

To demonstrate or to 'monstrate', that is the question:  
whether to practice some kind of aesthetic or ethic demonstration  
or to practice the cleansing of all 'nature', all 'culture', through the  
technically oriented efficiency of a mere 'monstration', a show,  
a blatant presentation of horror.

Paul Virilio

Developing John Dewey's thought regarding the unity of body and mind and his criticism of traditional notions of art and aesthetic experience, Richard Shusterman has proposed a discipline of aesthetics (Somaesthetics) whose purpose is to foster inquiry into the aesthetic dimensions of the human body.<sup>1</sup> These agreements aside, Shusterman is critical of Dewey's emphasis on the consummatory phase of aesthetic experience, that is, the phase in which the elements of an experience culminate in a fulfilling and organic moment that punctuates the flow of everyday life. Martin Jay too develops this line of criticism by arguing that aesthetic experience need not be consummatory in nature and that, with regard to somaesthetic experience, there are a wide array of "transgressive body techniques" that are just as aesthetically valuable as the kind of experience advocated by Dewey. Further, Jay argues that these techniques have political import since they draw attention to the violence that underlies the democratic process and since they illustrate the importance of political criticism. For this reason, he concludes that even though they are blatantly non-consummatory in nature, transgressive body techniques have both aesthetic and political value and should be advocated. Further, since Dewey continually criticized the tendency to conceptually divide one mode of experience from the next and since he held that aesthetic experience is essential for the democratic process, Jay concludes that Dewey would indeed espouse the work of body artists that speaks out against various forms of social injustice.

In this essay I will address Jay's argument by first assessing the aesthetic value of transgressive body techniques and then will go on to say something about their political efficacy. I will take the work of Orlan as my example and will argue that it, in fact, has minimal aesthetic value and that what value it does have is mitigated by its critical aims. In order to do so I will need to say a word or two about Dewey's notion of consummatory experience, go on to address Orlan's project, and then assess Jay's argument. In the end we will see why the kind of aesthetic experience that Dewey envisions is essential for the democratic process (in both its mundane and political forms) and why it is ultimately more efficient in bringing it about.

### I. Consummatory Experience

The central task of Dewey's *Art as Experience* is to give an account that does justice to the richness and distinctness of aesthetic experience and yet avoids the traditional tendency to conceptually divorce it from everyday life. He does this by arguing that everyday experience can be rendered aesthetic when it is consciously led to organic ends. When this happens there is a "conversion of resistance and tensions, of excitations that in themselves are temptations to diversions, into movement toward an inclusive and fulfilling close."<sup>2</sup> This conversion and movement renders aesthetic experiences distinct from those that are inchoate or overtly repetitious in nature. They stand out from these unaesthetic extremes because they are intrinsically meaningful and because they are contingent upon the work of intelligence or, to put it another way, design. Design characterizes works of art but is also possible to bring about in everyday life, for writing an essay, working in a garden, or playing a ball-game all entail ordering experience and consciously guiding it toward desired ends. In any case, there is a

movement of energy, a reciprocal influence of part and whole, and an overall amassing of value. This general notion of design allows Dewey to argue that fine art, craft, and certain activities that take place in everyday life are akin since they are ultimately variations on the process of intelligently ordering experience and rendering it more meaningful.

Further, every instance of significant aesthetic experience is contingent upon a process of problem solving, for in designing experience, intelligence must mete out both expected and unexpected difficulties. This is why aesthetic experience, for Dewey, is intimately related to democracy, for consummatory experience and the purposive activity that it is contingent upon is necessary for a public not only because it renders life meaningful, but also because the intelligence that is needed in order to bring it about is akin to the social intelligence necessary for the resolution of social problems.<sup>3</sup> That is, encountering and addressing the problems of aesthetic expression and guiding a project to its end is a process that is similar to the one used in dealing with social problems for, in either case intelligence is necessary in confronting problems that threaten the possibility of meaningful experience.

## II. Jay's Criticism

Somaesthetics attempts to balance out the disproportionate amount of attention that has been given to the cognitive aspects of aesthetic experience. It not only advocates inquiry into the often neglected somatic arts, but also stresses that there are many practices that can be taken up by citizens (and academics) that will aid in the pursuit of somaesthetic experience in a culture that has a long history of denigrating human embodiment. The Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, Bio-Energetics, yoga, *tai-chi chuan*, and the

martial arts are but a few examples of this kind of practice.<sup>4</sup>

However, the experiences that Shusterman advocates need not be consummatory in nature and, as mentioned, both Shusterman and Jay argue that Dewey's emphasis on holistic experience is questionable. In this context it has been pointed out that Dewey's aesthetic does not include a notion of the sublime, a notion that captures the aesthetic aspect of experiences that entail an encounter with and escape from imminent danger—experiences that are seemingly non-consummatory in nature.<sup>5</sup> Following this line of criticism, Jay goes on to examine the implications of the work of “performance artists who have experimented in often transgressive and provocative ways with their own bodies”<sup>6</sup> in order to enact social criticism. This work is preceded by the Cynic Diogenes of Sinope and by the theatre of Antonin Artaud (the Theatre of Cruelty), for these two individuals utilized the human body in order to question social and aesthetic complacency.<sup>7</sup> In following this example transgressive body artists demonstrate that there is value in using the arts in order to criticize various social norms and practices.

