

It's All About



OPINION

Under the palette-knife

In a society obsessed with beauty, plastic surgeons have become all-powerful image-makers. They can improve, change and remove features with a graceful stroke of a scalpel – so should they be recognised as artists? **Charlotte Sinclair** convenes a group of beauty-industry leaders, including a plastic surgeon and an artist, to consider whether the patient has become a walking canvas

Plastic surgery is a hot topic: newspapers bristle with pictures of collagen-injected lips and celebrity boob jobs; TV has been flooded with plastic-surgery reality shows (*The Swan*, *Extreme Makeover*) and dramas (*Nip/Tuck*); and Botox has become part of our modern vernacular. But could all this aesthetic self-improvement be considered art? *Harpers* asked Christa Urbain, public relations manager at Taschen, which has recently published

Aesthetic Surgery, a history of plastic surgery, to put this question to a panel including Martin Kelly, a plastic surgeon and one of the founders of charity Facing the World; Mary Greenwell, make-up artist; Newby Hands, *Harpers'* health and beauty director; and artist Alison Jackson, whose work, including BBC Two's *Doubletake* programme (in which celebrity lookalikes are filmed in compromising situations) deals with image and modern icons.

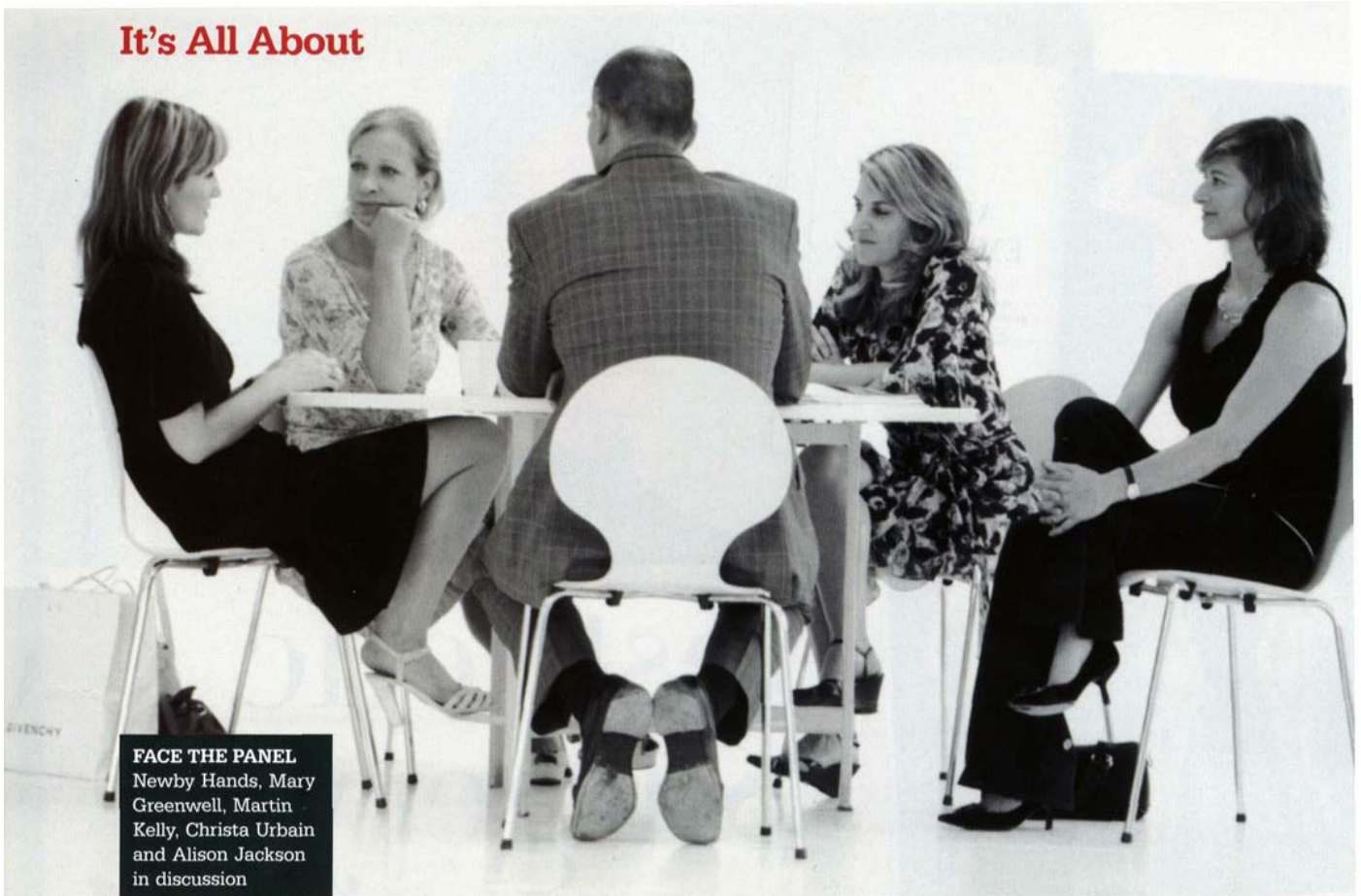
Christa Urbain Do you consider plastic surgery to be art? Can a plastic surgeon ever be artistic?

