

THE CUT OF THE ARTIST:



Welcome to the operating theatre of darkness and light: an ambiguous space of both surgery and performance which we are invited to enter through nine large window-like images by Nina Sellars. With *Oblique*, Sellars stages surgery as a theatrical act. Her photographs evoke the ambivalence of public autopsies and surgeries, which used to be held in medical anatomy and operating theatres not only for the benefit of medical students but also for the interest and pleasure of wealthy citizens. However, Sellars does more than just put on an 'edutainment' show for her contemporaries who still remain intrigued by the human body and the processes of its transformation. She actually joins the team of (invisible) surgeons in instantiating a series of cuts and incisions, by means of which she brings forth a unique event: a two-tiered, material-visual operation on an apparently disembodied arm and a seemingly displaced ear.

Herself an experienced prosector as well as a mixed-media artist, Sellars thus revisits the age-old practice of barber-surgeons, marginal figures within the history of the profession of medicine who have nevertheless been instrumental to the radical opening up, on both a physical and conceptual level, of the human body. With *Oblique*, a photographic art project which entails enclosing, freezing and carving the body into a particular form, she repeats the surgeon's master 'cut' with the click of the shutter which frames and fragments the body spectacle at hand. The doubling of 'the cut' within this body of work – from that of the surgeon's scalpel, making incisions in the arm which functions as a focal point for the images, to that of the artist's camera, carving out a moment in space and time while also cutting out this particular operating scene for us in a certain way so that all we can see is an arm, a few pairs of hands and a shaft of light - creates theatrical tension between medical and artistic intervention. It also introduces a gap between necessity and ornamentation, between lack and excess.



We can perhaps imagine Sellars' *Oblique* to be a restaging and a simultaneous multiplication of Rembrandt's famous *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*: the chiaroscuro colour template and the anatomic curiosity of the photographs easily encourage such a comparison. But there is another, more fundamental level at which Sellars puts her 'cut' to work. In Rembrandt, the audience gathered around the operating table to examine the muscle structure on the cadaver consists of darkly clad gentlemen, curiously poring over the body specimen. They are thus participating not only in a hands-on anatomy class but also in a metaphysical moment of literally trying to grasp 'the other side', to touch death with their hands. Something very different happens in *Oblique*, however. The close-up photographic technique cuts out not only the audience that may or may not have been gathered around the operating table on which someone is having an ear surgically constructed on their arm – a rather unusual bodily intervention that implicitly asks for an audience because it is in itself a form of spectacle. It also excises the surgeons performing the procedure, turning the operation into an other-bodied dance of hands and arms.

SELLARS' ANATOMY LESSON – Joanna Zylińska

The audience, of course, does not disappear from this spectacle altogether. In the age of makeover TV and ubiquitous plastic surgery – we can think here of shows such as ABC's *Extreme Makeover*, MTV's *I Want a Famous Face* and Fox's *The Swan*, or TV series such as *Nip/Tuck* – the spectators are already part of the picture, whether they are represented in the actual photographs or not. Indeed, viewers of mediated body makeovers are not just watching the transformation of others but are also themselves actively taking on their bodily wounds and corporeal metamorphoses. Such an audience is almost beyond representation: it goes far beyond the select few – be it the observers of the dissection in Rembrandt's painting or regular visitors to art galleries – to include all the transnational media viewers, exposed to twenty-first century anatomy lessons via franchised programmes that turn the surgeon's cut into popular entertainment.¹

In psychoanalysis, the cut symbolises castration, which Slavoj Žižek in his interpretation of contemporary bodily modification practices translates into a desire to disentangle oneself from authoritarian ties imposed by what he calls the Big Other, and an effort to re-establish a certain kind of individualism, outside the constraints of the symbolic order.² Sellars' project literally *cuts across* this fantasy of individualisation. What Sellars therefore offers us with *Oblique* is a series of TV screens which are subversively hung as mirrors. Ron Burnett suggests that 'viewing is about the desire to enter into the screen and become a part of the images and to experience stories from within the settings made possible by technology'.³ Watching the surgery we are also getting a glimpse into our own desire for the cut of the other, for his or her suffering, but also for the ultimate transformation and closure that sews up the cut and heals the (psychic and real) wound. The visible surgical tools and the implied camera equipment function as cutting devices for a self on the way to individualisation via self-incision and self-revelation.

