

**Until we are all thin,  
big breasted and  
similar**

**Before/After-**

**Lose ten kilos in a week without  
dieting-**

**Larger and firmer breasts guaranteed-  
6cm of cellulite off every week without  
effort -**

**Back to Youth gel** and the taken for granted **nose job** guaranteeing that nobody will ever trace any non European genes in you.

Selling dreams is as old as dreams but the free magazines that are deposited at my doorstep in Beirut are new and dreams are what they are selling all over their pages.. *Alwakil* and *AlWaseet* are the two most entrepreneurial among the advertising tabloids, they are everywhere and as present as the unending and unavoidable Lebanese debate: who is more beautiful Haifa or Nancy?

Let me tell you before I utter any other word that I am not against advertising; far from it. The proof is that I regularly open *Alwakil* and *AlWaseet* and I browse through their pages. Moreover I take them seriously because I take images seriously and I believe that advertising is a powerful expression of the cultural and psychological space that is negotiated by individuals within society. After all the man who turned advertising into the industry we know today, is none other

**Mai Ghoussoub**

than Sigmund Freud's nephew<sup>(1)</sup>. Neither am I against plastic surgery as such; people over the centuries have sought to change their fate by transforming their bodies. Baudrillard sees plastic surgery as a symptom of modernity : 'Starting with modernity we have entered an era of production of the Other....An identification and an appropriation of the body as if it was a projection of the self, or a self no longer seen as otherness or destiny... But (destiny) is precisely that which must be exorcised at any cost through an identification with the body, through an individual appropriation of the body, of your desire, of your look, of your image: plastic surgery all over the place.'<sup>(2)</sup>

Indeed, since we refuse the dictate of 'destiny' and look down at inherited attributes in wealth and family lineage, praising the self-made man (and more reluctantly the self-made woman), why wouldn't we boast about self-making our nose, breasts and bums?

This is where the images in my two freely distributed tabloid magazines are of great help. Looking at the advertised photos inviting us to 'improve' our looks, week after week, issue after issue, helped me explore and understand better my own dilemma: I am sure that many women like me have a love/hate relation with the idea of plastic surgery, a desire mixed with shame at the idea of succumbing to the lure of easy/miraculous beautification.

Beautification! If I trust my Latin, there is only a letter that separates this word from Beatification/Sainthood. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Beauty is saintly in the unconscious old mind.

There must be some dose of self-hatred behind the readiness to lay under the surgeon's knife for the sake of exchanging our features with 'better or superior' ones.

I don't think that Baudrillard had been aware of the frenzy that has taken Lebanon's beauty industry when he wrote his essay on plastic surgery; but looking at the adverts and their slogans among furniture/cars/ and domestic electronics in my two magazines, I have to agree that we are into something that begs to be scrutinized.

The main problem with the adverts printed in *AlWakil* and *AlWaseet* is their poor quality and the narrowness of the dreams they offer. How can we

(1) Tye, Larry. *The Father of Spin : Edward L. Bernay & the birth of public relations*. Henry Holt. New York, 1998

(2) Baudrillard, Jean in *Figures de l'alterite*, de Jean Baudrillard et Marc Guillaume. Descats e Cie. Pais 1994.

sell dreams and hope for change, miraculous transformation on cheap paper, in black and white inside an overwhelming grey tinted panorama? when colour pops-up on a page, it has been so much aspired by the cheap journal's paper, that it looks grimmer and sadder than grey itself. The advertisers seem to cater to desperate, un-demanding consumers to churn out the same repetitive messages and stick them on the same thinned female bodies, the fantasized large breasts aiming at the ceiling and famished elongated thighs. Badly collated illustrations, written with careless un-aesthetic fonts promise in small print a body of glamour. The lucky model invites us with an ecstatic smile to share her happiness and her creamy white spotless face. In the age of globalization, when Afro-rap style is the cool style for the youth of the world, not one woman, we are supposed to want to resemble is black, Asian or even Middle-Eastern. Worst, most of the models that we are invited to take as our ideal symbol of beauty and sexual attractiveness are blonds with western features and do not look like us at all!

