

ETC



ETC - 20th Anniversary. Rituals Feature articles translated to English

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ETC 20TH ANNIVERSARY
ETC, REVUE DE L'ART ACTUEL
TWENTY YEARS YOUNG!

Anniversaries, it is said, mark the phases of life. In Japan, for example, birthdays are celebrated with quasi-sacred rituals. How then, in the world of present-day art, do we pay fitting tribute to 20 years of determination, patience, creativity and giving of self? For behind any magazine there are people, in this case Isabelle Lelarge and the pillars of the various editorial, coordination and reader committees, all sharing a common vision of their roles. These are the people who, for the past two decades, day after day, night after night, have made *ETC* what it has become. Casting a retrospective light, this anniversary celebrates the magazine as it is today, but it also salutes its evolution, the path it has followed and the publication it will be tomorrow. In this sense, *ETC* bears a responsibility towards the future. Paradoxically, this means detaching itself from its framers to ensure a balance in the perspectives and the voices it conveys on present-day art.

Beyond proving *ETC*'s relevance in the ecosystem of the intellectual art community, these 20 years confirm the magazine as a player of indisputable status. But exactly what status? What weight does it really carry in the eyes of others? This question leads first and foremost to the writing, the writers and their subjects, but to the readers as well, the people for whom the magazine is intended.

There you have, in a nutshell, the parameters of a celebration of intellectual exercise and debate. For it goes without saying that *ETC* has always sought to be a forum for discussion of the art of its time – often intuiting it, constantly questioning it. This implies that the people who write and research for *ETC* prefer to venture into zones of risk and turbulence, rejecting absolutes and snap judgments. And apparently they find it stimulating, since nearly all of them are associated with institutions of learning worldwide. Indeed, *ETC* draws its contributors from an impressive national and international network of scholars and others who bring in-depth knowledge of particular topics and environments to propounding their views and exploring endless questions.

For example, when geopolitical change opened doors to art previously concealed from our view, *ETC* courageously devoted page after page to Central Asian art, Romanian art, Russian art – in short, to art forms often perceived as “different” despite affinities with known or even recognized practices. *ETC*'s commitment to marginal art goes hand in hand with its willingness to devote extensive sections of the magazine to artists of monumental stature in timely fashion. Louise Bourgeois, in particular, comes to mind.

Attesting great open-mindedness and unflinching rigorous standards, this attitude embraces risk and assumes a mission to shed light on the unknown and offer perspectives through different lenses. From varied prospects – here from the inside looking out, there the reverse – the magazine has tackled themes such as voyeurism and exhibitionism, and self-portraiture and portraiture of the other, to cite but two examples.

ETC's thematic features of the past 20 years are so astutely enlightening and consistently relevant that delving into them is a dizzying experience. Managing the feat of grasping the invisible for two decades takes considerable intuition, sensitivity and, let it be said, intelligence. It also takes a certain dose of modesty, because *ETC* opts for continual change, giving the floor to artists and their projects on occasion, revisiting current events for a closer look, questioning its own function and especially that of art in a society ceaselessly threatened by human nature. For human nature is so imperfect that it needs constant reminding that much of our current behaviour now impacts the question of survival.

How can you devote your life to art when the entire world is under threat? This is one of the questions that run like threads through the 20 years of *ETC*. Others: How is it that the art system rejects certain unconventional and sometimes unclassifiable practices out of hand? Can art produced outside the system play a critical

role? What is the role of large public institutions in disseminating and promoting art? And just what art are we talking about?

To provide answers to these questions, *ETC*'s editorial committee looks past the norm to in-depth interviews and extensive thematic features, which do not favour art being exhibited over art being made.

One such feature issue, no. 75, on the theme of ecology, is a perfect example of *ETC*'s approach. The discussion of bioart, for example, informs readers about practices devoted to things other than conventional art objects, things closer to Beuys's performance art. This issue also prominently focuses on ATSA (Action Terroriste Sociallement Acceptable, or Socially Acceptable Terrorist Action), which has always aimed to operate outside of museums, preferring to infiltrate and pervert them to further its fight against indifference. While situating the group in a network, at last, the magazine confronts the very principles of exclusion. Does the fact of including not call into question the former fact of excluding? What is art? Who determines the quality criteria against which each artwork is judged and, especially, how it is judged?

Rightly rejecting the restrictive limits of institutional choice, *ETC* is writing its own history of present-day art, sometimes venturing into singular territories, but always with great respect for the writer's point of view and for its readers. The technology theme, for example, has become a popular trend. It encompasses multiple questions, including surveillance, filmic effects, art and science, the media arts – all themes that *ETC* has dealt with in recent years, looking when relevant at hybrid art forms – dance, theatre and, of course, performance – that now regularly borrow from the visual arts.

All this suggests that *ETC* has permanent feelers out in space, time and the stuff of art. It unhesitatingly presents images that have created and will create scandal, or at least raise questions and spark debate. It features the work of artists dealing with morbidity, sexuality and identity, violence, exhibitionism at work and many other controversial themes. And that is as it should be!

What more can be said about this 20th anniversary? I hope that it marks a short pause in the life of *ETC*, a pause to reassert the magazine in its ever-evolving role and once again renew the energy needed by the people behind it to cope with tough financial times, adversity in the art community, and the pressures exerted by the community's many needs.

I also want to reiterate that it is Isabelle Lelarge who carries and nurtures the essence and substance of *ETC*, *revue de l'art actuel*. She is voluble; she has her own ideas and is not afraid to make them known; she surrounds herself at work with friends who share her passion; and she is informed yet independent and free-thinking. Yes, Isabelle Lelarge embodies *ETC*, helming it with the same fervour she deployed in bringing it into the world 20 years ago. She talks about its future development with concern for the younger generation that will take over. She is open-minded and generous and has every reason to boast about what she and her team have built. And yet she speaks just as passionately about what she calls the “less successful” issues of the magazine – wishing she could go back, rewrite history – as about her triumphs. One triumph is the international interest that *ETC* has generated, giving rise to new and pleasantly surprising contributions, and to the magazine's distribution in prestigious venues such as Beaubourg, in Paris. Much of this interest stems from the fact that, over its 20 years of publication, the magazine has brought to light an art history ahead of its inclusion in the system of art, galleries and museums. As Isabelle Lelarge points out, some of the works dealt with in the magazine may never end up in a museum simply because they are not meant to be there. Yes, Isabelle Lelarge has fashioned *ETC*. And she has never hesitated to use it as a soapbox to sound the alarm about situations she deplores. For instance, when CIAC (Centre international d'art contemporain) was in danger of closing, she spoke out in fierce terms against the indifference of a community too engrossed in its own problems to consider those of others.

