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## Towards a Phenomenology of the Witness to Pain:

### Dis/Identification and the Orphanian Other

To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other. (Butler, 2004: 44)

Insisting on intimacy sometimes blinds us to the utter otherness of our very selves. (Phelan, 2004: 25)

Performance's possibility for connection is often uncritically privileged as an essential aspect of its mode of representation. Unlike painting or film where the viewer turns his active gaze onto a passive art object – and it is usually *his* gaze, as Laura Mulvey and other critics of spectatorship remind us – performance is seen as a reciprocal event that engages both spectator and performer in live, immediate, and intimate exchange. Philip Auslander argues that this assumption has a certain value for performers and for a politics of transgression, but often leads to 'clichés and mystifications like "the magic of live theatre," the "energy" that supposedly exists between performers and spectators in a live event, and the "community" that live performance is often said to create' (1999: 2). For Auslander, the privileging of live performance is based on a faulty promise of unity when, in fact, the theatrical form is predicated on separation and difference, on the very mediation of the gap between performer and spectator. Even so, it is this promise of community that adheres to notions of authenticity in contemporary debates about the real. In fact, the spectre of performance – the assumption of its *liveness* – as somehow outside an economy of repetition or minimising the space between individuals haunts the foundational logic supporting the real/representational binary. This is no more apparent than in the performance of pain.

Pain makes us uneasy. It is inarticulate, pre-linguistic, a phenomenological problem that exists on the margins of what can be represented. It is, as Elaine Scarry claims, impossible

to know another's pain, just as phenomenologists would argue that it is impossible to know the plenitude of any object of perception (Scarry, 1985; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Even so, we can and do *know* of pain – we feel it in our personal experiences and in our political lives. The call of pain is undeniable, but how does one respond when pain is framed as art? Auslander's critique of the ontology of performance as somehow distinct from other forms of representation like television, film, or radio is important here: he claims that we have now entered an era of mediatisation where all cultural production is implicated in the forms of production and circulation of the mass media and media technologies. The meaning of the "live" as more real or more authentic than the televisual, for instance, is historically contingent and not the effect of a particular medium or mode of production.

Mediatisation is the discourse by which notions of authenticity are now understood and circulated as a kind of value. Contemporary body art provides a unique case study: here the border between real and fake is always already at stake and the intersubjective dynamics of spectatorship are clearly dramatised. Through careful consideration of the way pain is mobilised in French artist Orlan's iconic surgical performance *Omniprésence* (1993), for instance, I will show how performance's problematic liveness complicates any definitive or singular reading of the pain it enacts. Watching the artist-in-pain, I argue, involves complex acts of dis/identification that position the spectator as a kind of witness. [1]

My central concern is the way pain may operate in the performance matrix as a potentially ethical force on the spectator. This requires careful attention to the ways in which pain is perceived as live and mediatised, as both real and fake, for the efficacy of pain's performance is dependent upon the authentication of its existence by a spectator. I will argue that pain destabilises the epistemological drive towards the real in performance by proposing a mode of intersubjective, affective engagement that operates even when the liveness of the other, and her/his pain, cannot be assured. It is this very doubt about pain's performativity – including the dangers of empathetic repetition and the disciplinary powers exploiting its citational force – that makes our longing to know for certain part of an ethical imperative.

### **The Aesthetic Witness**

Representations of pain, whether live or mediatised, pose particularly problematic challenges to questions of authenticity, for pain is not a fact or an image, but a historically and culturally situated *experience*. The full sense of another's experience is impossible to know, but how one communicates that experience has important social, political, and ethical consequences. In the performance of pain, how the spectator perceives another's pain is vitally important, for perception is intimately tied to behaviour, and behaviour to action, and action to change, in the social field. It is important to note the many critiques of a classical phenomenological approach that have remarked on its limitations, especially its formulation of a stable seeing subject at the centre of the perceptual universe. Without getting into the complexities of the debate, phenomenology's focus on mute, prediscursive experience presumes the accessibility of the world to perception and in presuming so may

foreclose any possibility of understanding the other in her absolute difference. At its worst, it is a potentially universalising, masculinist, even solipsistic philosophy. [2] At its best, however, a focus on the phenomenological highlights the situatedness of the spectator's perceptive ability, too, as constitutive and constituted by particular ways of inhabiting the social world. Thus, in its ethical dimension, perception is bound by the limits of historical, cultural, and bodily experience which may or may not open one to respond in particular ways to the call of pain. Perception is never neutral, nor can it in any useful way exist outside of how one reacts or responds to what is perceived. As Diana Taylor claims, in her study of theatrical representations during the Dirty War in Argentina and of violence that happens at a distance, "'looking" is always an intervention, whether we like it, or accept it, or not. Not intervening, turning away, is its own form of intervention . . . Our choice is how, not whether, to participate' (1997: 264).