I felt annoyed, looking at these promises of improvement. I felt angry because I do not see improvement as becoming physically fairer, blonder, less Middle-Eastern, more European. I remembered when Malcolm X, still one of my heroes, admitted with great shame and regret how he spent his adolescence straightening his African hair in order to look like a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant). The WASPs were not less racist towards him, straight hair or not.

**A Cream for Whitening Your Skin, With Full Guarantee. Says the text pasted next to a super white super blond face.**

**'The products of Dream Woman, a cream that reduces the cellulite of your tummy by 6 cm a month'!** Another adult blond Barbie is here to confirm the seriousness of the product by hiding her sex with a message warning us to 'beware of imitations.'





I felt intrigued! When most ads promise to fatten our top (breast), all others offer to make our whole body thinner. What about our sense of proportions, let alone our knowledge of the laws of gravity? I felt intrigued, because in Lebanon as elsewhere in the world, young girls are having eating disorders because they want to look like the famished models on the catwalk who are all flat-chested. Are these adverts directed at women, or at men's ideal image of a woman? Are they trying to bring Twiggy and Marilyn together and fit them into our one and only one future?

I am not concentrating on the issue of thinness. This obsession made universal by the proliferation of catwalk shows on satellite TV and by the glossy fashion magazines is now a *vérité de la Palice*. The pursuit of

skeleton-like thinness is making the majority of adolescent girls feel frustrated with their looks, and unhappy with their size; images in the media set unrealistic ideals of unattainable, unhealthy state of thinness that most girls and women see as standard. Young teens in their majority are losing the capacity to enjoy food. Some researchers believe that advertisers purposely project unrealistically thin bodies to create an unattainable desire that can increase product consumption. This is a reality that is widely witnessed and studied about girls and women, but recently it has been noticed that boys and men are also beginning to risk their health in order to reach the idealised standard set by the media.

In a country like Lebanon where food - good tasty food - is such an important part of social life, it must be hell to be an adolescent forced to identify with these famished models who live on one banana a day with a fistful of unsweetened cereal soaked in zero fat milk.

**‘My dream has come true, says this advert for Bust Line Increaser: a machine that functions on air to increase the volume of your breast and lift it up in less than 10 days’.** I am not joking, nor inventing, they are selling us wind as the popular saying goes.



**‘Before’**, the image shows a hooked nose on a sad face. **‘After’** comes the image of the same, now cheerful woman with a turned -up tiny nose.

In an age when identity politics is triumphant, I find it mind blowing that all these projections offered to us are linked to one identity: A western

one! Not one image in these two publications addresses veiled women in a country where so many have opted, for good or bad reasons, to cover their hair! Not one Semitic, aquiline or large nose; not one tiny bump is allowed in noses carried on the faces we want to have as ours! 'The Lebanese nose is facing extinction.' A loss of a species in an age that is keen at preserving them all. This sad impoverishment has triggered a revolt among women artists. Mireille Azouri had her nose cast as part of an exhibition to celebrate the Lebanese strong nose 'We should trust our noses because they are proportional with the rest of the face.'<sup>(3)</sup>

Cherine Fahd, an Australian artist of Lebanese origin, made plaster models of Lebanese noses that will be displayed in an exhibition in Sydney at the end of 2004. Fahd is opposing the obsessive rush to turn our noses into pert cute little things. Nadine Touma performed as a nose seller on the streets of Beirut, selling her African, Greek, Asian... marzipan noses for 1 \$ a piece.

This is where the difference between fashion and art lies. A relation that art critics will never stop arguing about. This is where nature and the making of things come nose to nose!