There are many variations on the artistic direction of violence toward the body but there are central themes. First, the art industry—and its temple, the museum—are called into question by performances that purposefully escape the fetishization that is often associated with original and un-reproducible works of art such as paintings, sculptures, and buildings. To put it another way, these performances subvert the “aura” that surrounds art objects.<sup>8</sup> Second, because they are often violent and/or disgusting in nature, these performances make the psychological phenomenon of aesthetic distance impossible. No doubt, it is difficult to be a disinterested observer of performances in which artists mutilate their bodies or otherwise use them in a morally confrontational manner. Third,

since the human body is the work's primary material, the historical emphasis on the role played by the cognitive faculties in either artistic production or reception is called into question. Since this kind of work is rooted in human corporeality, it makes clear the fact that both the artist and the observer are embodied beings and not disembodied observers. Finally, there is often an element of social critique that aims at exposing various social injustices including sexism, racism, capitalist ideology as well as traditional notions of physical beauty. This activism leads Jay to write that:

Whether the intention was highlighting violence to women, the evils of political torture, the plight of the insane, or the ravages of AIDS, these works were meant to shock their audiences out of the anaesthetic complacency into which they had fallen.<sup>9</sup>

With this point made, he goes on to argue that these are themes that Dewey would espouse, for they are, in fact, essential for the democratic process. That is, their methods reveal that the public sphere is anything but a homogenous entity, that the *demos* is rooted in violence, and that democracy is an open-ended process. Jay writes that the confrontational methods of this art “makes us aware, as Dewey would have hoped it would, that the interests of life break through the frame of art, no matter how fierce the attempt to keep them at bay.”<sup>10</sup>

### III. Orlan's Carnal Art

Indeed, there are many artists whose work could be used to illustrate the methods, themes, and aims of transgressive body techniques<sup>11</sup> but I have chosen Orlan since her work is relatively well known and since it stands out as a paradigmatic instance of violent body art.

Amelia Jones describes Orlan's project as presenting "the body as meat."<sup>12</sup> In her notorious *Omnipresence* (1993), Orlan instructed plastic surgeons to perform operations that would reconfigure her face so that it may embody the Western ideals of feminine beauty as represented in classical works of art. Specifically, her eyes are modeled on those of a sculpture of Diana created by the hand of an anonymous artist of the Fontainebleau School. Her lips are modeled on those of Europa as depicted in Moreau's *L'enlèvement d'Europe* (ca. 1876), her forehead on that of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503-5), her chin on that of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (ca. 1480), and her nose on that of Gerome's *Psyche* as depicted in *Le premier baiser de l'amour a Psyche* (ca.1820). There have been eight operations in all and together they constitute the *Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* (1990-1995) which attempts not to attain an ideal physique, but to, among other things, call the Western standards of feminine beauty into question.

Orlan's surgical performances have two components. First, they are choreographed and directed by the artist who, at the time of operation, is under local anaesthetic.<sup>13</sup> They include music, poetry, dance, and recitation and costumes are provided (and sterilized) for all participants. In addition, images that portray the standards of Western beauty as well as images taken from previous operations are strategically placed throughout the operating room. Second, Orlan overcomes the restrictions of the sterile environment by creating an outside audience via the use of video recording equipment and satellite relay. *Omnipresence* was filmed for CBS News and broadcast to various galleries in New York, Canada, and France. In this way, Orlan renders operations public that are usually performed in private and she involves her viewers in a "Theatre of Cruelty" that does not allow them to passively enjoy the

performance but instead elicits a strong physical reaction that is contingent upon the viewer's very corporeality. She states that "These images plunge in and strike directly where it hurts, without passing through the habitual filters, as if the eyes no longer had any connection with the brain."<sup>14</sup> No doubt, this violent methodology has many implications for our understanding of human embodiment, but I will only discuss a few.

With regard to ontology, Amelia Jones argues that these performances make explicit Merleau-Ponty's observation that the human body is simultaneously subject and object.<sup>15</sup> The violence of Orlan's performances clearly demonstrates this, for she actively orchestrates them but her body is the passive entity that undergoes them. To put it another way, we commonly associate a person's identity with their face not only because its musculature normally expresses internal states, but also because the face has distinctive physical characteristics that aid us in distinguishing one person from the next. Orlan's surgeries, however, blatantly show that the face is detachable and that, under the surface, it is merely "meat."<sup>16</sup> This succinctly demonstrates that the body is paradoxically subject and object, for it is the medium of human subjectivity and yet it is contingent upon and vulnerable to the world that it inhabits.