To consider the performance of pain, then, is not just to think about the what-is- perceived, but how particular audiences are predisposed to identify and respond to particular aesthetic enactments as painful. I call this mode of spectatorship "witnessing" in order to inflect a less specular account of the performance moment and to suggest that questions of response and responsibility are always inevitably a part of spectatorial experience. The term "witness" suggests not only the juridical meaning of eyewitness (testifying to something seen), but also the function of authenticating, the actual experiencing of something in the moment of its occurrence, the inhabiting of proof through one's bodily presence, and testifying to that which cannot be known, to what is, in Kelly Oliver's (2001) phrasing, 'beyond recognition'. To witness is more than to see pain as an object of perception, as a representation in the field of the other; it is to attest to the very *otherness* of someone else's pain as somehow beyond the reach of one's experience.

The phrase "to bear witness" suggests a kind of physicality in its connotations of endurance, suffering, and responsibility and as such implies the ethical embodiment of a real beyond the visual. To witness is to perceive and, in some important ways, to "bear" the experience of another's pain. There is common sense to this assertion: in personal histories and intimate relationships, and in response to the images of human suffering that flood global culture, we may and very often do *feel* the pain of others. Pain is made communicable in its affect. Various defined as felt atmosphere, presocial force, emotional quality or intensity, affect signals the aspects of experience that often escape conventional visual representational codes but nonetheless form an integral part of their effects. As Deleuzian scholar Brian Massumi puts it, 'the primacy of the affective is marked by the gap between *content* and *effect*' (1995: 84). It must be understood as both process and product that works not only to produce body-selves as entities capable of being affected or affecting others but also to describe the quality of the encounter between them. In this sense, 'affect is not just a feeling or an emotion but a *force* or *energy* that influences a body's mode of existence' (Zembylas, 2006: 309). It is the felt quality of the phenomenological chiasmus, the affective texture that intertwines subjects and objects in the flesh of the world; it is part of what makes something "live" and lived.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) theorise affect as an unpredictable excess escaping into the field of difference: a force of connection in the process of becoming-self that only becomes articulated as feeling and emotion when located in the spatio-temporal specificities of a particular identity. But because identity is a mutable, constantly shifting process, affect remains only as a potential intensity that can never be harnessed. It is this perpetual circulation, momentary intensification, and sudden escape along what Deleuze and Guattari call 'lines of flight' that makes affect an unsettlingly unstable, but also potentially radical, economy (1987: 4).

The circulation of affect in the social-cultural field raises questions about representation and performativity which are at the heart of the contemporary crisis around witnessing, or what historian Carolyn J. Dean (2004) has called 'the fragility of empathy'. As Dean remarks, the rhetoric of compassion fatigue is a peculiar post- Holocaust phenomenon indicative of 'new historical restraints on imagination and feeling' (2004: 2). This historical context is pivotal and much more complex and nuanced than I can address in the space of this paper, but it is important to recognise that the term "witness" bears the marks of profound trauma, especially of the Holocaust and the debates about morality and the role of culture that followed it. [3] In this context, it is no surprise that many postmodern critics have lamented the failure of modernism's ethical framework, society's hyper-habitation to the image, or the absence of feeling in contemporary culture. However, I would like to highlight the intimate connection between representation and feeling such critiques imply, for they suggest that the ethical demand of pain is fundamentally a problem of (under- or over-) identification. It is a problem of *witnessing*: how is pain testified to through the perceptual or affective experience of another? To whom does this pain belong? Or, put another way, can there be witnessing without empathy, looking without commitment to the image, or history without feeling? These seemingly tautological questions point to the problem of pain as one mode in a larger dynamic of our encounter with difference.

For the witness to pain, both the experiential perception of another's pain and one's distance from it (experienced as both of and other to the self) create a site through which pain might be made meaningful. This is the site of 'empathic unsettlement' as intersubjective and affective possibility (LaCapra, 2001: 41). [4] There is, of course, a certain danger here: to identify with another's pain is to risk assimilating it and thus to suffer as well; to not identify with pain is to enact a profound indifference to its effects and thus risk committing inhuman violence on others. The witness must somehow do both, sustaining a position that is both empathetic and critically distant, or what I will call, dis/identificatory. This is a perceptual orientation that is not unique to witnessing performance or pain, but is one that mirrors the very fragility that marks all of our experiences of being in the world and underpins any phenomenological understanding of how we may learn from another's experience.

