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Intimacy, Imagination, and the Self: Orlan and the Composite Body.

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This paper will explore notions of intimacy and imagination in Orlan's serial performance art piece "The Reincarnation of Saint-ORLAN", carried out between 1990 and 1993. Over the course of nine surgeries, Orlan had sections of her face altered to resemble famous women chosen from Western art history: Botticelli's Venus, Boucher's Europa, Gérôme's Psyche, da Vinci's Mona Lisa, and an anonymous rendering of Diana from the Fontainebleau school. I intend to address the idea of intimacy in terms of Orlan's private/public dialectic, looking at how she subverts the intimate nature of surgical procedure and presents it as a wholly exposed and public act, involving her audience voyeuristically in the redefining of the operating "theatre". Secondly, I want to examine the surgeries as a reimagining, both of Orlan's own perception of Self and of conventional notions of beauty. Orlan interprets the historical male gaze at its most literal and superficially aesthetic level, and reinscribes that gaze upon her own Self, becoming a hybridized pastiche of the subjectivities of others. Her work situates her own body in public discourse, testing out the idea that identities and aspects of self (e.g. beauty) can be determined by the imaginations of others.

I am a PhD student in the Faculty of Arts at York St John University, and my research explores celebratory representations of the post human in contemporary arts (from literature to music). My main interests are the way science fiction and related artistic genres provide a discourse between art and science, and also the development of post humanism as a critical framework and philosophy. As such, Orlan is one of my case studies in the research I am undertaking.