What does Isabelle Lelarge hope for *ETC*'s future? Primarily, the expansion of its readership through wider distribution. Achieving this, she says, depends on financial support to make *ETC* a bilingual publication, for she

is rightly convinced that, in today's globalized world, bilingualism is the way to go.

Anniversaries may signify a pause, and they may be rituals, but what I am celebrating here is continuity. May whatever lies ahead continue to lead *ETC*, its director and its team along paths less taken. Happy 20th birthday and long life to *ETC, revue de l'art actuel!*

Manon Blanchette

Translation by Marcia Couëlle

NEWS/ANALYSIS

CLOSE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN RITUAL AND PERFORMATIVITY

The critical discourse on art must constantly reassess and recast itself. Ideas pass, values change and art critics, like artists, testify to the cultural shifts in a process that often resembles an ongoing dialogue. To any observer of current ideological fluctuations and theoretical waves, it is evident that interest in the question of ritual has grown considerably in recent decades, both in the human and social sciences and in various artistic practices. To help elucidate the conceptual fervour for and heuristic scope of this line of inquiry, we have chosen to make it the subject of a feature.

There is no one definition of ritual. The viewpoints vary with the theoretical horizons. In the twentieth century, ritual was first examined in the context of religion and myth. Making connections between ritual and theatre, the sociologist Émile Durkheim focused on the power of the ritual as an action fostering social cohesion (Schechner 2002: 50). Next, the structuralist wave demonstrated how rituals enable us to analyze and understand the structures and values of past and present societies. The research on rites of passage by the ethnologist Arnold Van Gennep of course served to situate the structuring function of rites in human life and, most notably, to identify three major stages: separation, marginalization and reintegration into the social group. More recently, numerous studies have dealt with the importance of ritual practices in terms of cultural symbolization and social communication. According to this point of view, rituals are among the most effective forms of expression and representation in human communication and constitute an intrinsic component of all social interaction. The work of the anthropologist Erving Goffman provided penetrating insight into the prevalent practice of little rituals in daily life. In addition to these still timely concepts of ritual, there has lately been a growing interest in the practical and performative aspect of staging rituals (Wulf 2005: 9). In this perspective, the ritual is conceived as an action in which the staging and representation of the human body plays the central role.

In the performative reading of rituals, the actors are no longer reduced to their cognitive dimension, and the context and sentient reality of the actions are taken into consideration. In other words, the ritual is not viewed as a mere carrying out of intentions; rather, "the manner in which the performer of a ritual device pursues his objectives adds to the ritual action" (Wulf 2005: 9). This way of approaching ritual practices through the notion of performativity¹ is academically grounded in postmodernity and the field of performance studies. Scholars and theorists addressing these conceptual shifts are somewhat less interested in the structures and functions of the practices than in grasping the effectiveness of the communication in play. One of the main objectives consists of explaining how such social and aesthetic actions affect and change us. The question of the lived experience in ritual was a key consideration for the anthropologist Victor Turner (Schechner 2002: 62), who expounded on the meaning of *communitas*, the sense of community that leads viewers to briefly live the feeling that all statuses, all inequalities, all differences can be temporarily abolished. Turner explains how corporeality induces performers of ritual to invest themselves in the social situation more than they would through language-based communication. These few examples of the many approaches taken to the relationship of ritual and performativity are offered by way of introduction to the

following essays, which bring a variety of viewpoints to bear on the question of ritual and show how it sheds informative light on the very diverse manifestations of present-day and contemporary art.

The contributors include the sociologist David Le Breton, who has authored many important theoretical articles on this theme and joins us for the first time with a reading of the work of Gina Pane. Looking at the question of rite, he explains how the anchoring of suffering in the performer's body can act as an outlet for certain social tensions and, in so doing, reveal our prohibitions in cultural symbolization. The critic Ludovic Fouquet situates the close and often ancient ties between ritual and theatre through an examination of the recent creations of several stage directors, among them Lepage, Castellucci and Traub. He discusses the principles by which the use of ritual serves as a factor of deconstruction or results in the *mise en abyme* of theatrical conventions. Tackling ritual in the new media environment, the writer Paule Makrous defines the effects of presence generated by the virtual and fictitious character Mouchette and explains how interactive mechanisms help to raise this hypermedia figure to mythical status as we connect with her. In an anthropological perspective, the art historian Maxime Coulombe revisits Arnold Van Gennep's theory on the rite of passage and develops an analysis of Orlan's surgery-performances in which he spells out the functions of sacralization and how this symbolic process enables the artist to break free of normative frameworks to go beyond the bounds of aesthetic conventions. My own contribution concerns *LiveLifeLab*, a recent project by the Montreal collective Bioteknika shown in March at Concordia University's FOFA Gallery. In it, I examine how with bioart, and more particularly this project by Jennifer Willet and Shawn Bailey, we are witnessing a process of ritualization of science that, by means of oscillating references to different settings – in this case, gallery vs. laboratory – sets off a self-referential process in the viewer.

Christine Desrochers

Translation by Marcia Couëlle

Endnotes

¹ Derived from the verb "to perform," performativity implies that to issue the utterance (say) is to perform the action (do). Hence, pronounce, announce, promise and swear are constitutive forms of speech-act utterance. This is the pragmatic trail blazed by the philosopher John Langshaw Austin in lectures delivered at Harvard in 1955, which, for the first time, revealed the importance of the performative dimension of speech in everyday life. The concept was reworked some years later by the philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose poststructuralist reading brought it widespread critical favour. Since then, this pragmatic conception of language has been closely tied to the issues of postmodernity.

Bibliography

Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002).
Christoph Wulf, "Introduction. Rituels. Performativité et dynamique des pratiques sociales," *Hermès* 43 (2005), pp.9-20.

NEWS/ANALYSIS

THE WOUND AS CREATION

For humans, the body is the first place of amazement at being self. The human condition is corporeal, but the relationship to incarnation is never entirely resolved. Everyone's relationship to the world is a matter of skin, in that skin signals the border between self and other, interior and exterior, inside and outside. Some artists push the envelope in a form of questioning now adopted by more and more teenage girls (and, to a lesser extent, boys),¹ who resort to scarification to express their suffering. In this discussion, my focus will be on a striking example of the deliberate use of the wound as cry: the performances of Gina Pane (1939-1990). In body art, performances constitute a discourse on the world, a questioning in the form of a personal commitment; they may vary in value, but in no case are they pornography, cruelty, masochism, exhibitionism or complaisance. The artist invests his/her entire

self in the action. These performances hurt the artist and shake the viewer's sense of security. They forcefully question sexual identity, bodily limits, physical endurance, male and female representations, sexuality, pain, death, relationship to objects and to others, space, duration, etc. The body is the ultimate place for questioning the world. The intention is no longer to affirm beauty but to provoke the flesh, to turn the body inside out, to impose disgust or horror, to unleash what is repressed, to hammer home a question. The body presents itself in its materiality, and sometimes in a radical manner. The viewers are physically affected, participating in the artist's suffering or malaise (or what they imagine it to be) by proxy. The body is a symbolic material; it is steeped in social symbolism, a noble vehicle for querying the foundations of society and the cultural limitations of gender, sex, perception, emotion, etc. The artist aims to disrupt routine thinking and inflict disorientation. The artist's distress is a sensory path offered to viewers to arouse amazement and thaw frozen thought.