Numerous scholars have written on the challenges and necessity of witnessing within the post-Holocaust context. However, like Jill Bennett's *Empathic Vision* (2005), where her interest is less in what the representation of trauma might mean, and more in how visual art might operate on the viewer as inciting force for empathy, I too am interested in *how*

spectators are compelled to ethical considerations by performance. Bennett does not develop a theory of witnessing or identification *per se* – in fact, she appears to reject notions of identification in favour of a more Deleuzian approach to art as sensation, as a ‘mode of engagement’ that relies on the transactional force of affect to provoke critical thinking (2005: 14). Although inspired by this approach, I believe Bennett’s visual model for empathy is limited by a theatrical understanding of the relation between emotion and performance, as reliant on character and role. Particularly in more non-narrative forms of performance, the kind of circulation of affect that Bennett notes as operating in the visual field to ‘orchestrat[e] a set of transactions between bodies’ is also present (50). In fact, the liveness of performing bodies-in-pain complicates the transaction, directionality and mobility of affective force because there is not just subject and object, artwork and viewer, but at least two body-selves in relation, simultaneously enacting their own subjectivities through an embodied intentionality towards that world of the other, an orientation which is formed by a particular experiential history. Where the witness might sit and how s/he might be implicated in this matrix is what I hope to signal by the term dis/identification. In this way, my use of the notion of identification is less about sympathising with someone’s experience and more about the ways *identity* as such is manifested in the space between subjectivities. This will hopefully become clearer in my discussion of Orlan’s performance of identity in *Omniprésence*.

Before turning to these larger intersubjective dynamics and dis/identificatory tactics, however, I would like to consider more closely the role proximity and presence play in the politics of witnessing. Pain’s peculiar ethical call seems to hinge on a consideration of its liveness – its present potential for affect and how the effect of presence functions to authenticate another’s suffering as worthy of response. French sociologist Luc Boltanski takes up this problem in *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* where he argues that the politics of pity has functioned historically through the creation of distance between the figure of an uninvolved spectator and the ‘massification of a collection of unfortunates who are not there in person’ (1999: 13). This is the problem of the spectacle of ‘distant suffering’. Instead, it is a focus on presence and present suffering which might implicate the spectator through feeling: emotion is performative for Boltanski and becomes a form of responsive action and the inciting force of an ethical intentionality. As performance scholar Edward Scheer remarks, Boltanski’s model of the ‘aesthetic topic’ (a rhetorical form of suffering that refuses both the denunciation of another’s pain and its over-sentimentalisation by representing the interiority of the artistic subject’s sublimating response to that suffering) ‘is one possible avenue of redemption – however profane – for a suffering that would otherwise remain unremarked’ (2008: 50). To put it in the terms of this paper, the performance of pain is part of a politics of *liveness*. It is one that requires not a pitying spectator of distant suffering but an aesthetic witness to pain.

Part of pain’s potency, then, is not just its inexorability – to vision and to knowledge – but its very felt interpellative affect. This is especially true in performance where the border between real and fake, where liveness is always already at stake. Affect, in this sense, is mediated and suffering is enacted not simply as the unknowable fact of another’s experience, but also as an aesthetic whose sensation is intentionally made both distant *and*

accessible to experience. The performance of pain is thus a useful site for thinking through how the perception and recognition of feeling mediates, consolidates, and cultivates one's sense of self and one's orientation in the socio-political field. Pain is, as Rosi Braidotti so elegantly put it, 'part of the affective core of political subjectivity' (2007). And, it is in performance that our doubts

– and our longing – that the feeling of suffering could be put to some use are rehearsed. In this sense, I am moving away from a disembodied visual epistemology of pain towards an ethical-phenomenological proposition for an aesthetic witness.

### **Dis/identifying with Pain**

There is no real existing behind representation, no essential identity contained deep in the recesses of our flesh, and no suffering that could be made presentable if we just had the right words. The phenomenological complexities of experience suggest that pain is not simply a "real" that can or cannot be represented, but a particularly potent example of the doubt that inheres in any perceptual experience. As Amelia Jones explains in a recent essay on the performance of bodily wounding:

Even our own experience of pain is sifted through the representational field (we experience firing neurons, yet our understanding of these impulses is filtered through our culturally determined notions about pain and bodily coherence). Not to mention the level on which our *memory* of pain takes place. (2006a: 36)

Every material experience is in some sense symbolically rendered, and every symbolic action points to its material embodiment. To highlight this intertwining, Jones proposes a 'continuum of the not-real and the not-fake' through which to consider the challenges performances of corporeal rupture make to the limits of human life (2006a: 20). Rather than a binary that would value only certain kinds of pain as authentic, Jones' use of the negative not-real/not-fake points to the ambiguity of performance actions as simultaneously lived *and* performed, to the way authenticity can be staged, and to how notions of presence are always already caught up in the representational. For Peggy Phelan (1993) the problem of real-fake is framed most effectively in the theatre of disappearance where the failure of a fake to produce a real is materialised in the body of the performer who becomes both metaphor and metonym of our longing to know the difference. Performance is thus founded on doubt, on an unverifiable real. Our doubt about the not-real/not-fake wound – the problem of pain's performance, its ambiguous 'liveness' – unsettles any certainty we may have of how to act in the face of it.