The violent and confrontational nature of Orlan's work leads us to the manner in which culture influences the experience of human embodiment. Amelia Jones writes that:

Orlan's subject ... is a French Catholic woman who negotiates the dominant tradition of modernist artistic practice in France: where women—saints or whores—are the objects of art. Orlan takes her own more ambiguous otherness (which is tinged with privilege) and makes it dramatically, repulsively, theatrically

available precisely at the moment of its transformation into the object/ideal.<sup>17</sup>

In martyr-like fashion, Orlan takes extreme and dangerous measures in molding her face so that it may conform to traditional standards of beauty. In doing so she reveals that the process of beautifying the human form can become an obsession that, contrary to popular notions, does not liberate the body, but “exacerbates ... [its] subordination to ... vulnerabilities and mortality—a subordination all the more dangerous for women due to its long precedent in Western representation and thought.”<sup>18</sup> These surgical performances highlight the absurdities of the quest for feminine beauty as well as the values of the broader cultural tradition that provides both the setting and impetus for that quest.

Another element of the tradition taken into account by Orlan’s performance is its emphasis on technological innovation and, more specifically, on the use of technology to represent the self. Orlan’s work demonstrates how video and medical technology can be used to transform the body into an object ready for viewing, for her face is mutilated and transformed by surgery as viewers watch via video technology. This illustrates a trend in contemporary body art to call into question the notion of a coherent self by drawing attention to the manner in which the body is transformed through the use of medical technology and otherwise represented through the use of various technological media.<sup>19</sup>

Earlier it was mentioned that various instances of body art share similar themes. With regard to the first, *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* is a series of performances that have been documented but, as is the case with any recorded or photographed performances, something of the original is lost when technology is used to preserve them. Further, since Orlan’s body is her medium and since it is constantly being manipulated,

her work is an ongoing work-in-progress that consequently escapes objectification since there is no object (like a painting, sculpture, or building) to sanctify and/or to place in a museum.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly and thirdly, Orlan's project also demonstrates a way in which violence can be directed toward the body in order to—via disgust—thwart aesthetic distancing and to advance a complex social critique. As mentioned, disgust and revulsion anchor the viewer to his or her body and this consequently makes it difficult view Orlan's performance in a detached manner. At the same time, the end product of Orlan's surgeries is her reconstructed face, a face that embodies the values of Western culture that concern physical appearance and representation. The use of the Western standards of feminine beauty in judging women's appearance and character is called into question in an explicitly confrontational manner. The viewer may wonder why Orlan would take such extreme and dangerous measures is advancing her critique, but, when the widespread complicity with these standards and, more importantly, with the absurd ends that they often drive women to becomes clear so does the method to Orlan's madness. The method reveals that both the audience and the performer are implicated in this act of martyrdom.

Clearly then, Jay is correct in pointing out the value of performances that manifest these themes. Orlan's *Omnipresence* is intentionally non-consummatory in nature since it keeps its audiences from having fulfilling experiences and since it ultimately calls into question their "anesthetic complacency." Further, *Omnipresence* is valuable since it exposes the overwhelming emphasis on a rather narrow conception of physical beauty and more generally on the phenomenon of construing women primarily as objects "to-be-

looked-at”.<sup>21</sup> Democracy, no doubt, needs such statements to be made, for, in order to remain consistent, it must continually struggle against both the obvious and subtle expressions of sexism, racism, ageism or any other form of institutionalized inequality.

It does appear, then, that *Omnipresence* does not mesh with Dewey’s conception of aesthetic experience nor with his pairing of consummatory experience with a liberal pursuit of value. Aesthetic meaning and value can be derived both from consummatory and non-consummatory experiences. Further, Orlan’s work, as well as that of other feminist artists, criticizes traditional conceptions of art and the aesthetic since those conceptions are often complicit with established structures of power whether they concern gender, race, age, or sexual orientation. Perhaps then, Dewey’s conception of aesthetic experience is in fact inconsistent with the democratic ideals that he espouses or, to put it another way, perhaps the kind of aesthetic experience he envisions should be more activist in nature.<sup>22</sup> In the next section I will explain why Dewey would not nor should not comply with this conclusion.

#### IV. The Aesthetic Value of Transgressive Body Technique

There are two reasons why transgressive body techniques such as those enacted by Orlan fall short of the kind of experience that Dewey envisions: their limited aesthetic value and limited political efficacy.

Before assessing the aesthetic status of such performances it should be noted that Jay’s interest does not center directly on the question of aesthetic value, however, he does state that instances of violent body art differ in quality, originality, and efficacy.<sup>23</sup> Further, he states that an institutional theory of art would include such work in the traditional canon.<sup>24</sup> The latter is puzzling since, in this case, Jay cannot appeal to the

institutional theory, for this is one of the theories that “body art” explicitly revolts against, for, as we saw a moment ago, one of the aims of transgressive body technique is to subvert traditional understandings of the art object and the idea that art status depends upon the decisions of the art world. Regardless, the question we are considering centers on the aesthetic value of violent performance art.

