

MEASUREMENT AS REFLECTION AND ACTION

The artist ORLAN is a well-known figure even outside the art world, but mainly as one of the first artists to use plastic surgery to change her body as part of her art. In our society, which is oriented towards spectacular references, this provides a very useful label. The image is not only effective but also apparently simple. It can easily be made part of a theme; today we all create and manipulate our self-image. However, does this theme really touch on the heart of the matter? ORLAN'S oeuvre is consistent and in its ongoing dynamism is probably critical of reductions like this. The measurements (*MesuRAGEs*) which also made up the core of her work in the 1970s are a key to resetting its current media-oriented image and to approaching her wider artistic contribution.

Putting the MesuRAGEs in context

In Antwerp the memory of ORLAN is not so much associated with her operations as with her early work. In her solo exhibition in Antwerp in 1980, not only did she carry out one of her *MesuRAGEs* – measurements of the space with her body, but there were also plans for a catalogue that would have been the first general overview of her work. The exhibition was held at the ICC, the 'International Cultural Centre', the first public institution for contemporary art in the country. The director Flor Bex was unfairly dismissed shortly thereafter, which led directly to the opening of the M HKA in 1987. A museum institution, the M HKA is of course required to study this history and is also the actual heir thereof. Indeed, the ICC also built up an important documentation centre, now in the M HKA, comprising a wealth of material on the international postwar avant-garde. Some of it deals with works of art, or, as in the case of ORLAN, comprises the material on the basis of which they were produced. With regard to ORLAN, amazingly the archive also includes the book that was never published. Now, after more than 30 years it is seeing the light of day after all.

It appears that ORLAN can also be clearly categorised on the basis of the 'measurements' in which she uses her body as a measuring instrument. Postwar neo-avant-garde art often sought the relationship with the human scale as an antidote to the grandiloquence of consumer society. Sometimes this art did this by literally and directly presenting the scale of everyday movement, such as in Stanley Brouwn's scribbled directions or body sizes in space, the postcards indicating the current location of On Kawara and his paintings, stating on which day he created them, the poles carried by André Cadere, and Hamish Fulton's nature walks. Sometimes the theme of the work was physicality itself, such as in the masculine body art from New York by artists like Chris Burden and the performances by Marina Abramovic – which were only recently placed on the same stage. ORLAN appears to fit in seamlessly with these special categories, as long as one approaches her on a fundamental level. However, in her case it is more about the immeasurable sensitivity that is associated with the human scale, which is also evident in numerous works from this period, from the poetic economy of Robert Filliou to the focus on real experience in the work of artists like Guy Mees and Richard Tuttle.

Anyone who looks at the *MesuRAGEs* as they repeatedly unfold will see something that is different and more complex than the simple act of measuring. ORLAN approaches an environment that is both real and symbolically charged, and her actions draw attention to this within a social dimension that is both practical and ritual. Much art from this period seeks a concentration based on self-contained images viewed from a distance. It remains, albeit in unusual forms, an extension of the representational tradition directed at a detached observer. This is evident in the *This Way Brouwn* works, but body art

also often fits into this pattern, though here it is all about images of physical intensity. In her *MesuRAGEs*, however, ORLAN heads down another road, not seeking a summarising image but, on the contrary, creating a situation that divides into branches with explicit participation in its process. She then also seeks forms that can sustain the situation in this capacity. She is very aware of the representational machine and plays on it.

Construction

She cultivates her process like a ritual from start to finish, using all the possibilities available to her. The measuring does not take place in an abstraction in itself but is consciously extended, not only to other images but also to other steps in the process. These extensions generate a self-reflexiveness. Through her focus on the initial ritual, the artist presents herself as an actor, which distinguishes the performance in the flow of time, thus building up a focus. Putting on the garment is the start, like the medieval knight putting on his suit of armour. On the other hand, she also arms herself on behalf of beauty; she brings along an easel symbolising the artist, just the key symbolises St Peter and the tower St Barbara.