In the early 1990s the French performance artist Orlan broke the taboo against the public opening up of the body with her *Reincarnation of St Orlan* plastic surgery project when she staged her operations in art galleries, with the camera capturing every cut to her face, the detachment of the skin from her head, the slow coming apart of her 'mask'. Orlan's performances have now been overshadowed by the far more gory and far more detailed exposition of the surgeon's cut in TV makeover shows. What is more, the radicality of Orlan's project has been overcome by the reduction of 'the cut' to a mere stage on the way to 'the stitch', i.e. a better representation and a fantasy of arriving at the fullness of one's being. Sellars, in turn, seems to be embracing 'the cut' as a positive condition of one's insertion into the world. The way she casts light and shadow in her photographs does allow us to see the open body, but it also prompts us to look obliquely at the processes of its constitution. Rather than trying to overcome or suture the wound all too quickly, her images dwell on it, repeatedly, obsessively.

In this way, they foreground what Parveen Adams has called 'the emptiness of the image, not the triumph of completeness that the dominion of the image seeks to induce'.⁴

We could therefore suggest that Sellars' project involves the staging of an anatomy lesson for the media age. It is a lesson in which the processes of both production and representation have become much more mechanical, and in which agency has been redistributed amongst different, human and non-human agents – including cameras, large-format printers but also cannulae, sutures and scissors. *Oblique* therefore provides a glimpse into what the philosopher Bernard Stiegler has called the originary technicity of the human, where *tekhne* actively brings forth humanity, rather than being only a promise or a threat to it.⁵ Significantly, in Sellars' anatomy class the surgery is distinctly direction-less. Unable to trace the master hand of the surgeon, we are exposed instead to the medusa-like network of cyborg-like, featureless, latex-gloved hands. As in Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, the body is the centre of each image here but what we are looking at with *Oblique* is a disassembled body, a body with organs in wrong places, an arm with an ear. Perhaps what these images actually depict is some sort of multi-limbed mutant surgeon – a self-mutilator who is folding upon himself in a bizarre act of self-creation.

The rich visual connotations opened up by the images are nevertheless anchored by the exhibition's subtitle. We learn that these are in fact images from Stelarc's Extra Ear surgery, a project in which this well-known Australian artist is constructing an ear on his arm with a view to exploring what he terms 'alternate bodily architectures'. By using this project as raw material for her work, Sellars playfully mobilises the strategy of remediation: she is trying to 'achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation'⁶ on the level of the photographs' content, while also foregrounding the mediation processes via their screen-like framing. In doing all this, she draws on the cinematic technique of montage, remediating a classical painting which she then multiplies into a kind of film strip. Even if we agree that Sellars' work is a way of holding up a mirror to our own narcissism, our makeover culture-fuelled desire to see 'beyond the surface' of the other, or a screen for the projection of our fantasy of completeness, her project also resists and undoes this tendency towards narcissistic incorporation. In the matt texture of their paper, the tenebrist tonality of their surface and the materiality of their box frames, Sellars' photographs possess a non-human agency of their own, which they unwittingly mobilise to take away what Victor Burgin calls 'our command of the scene'. Burgin writes: 'To remain long with a single image is to risk the loss of our imaginary command of the look, to relinquish it to that absent other to whom it belongs by right – the camera. The image then no longer receives *our* look, reassuring us of our founding centrality, it rather, as it were, avoids our gaze, confirming its allegiance to the other'.⁷

In allowing ourselves to be seen by Sellars' surgery scene, by being exposed to the gaping hole in the arm, the spectators are participating in their own undoing, in letting it happen to them. The images play with depth, promising a closure they cannot yield. This is their ultimate victory but it is also a moment when the look can return to the viewer(s) – who, as a reward for relinquishing the desire to master it, will be presented with their own restoration. The pleasure of looking at *Oblique* is thus ultimately the pleasure of survival, of getting over 'the cut'. It combines the scopophilic horror evoked by the object of desire – the other's body, the ear, immortality itself - with the narcissistic reconfirmation of the ego that has not been cut open, that is recuperated in this warped re-enactment of the mirror-stage scene where the self can say: 'This is not me'; 'I have not been cut'. But it also provides a safe entry point for consciously taking on the self's experience of mediation and fragmentation, with any potential psychosis being transformed into art.