I think that there is aesthetic value in these kinds of performance but it is mitigated by two factors: their absence of design and their narrowly instrumental function. As discussed, violent techniques are blatantly formless in nature, for they rely on a base materialism that consciously avoids designing the kinds of experiences described in section one. By way of contrast, traditional performance artists—dancers and actors, for example—transform the body into what Dewey calls a “medium of expression” and in doing so they increase the body’s aesthetic abilities consequently its aesthetic significance.<sup>25</sup> For example, a dancer must master a wide array of techniques that allow him or her to amplify and refine the body’s natural expressive abilities. In developing, flexibility, strength, coordination, a refined sense of space, posture, and specific pathways of movement the dance student consciously designs a body whose abilities exceed those needed in everyday life and this will, in time, allow him or her to reveal to an audience the aesthetic possibilities of human movement and the general educability of the human body.

On the contrary, such transformation is anathema to the aims of our transgressive artists, for their purpose is to reveal the human body in what Jay (drawing on Bataille) calls its “base materiality” and to otherwise expose the body’s vulnerabilities. Traditional performance artists exhibit the efficacies of the human body and demonstrate

that it can be educated aesthetically, however, non-traditional performance artists exhibit the weaknesses of the body as well as its readiness to accept and preserve the practices of the culture in which it is situated. But if Dewey is right in believing that design is the root of aesthetic value and if there is no design at work in such performances, then wherein lay their aesthetic value?

If we return to lifestyle of Diogenes of Sinope, then the answer becomes clear. His actions are akin to those of the performance artists that we are considering, for both utilize the body in order to critique social norms. However, in addition, body artists are striving to critique and subvert the dominant tradition of aesthetics and art criticism and value is consequently gleaned from exposing the practices and prejudices of the art world as well as the culture that it works within and ultimately reflects. Hence, for example, if the tradition construes the female body primarily in terms of beauty and, more generally, as something to be seen, then a way to expose and revolt against such construal is to perform the body as a formless sight of the ugly, the disgusting, and the carnal. The work of traditional performance artists draws its value from a system of techniques whose aim is to develop the body's expressive abilities whereas the work of transgressive body artists draws its value from critiquing the tradition. However, if Dewey is correct, then true body art entails transforming the body into an expressive medium, one that is liable to have consummatory experiences and one that can demonstrate to an audience how experience can be actively formed and guided to fulfilling ends. Since it is consciously formless in nature, transgressive body art has minimal aesthetic value and what value it does have arises from taking an explicitly critical stance.

We have seen Jay arguing that this stance is essential for the democratic process, however, Dewey would criticize such a narrowly instrumental use of the arts. He writes that “that which is merely a utility satisfies ... a particular and limited end. The work of esthetic [sic] art satisfies many ends, none of which is laid down in advance. It serves life rather than prescribing a defined and limited mode of living.”<sup>26</sup> It is unclear whether or not the artists we are considering—like our Cynic—are prescribing a mode of living, but it is clear that the efficacy of their work is mitigated by the actualization of primarily one end: social critique. There are two difficulties with this, the first being the negation of the power of aesthetic experience to bring about many—often unanticipated—ends. Criticizing notions of gender, race, capitalist ideology, or even criticizing the dominant understanding of art and aesthetic experience minimizes aesthetic value by turning the work of art into a lesson. The second difficulty brings us back to the notion of the transformation of material into the media of expression. When an artwork functions in a narrowly instrumental fashion the materials used in the execution are ignored and are reduced to “mere means” whose purpose is to bring about a pre-conceived end, whether moral education or social criticism. Consequently, sensitivity to material becomes rather unimportant. This is clear in Orlan’s work and in the work of other body artists that Jay describes (such as the Viennese Actionists), for in stressing the body’s materiality and vulnerability, they ignore the full range of the body’s aesthetic abilities.

I think this one-sided emphasis explains why many feminists reject Orlan’s work.<sup>27</sup> That is, she is often criticized for using plastic surgery to criticize traditional standards of beauty, for, in doing so, she seems to indirectly justify its use.<sup>28</sup> Whether or not one thinks that this is just criticism depends upon one’s stance toward cosmetic

surgery, but, regardless, I think that what ultimately underlies the criticism is the intuition that Orlan's project relies *solely* on questioning and manipulating *representations* of the human body.<sup>29</sup> That is, Orlan makes every effort to de-center her identity by focusing her attention on the possibilities of somatic representation. She refuses to create a fixed image and continually creates images that make it impossible to figure out who Orlan is. Her Pre-Columbian and African *Self-Hybridations* aid in as they entail using digital photography to inscribe signifiers of beauty from other cultures onto her form.<sup>30</sup> The incorporation of non-Western features into Orlan's image furthers the project—started in *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*—of illustrating the fact that she lacks a coherent identity.<sup>31</sup> This is a manifestation of a post-structuralist feminism that both calls into question the notion of a coherent Cartesian subject and criticizes a philosophico-religious hierarchy and the binary oppositions that it relies upon (good/bad, male/female, mind/body, theory/practice, and so on).<sup>32</sup> To fully address this approach would lead us well beyond the scope of this essay, however it is enough to say that the criticism of the Cartesian subject that it advocates is essential element of Orlan's project.

