

Artifice: Architecture, Film, Theory, Photography, Design, History, Art and Things.

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A woman's eyes look through the plastic cover. Exotic markings delineate her face. This face, or mask, or skin, covers the surface of *Artifice*: a booklet and a CD-rom (*fig 1*).

A booklet and a CD-rom, *Artifice* points to, but makes unclear, the relation of one media to the other. The CD-rom *appears* not to be a book. It uses movement, video and sound to enact the disguise and construct the skin which pretends an easy severance from the printed form. It is a mask which flaunts the technological promise of the computer age, that of the cutting-edge coloured by the illusion of the exotic - the tattoo manifest in the soft focus of the covergirl.

The technological, the primitive and the pornographic, construct this interplay of masking cut by the cover girl's tattoo - an exotic tattoo which anticipates cosmetic cuttings - for these exotic marks are not those of the conventional colonised subject - they are the Western tattoo of the facial surgery initiate. The cutting-edge of technology becomes literally, we find, the cutting-edge of the plastic surgeon. It cuts, like the tattoo, perpendicular to the surfaces of the mask and face. It is a cutting which both joins and separates - an architectural section contaminating any easy separation.

This is Orlan whose work prompts initial comment in the "Foreword" of the booklet which iterates the CD-rom and her face as its cover. Explained as not "so easily refuted if placed in ... feminist and art historical contexts,"¹ Orlan's work is proudly announced "as 'blasphemous'"² as she sets about to reconstruct her 43 year old face in compliance with conventional "ideals of Feminine Beauty"³: Diana, Europa, the Mona Lisa, Venus and Psyche. Presented in the CD-rom through morphing, these Beauties become Orlan and iterate "The Edison Effect Companion" - a head which turns: younger and male

or older and female. This fascination with turning - particularly a turning into something else - through movement (a physical turning) and surface (the site of turning) prevails in *Artifice*, and is ironically situated within an electronic medium whose virtual lack of physicality enables it a seemingly endless capacity for depth.

*Nowhere is this more marked than in the now New offering of electronic space: the new infinite, eternal design with no bounds, no walls, infinite frontiers, no stopping.*⁴

Yet rather than depth, this "new offering of electronic space" relies heavily on the circular (the turning and returning of the surface). Cycling and recycling, loops of sound, image and movement, construct impermeable surfaces reinforcing notions of an impenetrable skin and mask. Yet moments exist of the cutting of this skin - a sectioning which anticipates an exotic both beyond and within contemporary Western culture - a "voodoo [where] the deepest cut on the doll results in the sharpest pain in the body."⁵

Westernised, the pain is not referred to some distant victim of the curse, instead the pain and cut coincide. Both doll and cursed, Orlan "puts herself in jeopardy, fiddles with mortality and propels her body into severe discomfort,"⁶ literally playing out the bizarre and painful rituals so many, who seek similar aspirations to embody feminine beauty, are prepared to experience to attain an allusive and sought after female ideal. Validating this grotesque and disturbing phenomenon as feminist and art historical, the location of her 'work' denies the horror of the grotesque incisions, tucks and stitchings of plastic surgery:

*adorning her surgeons and herself in couture clothing ... [she sites] translators in bizarre conical hats around the bed; and ... [entertains] a voluble stream of faxes and oral communications from herself and others, some coquettish and self-conscious, others more earnest quotations from psycho-analytical texts.*⁷

Here the masquerade of the academic endorses and promotes, as art, the disturbing and violent manifestations of beauty, each performance becoming literally "more life-threatening than the last."⁸

*The viewer is swung further and further into anxiety as the incisions begin; an anxiety heightened because the wounding is evidently 'real,' but also confused because of a number of theatrical effects devised by the artist herself.*⁹

The operation of the theatrical, the mask and of *Artifice*, displaces the architecture of the operating theatre; violation is supplanted and legitimised by play:

*it may look as if there is a kind of violation going on, but I think it is only there because one has this idea of sanctity about architecture, and when that sanctity is challenged one is more aware of violation. But it is never malicious; it is just a case of physical play.*¹⁰

This play of surface allows the confusion of the body and architecture. The physical violation of Orlan's body becomes architecture, the pencil markings on her face become "chartings, at once graffiti, anatomical diagram and architectural plan"¹¹ anticipating the sectional cut. The body becomes architectural and architecture is made bodily as Peter Cook locates cj Lim's work, in "... They Came To London," within the rhetoric of the body: "His buildings were essentially to do with skin and bones" and "his immense talent with skins and surfaces suited the mood."¹²

Violation and play, bodies and buildings, are substituted and exchanged. They cut through the surfaces of skins as conventional constructions of the body and the cosmetic are confused. The surface and the object are seemingly mistaken, as the packaging of Hoete, Yuji and Hallman's *Temple of Laughter* entry is given a weighting similar to the entry itself (*fig 2*), a billiard table supplants the surface of a concrete floor in Richard Wilson's *watertable* installation at Matt's Gallery, 1994 (*fig 3*), and manslaughter, sectioned by the gun shot and bullet, is (mis)read as mans laughter.

This moving and cutting of the skin, this play, is the electronic manipulation of Paul Panhuysen's "Pattern Primer," and the deployment of computer and surgical technology which locates Orlan's work at a cutting-edge. Layers cut and pasted construct literal cutting-edges which strive to reinstate traditional notions of beauty of the female and the land (*fig 4*)¹³ - a cutting-edge which, by its very desire to be new, is inherently nostalgic:

*the desire to be New has become so old hat as to form a bizarre paradox sustained by the now rather rickety crutch that is called Progress ... this apparent nostalgia-free zone is, in fact, nothing if not nostalgic, a repression of 'home-sickness' so extreme that something is not quite being covered up.*¹⁴

This 'not quite' covering up of home-sickness is, in fact, the location of the cutting-edge - the 'as yet' unseamed, leaking the desire for home. Around and beneath the electronic edges of *Artifice* this domestic leak is found in the unlikely site of the academic, the physical origin and source of *Artifice*: the booklet which is its foundation and authority.

Beneath, founding and supporting the technology of the CD-rom-mask, the booklet, is this site of comfort. As foundation, it is the site of discourse from which the academic emerges: the printed word. As the orthodoxy which allows technology to exist superficially, it accomodates the more conventional representations of academic work - Dr. Jian Fei Zhu's "Japan and the Convergence of Eastern and Post-Humanist Paradigms" (p. 106-119), Jonathan Hill on Yves Klein and Donald Judd in "Licking Space" (p. 80-89), Peter Cook's writing "...They Came To London" (p. 64-79) and "Richard Wilson interviewed by Jeremy Till" (p. 20-31).

Supplied within conventional notions of text, these allow the CD-rom to appear to exist as "contemporary, speculative, playful," apart from the "serious," separated by the conjunctive "and."¹⁵ This appeal to convention through the written text simultaneously supports the CD-rom and disables its ability to stand on its own. As face and foundation, the booklet allows the CD-rom to be a superficial layer of face-mask and make-up - a cosmetic accessory dependant on the face beneath its surface.

Miniaturised and promoted as "Magazine," the booklet both pretends to be, and is a be-littling of, conventional academia. Physically stunted, and occupying (as magazine) the genre of the woman's weekly, a more popular and readily consumed discourse, its positioning as academic is displaced, as homely and suspect, locating electronic space within a lineage from the domestic. Domesticated, technology and theory are consumed by a rhetoric of the cosmetic and household economies, sites where make-up is *put on* and technology is *appliance*: the microwave, the television (*fig 5*) and the washing machine - "and we know there are too many washing machines in the world you know."¹⁶ Existing excessively, the cosmetic and the technological

become applications which exist in and of themselves constructing the domestic rather than applied to it. They construct the 'home' which is the point of reference for cutting-edge technology of electronic space.