There is also a final ritual that not only adds context to the action but also generates forms that make it possible to focus more attention on the purpose of the action. The easel is the bearer of a *constat*, a sheet of paper attached to a portfolio, on which the situation and conclusions of the performance are recorded. The garment is washed out on the street, thus also distilling the liquid from it that will be preserved as a relic in jars and vials. This relic is then held up in the air for a photo in the form of the Statue of Liberty. This high point – which is displayed life-size at the exhibition – therefore acquires the form of a welcoming offer of a delightful perspective, because this is what the Statue of Liberty stands for. In the presentation device too the performance proliferates in this way and makes it clear that this is not about an image but a broad context, which also includes commemorative plaques that remind us of the action and a small version of the easel as a sculpture on which there is again information with a small photo of the artist as yet another manifestation.

Apart from the role of the artist, that of the public is also formalised. The witnesses are more than just her sounding board. In each of the actions they play a role that is important and visibly constructed. The witnesses are representatives of the public. In this way ORLAN radically challenges the classic performance set-up. It usually simulates equality among all those present, with a body that does something and is encountered by other bodies, something that ‘happens’ in real space in which people do not have a chair with a number but walk around or can sit on the floor on which the event is taking place, without the traditional theatrical distinction between stage and audience areas. In practice however, we see the more deeply embedded schism between the image and the observer. But in her pursuit for reality, ORLAN abandons false spontaneity and from the start transform the audience element into roles. The most important role here is that of the witness. She thus chooses her own audience and makes it concrete and physical. For the new *MesuRAGE* for the MuKHA’s 25th anniversary she invited three artists, Marina Abramovic, Guillaume Bijl and Jan Fabre, and three organizers, the former and current directors and Barbara De Coninck, with whom she previously worked and has a good relationship. By doing this she respects other positions but also immediately directs them. The witnesses figure as representatives of the public in the event itself so that the audience also becomes a part of the image. In the first place this is because the witnesses participate in the second phase of the performance. Indeed, the first phase is purely physical. Body after body, a length becomes concrete. In the second phase these lengths are numbered, and shared with the witnesses. ORLAN also gives them legitimacy because they contribute to the formal *constat* (report)

and so formalise the credibility based on witnesses which Bruno Latour, the French philosopher of science, regards as the basis of modern scientific work, a basis which he links to the Anglo-Saxon legal system. However, there is more. Most important perhaps is that ORLAN suggests that the participant be a witness and that in this way, however the result is then displayed, she opens up a second, additional route in which the performance carries on because it continues to be narrated. Because this is what a witness does, he testifies.

Similarly, the video artists and photographers acquire a clearer and more confirmed position. In performances their position is usually ambiguous. They appear to be there more or less by chance or as part of the infrastructure, like the lighting and sound systems. Of course this is not true; they ensure the continuation of the moment that will become the definitive image of it. In the *MesuRAGEs* they also become a part of the set-up. The best way to describe the *MesuRAGEs* space is as a film set. Various actors playing different roles work together to ensure a good result. The performance does not develop 'naturally'; it relates strongly to its continuation and then, if necessary, even makes its progression subordinate.

Measuring as duality

In the two 2012 *MesuRAGEs*, ORLAN introduced a new level: she measured the measuring body in the course of the work and thus also the difference that this work made to the body. This data becomes a new sort of ongoing effect. The act of measuring is in any case reflexive.

It always opens up a rift between two realities. The one is placed in relation to the other. This used to be clearer than it is now. Inches and cubits, feet and rods differ from region to region. Surface area could be expressed in *gras*, as was the case in Groningen, where one *gras* was the area one cow needs, about half of what we would now call an acre, or the Flemish *dagwand*, an area someone could plough with an ox in one day, about a third of a present acre. The Napoleonic era did for measurements what it did for the legal system: it placed the power of the state between separate parties. From this time on it was no longer a question of finding a compromise between the perpetrator and the victim, as was possible in the legal system under the *ancien régime*, but of the state imposing the same penalties always and everywhere. It also does this with regard to measurements. In the late eighteenth century the metre was defined as the ratio between something and the meridian of Paris, with the metre as one ten-millionth part of it. Previously the metre was seen in relation to gravity and time (the length of a pendulum in which half the time it takes to swing is a second); now it is determined in relation to light and time. The measurement is always 'a relationship between' and this does not decrease as 'that with which there is a relationship' appears to be more abstract and more difficult to comprehend. This abstraction is a regimen of exercising power so that the system can take its course. 'That with which there is a relationship' is taken out of our hands. Formerly, a community had an image of how long an average thumb was, so that was a bit of a compromise. The transposition of the physical register to the globe means a change in the relationship a human can have with it. The Dutch architect John Körmeling made the actual new relationship and the nature of this change visually clear in his book *Een Goed Boek* when, based on the proportions of Da Vinci, he calculated that Napoleon's navel was located at a height of precisely one metre. The seemingly abstract standardised sizes in fact endorse the relationship between what is measured and the system. The result of this systematic superiority is that space has become an economic commodity that surrounds us like shrink wrap, with aeroplane seats with legroom starting at 71 cm, with Tetrapaks and studios of 25 m². It is remarkable how measurement has become its own image, coiling like a tape measure and as angular as a folding ruler. Measurement has thus lost itself because it has lost the relationship that gave it meaning.