To return to the matter at hand, the difficulty with Orlan's work is that it portrays the *surface* of the body as the sole locus of somaesthetic value. It does this by simultaneously revealing how malleable the skin is and by revealing that underneath it there is nothing but "meat". A moment ago I stated that Orlan's work (or any work that relies heavily on the body's base materiality), in fact, ignores the characteristics of the media that it utilizes and this begs the question as to what aesthetically relevant characteristics and abilities the human body has. No doubt, Orlan emphasizes the external surface of the body since Western culture emphasizes the powers of vision and

representation<sup>33</sup> however, we must remember that this does not exhaust all somaesthetic possibilities. As mentioned, actors and dancers demonstrate that the human body can be transformed into an aesthetic medium of expression by developing skill sets, that is, by developing an organic system of habits that enhance the body's inherent expressive abilities. When this is accomplished the body develops the ability to manifest aesthetic phenomena that can be found in all the arts including rhythm, tempo, tension, relaxation, symmetry, opposition, and so on.<sup>34</sup> The use of gesture can be used to illustrate this point since it is used in everyday life in order to facilitate the communication process and can, through practice, become aesthetically significant. Performance artists learn how to refine and magnify gestural abilities so that their gestures may be projected in a manner that exceeds the utilitarian limitations imposed in day-to-day life. By experimenting with different rhythms and tempos, they discover how gestures can be modified, controlled, articulated, that is, designed. By experimenting with muscular tension and relaxation, they learn how to amplify the body's ability to express energy and by experimenting with structural principles they learn how to compose gestures in light of the specificities of posture. Further, since gesture always takes place in a physical and temporal context, they also learn how to structure gestures so that they may facilitate the development of a character or theme and ultimately contribute to the movement of a work as a whole.

This is but one example that briefly sketches out the manner in which traditional performance artists cultivate abilities that disclose the general educability of the human body.<sup>35</sup> In criticizing the narrowness of transgressive body technique I am not, however, criticizing somaesthetic representation *tout court*, for it is clear that representation is also essential in the performance arts (dancers and actors often utilize costumes, props, and

make-up in order to facilitate their performances). Instead, I am criticizing the reduction to representation since it is but one aspect of somaesthetic experience and since the reduction does not do justice to the many avenues of somaesthetic expression nor to the complexities of human corporeality.

#### V. Two Possible Objections

At this point, Jay can reply that my argument is irrelevant since his true purpose is to demonstrate the political effectiveness of body art. However, I am also skeptical about this point.

In briefly sketching out the work that must be done if one is to become an actor or a dancer, I have established grounds for a reply to this objection. Remember that Jay's argues that Dewey places too much emphasis on the consummatory phase of experience and does not take into account the fact that non-consummatory experiences may be instrumental—if not necessary—for the democratic process.

We have seen that transgressive body techniques direct violence toward the body and enact a form of activism since they critique the manner in which the body is swept up in the movement of social forces. In a sense, the violence that these artists perform is a reaction to the subtle violence that they see directed toward the experience of human embodiment. However, we must question the effectiveness of this kind of activism. No doubt, this method is effective in creating an awareness of questionable social norms and practices, however, in terms of political value, this is the stopping point, for, as a violent methodology, it provides no insight into the manner in which experience can be lead to its consummatory phase. Dewey emphasized consummatory experience since he held that in order for individuals to find meaning, they must find a way of actively shaping the

course of experience. Consequently, he would agree that aesthetic apathy or complaisance must be avoided and criticized, but he would go on to argue that the crucial next step is to show individuals how experience can be designed so that fulfilling ends may be actualized.<sup>36</sup> Social conditions contextualize the pursuit of meaning experience and, indeed, there are many times when they are not conducive to that pursuit. However, using the arts in order to enact social criticism and using them to demonstrate that coherent experience is a fleeting ideal is questionable since it does justice neither to the possibilities of aesthetic experience (as presented in day-to-day life or in encounters with works of art) nor to the possibilities of consummatory experience that exist in any given culture. Transgressive body techniques can be called into question since they implicitly criticize the pursuit of fulfilling somaesthetic experiences and portray the body as passive entity that is incapable of attaining them.

With this said, at this point, a second objection may arise. That is, some may argue that even though traditional performance artists reveal the expressive possibilities of the body and more generally reveal that the body is educable, their work is nonetheless complicit with a tradition that delineates a conceptual hierarchy and advocates an array of questionable binaries (mentioned above). Indeed, this kind of argument takes two forms, the first holding that the kind of aesthetic experience envisioned by Dewey is suspect since it renders the viewer complicit with an established hierarchy and its binary oppositions, the second holding that traditional performance arts have long histories of reaffirming the dominant cultural tradition by enacting narratives that reflect long standing values that must be called into question.

The first form of the argument holds that the kind of experience that Dewey

advocates is characteristically coherent in nature and consequently provides the *illusion* that the subject who has it is a coherent one. This returns us to the post-structuralist subject that was described in the last section. The work of many body artists calls the modernist Cartesian subject into question since it influenced the development of the notion of the artist as a disembodied genius or a transcendent “I” that stands behind the work of art. Moreover, since it is transcendent in nature, the Cartesian subject is a self-contained entity that can close itself off from the outside world.<sup>37</sup> It is coherent since it is ultimately independent of the things that it encounters whether mundane objects, the body, or others.

Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and other social pragmatists also disagree with this conception since they hold that the self is a process that is continually influenced by the physical and social environments in which it develops and inhabits.<sup>38</sup> The self is not *de facto* coherent or incoherent but can become increasingly coherent if experience is structured by family and educators in early childhood and if it is consciously organized by the individual in adulthood. This is why Dewey stresses the need for the active pursuit of organic experience in a world that is often characterized by the unaesthetic extremes of monotony and formlessness.

We have seen that two premises of Orlan’s work are the lack of a coherent self and the dissonance that is created by the interaction of an incoherent self with the skin that it inhabits. Orlan’s shape-shifting aptly illustrates an incoherent self and in turn raises the question of whether or not the self can become coherent. In answering this question it is important to keep in mind that there is a false dichotomy at work here, for we are being presented with two options: the Cartesian subject or the post-structuralist

non-subject. If one believes that these are the only two options and if one believes that the first option is a dead one, then it makes sense to consequently argue for a transformation of the notion of somaesthetic experience that would construe it primarily in terms of the theme: “expression or representation of the incoherent subject”. However, if one holds that the self is best characterized as an unfolding process that can become more or less coherent, then the next step is to advocate the avenues of aesthetic expression that are conducive to designing coherent experiences.

With regard to the second form of the argument, it is clear that many plays and dances often include questionable content, content that often complies with and even endorses unjust practices such as sexism, racism, and so on. However, this does not necessarily entail that all works that fall within the tradition are complicit in this manner, for we can think of a wide array of works that criticize the limitations of the tradition and, at the same time, do justice to the media that they utilize. With regard to the body and the performance arts, one can cite the work of directors who have—despite traditional methodology—focused their attention specifically on the aesthetic possibilities of human embodiment. Among others, these include Constantin Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Jacques Lecoq, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Tadashi Suzuki, and Anne Bogart.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, there is the work of choreographers who have questioned the aims and methods of traditional dance forms and have gone on to explore alternatives that opened up more avenues of somaesthetic expression. Among others, these include the Judson School of dancers, Twyla Tharp, Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham, and Alvin Ailey.<sup>40</sup> The school of modern dance both criticized the limitations of its tradition (as well as its often sexist implications) and went on to develop

alternatives that either modified the existing tradition or drew on other non-traditional forms. This work demonstrates that aesthetic value—in the Deweyan sense—is not inconsistent with critical content, for works of art can be critical and yet can do justice to the wide range of the aesthetic possibilities of the media that they rely upon.

Hence, these two objections fail since they assume that the post-structuralist account of the self is correct and since they hold that traditional art forms are either structurally disposed to give their audiences the illusion that experience can be lead to consummatory ends or that they are complicit with unjust social practices. Since Dewey's account of the self diverges from that of the post-structuralist's, it is clear that he would denounce it and since it is neither clear that traditional forms are necessarily complicit with unjust practices nor that consummatory experience is an impossibility it is not clear why we must acknowledge the stance taken by the transgressive body artists.

I would like to close this essay by drawing attention to the fact that Jay's argument does not take Dewey's notion of democracy fully into account. He does note that Dewey believed that aesthetic experience and democracy were intimately linked, but since he does not discuss Dewey's notion of democracy, that connection is unclear. In turn, this vagueness allows him to argue for the necessity of transgressive body techniques since the violence and social criticism that they entail is said to be important for democracy. But just what does "democracy" mean here? What does it mean for Dewey?

I have argued that transgressive body techniques—such as those used by Orlan—have minimal aesthetic value since they disclose only two aspects of human embodiment (the body's base materiality and somaesthetic representation) and since they disregard the

possibility of actively pursuing meaningful somatic experience. It was shown that the self is also at issue here or, more specifically, the possibility of a coherent self, and even though this issue requires a great deal of attention, I have only briefly skated over it.<sup>41</sup> Regardless, I have shown that, for Dewey, the self—through education and the use of social intelligence—can become increasingly coherent and this allows me to argue that Dewey would, in fact, question the democratic value of transgressive body technique.

It is clear that there is some value in such work since criticism is an essential component of social intelligence. Criticizing the tradition of aesthetics and art criticism avoids the all-to-common tendency to idealize established institutions, that is, to sanctify and protect them with various forms of ceremonial precaution.<sup>42</sup> However, democracy must move beyond pure criticism and begin the work of securing the possibility of meaningful experience and this work, for Dewey, necessarily entails communal life. He writes that the idea of democracy

is the idea of community life itself ... The idea or ideal of a community presents ... actual phases of associated life as they are freed from restrictive and disturbing elements, and are contemplated as having attained their limit of development. Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community.<sup>43</sup>

No doubt, this is an ideal that would be difficult, if not impossible, to attain, however, the central point is that democracy (and, in this sense, not just political democracy) cannot be attained if there is no shared activity and if the goods that characterize that kind of that activity are not realized by individual members. The link between democracy and aesthetics just is the liberation of experience that they both have the capacity to provide. Aesthetic experience is liberating when it “serves life” and not some specific end and democratic experience is liberating when it provides a communal context for action that respects the individuality of its members.<sup>44</sup> In either case the result is the same: meaningful experience and growth.

