

Variable Time and Medusa's Kisses

Introduction

(...)when films and videos are placed in an artistic context, their temporal status changes and becomes uncertain (...). Boris Groys
Images are time looking at us. Georges Didi-Huberman

ORLAN is one of France's greatest living artists. Her work has now attained the fullness of maturity; it is powerful in its incisive exploration of the major artistic and social issues of our times. ORLAN uses her body as her medium, her raw material, and the visual tool of her art. By making it a space for public debate, she holds a mirror up to society and explores forms and values that challenge natural, social, and political determinism and all forms of domination, from religion to male supremacy and from cultural segregation to the constraints of normativity.

ORLAN draws on religious iconography, representations of the body and of women in Greek mythology, the Baroque, and traditional cultures in Africa, the pre-Columbian Americas, India, and China - all recurrent themes in the history of art - while at the same time engaging with their physical, emotional, and virtual reality by means of cutting-edge biological, scientific, and computer technology.

Her works regularly represent freedom by the familiar gesture of the arm held aloft, borrowed from Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty. Freedom is both the point of departure and the object of her quest. The integrity of her artistic practice and the constancy and profundity of her grasp of form are equaled only by the inventiveness of her forms, which undergo constant renewal as a means of heightening the power inherent in art - building imagination like a muscle, fine-tuning the viewer's gaze and deepening their awareness of reality. Cross-breeding, hybridity, transversality, and exploring beyond the limits are all key procedures in her artistic practice, which draws on a wide range of media and subtle connections between visual art, film, literature, philosophy, and science. Her aim is to explore art and being through time.

The exhibition *Variable Time and Medusa's Kisses* was initially conceived as a chronological journey through ORLAN's work, from the 1970s to the present day. It also brings together works in which time is revealed, dissolves, and breeds independently of chronology, thanks to the simultaneity of past, present, and future; time becomes variable, picking up the radio frequencies of shifts in consciousness and our perception of the world, art, and the body. "Hybridise thyself" is ORLAN's watchword - one she constantly experiments with herself, working with cells, flags, and cultures, for example, to loosen the straitjacket of social, political, and aesthetic determinism. She does the same with time, isolating it from the conformist, and now discredited, doctrine of teleological evolution. This is what the exhibition sets out to explore in its new presentation, focusing exclusively on ORLAN's digital work in the form of videos, 3D, augmented reality, and biotechnology, among others.

The exhibition's title refers to the "Medusa kisses" that ORLAN gives science, art and religion in her 1982 video *Mise en scène pour un grand Fiat*, shot when digital technology was still in its infancy. The video, installed in a dark tunnel above a pool of water that acts as a mirror, is the culminating point of the initial version of the exhibition at the Le LAIT Art Centre in Albi. It is also the point of departure for a second tour of the exhibition imposed by the layout of the premises, which forms a loop starting and finishing with the initial work, *La liberté en écorchée [Freedom flayed]* (2013), in which the artist appears transformed into a digital being reminiscent of prehistoric Venus statuettes, the goddesses of Antiquity, sixteenth-century anatomic engravings, and futuristic cyber-heroines, forming a concretion of images and temporalities. Starting from the ground up, ORLAN slowly raises her flayed arm aloft; her flayed body measures the space of the image by means of the "ORLAN-body", a unit of measurement established in earlier performances for use in museums and other sites where she appears. The slow movements imply a change in approach to the work; visitors must take the time to *see* and *understand*. Slowness is also a key concept in the following works, *Asil / Exil* (2011) and *Repère(s)Mutant(s)* (2013), which explore the notions of cultural roots and nationality. Slowness alters our state of awareness, which is usually heightened, if not annihilated, by a ceaseless, profuse, rapid flow of images.

The exhibition is staged in such a way as to weave a common warp and weft from one work to the next by fragmentation, contamination, ebb and flow, folds and furls, thereby setting up a dialogue between the works and their images and rhythms. The works teem with the great cycle of life and death, expanding and drawing nourishment from memory and projection in a noisy carousel of references and inventions of both vision and sound. The rhythms in the final room are explosive. The alternation between slow, silent contemplation and frenetically paced images and sounds offers a way out of their unconscious hold over the visitor.

The range of videos from different periods is complemented by the production of a video game developed progressively by the addition of levels of complexity as the exhibition travels to various countries. The aim is to create a new work with ORLAN's avatar in direct response to the ever more inventive ways culture and its powerful memory are being destroyed by the current political and economic climate worldwide.

The exhibition, designed in collaboration with ORLAN, can – like the works themselves – change to fit the space of display, being staged in a variety of ways chosen to showcase the works. The timespan of the exhibition is dictated by the works and its journey to various sites. It was planned to be long-lasting from the outset, with various hubs whose content can be increased or reduced depending on the unique approaches used to activate them. In tune with the technological media used and their capacity for instant transmission, the whole exhibition fits on a memory stick, making the most of the reproductibility of modern technology. It plays the card of ubiquity in that it can be put on simultaneously in several places, the same, yet unique in every new place thanks to the changes made by curators at partner institutions and the context of display. The exhibition's mobility and variability have been built into the artistic undertaking from the outset.

Above and beyond ORLAN's ongoing commitment to freedom and her acid humour, time and its facets constantly suffuse the profusion of forms and sounds with depth, critical distance, and the insolent dynamics of meaning.

Past, present and future are experienced against the grain, as Walter Benjamin suggested was the duty of historians. Their linearity is broken and the coexistence of forms from varying temporalities is given weight to trigger meaning. According to Henri Bergson, questioning time and using it as a force for understanding reality is the true nature of art; intensifying its perception by disguising and connecting various sources, measurements, experiments and identities creates the immanent, unique incandescence that is ORLAN.

Aby Warburg wrote that strangeness is what allows an image to survive as the trace of a culture. ORLAN's works shed light on the key artistic and cultural questions of our time, with all its regressions, displays of archaism, and advances. They mark the end of a historical era founded on the constant advent of the new, born from the ruins of the past. A new, unpredictable temporality has arisen, drawing on countless cultural and artistic ages past and their hesitant, manifold projection of futures conjured up by science, spirituality, and economy, by the horizontal, simultaneous exploration of times past and future, and by sensitive intuition of the present through the inhabited presence of bodies.

In an age when awareness of time is no longer dictated by the certainty of progress but is rather dislocated and rudderless, when past and future jump the traces of ideology and come together in the virtual space of the present which has itself become a flux beyond our grasp, the perception of time is a burning social and artistic issue. In ORLAN's polysemic videos, time piggybacks on itself, ties itself in knots, shrinks, measures and repeats itself, accelerates, slows to a crawl. Bodies that are attuned can pick up and emit the spirit of the age.

Jackie-Ruth Meyer, curator of the exhibition

Translated by Susan Pickford