ORLAN makes measurements 'to a certain degree' once again. Because she uninhibitedly concretizes them, measurements once again acquire the humility that made them work, when they were still the armpit or foot and it was about rolls of fabric or land on which something could grow. Not only did she concretely bring back the measurement, as other artists have also done, but at the same time she appropriated it. This allows her to do her work. She does not opt for the protest or complaint, she reflects and acts.

Her measuring is a counter-measuring that brings into focus the rational tension that is always implicitly present in measuring as a rift between two realities. Because she declares herself to be a ruler (the *ORLANcore*), she can measure the one thing that is otherwise never measured – because it usually lies on the measuring side of the rift – power. She does not so much criticise this as make it subordinate, she objectifies the king because she herself becomes the actor. She does not measure herself against the institution, she measures the institution against herself and thereby reduces it to an unimpressive figure 41 or the ICC, 74 or the M HKA.

Measuring introduces scale and therefore also the deviation from it, but even more so a tension and the possibility of proportion.

ORLAN does not give herself a central role to play but mainly opens herself to what is happening outside her. Like the two in Antwerp, these *MesuRAGEs* are not about man in the world, but about the encounter between a person and architecture, architecture which, thanks to Jimmie Durham, we know extremely well is always an instrument of power, a symbol of power and an expression and instrument of it. For the ICC this was even the case at various levels; under the directorship of Flor Bex it was the first public institution for contemporary art in Belgium and was housed in the former royal palace. ORLAN does not criticise this architecture, but limits it by making it relative, connected to her body. She stages its limitations. To start with, any architectural space appears to be only a few body lengths long and wide, but at the same time it always goes together with what people do not wish to see, with dirt, chaos and bits of illegality. This is what ORLAN encounters as she measures the space lying down, this is what the movements of her body register and what sticks to her clothing; the dirt that is not supposed to be there. Something very similar happens in the second major series of *MesuRAGEs*, of streets named after Important Men. Here she starts out from a clear critical position and points out the seizure of power – why does the street have this name – but then just as easily continues on her way anyway. And meets the nameless street, the street that occurs, the road that is material and not an abstract principle. *Dans une certaine mesure la mesure est comble*, she writes, the measurement is to some extent the culmination, overfull. Consequently, not only through her focus on places, but also because of this impact on what makes them overfull, ORLAN focuses on references outside herself. She encounters an environment.

Deviation and humour

In the exhibition that follows, she displays this but she is also the mercurial artist she will remain all her life. The presentation is not the documentation of what she has previously experienced – in the performances – but a continuation thereof. For ORLAN, art is an encounter, between herself and other people. This is clear in the way she presents herself. She is the instrument of measurement we can use; she always presents herself crawling, in photo series in which she crawls forward parallel to the spectator and in slide projections that repeat her movements. Visitors get to see the paraphernalia of the performance, its relics, the memory of it, but were also welcomed in the ICC by life-size ORLANs placed on both sides of the entrance (her staff were the reverse of that of Cadere, a means to bring

about a standstill) and further on as a Statue of Liberty suggesting they move on and think through the remaining material. She transforms her proposals and allows them to move on.