A critical mirror of our behaviours and intellectual blindness, body art is an insurrection of reason against the sanitized representations of the body in the contemporary world of images and merchandise. It expresses rejection of the hypocritical discourse of freedom and well-being conveyed by the media and advertising but contradicted by real-life conditions. It resonates like a fist slammed on the table of social connivance, like a refusal to further condone the fairy tale. While escaping the fairy tale is not always conceivable, body art is an opportunity to retreat, a step back in order to cease being part of the evidence. You cannot always change the world around you, but at least you can change your perspective and find another stance. When a writer describes the obscene, it remains clothed in words. And the word "dog" does not bite. Painted obscenity never leaps off the canvas, even if it induces discomfort. Body artists, on the other hand, strip themselves, bare their souls and make art of their bodies. The blood that flows in a narration does not have the same impact as blood spurting from a man or woman who has just cut him/herself.

A performance ritualizes a social and/or personal tension that the artist bears before the eyes of an audience, giving it a social and political resonance. This is a private ritual. A ritual in the sense that the connection to the other is not aleatory but draws on shared affect, at once intimate and private; and in the sense that the artist alone controls the event, with the public in the gallery (or other space) generally unaware of how the action will develop.

Gina Pane went to great lengths in investigating the bodily limits of the human condition. In the 1971 piece *Escalade non anesthésiée* [Unanesthetized climb], bare-foot and barehanded, she climbs a metal structure with spike-studded rungs. In *Nourriture, télévision, feu* [Food, television, fire], also 1971, she overcomes disgust to ingest rotten raw meat, watch news on TV in an uncomfortable position, and puts out fires burning on sand with her bare feet until the pain forces her to stop. In *Lait chaud* [Hot milk], dressed in the white garment she wore for actions involving wounds, she alternately cuts herself with a razor blade and bounces a tennis ball against a wall: the emergence of a moment of childhood and innocence in the immanence of the world. She cuts her face before picking up a camera and filming the audience at length, lingering on the features of certain people, thus denouncing social passivity in the face of violence, indifference to horror, the anesthesia of the gaze.

In the 1973 *Azione sentimentale* [Sentimental action], she cuts her hand with a razor blade and jabs rose thorns into her arm, metamorphosing it into a place of communion for other women. Simultaneously, female voices are heard reading letters in Italian and French exchanged by two women. In *Psyché* [Psyche], 1974, she reproduces her features on a mirror by "making up" her face with a razor blade, inflicting most of the cuts around her eyebrows. The blood dripping on the mirror completes the reflected double. She manipulates bird feathers and rubber balls – one yellow (death impulse, negativity), the other blue (life sign, positivity) – thus representing the duality of the two sides of life. Following that she climbs

a stepladder, blindfolded with a cloth soon seeping with blood, and she tries to voice a message of hope for humanity, but no sound comes from her mouth. Then she incises a cross on her stomach around the navel, the wellspring of life. In *Autoportrait(s)* [Self-portraits], she presents herself as woman and artist. Lying on a bed of burning candles, she becomes a metaphor for the suffering of women in childbirth; the contractions force her to internalize the pain. The microphone turned against a wall captures no sound: Women remain mute. Next she scores the skin around her nails while a series of slides shows a woman applying nail polish: Women exist only in mutilating appearances. In the final phase, gargling with hot milk until blood mixed with the white liquid, she painfully merges two symbols of the feminine condition: milk and blood.

These are just a few Gina Pane performances; reducing them to theories or to a narrative diminishes their impact. The critical power of her work, she said, was aimed at "denouncing servomechanisms wherever they are: in art, science, politics, everyday life. That is my purpose."² Her intention was to forge a new creative path: "The wound: by relating it to the other as the receptacle of the other's sociopolitical and cultural environment, but never in an illustrative or narrative way, which would merely have a ricochet effect; but with the intention of opening onto a new language; for me, modernism had to move forward and be expressed through the body."³ The artist's wound went beyond her person; she took up performance so that her body's trouble would become the trouble of other people's minds.

Pane's actions were not mutilations but sensory appeals. They forced the issue in order to expand ties to the world. "This body must explode, scatter in all directions, go conquer spaces, new lands," she said. The wound is a form of writing; it symbolically serves to soothe another sore. "With this opening of the body, I do not mean to give the public blood, or to be a gladiator, or even a primitive of ancient society. ... The wound locates, identifies and inscribes a certain malaise. It is central to my practice; it is the cry and the white of my discourse. The affirmation of the individual's vital, elemental need to revolt. An attitude absolutely not autobiographical."⁴ Far from claiming to bring truth to others, she made the wound a gesture of paradoxical communion. Unlike the masochism that it challenges, she saw pain as a gift, an attempt at healing, a movement of deliverance. Gina Pane staged sacrifices by offering her pain in exchange for an expanded awareness of the suffering of others and in the symbolic perspective of diminishing it – a symbolic resistance expressed against the injustice of the world, not in a Christly dimension but in an intuition of her belonging to the cosmos. She was determined to lessen social suffering (war, oppression of women, etc.) by taking it upon herself in a secret, intimate ceremony conceived to somehow change the world, even subtly. There was no brutality, no violence in this slow, peaceful liturgy, where the flow of blood contrasted with the tranquility of the performance; no disorder in a ritual progression thought out in great detail.

Each action was meticulously prepared, marked out with charts, diagrams, notes, texts, objects fashioned for the occasion or recovered from previous interventions. A photographer or a videographer recorded the memory. But this made the artist no less vulnerable, unprotected. Entering the performance space, she would lose herself "in the flesh of others," submerge herself in the audience as if she were its sounding box. She remained self-possessed during performances, in a hieratic attitude that unnerved the audience, but she did not escape unscathed. Her personal life, her sleep and her dreams were affected. Like a healer giving every ounce of energy to the sick, she felt "totally emptied," she had the impression of flying, of having no body. Hers were private, pagan rituals, open to viewers and to the history of art, aimed at exorcising part of the world's suffering. In an interview, she spoke about the experience of shamans, healers for their communities, about the inner pain they used to live with: "The healers of a wound were themselves carriers of a wound. ... They incarnated, they were affected by the patient's moral problem. It was the opposite of medical practice today. So, if I have a problem and I want to share it with others, I incarnate what I say." Pane frequently cut her lips as

well, prolonging in blood the cry that speech too quickly reabsorbs. The failure of language calls for bodily means to overcome helplessness.