Hence, transgressive body techniques neither go far enough aesthetically nor politically since they do not present the possibility of liberating experience in the way that Dewey envisions. They do not disclose the avenues of aesthetically rewarding cooperative activity that are so essential at present and go so far as to presume that such activity is unlikely at best. Contrary to this, the traditional performance arts demonstrate that the option of aesthetically fulfilling communal experience remains open, for we find individual artists inheriting, embodying, criticizing, and developing various traditions in a cooperative manner. With regard to somaesthetic experience, we find that cooperative activity—artistic education—is the means by which the body is transformed into a medium of expression. The work needed to develop a body capable of performance cannot take place in isolation, but must be taken up with qualified instructors and peers. This kind of work illustrates the intersection of democracy and aesthetic experience as envisioned by Dewey not only because it demonstrates how the human body can be cultivated and rendered aesthetically expressive but also because it demonstrates the

necessity of interacting with others and forming communities of increasingly meaningful shared experience.

## NOTES

- 1 – See *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*. New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 157-177. Also see his *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992, pp. 262-283.
- 2 – *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigree, 1934, p. 56.
- 3 – For Dewey’s discussion of this point see “Art and Civilization” in *Art as Experience*, pp. 326-349.
- 4 – For Shusterman’s descriptions of a few of these practices see his *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 154-181.
- 5 – See David Fott, *John Dewey: America’s Philosopher of Democracy*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998, p. 118. I am not altogether convinced by this criticism, however. It is true that Dewey does not discuss the sublime, but he does argue that consummatory experiences can be dominated by qualities that are unpleasant in nature. He mentions narrowly avoided catastrophes and violent life threatening storms in order to illustrate this point (*Art as Experience*, p. 36). Thomas M. Alexander discusses this point in “The Art of Life: Dewey’s Aesthetics” in Larry A. Hickman edited *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998, pp. 7-8, 13-16.
- 6 – Martin Jay, “Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Body Art” in *Refractions of Violence*. New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 166. This article can also be found in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 36, Number Four, Winter 2002, pp. 55-69.
- 7 – Diogenes the Cynic practiced a wide array of practices including walking barefoot in the snow, willingly accepting the blows of drunken strangers, and masturbating in public. The purpose of these acts was to illustrate the arbitrary nature of societal norms and to otherwise strengthen himself. See Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1925, Volume Two, p. 71. Artaud strove to create a theatre that would affect the entirety of the spectator’s being, especially his or her body. For more on this see *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*. Edited and Introduced by Susan Sontag. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, section 20, pp. 215-271. Alternatively see, *The Theatre and its Double*. Translated by Mary Caroline Richards. New York: Grove Press, 1958, pp. 84-132.
- 8 – For more on this see Walter Benjamin “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1968, pp. 217-252.

- 9 – *Refractions of Violence*, p. 171.
- 10 – *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 11 – Amelia Jones' *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) is an excellent overview of this kind of work.
- 12 – Jones' account of Orlan's project can be found in *ibid.*, pp. 226-229. I encourage readers to view Orlan's website: <[www.orlan.net](http://www.orlan.net)>. For more on Orlan's methods see Carey Lovelace, "Orlan: Offensive Acts," *Performing Arts Journal*, n. 49 (1995): 13. Also see Barbara Rose, "Is It Art? Orlan and the Transgressive Act," *Art in America* 81 (February, 1993): 82. Also see C. Jill O'Bryan, *Carnal Art: Orlan's Refacing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- 13 – Orlan differs from other violent body artists such as Chris Burden and Bob Flanagan since she does not experience pain during her performances. Nevertheless, her performances are violent in nature since they are performed for audiences that will, more than likely, experience disgust, revulsion, and the like.
- 14 – Quoted in *Carnal Art*, Introduction, p. XV.
- 15 – See *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, pp. 40-41, 49, 45, 57, 118, 239. Also see "The Chiasm—The Intertwining," in *Visible and Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis and edited by Claude Lefort. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968, pp. 130-155.
- 16 – The "medical body" that is exposed by anatomists, physiologists, and physicians is characteristically a de-personalized body. Drew Leder describes this phenomenon in detail in "A Tale of Two Bodies: The Cartesian Corpse and the Lived Body," in Donn Welton edited, *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, pp. 117-130. O'Bryan links the *Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* with the tradition of artistically rendering the human anatomy. See *Carnal Art*, Chapter Two: "Looking Inside the Human Body", pp. 39-80.
- 17 – *Body Art*, p. 228.
- 18 – *Ibid.*, p. 227-228.
- 19 – Other artists who address this issue include Gary Hill, Maureen Conner, and Laurie Anderson.
- 20 – More will be said about the course of Orlan's work in a moment. For now, it should be noted that Orlan is always leaving remnants of her performances in order to question traditional notions of what the art object is. She does this by painting with her blood and by preserving surgically removed material. These works are both remnants of the surgery-performances and the body that they work on.

