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Art as Mimesis, Aesthetic Experience, and Orlan

On the work of French performance artist Orlan, on how ‘representation’ and the ‘represented’ seem to coincide, on mimesis and whether ‘art as mimesis’ is sustainable, and on plastic surgery in this aesthetic context.

■ Is ‘art as mimesis’ sustainable?

Proponents of symbolic art (abstract, expressionist, etc.) or avant-garde art sometimes derogate mimetic art, and vice versa. The avant-gardism of French performance artist Orlan¹, for example, has been cited as antithetical to mimetic art. But mimetic art is a very broad category, and is present to some extent in a lot of art not so categorized. The surrealism of Dali, for example, uses mimetic elements extensively.

As described in Orlan’s biography, her performance *The Reincarnation of St. Orlan* transforms an operating room into an artist’s studio where surgery-performances produce works of art decrying the social pressures placed mainly on women’s bodies. Orlan’s *Reincarnation* series comprises a lot of both mimetic and symbolic components. Even the surgery-performances are in part mimetic, with inverted symbolic meaning and avant-garde execution.

Mimetic art is sometimes viewed as simply imitating nature. But mimetic art should not be viewed as a narrow realism imitating the literal world. The varieties of types of realities, rearrangements, and mental experiences expressed in mimetic art take on many forms (e.g., Chagall and Dali). The multiform ways mimetic art can be stretched is itself an insurance for its sustainability (even if narrow realism were an endangered species of art).

Having said that, my argument is that the question of the status of mimetic elements, or mimetic expression, really is not an important concern in the larger art world. There are many artistic camps, and the mimetic vs. symbolic camps represent just one of the ways to ‘divide’ art. There are other types of camps, for example, the art-for-art’s-sake camp, which decries any kind of message creeping into the art. Orlan conveys a message in her surgery-performances, and the aesthetic quality suffers proportionally (according to this camp). But such camps and divisions are irrelevant, for reasons elaborated in the next section.

¹ See: <<http://www.orlan.net/>>

Because the existence of art is dependent on artists creating something, the fate of any art form lies in whether artists are creating anything in the art form. The question of sustainability may be more a question of artist preference. So as long as artists are creating mimetic art, the form will be sustainable. My observation, in the art world, is that there are always plenty of artists practicing in every imaginable art form, as well as inventing new ones. From the point of view of lay persons who simply love art, most disregard the divisions in favor of the art itself, or the aesthetic experience.

■ **The aesthetic experience, and why camps and divisions are irrelevant**

A more sane definition of art must assert that art is purely and simply an aesthetic object that appeals to the senses in a certain way. Trying to define that 'way' is ultimately not productive. Symbolic or mimetic categories are helpful when describing a type of art, but not when arguing differences in the value of art, or the definition of art.

Nothing is universally 'art' and the status of an 'object' being artistic is always a question of 'more or less.' An object achieving the status of art is a matter of degrees of 'appealing to the senses in a certain way.' In other words, when one encounters an object, the 'aesthetic experience' is itself the only quality that changes an 'object' to an 'art object.' So the more people (especially people involved in the arts) who agree that there is an aesthetic appealing quality, the more objective the status 'art' becomes for that object. (Taking for granted we understand objectivity and subjectivity are matters of degree and not absolute.) Of course, the object in question may be a performance, a piece of writing, a sea shell, a painting, or whatever.

The point, therefore, is that symbolic, mimetic, message-art, art-for-art's-sake, and any other approach to art will be sustainable as long as the respective artists exist and people keep having aesthetic experiences when they encounter the respective works of art. That will probably never end.

■ **'Representation' and the 'represented'**

In Orlan's *The reincarnation of St. Orlan*, the represented is Orlan having surgery to modify her body. The representation – the meaning artistically expressed and executed within the medium – seems to be a disturbing vision and lamentation. The lamentation is over the disruption of one's natural identity, or even one's humanity, associated with surgery that modifies a woman's body. The implicit (non-ironic) purpose for the modification, to look better, seems to contribute to the meaning and to the lamentation.