She aimed to expand the knowledge of her viewers by freeing herself from the major prohibitions of pain and death, the only things with a power subversive enough to distress an audience. If Gina Pane hurt herself by burning, lacerating, cutting and adopting painful poses, it was to denounce the moral locks and keys that weighed on her woman's body and the violence that prevails in our societies. She reminded us of the precariousness of the human condition, of its exposure to wounds, pain and death. In so doing, she transgressed social proscriptions, provoking fright and rejection.⁵ Audiences find the spectacle of physical pain intolerable, because the screen is abruptly rent by the gash that shatters untroubled identification. All distance is eliminated by the surging of emotion.

The radical nature of such an approach is disturbing, especially in a supposedly fragile woman. The temptation to ascribe this to madness or masochism in order to neutralize the interrogatory power of the cut is a common exorcism, both for cutting by teenage girls and for cutting involved in artists' actions. Pane knew that corporeal integrity is a sacred value in our societies, especially in the case of women. By altering her cutaneous envelope, by letting the blood flow, she unsettled the collective imagination and achieved her goal of making people think, of prompting self-reflection. The traces of her wounds faded, since the cuts or burns were superficial, but the questioning continues still today, after her death.

Scarification, at the heart of the suffering, is now all too common among teenage girls. Their cuts are a bodily criticism of life's conditions, a personal way of dissenting and attacking social representations. The tyranny of appearance causes them to obsess about not measuring up. They feel the need to exist through seduction. That being so, turning against the skin serves to combat an unsupportable identity they want to cast off. The cry incised in the flesh is a painful purification of the others' gaze that denounces the difficulty of being a woman in a largely macho world. The corporeal wound is an attack on the body of the species; it deranges human forms and causes unease and rejection. Women and girls who cut themselves are expressing scorn for the smooth, hygienic, aesthetic, commercial icon of our societies. In a world haunted by the display of self-image, body cutting is a way of breaking the mirror to finally find oneself.⁶

David Le Breton

Translation by Marcia Couëlle

Endnotes

- ¹ On scarification in everyday life and in the history of body art, see David Le Breton, *La peau et la trace. Sur les blessures de soi* (Paris: Métailié, 2003).
- ² Gina Pane, *Lettre à un(e) inconnue(e)* (Paris: École supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2003), p. 15.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- ⁴ Quoted in Christian Schlatter, "Motifs et teneur en fragments pour corps et traces," in *L'art au corps. Le corps exposé de Man Ray à nos jours* (Marseille: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1996), p. 53.
- ⁵ See for example the remarks by François Pluchart, an attentive observer of her work, in *L'art : un acte de participation au monde* (Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon, 2002).
- ⁶ See Le Breton.

NEWS/ANALYSIS

THE MYTHICAL FIGURE OF MOUCHETTE: EFFECT OF PRESENCE AND RITUAL

Since the advent and proliferation of microcomputers in the 1980s, the digital universe of the World Wide Web has penetrated our daily routines and pervaded realms as private as the home. This has led to the observation that online viewers are increasingly "subject to a schizophrenic dislocation between their existential reality

and their screenic virtuality."¹ For artists, this fragile demarcation offers an opportunity to experiment with new fictional forms. Drawing on immersive and interactive strategies, these forms profoundly blur the line between fiction and reality, creating what is called the effect of presence, or reality. Such is the case of the virtual character Mouchette, who circulates on the Web and infiltrates our imagination while allowing us to infiltrate her, to assume her identity. As Mouchette is embodied by visitors to her site, the illusory boundary between the real and the virtual completely crumbles away. And the ritual, the structure that enables users to become Mouchette, raises the fictional character to the status of mythical figure.

Effect of Corporeal Presence

The first enabling factor towards a ritualized personification of Mouchette is the impression of the character's existence. This illusion derives in part from her reference to a body, a concrete entity in the tangible world. Here, the body as concept is differentiated from the body as incarnation: "embodiment is contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology and culture, which together compose enactment."² Viewing what the text, images and sound present as being Mouchette produces several different effects of corporeal presence. Photographs with hyperlink captions that anchor the character in particular locations serve to create a contextual presence. Mouchette's sensorial presence is generated by close-ups of parts of her face that evoke physical sensation, through the senses of taste, touch, hearing, smell and sight. The vocal representation of the body – Mouchette's sensual moans and whimpers – plunges users deep into their imagination, into a physical characterology based on voice tone. An "evenmental" presence is rendered in images and text indicating Mouchette's participation in social events, such as her birthday or a Triple X festival, or in legal proceedings attested by the SACD's cease and desist notice (personally addressed to Mouchette for having illegally used images from the Robert Bresson film). These events shatter the reality/fiction boundaries all the more in that they go beyond the virtual framework to involve the tangible world. This leads to seeking who is behind the work, who sends the messages from the other side of the screen, perhaps forgetting the possibility of a fictitious construction and the fact that the being presented on screen does not exist "behind the screen." Her existence is confined to the digital world and an artist's imagination. If that becomes confusing, it is because the user is placed not *before* a fiction but *with* it.

Interactivity as Act of Faith

As with all works of fiction, Mouchette's visitors are asked to suspend disbelief. In hypermedia art, this is made possible not by an introductory text of the "once upon a time" sort but, rather, by an interactive process, an act of faith that translates to "I act, I commit to believing." This process becomes a ritual for users familiar with the navigation codes. Having integrated the language, they venture into a work that presents itself with a certain semiotic transparency. The rituals of use allow them to enter in representative mode, indeed, to become part of the work through their actions. Following a path forward, going back, and manipulating the order of the contents is what allows them to believe in the Mouchette character, who repeatedly foretells her death along the way. The interactivity enables the construction and maintenance of the fictional edifice by rendering the users impervious to contradictions, whereas the action that animates the content of the modules lies more in the connections that users make to piece the scattered figure together. This is how they tell themselves Mouchette's story and inevitably become part of it, as main actants. They can send her e-mail and they receive a reply. Since the action-processing-reaction sequence³ results in reactive interactivity, the illusion of dialogue comes into play. In exchanging with the character, the users engage with the fiction. And in doing so, they strengthen their "pledge" of willing belief in Mouchette's existence. If the character's effect of presence persists beyond the aesthetic experience, it is because the fictional edifice is built not only on real events but also

on interactions that serve to concretize her being. For the user, this engenders an empathy that crosses the virtual boundary.