Consider French performance artist Orlan's best-known performance project *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* (1990-1993) which dramatises this problem of representational doubt in a particularly poignant way. Over a series of nine publicly performed operations, Orlan had her face and body surgically transformed into a monstrously permanent parody of the feminine. Orlan's reinvention of self in this project is brutally real and highly fantastical. As Jones puts it in her brief reading, 'Orlan's project

brilliantly navigates the inseparability of the not-real and the not-fake' (2006a: 31). But this series of performances is more than a troubling of the boundary between metaphorical and material; it is a staging of the witness to pain in what I might call an ambiguously not-political/not-personal context. Hers is not an explicitly activist work – although the feminist ethics in it are still resonant and relevant; rather, it is the inhabitation of this more subtle space between the personal and the political, and the work's distance from the urgency of the pain of torture, war, illness and our other more immediate contemporary concerns, that makes space to consider in detail some of the mechanisms of witnessing in performance. It is, I will argue, the mobilisation of affect – the experience of a pain whose existence can never be assured – that here works to incite a dis/identificatory process of perception. It is one which might position the aesthetic witness in responsible relation to the Orlanian other.

*The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* is not explicitly about pain, but for those of us witness to it, the affect of pain is an entry point into the troubling entanglement of looking, knowing, and acting this work performs. Orlan's project, in a larger sense, can be seen as an aesthetic encounter that speaks both conceptually and experientially to our inability to know ourselves or another with any certainty and how that unknowability is formed in the perpetual oscillation between identification and disidentification with the other. The serial nature of the *Reincarnation* project suggests this inexhaustibility and is a quality peculiar to much of Orlan's oeuvre: she often relies on techniques of reiteration and recycling, and a self-image that is perpetually fragmented and under constant transformation – narratively, surgically, even virtually. From the moment of her self-"baptism" as Saint Orlan in 1971 to the recent digital composite portraits of the *Self-Hybridation* series, Orlan has consistently performed 'the compulsion to posit one's identity inexhaustibly because it is so precarious' (Augsburg, 1998: 302). This precariousness is revealed most terrifyingly in *Omniprésence*, the seventh of Orlan's surgical performances in the *Reincarnation* project, where identity – signified by that potent marker, the face – is literally unhinged.

*Omniprésence* was performed in a sterile operating theatre in New York City in November 1993 and broadcast live to twelve satellite locations around the world. During the performance procedure, Orlan had silicone implants inserted under her eyebrows while simultaneously engaging in conversation with her doctors, crew, and audience. Although she received localised anaesthetic throughout the procedure to eliminate the pain, the brutal cutting and scraping of flesh makes it hard not to imagine that her body suffers. Throughout the procedure, Orlan received questions via fax and videophone from audiences around the globe and continually denied the experience of pain in claims like 'Je n'ai pas peur' or 'It is not me who suffers' (Orlan, 1993). These repeated queries from viewers about whether or not she was in pain are indicative of the doubt we have about the "truth" of Orlan's assertions. By forcing us to question the presence of her pain, Orlan also asks us to question the she who (does not) speak of it. The body Orlan shows us is unsettlingly ruptured from the identity she claims. She claims a body impermeable to pain, but our own experiences of bodily rupture tell us that cutting flesh must hurt. Whose experience can we trust? Which Orlan do we believe: the one we see or she who speaks? Or is something else going on?

On one hand, the plenitude we expect to see behind Orlan's skin – the “real” and fully experiencing subject behind it – turns out to be a bloody, fleshy void. Parveen Adams, in her psychoanalytical reading of this work, notes how Orlan ‘undoes the triumph of representation’ by revealing the lack, the emptiness behind the facial mask (1996: 145). On the other hand, this lack can only be experienced by the spectator if one is anaesthetised to feeling or only seeks to see something of the truth of identity. For, in fact, the effect of Orlan's performance is not at all lacking in *feeling*. It is this revelling in the affective possibilities of performing pain which proves the most persuasive aspect of Orlan's critique of identity.