- 21 – See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen*, Volume 16, Number 3, 1975. Indeed, *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* anticipated the creation of television shows in which individuals willingly undergo plastic surgery in order to either enhance their self image or to imitate the features of famous personalities (ABC’s *Extreme Makeover* and MTV’s *I Want a Famous Face*, respectively). I say “anticipate” since these shows perpetuate standards of beauty and utilize both medical and video in doing so.
- 22 – In this vein some have criticized Dewey for not actively speaking out against racism. For example, see in William J. Gavin (ed.) *In Dewey’s Wake: Unfinished Work of Pragmatic Reconstruction*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2003.
- 23 – See *Refractions*, pp. 171-172.
- 24 – Ibid.
- 25 – For Dewey’s discussion on this matter see *Art as Experience*, Chapter Four. I develop the notion of somaesthetic development within the performance arts further in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* (forthcoming).
- 26 – *Art as Experience*, p. 135.
- 27 – O’Byrne discusses this reaction to Orlan’s work in *Carnal Art*, pp. 31-32
- 28 – Rebecca Schneider writes that something is “afloat when a work does not symbolically depict a subject of social degradation, but actually is that degradation terrorizing the sacrosanct divide between the symbolic and the literal.” *The Explicit Body in Performance*. London: Routledge, 1997, 35. It should be noted that Schneider’s comment is a reference to the work of Carolee Schneemann, but it can be seen that it is also relevant for a consideration of Orlan’s work.
- 29 – She has stated: “You’ve got to make yourself a skin out of art.” *Carnal Art*, p. 146.
- 30 – These self-hybridizations can also be viewed at <[www.orlan.net](http://www.orlan.net)>.
- 31 – This quote has been quoted many times: “Skin is deceiving ... [I]n life, one only has one’s skin ... [T]here is a bad exchange 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, the skin of a black person, but I am white, the skin of a woman, 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.” *Carnal Art*, p. 19.
- 32 – For more on this see *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Chapter One: “Post-Modernism, Subjectivity, and Body Art: A Trajectory”, pp. 21-52.

- 33 – For more on this point see Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- 34 – Shusterman discusses this point in “Somaesthetics and Burke’s Sublime” in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Volume 45, Number 4, October 2005, pp. 3-4.
- 35 – Much more could be said regarding the other outcomes of the kind of somaesthetic transformation that I am considering including: “flow” (the ease that is experienced by artists when both moment-to-moment feedback about the efficacy of action and a clear understanding of the problem that contextualizes it are evident), the synthesis of an array of human faculties (bodily movement, imagination, thought), aesthetic agency (the sense of self that arises out of artistic work), and the sense of interaction with other performers. For more on “flow” see Mihaly and Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi, eds., *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988. For more on the remaining points see “Being With”: The Resonant Legacy of Childhood’s Creative Aesthetic” in the Symposium “Aesthetic Lives: Teaching and Learning as Creative Work” in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 39, Number Two, Summer 2005, pp. 36-57.
- 36 – Michael Eldridge’s *Transforming Experience: John Dewey’s Cultural Instrumentalism* succinctly analyzes this approach. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998.
- 37 – For more on this see *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, pp. 37-46.
- 38 – This is an oversimplification. For Dewey’s account of the self see *Experience and Nature*, pp. 208-297. For Mead’s see *George Herbert Mead on Social Psychology*. Edited and introduced by Anselm Strauss. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 19-44, 199-248.
- 39 – For an overview of this kind of work see *Movement for Actors*. Edited by Nicole Potter. New York: Allworth Press, 2002.
- 40 – See Twyla Tharp, *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003. Roger Copeland, *Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Martha Graham, *Blood Memory*. New York: Doubleday, 1991. Also see Julia L. Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey*.
- 41 – I should point out that Jones and O’Byrne base their analyses of body art primarily on the psychoanalytic conception of the self as described by Jacques Lacan. In both cases, Lacan is taken at face value and this is an acceptance that I find questionable. See *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, pp. 23,44, 45, 51, 67, 199, 120. Also see

*Carnal Art*, pp. 33, 35-38, 85-86. Of course, I am taking Dewey's understanding of the self at face value, but this is enough for my purposes as my main goal is not to argue for the pragmatist conception of self, but to criticize Jay's association of Dewey's philosophy with the aims and methods of the transgressive body artists. That is, the fact that these conceptions of self are at such odds with one another demonstrates that this is a forced pairing. More will be said on this in a moment.

42 – For Dewey's discussion of this point see *The Public and its Problems*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1927, pp. 169-171.

43 – *The Public and its Problems*, pp. 148-149. Also see James Campbell's "Dewey's Conception of Community" in *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation*, pp. 23-42.

44 – I again refer the reader to Alexander's (pp. 16-18) and Campbell's (pp. 23-34) essays for more on the relationship between the aesthetic, the self, and the community.