The Establishing Ritual: A Symbolic Outlet

The work offers the opportunity to become Mouchette. While the character may already have penetrated the user's private world through simulated interaction, the actual experience of incarnating Mouchette is utterly immersive. It is produced not by a headset and sensors that submerge the viewer in a virtual environment, but by the profound interconnection between the real and the virtual that inhabits the user at that point. The immersion effect gives users the feeling that they are "momentarily cut off from the surrounding real world and plunged into another world."⁴ By becoming Mouchette, via an initiatory process akin to many found on the Internet (registration, password), users can respond to Mouchette's e-mails, use an interface to replace her photo with their own and recreate the work as they wish. But instead of altering the creation *Mouchette.org*, this creates a subsection of the site with a URL extension, such as *Mouchette.org/Julie*. Users can then explore themselves, if they wish, in their personal page at the heart of a virtual, fictional universe. They can recreate the contents of the existing modules by means of representation and construct the virtual role they will play. In this way, the work operates as an "establishing ritual,"⁵ a symbolic structure affording the experience of unfamiliar feelings. This ritual is a quest for one's own emotional limits. Representation is used as it is given, in Mouchette's work, with its attendant emotional charge. Mouchette deals with profound, existential issues related to the problems of childhood: sexuality and suicide. The feelings that normally "carry the risk of an irreparable loss of self-control"⁶ are explored here in a playfully artistic framework. Through its structure and its vehicle, the work offers the user a mythography, "a visual or literary script of a subject's fantasized projection serving to multiply his or her extensions of identity,"⁷ a scenario for self-representation. By incarnating the figure, users rediscover themselves, otherwise, in the mirror of virtuality. The self-representation occurs in a space-time that suspends reality and permits symbolic actions, because they are performed in the representative framework. The establishing ritual thus becomes a symbolic outlet, a place of release and exploration. The intimate experience of the figure is fixed in the image and text added by the user. The imprint of the ritualized moment remains after the ritual and retains its effects. The user can relive the assumption of the figure's identity, now as an immanent effect, by returning to his or her personal page and pursuing a role as Mouchette.

Intertextuality: From Fictional Character to Mythical Figure

If the ritualizing experience permits multiple corporeal supports for a single fictional character, it is because, on the paradigmatic axis, Mouchette is charged with references and becomes a symbol, thus moving from fictional character to mythical figure. The name "Mouchette" carries with it a literary and cinematic past that is part of the encyclopedic knowledge necessary to understanding the work from a symbolic perspective. Web users may remember the famous protagonist of the Georges Bernanos novel *La nouvelle histoire de Mouchette*, written in 1942, and of Robert Bresson's 1964 film adaptation, *Mouchette*. In Bernanos's book, the reader discovers a world too adult for a child through the eyes of the young Mouchette. Abused by her father, raped by a villager, scorned by the locals and neglected by her dying mother, Mouchette's only refuge is suicide. Bresson's film tells the same story, but with the narrative restored to a diegetic chronology, instead of the order in which Mouchette lives the events. Owing to the specifics mentioned above, hypermedia works break down the narrative into a complex interactive structure, a ritualized space: "The narrative, previously conceived as a series of actions carried out by the characters, has been transformed into a space, a world of representation given over to the interactor for exploration."⁸ Each medium possesses its own immersion and believability strategies. Both the movie and the novel, in their respective ways, tell Mouchette's story in a pathetic register

designed to move the viewer or reader. The online work, *Mouchette.org*, retains the essential elements of the narrative, treating them with irony, derision, subtlety and ambiguity. It's all there: the suggestion of parental mistreatment, references to explicit sexuality and extensive discussion of suicide; however, everything remains to be constructed, there are no givens. The effect of presence and the interactivity that it commands compel the visitor to act and to reflect on present-day phenomena. And it is through this form of embodiment that Mouchette becomes a mythical figure, since "a figure that is not inhabited, that is not integrated into a process of appropriation, loses its characteristic symbolic dimension and re-becomes a simple figure."⁹ Mouchette has always been the same age; she transcends temporality and, like any mythical form, she is open to updating through ritual.

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Endnotes

- 1 Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *L'art à l'époque du virtuel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), p.111.
- 2 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 156.
- 3 Louis-Claude Paquin, *Comprendre les nouveaux médias interactifs* (Saint-Hyacinthe: Somme, 2006), p. 205.
- 4 Ibid., p.17.
- 5 Denis Jeffrey, *Jouissance du sacré, religion et postmodernité* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1998).
- 6 Ibid., p.154.
- 7 Joanne Lalonde, "Le sujet tragique : fantasmes du double dans le miroir hypermédiatique," *Visio* (Regards sur le corps), August 2005.
- 8 Paquin, p. 207
- 9 Bertrand Gervais, *Figures, lectures, logiques de l'imaginaire*, vol. 1 (Montreal: Le Quartanier, 2007), p. 34

NEWS/ANALYSIS

THE THEATRICAL EXPERIENCE, OR AN EXPLORATION OF RITUAL

For this feature on the ties between art and ritual, I will not expound on the correlation of ritual and production, since the subject would be too vast. After all, much of theatre is simply a series of rituals produced right up until seconds before the curtain rises. Actors invent their preparation rituals as moments of self-gathering, decompression, conditioning and communion (the famous energy circle done by cast and crew just before a show). I will not dwell either on the theatrical superstitions – still alive, but less and less so among the younger generation – which, in the French tradition, forbid uttering the word "rope" or "string" on stage (a superstition imported by the sailors who worked the scenery rigging in Italian-style theatres) and prohibit the wearing of green. The most evident and, no doubt, most poetic ritual gesture is the one involving the ghost light (called *la Servante* in France). In the eighteenth century, it became a habit to leave a light burning on the stage to provide minimal illumination in the darkened space, but also as a precaution against fire (early gas lights were apt to explode if pressure built up). I am always surprised by people's attachment to the ritual of lighting a simple bulb affixed to a metal tripod and placed centre stage by the last crew member to leave the hall. Today, the ghost light's function is entirely ritualistic, imbued with nostalgia and poetry. And poetry is precisely what Ariane Mnouchkine sees in the ritualized gestures that she borrows from societies of all sorts to create her plays. "Another reason why I regret the deritualization of daily life," she says, "is that it robs life of everything aesthetic and especially everything positive, because, ultimately, all of these things are positive."¹ At the heart of stage performance, dramatic composition reinvents rituals that can be as much rites of communion as means of creation, steps and signposts that serve in constructing a work, just as actors compose an inner score to provide cues in constructing a performance and maintaining its quality, even when emotion lacks, fatigue intrudes, etc.