Cosmetic surgery is socially understood as marking a drive towards completeness; it is an aesthetic strategy for aligning one's exterior and interior self-image – a way of forcing representation to reflect the “reality” within. Orlan unsettles the representational economy and the mind/body dualism on which such a notion of completeness relies by turning the operating theatre into a carnival. In a parody of typical surgery, Orlan is at the centre of the operation, talking, laughing, reading aloud, directing that certain images be captured, and demanding her words be translated, while simultaneously having the flesh around her ear sliced and the skin peeled from the bone [see Fig. 1]. Her grotesque face gives, as she says in her later writing about the work, ‘the impression of an autopsied corpse that continues to speak, as if detached from its body’ (1998: 321) [see Fig. 2]. By breaking the taboo of the passive patient (the one who normally remains unconscious while her body is treated as so much flesh), Orlan stages the absurdity of the Cartesian split between body and subject: her dead flesh is live, alive, and in conversation. It is not even a question of a mismatch between representation and reality, between exterior and interior, but a fundamental rupture of the binary itself (Adams, 1996: 145).

Jill O'Bryan argues that this ‘binary terror’ creates a kind of ‘identity gap’ where the exterior image is in a constant state of flux and the interior image unlocatable (1997: 52, 54). This is not surprising considering that the interiority that Orlan's new “face” is meant to mimic is actually based on a series of representational ideals – a composite of exterior images, icons of western beauty (Botticelli's Venus and Da Vinci's Mona Lisa, among other classical paintings) – and, also, because Orlan draws our attention to the incompleteness of any plastic surgery by displaying the recovery process as a work-in-progress. The photographic installation, which unfolded in the forty-one days following the operation-performance, points to the gap between a digitally composed image-ideal (the photographic series of morphed classical models called *Entre-Deux*) and the surgically-altered body whose appearance is (painfully) unpredictable [see Fig. 3]. Such a juxtaposition suggests that Orlan herself exists somewhere *entre les deux*, literally, in the interval between.

Orlan stages the process of becoming-self as a perverse identification with an ideal, or, put another way, as a painful encounter with ideology. Louis Althusser, in his well-known essay ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, remarks upon how an individual is formed and subjected to a disciplinary regime through an ideological apparatus that hails the individual as subject:



ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals . . . or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects . . . by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'. (1971: 174)

The subject's obedience to ideology, Althusser argues, is not because of an external force demanding her/his submission (the actual police officer) but because of the force of interpellation (the subject's recognition of him/herself in the "you" spoken by the other) – it is an internalisation of the "you" as imagined by ideology, in this instance as criminal, which confirms the subject as *subject*. Orlan "behaves", in this model then, to the extent to which she internalises a patriarchal ideal and performs her self, her subjection, as a "beautiful" subject.

The problem, of course, is that Orlan's recognition of self in the other of ideology is not the beautiful woman imagined by patriarchy. This is not to suggest that one's interpellation by ideology necessarily operates without resistance. The compulsion to assimilate a dominant fiction of identity by either identifying or counter-identifying with its interpellative call is marked by failure: the ideal is itself a fantasy. As Althusser explains, interpellation is an 'incessant (eternal) practice' and ideology is not an achievable thing but a mode of relation: '[i]deology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (1971: 173, 162). Even in the psychoanalytic account, the role of identification in subject formation is fraught: Lacan's foundational encounter in the mirror phase is a site of both self-recognition and misrecognition. Identification is never simple mimesis, but an ongoing processes of introjecting and misrecognising the behaviour of others, including the imaginary other projected as one's ideal mirror self. It is an inevitably failed assimilatory drive to transform the self in the image of the other. In this way, Orlan performs a kind of Lacanian subjectivity by materialising the gap between ideal (her digitally composed self-image that acts as a surgical map) and the impossible ratification of that ideal (her fragmented and bruised face) as self-alienating and alien visage.

It might be more accurate, however, to argue that Orlan overidentifies with the image of the ideal woman in order to short-circuit the process of interpellation that would normally inhere her in its inescapable ideological grasp. Slavoj Žižek outlines this potentially transgressive aspect in his concept of overidentification. Žižek critic Ian Parker describes its operation as 'tak[ing] the system at its word and play[ing] it so close it that it [sic] cannot bear your participation' (2004). Most spectators certainly cannot bear to watch Orlan's performance, which suggests something of the disruptive power of overidentification. Overidentification, Parker continues, supplements the ideal with its 'obscene element, the hidden reverse of the message that contains the illicit charge of enjoyment' (2004). It is not a counter-identification with the opposite of the ideal – a strategy of resistance by rejection – but an excess of identification that mobilises the simultaneous fear and fascination we have with the ideological and the power that undergirds it: our wanting it but not wanting to be subject to it. For Orlan, the underside of the ideal is imagined as abject. [5] How the spectator might respond to the powerful affect of this abjection and its obscene ideological

pleasures form an important part of the political dimensions of the work, and of performances of pain more generally, as well as being essential to the model of relation I am proposing for the aesthetic witness: dis/identification.