Beyond the non-ironic purpose for surgery (to look better), there is irony in the representation: for example, the piece entitled 'successful surgery' has the appearance of a bizarre press conference, and 'draw with blood' has the appearance of a child's finger painting, only done in blood. The represented in each piece is an aspect of Orlan, the representation is Orlan's self as medium (with other elements) – and so the representation and the represented coalesce into a synthetic aesthetic experience.

This series, along with Orlan's other work, defies any fixed placement under a particular category. Because the intellect plays a role in appreciating or experiencing art, Orlan's manipulation of irony, the represented, and the representation, most definitely heightens the aesthetic experience with her work.

■ **Plastic cosmetic surgery**

The real world of plastic cosmetic surgery is the world of millions of people trying to modify their appearance to align with their perception of 'looking better.' There is an implicit premise, of course, that 'looking better' is valuable. It should be noted that opting for surgery is not always based on a dissatisfaction with one's appearance. Surveys of employment trends are showing that cosmetic surgery can be correlated to financial reward, raises, better jobs, promotions, etc. The social pressure, material and psychological, pushes the case for cosmetic surgery from the insecurities of wanting people to 'admire the way I look,' to wanting companies to 'pay me more for the way I



look.’ This is a growing trend and an indication of the broad and deep influence that the corporate environment (i.e., the world today) has on society and on individuals.

But what does it have to do with art? There is an interesting infusion of the artistic sensibility in the world of ‘aesthetic surgeons.’ At plastic surgeon conferences, the most common theme is acknowledging who are the best cosmetic surgical artists. The canvas is a portion of the patient’s body. The artist’s work (the patient’s body part after healing) is projected on a PowerPoint presentation on a large screen. The subtleties in each ‘work of art’ are explained and discussed. There is no irony. The atmosphere is almost like an Algonquin Circle discussing the merits of the latest Hemingway novel. Among these surgeons, there is nothing more artistically meaningful and rewarding than a successful outcome for a patient.

From the cosmetic plastic surgeons’ point of view, cosmetic surgery is most definitely a legitimate art form, which requires deep understanding of the human canvas: anticipating how this modification will look on this individual in five years; does the outcome look natural as opposed to symmetrical; among other criteria. As in other arts, the surgeon-artist needs special skill in the use of instruments and in the surgical execution. Surgeons also seem to consider the patient’s happiness with the outcome as a major element of the verdict on artistic success. If cosmetic surgery can be categorized as mimetic art, rearranging forms from nature, it is most assuredly sustainable in our society.

■ Final comments

Some people question the viability of traditional realism in the narrowest mimetic art forms, but there will always be artists who practice it and people who appreciate it. Art exists where minds filter objects through an aesthetic faculty. So people who appreciate art (including artists themselves) make art exist. And the status of an object as art is only objective more or less, according to the number of people who assign such value (i.e., have an aesthetic experience with it).

The people among whom Orlan’s work attains the status of art is most likely a very different group of people from those among whom the cosmetic plastic surgeon’s work attains the status of art. My guess is that there is little overlap, but I may be wrong. I hope there is a lot of overlap among those who have an aesthetic experience with mimetic, symbolic, avant-garde, pre-Raphaelite, mediaeval, Victorian, impressionist, renaissance, post-modernist, and performance art; art-for-art’s-sake, and message art. I certainly appreciate and value all of them.

Perhaps the most important division to be made in human civilization is among those who have an active faculty of aesthetic experience and those who don’t. The greatest threat to civilization may be the loss of value on the aesthetic experience at all, and by natural collective atrophy, the loss of the aesthetic faculty. I don’t see this happening, and I do see a lot of people valuing and pursuing various forms of the arts. So I hope the atrophying of the aesthetic faculty among humans remains only a Twilight Zone episode.

Robert Rose-Coutré has published a novel (*The Marriage Syndrome*) and a philosophy book on art and language (*Abstract Objects, Ideal Forms, and Works of Art*). He has a Master of Arts degree with a major in literature and a minor and post-graduate work in philosophy. Robert is the editorial director for an online cosmetic plastic surgery news and information publication.
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