Many stage directors speak of what anthropologists define as one of the initial phases of ritual: its separation from life and its conventions. Mnouchkine has an original take on this: "Very often, you remember that there are people who are coming to the theatre for the first time, and others who are coming for the last time. When that crosses your mind, you realize that what you are about to do is not banal. There is nothing banal about assuming people's emotions, thoughts, silence and vulnerability for three hours, five hours."²

What I will look at, therefore, is how the theatre reinvents itself from the sacred, from theatricality, questioning it, mistreating it, pushing it to the extreme (Castellucci or Maxwell).

At the most recent Festival d'Avignon, Anatoli Vassiliev, champion of an – in my opinion – over-mediated dramatic liturgy, presented a version of Book XXIII of Homer's *Iliad*, a mixture of physicality and incantation recreating the collective invocation, the undertaking of mourning by a given society, the construction of a rite of remembrance. A group gathered to celebrate and overcome the death of one of their own (Patroclus), lamented by his friend Achilles. They conveyed pride in the hero and the need for words that can only be chanted or sung, forcefully resonating in every body. But communion with the audience failed to materialize, likely because the elements underlying these gestures and rites were too disparate, but mainly because there was no common language – not so much the language itself as its references and the unspoken codes that were used.

Quite the opposite is true in the case of directors Robert Lepage and Peter Sellars, who primarily address a videosphere-era (as Debray calls the television age³) audience with shared codes, media languages as the basis of exchange, and readily identifiable communicative rituals (cinematic syntax, televisual zapping). At the same time, Lepage applies a ritualistic concept of theatre, or invents for himself the initial dramatic rite, transforming the theatre from the "place from which we see" (*theatron*) to the place where we listen to a fireside storyteller. While borrowing certain historical aspects of Greek theatre, emergent in religious rituals, Lepage takes the place of the statue or altar of Dionysus by the fire, at the centre of the circle. However, he also adds an essential visual dimension, since the listening audience sees the storyteller's shadow on the wall behind him, and the shadow can *recount something different* from the teller's story (the autonomy of the shadow and, thus, of the projected image is essential). Like the image, the verbal ritual is vital to the construction of the entire Lepagean universe, to its narration and to its staging. Traces of this were apparent in *Lipsynch*, a play that explores the rituals of speech (dubbing, psychoanalysis, interview) and its loss (aphasia, amnesia, etc.), identity and voice, presented at the latest Festival TransAmériques (FTA).⁴ Numerous rituals run through this piece like Lepagean recurrences, like previously seen formulas, or scenes or characters met before. The ritual in this instance would be the repetition, the self-quotation, the reassuring variation. Ritual also owing to – and this no doubt justifies the recurrences – the supreme self-confidence that allows Lepage, in what is becoming a habit (thus "ritual" in a way), to present a work unfinished and still very much in progress, even though already five and a half hours long! Public showings are well entrenched in the Lepagean rituals, as is coming to be the presentation of works in progress. Here the ritual would be not the repeated gesture but the seeking gesture, and the seeking itself. A theatre ritual stripped of its metaphysical aspect, its austerity or the use of gestural codes. Not a quest for purity but for the grand dream that gave birth to theatre, for a life of theatre, and for the high masses of classical theatre, of Elizabethan theatre, the moments of communion of an audience gathered for *la grande Geste*, the portrayal of heroic deeds (as advocated by Lepage at a public talk before the FTA showing).

In such case, the ritual would be that which takes place in the present for a specific audience, an audience potentially lost in its landmarks, astray on familiar ground.

This is true of the work of Richard Maxwell, who staged two shows in real-life Parisian venues: a hotel room for *Showcase* and a hotel conference room for *Good Samaritans*⁵ (the latter was originally slated for a performance

venue that was on strike at the time). Playing on the confusion between real and theatrical settings, actors and observers, Maxwell manipulates the very basis of the rituals of dramatic representation, going so far as to eliminate distance: For *Showcase*, the seven or eight audience members were seated disconcertingly close to the bed where a naked man lay, doubled by his shadow (another actor, dressed in black).

It is also the true of *Paso Doble*,⁶ a collaborative work by the choreographer Joseph Nadj and the painter Miquel Barcelò, in which the two men vigorously attacked a wall of fresh clay, kneading and modelling the material into vessels and other shapes in a strange, wordless ceremony (which, for good measure, took place in an Avignon church). Barcelò's familiar bestiary emerged, but viewers were also treated to a ritual by the rarely seen painter: the birth of an image. The experience harked back to the immemorial gesture at Lascaux – the trace, the hand, the body as brush, a body that eventually disappears, as if swallowed by the clay wall. Something was in play between regression and physical action, yet fully assumed as a performance whose goal was not the final image but the process of creation, the moment, the observable construction, the emergence of the picture, its appearance and its alteration, its rending, its transformation, its eradication, its collapse. Was this a ritual become show, or the opposite? It's hard to tell. But the passage from one state to another is where the performance found its impact.

This brings to mind the experience of Roméo Castellucci's latest show, *Hey Girl!*, also presented at this year's FTA.⁷ As a general rule, the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio is based on rites (religious rites, but also contemporary rites), violently pitting man against machine, flesh against metal, blood against oil or electricity. A bare space, saturated with visual and audio presences, pierced by strident sounds, *tableaux vivants* that disappear in a flash and gradually coalesce in each viewer's mental notebook, or on the blackboard of memory, gently taking on meaning and becoming confoundingly evident. Rarely has any piece been as dependent as *Hey Girl!* on the viewers' willingness to go with the flow of a situation to which they hold no keys, to allow the images and sounds to slowly permeate them, to create a thread, to become a rite. Everything but the kitchen sink is brought into play: theatre, art history, performance, music, visual technologies, literature (bits of *Romeo and Juliet*), Chanel No. 5 perfume poured on an electrically heated sword that drew a burnt cross on a sheet. And, as often, religious references, signage, confusion between mystical and artistic callings. The story of an adolescent girl and her relationship to her image is overlaid with historical and religious references such as the creation of Eve and an evocation of Joan of Arc (the chosen girl, conversing with God), sometimes making it hard to differentiate the narrative levels.