These references to 'home' pervade the electronic space of *Artifice* (fig 6) compliant with a technological tradition which institutionalises the electronic within notions of domesticity. It is a "home hearth concept [which] has become detached from the material paraphernalia of dwellings,"¹⁷ but which is still located within conventional and nostalgic images of home. It is, as Matiu Carr defines it, "a place where you know where you are."¹⁸ It is a relocation of self within the electronic which comforts the fear of getting lost.

*No matter how far one ventures into the chronological or geographical distance, there is at every point, or moment, the possibility of a loop in the itinerary that returns to the starting point. This home base, this safe domestic space, is an implicit but necessary condition of the picturesque tour, that parallels that of the cyberventurer.*¹⁹

In *Artifice*, the 'home' page (fig 7) utilises the rhetoric and imagery of the alien and of science-fiction, in an attempt to supplant conventional images of domesticity and of home. Objects orbit²⁰: a coloured ball, blocks, alphabet letters, and a crude rendition of a house. But these abstractions - reminiscent of children's toys - supplant the alien and site the home and origin as an interior which is a nursery rather than the apparent exterior of a science-fiction landscape. Domesticated, these alien objects become familiar, they become "a place where you know where you are."²¹

This rhetoric of an unfamiliar surface, the mask which pretends to be something or someone else, is in fact that which already is apparently known but is made unfamiliar in electronic space - the way home - taking us always to that place which is constructed as most familiar. Here every moment of play is both a disguising and embodiment of the way home. They are that "possibility of a loop in the itinerary that returns to the starting point."²²

"And now ... you know where to go."²³

HOME

NOTES

1 "Foreword," *Artifice* (1995), n.2, p. 7.

2 Anna Price, "Orlan," *Artifice* (1995), n. 2, p. 46.

3 Price, "Orlan," p. 46.

4 Jennifer Bloomer, "The Matter of the Cutting Edge," *Interstices* (1995/6) n. 4

5 Jonathan Hill, "Licking Space," *Artifice* n. 2, p. 88.

6 Price, "Orlan," p. 47.

7 Price, "Orlan," p. 48.

8 Price, "Orlan," p. 47.

9 Price, "Orlan," p. 47.

10 Richard Wilson, "Richard Wilson interviewed by Jeremy Till," *Artifice* (1995), n. 2, p. 28.

11 Price, "Orlan," p. 47.

12 Peter Cook, "...They Came to London," *Artifice* (1995), n. 2, p. 71.

13 The relation of the cutting edge to images of the land and the female body are made explicit by Jennifer Bloomer:

The persistent metaphor of the cutting edge belongs partially to the heroic narratives of conquest of the unknown, that is, the unexplored. And in the narratives of the exploration of the "New World," the protruding blade ever inscribing the frontier is the protagonist of a consistent allegory: the sexual conquest of a virginal female body of seductive material richness. (vid 12)

Bloomer, "The Matter of the Cutting Edge"

14 Bloomer, "The Matter of the Cutting Edge"

15 "Foreword," p. 7.

16 Beaconsfield, "A conversation between Greg Hilty of the Hayward Gallery and Nicholas Logsdail of the Lisson Gallery with interjections by Viennese artist Franz West," "Public and Private," *Accompanying Dialogues*, *Artifice* (1995), n. 2.

17 John McHale quoted, Mark Wigley, "Recycling, recycling," *Interstices* (1995/6), n. 4.

18 Matiu Carr, personal correspondence (3 April 1996).

19 Bloomer, "The Matter of the Cutting Edge"

20 The action of orbit locates specifically the orbit which constructs contemporary notions of the solar system - specifically that which sites the earth which McHale, as Wigley points out, constructs as one

house. The *Artifice* 'home' page perhaps enlarges this already inflated house siting the galaxy as interior and home.

- 21 Matiu Carr, personal correspondence
- 22 Bloomer, "The Matter of the Cutting Edge"
- 23 Bloomer, "The Matter of the Cutting Edge"