José Muñoz, in his important book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), proposes a model of social relations that frames identity as the hybrid or intersectional site of emergence occurring in a web of competing (and often colluding) ideological paradigms. I am deeply indebted to Muñoz's scholarship; his proposal for a queer politics that only partially identifies with dominant ideology is crucially important for the performing minoritarian subject Muñoz describes. Disidentification works from an understanding of the subject as always already *in* ideology (not outside it and thus only able to respond for or against) and of the mobility of identificatory force (which is inevitably caught in the flux of desire, discourse, and power). The disidentifying subject simultaneously secures points of affinity with others and ruptures those alliances through tactical or partial misrecognition. But, I would like to take the term beyond its framing within queer identity politics in order to account for the ways in which disidentificatory tactics are involved in any encounter with difference on the level of subjectivity and, more importantly, in perceptual experience.

First, it is important to consider subjectivity as an experience of self resulting from the performativity of identity. Judith Butler, whose work forms the theoretical grounding for Muñoz's analysis, describes performativity as central to both the process of subject-formation and political transformation. Butler proposes the ethics of 'a double movement: to invoke the category and, hence, provisionally to institute an identity and at the same time to open the category as a site of permanent political contest' (1993: 222). It is important to note that Butlerian identity is a kind of performative naming that is not completely determined or necessarily consciously willed by the subject. It is the very iterability of the signifier of identity itself that ties it to the social field, to the legacy of historical or conventional articulations, and to which identity owes both the compulsion to secure itself and the possibility of its resignification. In every act of repetition there is the possibility of failure, in every failed repetition the possibility for the new to emerge. Subjectivity is, thus, the process of becoming-self through the performative. As political agency, it is about harnessing the potential that appears in the iterative gap: in Butler's words, 'agency is the hiatus in iterability, the compulsion to install an identity through repetition, which requires the very contingency, the undetermined interval, that identity insistently seeks to foreclose' (1993: 220). In this sense, Orlan's gaping face is not only a sign of the repetitive failure of the category "feminine", but an inhabiting of the very violence of differentiation, the temporal gap in which resignification is performed. In the sense that this gap comes charged with the affect of pain and abjection and with the feeling of temporal rupture that Orlan not only disidentifies, but *dis/identifies*. Orlanian subjectivity is mobile and mutable, and is thus a dissing and dismissing of the ideological notions of continuity, stability, and singularity adhering to the idea of selfhood. Hers is not just a political contest with the image of white female identity, but an absolute recognition and refusal of the category "identity" itself and the ideological notions of continuity, stability, and singular visibility which adhere to it.

Second, although a large part of the success of *Omniprésence* is in its staging of the performativity of categories of female beauty – the way Orlan inhabits the ‘identity gap’, to return to O’Bryan’s phrase – the political efficacy of the work also rests in how it functions as a site for producing the radical contingency of the witness as the one positioned to authenticate this performance of the other. Orlan’s resignification of identity is not merely in relation to ideologies or signifiers of femininity, or a restaging of how these might be read, but in the actual phenomenal moment of her becoming-other. Although Phelan puts it in more psychoanalytical terms, the intersubjectivity of this process is clear:

Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly. Identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other – which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being. (1993: 13)

Orlan’s self-creation as Saint Orlan is thus dependent upon an audience for its very emergence as an identity; such is its melancholic politics. As witnesses to the Orlanian transformation, we are faced with the appearance of an identificatory site that, in its failed and painful intimacy, promises and provokes our own processes of dis/identification. Just as Orlan dis/identifies with the feminine-ideal that hails her, so we too might dis/identify with her and her performance of it. The process of dis/identification spirals out in the intersubjective space between. Orlan is never Saint Orlan and we are never ourselves: each becoming-self is intertwined in the process of becoming-other. As Butler reminds us, ‘To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other’ (2004: 44). [6]

Third, the process of becoming-self is an encounter that relies, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) has argued, on the tangibility of vision, on the difficult reciprocity of perceiving and being perceived, and on the temporal flow of experience both into the past and into the future. Dis/identification, then, is a process of self-fashioning by recognising the ultimate unknowability of the other. As Phelan puts it, ‘the after-effect of disappearance is the experience of subjectivity itself’ (1993: 148). For it is not in the moment of her emergence that we recognise Orlan, but only in our later becoming-other that we may perceive the Orlanian plenitude we missed. To put it another way, Orlan turns our attention to the phenomenal rupture of ideology – the flesh of dis/identification, the encounter with the skin between self/other, ideal/object, love/disgust – by staging the moment of becoming-woman as contingent and touched by otherness. This happens quite explicitly in the material invasion of her face by silicon and iconography, and in the potently visceral response of watching the transformation where Orlanian pain provokes the affective sense of the spectator. Clearly, the monstrosity of the Orlanian figure suggests hers is a partial and perhaps unsuccessful othering. Nor am I suggesting that we feel Orlan’s pain exactly (for in fact she does not feel it herself) but that we are *touched* by it.