Notes

¹ Gunther von Hagens' televised autopsies, shown as part of *Anatomy for Beginners* in 2005 and of *Autopsy: Life and Death* in 2006 on the UK-based Channel 4, are examples of such programmes.

² Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso), pp. 37-71.

³ Ron Burnett, *How Images Think* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2004), p.7.

⁴ Parveen Adams, *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 145.

⁵ See Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁶ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2000), p. 11.

⁷ Victor Burgin, 'Looking at Photographs' in: *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 152.

Joanna Zylinska is a Reader in New Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is the author of three monographs: *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* (MIT Press, forthcoming 2009), *The Ethics of Cultural Studies* (Continuum, 2005) and *On Spiders, Cyborgs and Being Scared: the Feminine and the Sublime* (Manchester University Press, 2001). Most recently she has been combining her theoretical work with photographic art practice. Writer's website www.joannazylinska.net/

Stelarc is Chair in Performance Art at Brunel University West London. He is also Senior Research Fellow at the MARCS Lab at the University of Western Sydney. In 1997 he was appointed Honorary Professor of Art and Robotics at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh. In 2002 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by Monash University, Melbourne. In 2005/2006 he was a recipient of a New Media Arts Fellowship from the Australia Council. His art is represented by the Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne. Artist's website www.stelarc.va.com.au





SELECTED CV OF RECENT ACTIVITIES

Selected Exhibitions

July – Sep 2008

Oblique: images from Stelarc's Extra Ear surgery, Guildford Lane Gallery, Melbourne, Australia

Mar 2007

In the Presence of the Body I, Gallery 111, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, New York, USA

Mar – June 2007

Días De Bioarte '07, Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, Barcelona, Spain

Awards and Residencies

2008

Artist in Residence, Pilchuck Glass School, Seattle, USA

2008

Australian Postgraduate Award, Monash University, Australia

2007

Honorary Research Fellow 'Women in Research' Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University, Australia

2006

Australia Council, Skills and Arts Development (Out of Time) Grant

Conferences/Presentations

Feb 2008

Lightwave Festival, Science Gallery, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland; invited speaker presenting on 'Anatomy and Light'

Aug 2008

Bellevue Arts Centre, Seattle, USA; invited speaker

With the assistance of an Australia Council grant, Nina Sellars travelled to Los Angeles in 2006 to photograph the surgical construction of the Extra Ear project. The experimental and internationally renowned artist Stelarc underwent surgery to have a left ear constructed on his left forearm. The idea was to replicate a bodily structure, relocate it and rewire it for additional capabilities. The skin was suctioned over an implanted Medpor scaffold and a miniature microphone was also positioned within the ear during surgery, allowing it to wirelessly transmit sound. Sellars' artistic practice, which focuses on the physiology and phenomenology of the human body, profoundly intersects with Stelarc's own body-based practice.

Sellars lectures in Anatomical Drawing at the Faculty of Art and Design Monash University, where she is also currently undertaking a Masters of Fine Arts in Drawing having received an Australian Postgraduate Award. Sellars' MFA research 'Anatomy and Light: perception of the body' investigates the idea that, with the advent of new technologies to emanate, record and capture light, our perception of the anatomical body alters and a new body is imaged. The work explores how light determines what we see and experience in relation to the anatomical body. Sellars is also a trained prosector: a dissector of cadavers for medical display. Her artwork has been exhibited nationally and internationally.

Nina Sellars: nsellars@iinet.net.au

Extra Ear project: www.stelarc.va.com.au/extraearonarm/index.html

The Extra Ear surgery was performed in Los Angeles by Malcolm Lesavoy, MD; Sean Bidic, MD and J. William Futrell, MD. Care in Melbourne was supervised by Wayne A. Morrison, MD. Documentary filming directed by Jeremy Taylor, October Films, London. Extra Ear surgery was funded by Discovery USA, for inclusion in the documentary series 'Medical Mavericks'. Exhibition images printed by Brian Gilkes, Pharos Editions, Melbourne, Australia.

Nina Sellars wishes to thank Stelarc; in appreciation for his generous spirit and curious mind



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NINA SELLARS

OBLIQUE

IMAGES FROM STELARC'S EXTRA EAR SURGERY