum55.htm> [accessed 11th July 2011].

⁷ Barbara Rose, “Orlan: Is it Art? Orlan and the Transgressive Act,” *Art in America* 81.2 (February 1993): 83-125. <www.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Orlan/Orlan2.html> [accessed 5th January 2012].

⁸ Carey Lovelace, "Orlan: Offensive Acts," *Performing Arts Journal* 17.1 (January 1995): 13-25 (18). *JSTOR*. Web. [accessed 4th January 2012].

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 63.

¹⁰ Maren Möhring, "Working Out the Body's Boundaries: Physiological, Aesthetic, and Psychic Dimensions of the Skin in German Nudism, 1890-1930," in *Body Parts: Critical Explorations in Corporeality*, eds. Christopher Forth and Ivan Crozier (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005): 229-246 (238).

¹¹ Seltzer, 242.

¹² Renata Salecl, "Cut in the Body: From Clitoridectomy to Body Art," *The Other Within*. Vol. 1, ed. Ruth Parkin-Gounelas (Thessalonica: Athanassios A. Altintzis, 2001): 157-173 (169).

¹³ Patrick Campbell and Helen Spackman, "With/out An-Aesthetic: The Terrible Beauty of Franko B," *The Drama Review* 42.4 (Massachusetts: MIT Press, Winter 1998): 56-74 (59).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 61-2.

¹⁵ Seltzer, 265.

¹⁶ Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Postmodern Age* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 195-6. I am also reminded here of Derrida's assertion in "Passages – From Traumatism to Promise," *Points – Interviews 1974-1994*, ed. Elizabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995): 372-395 (386-7) that 'the future is necessarily monstrous: the figure of the future, that is, that which can only be surprising, that for which we are not prepared [...] is heralded by species of monsters'. Yet this monster is somehow made 'legible': it is inevitably accommodated, acculturated, even normalized. By the same token, future 'monsters' of technology are waiting to be realized and accommodated within society.

¹⁷ Qtd. in Gray, 198.

¹⁸ J.G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995), 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.