People do not perceive or experience pain in the same way and I am certainly not arguing for a universalising model of witnessing. My own tendency is to overidentify with others' suffering; as a privileged Caucasian-Canadian woman raised on a diet of paternalistic education, Protestant guilt, and liberal-left politics, I am constantly challenged to find the ethical distance in my own dis/identificatory position. The painful questions about classical beauty which Orlan's performance raises may well not have the same kind of resonance for women of colour, most men, non-Euro- Americans, those with limited class privilege, or others less compelled by the interpellative call of western patriarchy. And, of course, there are those who do not perceive pain in their experience of the world, as is the case in forms of congenial analgesia like Familial Dysautonomia or CIPA [7], which opens the conceptual possibility of not identifying with Orlan at all. In this sense, Orlan might be out of this world and her apparent suffering incomprehensible. But such a non-painful, non-identificatory existence is a rare and a potentially fatal condition. The sensation of pain is necessary for survival and the recognition of it in others is how we may learn to recognise and thus avoid such suffering in ourselves. Of course there are (sometimes necessary) forms of self-preserving, dissociative relations to pain, but this does not necessarily mean the non-sensation of pain's affect. Even in the case of violent trauma where a painful event is not necessarily perceived in the moment of its occurrence, affect circulates if only to appear later as the inarticulate effect of its displacement (e.g. the throbbing itch of a healing wound or the weeping sleeplessness of an unacknowledged grief).

Pain is a troubling phenomenon. Drew Leder (1990) has convincingly shown how pain unsettles one's habitual orientation to the world and to one's own body: the experience of pain is a kind of turning outside-in that makes one's body-self, which is normally imperceptible to consciousness (or at least not a matter of concern or attention), appear and the plenitude of the world fade into disappearance. It is the here and now of pain that makes it hard to notice anything else but its feeling. If we think about this perceptual rupture not only in terms of the experience of pain but of the perception of its more mobile affect we move closer to understanding the ways in which a witness to pain might experience her/his body-self in relation to an other's.

"Dis/identification" is thus not just disidentification with ideology per se, but an expression of the experiential rupture at the core of the affect it mobilises. As the Orlianian face reminds us, ideology is inevitably materialised in the body-self: its sensations of pain and the troubling gap pain makes in the process of recognition feels like a kind of splitting. Thus, the slash also works phenomenologically to suggest the tangibility of the meeting point as a site of meaning-making between the absolute unknowability of another's suffering and the touching affect through which we may identify with it. Dis/identification is not just about how the witness makes pain visible and leaves its meaning open to contest (as a politically disidentificatory position might take with an ideological category), but about the role feeling plays in authenticating another's pain and in the politics of responsibility. Simply put, if another's pain remains imperceptible, if the affect of suffering is only one's own and not recognised or felt by others, it cannot register in the social or political domain and thus cannot compel or incite the becoming-other in which the possibility for change resides. Instead, I am offering the radical position of the aesthetic witness who may

simultaneously recognise and dissociate from a pain that cannot be confirmed, whether that be because of its performative status – the uncertainty of its liveness – or simply the ultimate unknowability of anything in the perceptual field. The performance of pain positions the spectator as witness through the affect it mobilises and the complex acts of (always partial) identification, misidentification, and counteridentification, and overidentification it incites and by which s/he might relate to that affecting other. In this process of dis/identification, suffering might be made meaningful.

### **Conclusion**

It is the aesthetic witness who holds open the moment between suffering and its enactment through the sensible perception of affect, through responsible acts of dis/identification. As a political and phenomenological positionality, dis/identification signals the experiential rupture that inheres in any ideological interpellation; it offers space to over-, under-, mis-, or dis-identify with the ideological apparatus within and to recognise the role feeling plays in authenticating any notion of its “real”. Particularly in terms of the politics of suffering and the way pain is mapped onto ideas of otherness, dis/identification marks the pain of not knowing what we are becoming or how best to negotiate our dependency on others who we can never know in their plenitude. In the performance of pain, where the identity of another’s suffering is always already circumscribed by doubt, such witnessing – and the ethical questions it raises – is played out on the field of the live.