The artist Cherine Fahd is proud of her nature! But artists, modern artists are not usually very keen on nature. The Australian/Lebanese artist summarises my own dilemma, I like her pride, but I am not so sure about the merits of nature. Aesthetic surgery is a revolt against god's injustices or what is seen as an injustice by people who need to identify, to be accepted or to be praised. The rise in this obsessive trend to let the body be cut and sawn, to be amputated or extended is part of a modernity that incessantly stretches the limits of the 'necessary'. ..'the definition of "human suffering" has gradually changed. We now find ourselves faced with the reality that is no longer sufficient to prevent or treat sickness of the body or the mind, but that physicians are expected to address increasing attention -and society's dollars- to the millions who are dissatisfied with what nature and their own DNA have given them.'<sup>(4)</sup> Between sickness and discontent, the line is getting thinner, be it in Beirut or everywhere else in the world.

I was bored with the lack of variety and the repetitive images displayed in my two free magazines until my gaze was drawn to an image on the top

(3) almashreq.hiofno/Lebanon 610/617.

(4) The New York review of Books Feb 12, 2004. Sherwin Newland reviewing Rothman M & D. The Pursuit of Perfection: The Promise and Perils of Medical Enhancement. Pantheon, 304 pp.

Ghoussoub: Until we are all thin, big breasted and similar

corner of one of *AlWakil* a-colored pages : The large rectangular insert advertised the ‘Institut Mireille Haddad’.



A puzzling inspiration

Here is an advertiser who should be saluted for trying to differ from all other sisterly ads for a better looking female future. The pretence of resorting to high art - the Institut Mireille invites the potential consumer through a reproduction of a painting by the famous early Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli - be it ridiculous or welcomed is at least trying to break with the routine. Let us be clear about one fact: we are not in an era that glorifies the vulgarisation of science; this trend has ended a few decades ago. The toothpaste ads on our screens do not show germs being killed by the power of the promoted product any longer; instead they invite us to admire the wonderful white-teethed smile shining out of a pretty face. So Institut Mireille Haddad for training beauticians, is not showing us pictures of its solemn and busy personnel, wearing white overalls concentrating scientifically inside a laboratory; instead it is exhibiting a portrait of Simonetta Vespucci, an icon of beauty, a symbol of high art inherited from fifteenth century Florence. I was puzzled by this image because I have always argued with the elitists about the lack of separation between what is

called 'High Art' and 'Low Art' or vernacular art. Here is an example that is slapping me in the face. What is the relation between this image of Simonetta Vespucci, her subtle melancholy, the meditative ideal of spiritual aspirations, the precise contours of Boticelli's brush in the original work and what is printed in my free tabloid? The advert says: 'La Perfection dans les Details.' But the cutting of the face's contours of the Florence delicate muse has been roughed-up so badly, the composition within the space is so messy and compressed that we are not only far from the aesthetic myth but we are standing in the midst of ugliness (I was hoping that I would never have to resort to this controversial adjective, but I made virtue out of necessity). I would have liked to salute the designer of the advert for bringing together humanist mythology into popular circulation, but the hideous, careless font stuck on Simonetta's breasts inviting the trainees to a starting fee of \$ 500 shouted back at me, ordering me to keep my mouth shut. Worst, I felt like begging Institut Mireille's designer to keep away from the Museums' archives.

For the sake of their art and profession, many artists/performers have undergone treatment or surgery in the opposite direction: Robert de Niro gained 30 kilos to personify Jake La Motta in the film *Raging Bull*. Recently, the film star Charlize Theron has recently transformed her cover-girl look into a sun-coarsened mentally deranged woman in *Monster*. On the other hand, Simone Signoret admitted in her memoirs that she had always regretted her lack of professional dedication when she refused to be turned into an older, uglier woman to play the role of Bouboulina in *Zorba the Greek!* Art and Beauty are intermingled in a web of contradictory relations.

