**Orlan. Zoom baroque / plis et déplis.**

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The invitation card to the exhibition announces the presence of the artist herself at the opening. The famous and controversial French artist Orlan would be also presenting a book published by Peccolo Art Gallery in Memorie d’Artista series. The small elegant volume consists of a text by Orlan, and some black and white pictures zooming progressively onto a detail of a cloth with which Orlan had made a performance at the same Tuscan gallery back in 1981.

I also, back in 2001 wrote about Orlan in the ***Rivista di Psicoanalisi***. I was puzzled and impressed by the art project "Carnal Art" she had started in the ‘90s, in which the artist envisioned "reincarnations" - or better, redefinitions of identity - through the possibility of contaminations between body and technology. In a manifesto of those years, the artist said: “Carnal art is a work of self-portrait in the classical sense, though it is made with the technological means of the time. It oscillates between defiguration and refiguration. It is engraved in the flesh because our time begins to give us the chance”.

Orlan’s self-portraits focused on the face and in 2001 she had already undergone nine surgeries. Films and photographs documenting the various stages of the surgeries through shocking images were part of her project, together with a mass of theoretical writings that illustrated their aim and meaning. All the surgeries, videos, photos, texts, like the tiles of a mosaic create a self-portrait in progress, able to fill the distance between "inside and outside", between being and appearance. In Orlan’s perspective the human being is envisioned as a subject whose identity is precarious and mutant, and the biogenetic advancements as well as the new technologies offer and promise astonishing opportunities for upgrading and changing one’s own body and appearance.

Far from seeking an image of ideal or canonical beauty - indeed, denouncing it - the virtual rendering that foreshadowed the possible modifications were rather disturbing.

So I was extremely interested to see how Orlan looked like in flesh and blood! I wondered who knows what monstrosity I would have to face. I must confess that my pruritic curiosity – let’s say fuelled also by the aura of sensationalism and provocation with which the artist has built up her public image - went alas, disappointed.

I found myself in front of a beautiful middle-aged woman, who exhibited a female neat figure not mortified by penitential diets, and a wrinkleless, cleverly made-up face. Of course the hairstyle was a bit eccentric, and the implants like small bumps on the temples, just above the end of the arch of the eyebrows - created in the course of performance / surgeries in the 90s - were charmingly sprinkled with glitter for an original make-up, but really nothing more.

Frankly we have seen worse and more monstrous things among Body-Art performers, and even among celebrities of the show business after "normal" aesthetic interventions!

It is worthwhile remembering that the Body-Art movement was an art research trend followed by several generations of artists from the ’70s on, and it started declining at the beginning of the century. Anyway it is interesting to reflect upon how it foreshadowed socio-identity issues now widely spread in our postmodern culture.

In the broader context of social and cultural upheavals of the ’70s, many artists radicalized the overlapping of art/life to the extreme. If you want to make art of your own life, is there a better canvas and palette than your own body, the “embodied self” where life experience is embodied? And if art is also a form of knowledge, to know themselves through a '"carnal art" means to explore physically all the perceptions, sensations, feelings and experiences that are lived in the body and with the body. These artists transformed the physical body into a live and sentient material to work with: it went to embody the “corpus” of an artistic research that was expressed in extreme explorations of bodily limits and possibilities. Their performances were often sexually provocative, crude or perverse or self-injuring, and at their own risk they underwent painful experiences which aroused confusion, disgust and excitement in the audience.

I would say that in the immediacy of the performative actions they made their own body an activator of intersubjectivity that abolished the communication distance with the other, so that it became a place of exchange of primitive anxieties and stressful, deep emotions, of projective identifications between the artist and the spectator.

The Ego, as Freud said, is primarily a body ego. The body is the site of emotions and feelings, experiences and memories, and to rewrite the body with cuts, marks and scars means using it also as a support to carve one’s own emotional history; or rather, through rituals of self-harm, it is as if this same psychic history is brought to the surface, giving concrete representation to psychic wounds and lacerations "tattooed" indelibly on the skin, almost as if it’s the only way to relive them and not forget them, when the mind is not able to contain and symbolize them.

Many psychoanalytical conceptualizations take on the metaphor of the skin to refer to the structuring of early mental processes - the skin as physical shell that generates and supports a psychic envelope; the skin that holds parts of the self that still lack cohesion; the skin-ego like a fantasy of "common skin" or mother-child interface, which can retain traces of their separation and differentiation in terms of broken, battered, bruised psychic skin.

Anyway, in addition to pathology and sensationalism, we could widen our reflection to remembering how often the artists who choose this expressive language often bestow the significance of sacred rituals to their performances, and re-propose the romantic idea of the artist as a sacrificial victim, or prophet, shaman, priest, invested with the task of opening the consciousness to the revelation of another dimension - be it magical-esoteric, or religious in spiritual or animistic terms. I’m thinking of Joseph Beuys, but also of the gory performances of Gina Pane; or of those from the ‘70’s of Marina Abramovich, which were meant as exercises against pain and fear, and more and more were aimed to release and harness the natural and cosmic energy identified with the human body itself - like the exercises of the Eastern monks to awaken the primitive force of Kundalini, the primordial snake-deity.

The first performances made by Orlan comes to my mind also - the ones before the series of live surgical operations in the 90s, from which she would sell framed shreds of skin as relics. In her sexually provocative actions in the '70s, Orlan represented herself as Saint Orlan, plastically wrapped in white drapes that recalled the religious iconography of the Madonna or Santa Teresa by Bernini, in order to denounce the splitting of the female image in Madonna/whore.

The unpublished photos related to a performance in the guise of "Santa Orlan" in Venice (Palazzo Grassi, 1979 are now being exhibited at the Peccolo Gallery, along with two wonderful enlargements in black and white of a detail of the folds of a drape, where you can experience the echo of what the artist writes in the opening of the recently published book:

"The Baroque and the monster of the classic. / The Baroque shows Santa Teresa taking delight of the arrow of the angel / erotic, aesthetic ecstasy. / The Baroque does not force us to choose between good and evil / good and evil are present at the same time. / The lesson of the Baroque was the one that I have learned and applied most in my work / The fold activates light and shadow. / The fold unfolds, it becomes garment, it is surface and sculpture as well".

1. M.G. Vassallo Torrigiani: Psychoanalytic Consideration on the Body in Art: from the Classical Nude to Body Art, in E.J. Blum, H.P. Blum, A. Pazzagli (editors) *The Body Image in Psychoanalysis and Art*, 2007, Nicomp L.E., Firenze
2. M.G. Vassallo Torrigiani, S. Vassallo: L’autoritratto nella carne: il “realismo psicotico” di Orlan, *Rivista di Psicoanalisi,* 2001, XLVII,4.