Similarly looking to religion as a source of ritual, the Belgian artist Wayn Traub develops strange filmic shows that owe as much to medieval mystery (complete with costumes, mysticism and gestures) as to musicals or to labyrinthine video installations with multiple twists, composed of juxtaposed screens on which the continuous counterpoints of the staged action unfold like wrong turns. For Traub, who also employs fantasized dramatic concepts (although closer to Wagner than to Plato), theatre is a ritual of transition, a creative act that finds inspiration in the impulses and memories of the individual marked by animality. Traub defines his work as "ritual theatre with a human mission,"⁸ built in steps designed like rites of passage. The strangest piece, in this sense, was *Maria Dolores* (presented in France in 2003), an amalgam of a Marian mystery set in the Middle Ages and documentaries featuring the same protagonists as well as others relating to show business (rehearsal, dubbing, but also love scenes, fight scenes, etc.). The resulting phenomenon of recognition cast a veil of "de-reality" on the stage performance, conceived as a ritual, in contrast to the documentary nature of the recorded images. The mixture of the two produced a sort of contemporary video miracle play that tapped religious roots while indulging in salutary humour. Both the video and the stage play were punctuated by moments of irony as a way to defuse the ritual, to give it complexity by making it less unequivocal.

The interesting thing about the examples cited here is the way in which they suddenly reintroduce something of a ceremonial nature, not based solely on a religious underpinning but designed to propose a mystique in a new manner, to establish a ceremony while potentially mocking or complicating it. There is purity and complexity, striking evidence of images and acts become icons, but also impurity and commingling. The theatrical ritual is a crossbreed, but it is always based on a founding communion, even if this communion invents syntax and semantics at the same time as it deploys them.

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Endnotes

- 1 Françoise Lauwaert, "Rituel/Sangatte/Tibet," transcription of conversations with Ariane Mnouchkine: www.lebacausoleil.com/SPIP/imprimer.php3?id_article=289
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992).
- 4 *Lipsynch*, Ex machina/Théâtre Sans Frontières, presented June 1, 2007, at Salle Pierre Mercure, Montreal.
- 5 *Showcase and Good Samaritans*, presented October 11-14, 2006, at Hôtel Citadines, Paris, as part of the Festival d'Automne.
- 6 *Paso Doble*, premiered July 16-27, 2006, at Église des Célestins, Avignon, as part of the Festival d'Avignon. Reprised June 2007 at Bouffes du Nord, Paris.
- 7 *Hey Girl!*, Societas Raffaello Sanzio, June 3 and 4, 2007, at Usine C, Montreal.
- 8 Interview by Julien Carrel, May 31, 2005, for *Fluctuat*: www.fluctuat.net/2536-Wayn-Traub

NEWS/ANALYSIS THE FEAR, THE BRIDGE, THE PASSAGE

As sentient beings, we are devisers of rituals. We are skilled at disrupting life's flow with moments of prodigiously existential density, upsetting the quotidian rhythm and interspersing it with sacred pauses. Naïve minds believe that postmodernity has smoothed out these ritualistic moments by destroying metadiscourse (religion, socialism, etc.), but this stems from ignorance of humans and their inexhaustible desire to make sense of their surroundings. Faced with the so-called post-modern difficulty of placing ourselves under the auspices of a predetermined structure that imparts meaning and shape to our social relationships, overdetermining certain moments of life – birth, death, transition points – and enabling us to negotiate them with some degree of assurance, we deploy a wealth of ingenuity in fashioning new, more personal rituals. Founding a tradition around an event important for a group of friends, developing new symbols to cope with mourning and repeating particular gestures to drum up courage are just a few examples of today's flourishing rituality.

It is not surprising, therefore, to see contemporary art, which echoes the driving forces of Western culture, exploring these new ritualistic practices. From among the diverse artistic reifications of ritual – which form less a specific category of works than an analytical approach to comprehending current production – I have chosen to analyze one form: the rite of passage.

Contemporary art frequently ventures into troubled waters; it likes to plunge into places unmarked by the axioms of present-day culture, fraught with its contradictions and queries. For the artist, exploring these regions is difficult. Bringing the issues to light often involves performing them, experiencing them subjectively. It also implies exposing our dependency on social norms and constraints, and positioning oneself in the dizzying void of their absence.

The use of the body in performance art heightens the vertigo, as well as the issues raised by such practice and the existential investment it demands of the artist. In this respect, the rite of passage can provide comfort when the artist's solitude becomes anguishing: it accompanies and frames the transgressions of norms. As Denis Jeffrey explains in *La Jouissance du sacré*, "What rituals help to conquer is the sense of fear, anguish

and terror caused by that which human beings appear unable to grasp: the unknown, the unpredictable, the strange, the random, the obscure words of the oracle – everything that characterizes life's unavoidable delimitations and speaks to human frailty and the imperfection of its identity boundaries" (Jeffrey 1998: 117).

The radical nature of Orlan's artistic practice perfectly exemplifies this process, which involves appropriating a ritual in order to stave off the anguish of a difficult situation while simultaneously transforming the ritual to put it to work as part of one's own references, one's symbolic framework.

Face and Ritual

Between 1990 and 1993, Orlan staged performances during which her face was altered by increasingly radical cosmetic surgeries that culminated, in the final operation, with the implantation of two bumps above her eyebrows, definitively distancing her from traditional aesthetic standards. These performances, titled *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, were designed to challenge the Western canons of beauty and propose new, elective alternatives.

Modifying the face is not an innocuous act: the face is where identity and humanity reside (Le Breton 1992: 14). As Deleuze and Guattari correctly pointed out, "taking apart the face is no small matter. It can lead to madness" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 230). In this sense, Orlan's performances – moments where the face becomes *shapeless*, the features waver, and the scalpel suspends identity by lifting the skin – are indeed abject.¹ They call into question not only the aesthetic system, as reflected in the face, but the artist's very identity. Therefore, to neutralize the threatening aspect of the performances, Orlan transformed them into veritable rites of passage.

Although Van Gennep's theory was originally conceived to explain rituals performed in so-called traditional societies, contemporary anthropology has convincingly demonstrated that it remains highly valuable in analyzing today's culture. The rituals may have changed from social impositions to personal creations, but to a striking degree they retain the structure revealed by the German ethnologist.

In reformulating Van Gennep's theory, Thierry Goguel d'Allondans distinguished four stages in the rite of passage seen in its anthropological structure: everyday life, sacralization, threshold and desacralization (Goguel d'Allondans 2002: 42-53). Sacralization, the preliminary stage, and threshold, the identity-transition stage, correspond to the time spent by Orlan in the operating room, to the artistic performance as such. These, then, are the two moments I will examine in the following pages.

In comparing Goguel d'Allondans's description of the two stages with the *Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* performances, there emerges a tense, dialectical relationship between the extraordinary structural power of the rite of passage and the subjective appropriations that they involve. The analysis of this dialectic tension is fruitful in that it more generally concretizes the process of fashioning any personal rite.