No one who follows the internal logic of the *MesuRAGE* hangs on to the measuring and counting that brings about the relationship and thus constrains the grandiloquence of the architecture, but continues further and ends at the jar in her hand that is the ultimate essence, the scent of the circuit. This jar is in fact what she holds up in the final movement and she gives it meaning by holding it up like the Statue of Liberty. Of course in the U.S. this is a symbol of welcome par excellence, but it is first and foremost a French mental and physical construction. In his early work, Carl André once analysed that only the base is American. The construction is by Gustave Eiffel and the form by the Italian-French sculptor Bartholdi. In French it is called *La liberté éclairant le monde*. In other words, ORLAN becomes the embodiment of freedom and the jar that replaces the torch is the enlightenment she brings to the world. The content of the jar is twofold, a bipolarity as powerful as the discord between the measured and the measurement. On the one hand it contains detergent and therefore beautification in keeping with public expectation, while on the other hand it contains the dirt of the streets, of corners, the insignificant, the meaningless, the neglected which always collects unseen at the edges.

The *MesuRAGEs* contain an element of rage, this is clear. The institutions she measures – using herself – represent a power that can only be described as male, just as in the *Rue Général Leclercq*. ORLAN is rightly seen as a feminist artist, but should not be reduced only to this. The relationship with power, the attraction and repulsion between people, appearance as standardisation – and therefore a mould into which one is forced. She deals with problems that are generally human but are experienced more forcefully and acutely by women, even more so at the time of the ICC, when institutions were built only by men and run by men. In French, *rage* has the connotation both of rabies – that which does not fit in with the standards, is unmanageable – as well as '*faire rage*' which means that someone does their utmost.

She uses her drive as a person and the feminist form that is its logical consequence, as a double-edged sword. She uses it to sharpen her observations, but also happily allows them to go over the top as in the *MesuRAGEs* where she literally crawls through the dirt at the foot of the building, starting as innocent painter with an easel and ending with washing and mopping and making everything clean once more. And then she becomes a Statue of Liberty, just as she had previously turned her Venus mound into a piggybank so you could insert coins in it, and later on became a Madonna in a garage who ascends to heaven on the hydraulic hoist which can be used to lift cars. This touch of the burlesque renders her actions fundamentally mobile. She does not opt for complaint but for visual conversation, the game in which one can participate, the joy that concerns what is urgent and remains humorous. Her posture is one of misleading – imposture. She offers herself innocently, she is radically critical, she gives humble attention to the foot and the corners of the institution, she puts it into perspective. All at the same time.

Wherever elements present themselves in the situation, she greedily absorbs them, processes them and places them. The *MesuRAGE* in the Guggenheim focused on the text in the inlaid bronze plaque at the entrance, because it is a good text, "Let each man exercise the art he knows", and whatever meaning the institution itself may have, this is a phenomenal start. The *MesuRAGE* in Liège, which took place in the context of criticism of the urban development of the Place Saint Lambert, absorbed this and exploited it. The final part of the performance, which gave it its legitimacy, became the

confrontation with power when the mayor forbade the continuation of the performance; the legitimacy here was that of protest. Visually, it found itself once again in an almost hilarious situation. Earlier on in the process ORLAN had appropriated a bulldozer, the symbol of this urban planning upheaval, and been transported around in its scoop like Snow White in her open coffin, representing a fragility that had some meaning in contrast to the blindness of the monster, who was stripped of his supremacy by this confrontation. She also had the builders drag along sheets of wood to allow her measuring to continue without encountering too much mud.

Christianity has two ways out for dealing with the power that this approach to measuring embodies. What does it mean, the reversal brought about in this measuring and which expresses itself as counter-measuring? The Old Testament offers the possibility of an eye for an eye, the New Testament believes that you reap what you sow. They are two possibilities of measure for measure. ORLAN opts for neither, but establishes her autonomy as relationality and negotiates with both of them. She accepts ambiguity as a given fact, but also as a space that makes it possible to act and articulate one's own position. This individuality lies in a deviation that has the courage to use itself as a measure. Nothing can be resolved, but one can achieve the sharpness the Dutch language so aptly describes as 'double-meaningness' or ambiguity. See her here, ORLAN, in capital letters. She knows only too well the game she is playing, and humour is ingrained in it. At the same time the insoluble or ambiguous can, through the proper actions, reveal various meanings, perspectives that each have their own meanings and bring awareness to one another. This generates a rational concept. *Dans une certaine mesure le mesurage est comble.*

Bart De Baere