Beyond the obvious critique of Cartesian identity, Orlan’s “reincarnation” project raises important questions about the density and complexity of the aesthetic mediation of feeling and about the powers and politics at work in representing pain. In *Omniprésence*, the appearance of pain functions to mobilise the intensity of affect and thus becomes as a strategic tool to draw the spectator away from the dangers of the spectacle of distant suffering and the merely representational to the complex affects and intimate distances of the phenomenological. By touching the spectator where it hurts, Orlan’s performance makes space to speak to widespread apathy in the face of subtle violences that often remain unmarked: the commodification of identity, the disciplinary demands of patriarchy, and the challenge of ethically facing the other and her suffering. Her mediatised suffering – and by extension the televisual representations of bodily torture and pain invading the field of our perception every day – is not just “art” or “representation”, or beyond the realm of sensation and sensibility: it is live and felt in its affect. In this way, another’s pain is also not outside of effective response and the circuits of feeling that make us ethically responsible and responsive to the pain of others.



Image 1. Orlan during her 7<sup>th</sup> operation. New York 21/11/1993. Courtesy SIPA Press.



Image 2. Orlan during her 7<sup>th</sup> operation. New York 21/11/1993. Courtesy SIPA Press.



Image 3. Orlan following her 7<sup>th</sup> operation. New York 21/11/1993. Courtesy SIPA Press.

### Endnotes

The author would like to thank Amelia Jones, Ana Carden-Coyne, Karen Ward and this journal's anonymous reviewers for feedback on earlier drafts.

[1] It is also important to note that my own encounter with these works is through mediatisation: my own experience of the pain Orlan enacts was through video documentation, textual description, and photographic images. Despite this mediation, I still find the affect of her work to be powerful, disturbing and remarkably visceral. In this sense, my understanding of the "live" has little to do with actual presence.

[2] See especially Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993) and contemporary commentators Dorothea Olkowski (1999) and Jane Blocker (2004) on Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty.

[3] Well-known texts like Primo Levi's 'The Gray Zone' (1988), events such as the 1968 Eichmann trial, and the culture debates initiated by Adorno's provocative phrase, '[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (1983: 34), form important touchstones in this history.

[4] LaCapra argues that any history of trauma, especially that of the Holocaust, must account for the affective quality of the events on those involved, including the historian who must ideally function as a kind of secondary witness to a belated trauma. This is achieved in the dialectic of working through, a process of historical mourning which produces 'empathic unsettlement' as an

uncanny relationship to subjectivity: the witness is both there and here, taking on the feeling of another's experience and yet remaining distant from its traumatic effects (LaCapra, 2001: 41). Although LaCapra approaches 'empathic unsettlement' through a psychotherapeutic lens that is never clearly defined (he is deeply interested in memory and trauma), the sense of disorientation and collapse of distinctions the term implies suggest something of the affective texture I argue may also be part of a spectator's response to pain in performance.

[5] I am grateful to Amelia Jones for this insight. See also the work of Julia Kristeva on abjection and the maternal as the excluded ground upon which patriarchal identity is founded.

[6] The fact that Orlan intended to petition the courts for legal assurances of her new face as a corporate brand suggests that recognition in the social field is not so easily assured. In fact, Orlan's claiming of the need for institutional assurances marks and reiterates the unsettlement of identity as stable category that the surgical performance enacts. It is not really the recognition of the courts that Orlan requires, but the recognition of that which disappears – the sites of loss, the mutable gaps – in her saintly performance. In the very act of citing the power of law and of capital, she unsettles their authority to name and stabilise. As Orlan explains, 'When the operations are finished, I will solicit an advertising agency to come up with an artist's name and logo; next I will retain a lawyer to petition the Republic to accept my new identity and my new face. It is a performance that inscribes itself into the social fabric, that challenges the law, that moves toward a total change of identity' (1998: 326).

[7] 'Familial Dysautonomia (FD) is a rare genetic neurological condition that affects the sensory and autonomic nervous systems, causing severe gastrointestinal, cardiac, pulmonary, orthopedic, renal and ophthalmologic problems' (see <http://www.familialdysautonomia.org/>). Persons with FD often have insensitivity to pain or various other inappropriate responses to sensory stimuli like heat, taste, etc. Persons with CIPA (Congenital Insensitivity to Pain with Anhidrosis), also a rare hereditary condition, often have a general insensitivity to pain and trouble differentiating between extremes of temperature; for this reason, sweat function is often impaired ('anhidrosis').

### List of Illustrations

Figure 1 Orlan orchestrating the operating theatre carnival during her seventh surgical performance, *Omniprésence* (1993).

Figure 2 The 'autopsied corpse that continues to speak'.

Figure 3 *Portrait produced by the Body-Machine Four Days after the Surgery- Performance.*

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## Editorial Note

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