Indeed there is a relation between art and plastic surgery. This is what the French artist Orlan<sup>(5)</sup> has been trying to prove 'with her own skin' in the last few years: Orlan, in an attempt to look like a computer generated ideal based on artistic historical references, has undergone plastic surgery repetitively since 1990. Her surgery/performance, filmed under her own direction - she has the surgery performed under local anaesthetics - is a work of art in which her body is her sculpture and material. Under the Camera and the knife of the plastic surgeon, Orlan manipulates her features to acquire the forehead of Mona Lisa, the chin of Boticelli's Venus, the lips of Boucher's Europa and the nose of Gerome's Psyche. More features following some other famous feminine icons are to be grafted on her face in

(5) Orlan, *This is My Body...This is My Software*. Black Dog Publishing. London 1996.



the future, we are promised. Frankenstein or courageous creative? The critics of Orlan's art performances are radically divided. Is Orlan trying to answer our question about the relation of beauty and art, about advertising and plastic surgery? Is her deconstruction of the process a scream for or against nature, the power or the virtue of self-centeredness? Is it promoting or questioning the definition of beauty as we have inherited it from the European artistic establishment? If the questioning is prolific, the answers are in total disagreement.

I have always preferred the sellers of 'beauty' to those who sell cleaning powder. I am less offended by the impossible narrow waste and the unrealistically blown-up breasts than by the ecstatic smile of a woman who discovers that Tide, Omo or Persil makes her family's underwear whiter. Do you remember the picture of women reaching ecstasy and blissfully satisfied because their floor is shinier thanks to some new brand of chemicals? At least here, there is a bit of selfishness on behalf of women and their wishes. But hold on, this is not the whole story. The images in my two magazines are still offensive and the reason is that they are poor, aesthetically, imaginatively poor. All the promised glamour is presented on a paper of such bad quality that they seem to tell us that dreams of beauty and success are grey like the colour of the page surface. All these promises of making you unique as a sex symbol or an irresistible woman with a rare body are repeated issue after issue like the bored routine of the life that is intended to be made exciting. How desperate do they think we are?

Looking through gender-conscious glasses at these adverts, I realise that men are solicited on two fronts. First front: The threat of baldness; here the before and after are limited to the picture of the same skull once bald, and then covered after treatment with a thick black duvet; the second and equally obsessive front is that of sexual performance. There are innumerable products, other than the magical and expensive Viagra that turns the male on these advertising pages into a stud, a super satisfier. These projections repeat the traditional clichés, women are pretty objects and men are active performers!

**Magic Touch Gel, external use for those who deserve it most, to postpone ejaculation and trigger an irresistible strength.**

**Back to youth gel. Insures a permanent erection for all ages.**

**Don't keep quite! Get an erection any time you chose. Made in England, Get the best make.**

And in the age of homeopathy and natural medicine, men are offered: **Tablets 42 can liberate you from artificial injections. Try and win don't lose!**<sup>(6)</sup>



Plastic surgery, products to achieve a projected physical self go back as far as human history. Men as well as women have subjected themselves to all kind of procedures to avoid associations with negative aesthetic models or in order to be seen as a successful member of a group with which they want to identify. They have subjected themselves in order to fit but also in order to be noticed as special or particularly noticeable within the group. In seventh century Alexandria, surgeons performed an operation to remove breasts from young male chests. Women have been so enamoured with red lipsticks that in ancient Greece they went as far as applying on their lips a mixture of sheep sweat, human saliva and crocodile excrement to reach the perfect dye.

(6) In English in the ad.

Men and women, always thriving to achieve the impossible balance between integrating a group and being something special in its midst, have always defied nature. They have suffered under the rough instruments of medieval surgeons, self-inflicted burns - in Africa mainly- to design perfectly aligned beauty scars on their faces and moved wilfully inside the operating theatre for liposuction or tummy tucks. Today, after having for centuries praised thin lips à la Joconda, they enter the clinic to acquire silicone enhanced lips, an erotic criteria of our times.

My problem is not with the procedure of making the body beautiful, but with the growing danger of the homogenisation of the body. Deep down, I am afraid that my concern here is aesthetic more than moral or social; what if the imagery presented and conceived keeps on being reduced in its scope? I wish that the photographs and the captions, sold freely on our doorsteps, could offer some more exciting images to enhance our dreams and the promises of a brighter future. I feel cheated by the lack of efforts on behalf of the merchants of dreams; I want to tell them loud and high that: Really, We are not that desperate!