Sacralization and Threshold

With *sacralization*, the preliminary stage, "one leaves a secular sphere to pass into a sacred sphere," says Goguel d'Allondans. "Sacralization represents a stop and a start, the end of a cycle and the beginning of the ceremony" (Goguel d'Allondans 2002: 44). Sacralization thus marks the crossing to the realm of rite of passage. It breaks with the quotidian rhythm and frames the "sacred" moment, a sometimes dangerous moment freighted with meaning, and with values often distinct from those of everyday life: the moment of identity change. In Orlan's art, the sacralization is co-extensive to its occurrence in a medical framework, a condition of cosmetic surgery and bodily modification. It authorizes the performance of acts that normally would be taboo, forbidden, abject: wounding and opening up the body.

While Orlan could not leave the performances' medical setting untouched without compromising the artistic aspect of her work, it is telling that she retained many of its elements in order to dispel the appearance of violence, abjection and physical risk involved in the iden-

tity change. She took herself to a medical clinic, enlisted cosmetic surgeons, anesthetists and specialized nurses in her performances, and scrupulously followed health-safety rules. But once the medical basis established, the performances sought to alter its context, and its value. The glacial, unsettling atmosphere of the surgery suite gives way to a veritable carnival. The walls of Orlan's operating room are decorated with pieces from her earlier works; the surgical tables are strewn with kitsch objects; film crews roam the room seeking the best angles; the medical team changes from white scrubs to costumes by haute couture designers (Paco Rabane, Charlotte Caldeburg, Franck Sorbier and others); and an occasional dance routine adds rhythm to the event. Orlan virtually turns the medical space into an artist's studio.

As a source of visual inspiration and intellectual underpinning, Orlan selects a philosophical text for each performance – writings by Lacan, Serres and Kristeva have served in this way. But while the themes and visual references of the performances vary, the execution is meticulously choreographed and reveals a masterful sense of spectacle. In order to be able to supervise the process, the artist forgoes the general anesthesia normally administered for facial cosmetic surgery and demands a local (epidural) anesthetic. This allows to her to stay active during the operation, reading philosophical literature and directing the film and photo crews assigned to document the event. Also, before each surgery begins, she recites an excerpt from the book *La Robe* by Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni – an excerpt that has served as a true profession of faith in Orlan's concept of the body since the 1990s: "Skin is deceptive ... in life, one has only one's skin ... there is a misdeal in human relations 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 puppy, a black skin but I am white, a woman's skin 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" (Lemoine-Luccioni 1983: 95).

Together, the precise pacing, the repetition of moments and gestures, and the use of a medical/artistic setting act as a framework that brings an exacting assurance to the identity change.

Goguel d'Allondans describes the *threshold* stage, introduced by the sacralization, as a liminal moment, outside the instituted world, opening onto a "suspension of identity," indeed, a *regressus ad uterum*² (Goguel d'Allondans 2002: 47). The operating room truly looks like a place of identity dissolution and reconstruction; it is the realm in which Orlan's face is deconstructed, broken and disrupted. As Van Gennep observes, there are places where the individual no longer resides in the usual system of things, and thus "finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds. It is this situation which I have designated a transition" (Van Gennep 1960: 17). And in fact, Orlan's face, although broken and reconstructed by the surgery, does not yet represent the desired new identity. Her new face will not be visible until the swelling goes down, for during the operation her identity becomes a no man's land, an in-between, a nowhere. The threshold stage initiates a rebirth.

If the threshold is the moment of loss that leads to a new identity, it is also the moment when initiators "teach the young about the dawn of time, the dreamtime, the primeval days of the ancestors" (Goguel d'Allondans 2002: 49). It is a time for transmitting knowledge, and secrets, the moment when the initiate crosses to the other side of the mirror shepherded by initiators, or guides. These tutelary figures are highly visible in Orlan's performances. The texts of Michel Serres, Jacques Lacan and Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni are as much explanations of the issues of her art as authoritative arguments that give meaning and value to her identity transformation. Reciting these works by heart in her "identity darkness," she draws courage from their authority. She makes them initiators that, possessed of special insight into the identity constraints of today's individuals – including the artist – shed light on the normative mechanisms that govern us. As Orlan explained in her *Interventions* talks, "It was while reading a text by Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, a Lacanian psychoanalyst, that the idea of putting this [notion of transgression] into action came to me" (Orlan 1997: 37).

Opening

Orlan's performance-operations, albeit original creations, are set to the rhythm of a ritual that sees her through the "identity darkness" that comes with abandoning one's biological identity in favour of an elective identity. However, the rite of passage is not a recurrent, unchanging *content* to be whipped out like a rabbit's foot, for protection. Rather, it is a structural, anthropological *form*, enacted differently each time by each culture – and now by each individual – to get through some of life's most difficult situations.

In using ritual as a means to dispel the anguish of crossing the boundaries of identity, Orlan also makes it a means to propel herself beyond the reach of normative constraints. Ritual serves to integrate her identity changes into a framework that enables her to manage the abjection of such acts, but in doing so it also gives her the courage to rise above traditional, standardized aesthetic codes.

Such a possibility is fascinating. It would be simple – so simple, the sort of simplicity offered by apathy – to take comfort by pretending the normative structures and frameworks are inextricable constraints that form the smooth marmoreal walls of a labyrinth imprisoning the individual and made bearable only by the illusion of freedom they exude.³ Things are actually far more complex. The network of structures and norms determining individual behaviour lacks the perfection of a concentration camp: it is everywhere alive with movements, tensions, overdeterminations, paradoxes. The long life of a structure may well overshadow the uncertainty of a norm; some monopolistic intent may well collide with a local rhythmicity. Certain constraints may cover only part of the social fabric; others may clash in the depths of a conflict that animates it.

The rite, as a structural form, knows how to ruffle the smooth surface of the normative frameworks operating on today's individual, and thus escape their weight for a brief while. Hence, the individual employing a rite of passage can take advantage of its phoric capacity (Tournier) to conceive him/herself otherwise. Ultimately, the individual will not have liberated him/herself from the normative frameworks but will have learned to migrate, to occupy a separate "minority" space (Deleuze) within them, a space of freedom.

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- Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). Originally published in French as *Les rites de passage*, 1909.

Endnotes

- ¹ According to Kristeva, "It is not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 1982).
- ² This metaphor takes us back to the artist's desire to give birth to herself, to become her own progenitor and break with her family base. Such yearning is omnipresent in the artist's wish to transform her identity by means of cosmetic surgery (see Orlan 1997, Coulombe 2003).
- ³ As Pierre Bourdieu famously said in reference to the sociologist's role, "Sociology frees us by freeing us from the illusion of freedom."