Martin Kelly I think overwhelmingly no. A plastic surgeon cannot allow him or herself to be thought of as an artist.

Alison Jackson I'm relieved to hear that.
MK We have a tight remit. We analyse the disharmony in a patient's face, educate them about it and explain how much

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM AESTHETIC SURGERY EDITED BY ANGELIKA TASCHEN (€29.99, TASCHEN)

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FACE THE PANEL
Newby Hands, Mary Greenwell, Martin Kelly, Christa Urbain and Alison Jackson in discussion

surgery may or may not help them achieve their aesthetic goal. Then we help them technically reach their goal. There's no room for art in that exchange. There's no artistic licence or autonomy in the surgeon's hands. You can't get creative.

AJ You do get to realign someone's face.

MK Well, no, because you're working on a template that's already there. If you're going to do someone's nose, you can show them a picture of the nose they can have on a computer. That's craftsmanship, rather than artistry, because you're trying to give them that particular nose. With plastic surgery, what you can guarantee is that the aesthetic results will be an improvement; and if you can't guarantee that, you shouldn't be operating. There is quite a lot of armchair psychology involved in plastic surgery. It is as much about operating on patients' psyches as on their bodies. If you feel that what your patients are asking you to do or their reasons behind it are dishonourable, you should turn them away. Unfortunately, there are plenty of surgeons who are happy to do whatever people ask them to. This is where you witness cases of extreme surgery.

AJ What are your thoughts on Michael Jackson, for example?

MK He is an almost unique example. Celebrities are more complex. Surgeons do tend to cut corners a bit for them; they do squeeze an appointment in; and they tend to go along with patients' requests a bit more – although

they shouldn't. You've got to hold the line. So in terms of Michael Jackson, his surgeons have probably gone along with his wishes, but someone should have stopped him.

Newby Hands It's almost like 'the bride of Wildenstein' [Jocelyn Wildenstein, famed for her feline facial surgery] – that's the same sort of extreme surgery as a porn star with balloon breasts or huge lips.

MK Is that art? Is the patient the artist?

CU For the French artist Orlan, extreme surgery on her face and body constitute her art. [Images and videos of her operations – including one in which horn-like bumps are implanted in her forehead – are shown in galleries.]

MK Yes, Orlan has employed craftsmen to work on her, to communicate her ideas through her face. Maybe it is art, but it's not plastic surgery.

AJ So that is an example of someone expressing an artistic idea through surgery. Orlan is commenting on plastic surgery, but isn't it also self-mutilation?

MK Absolutely, it's controlled self-mutilation. It is artistic, but *she* – not the surgeon – is the artist. To me, the surgeon would

have to transcend a code of ethics to do this sort of work. We are primarily doctors; we spent most of our days reconstructing the body and bringing it back to normality, rather than pushing it further away from normality. If a patient came in and said my eyes are here [points to eyes], but I want them there [points to temples], no one should make that face.

NH But I've seen work that is incredibly artistic, almost like very subtle sculpture. If a surgeon is interested in art and sculpture, it shows in their work – they have an eye for it.

MK They have a trained aesthetic eye, allowing them to see quality and beauty; but whether that gives them artistic licence is another matter.

Mary Greenwell I think that's what people come to certain plastic surgeons for.

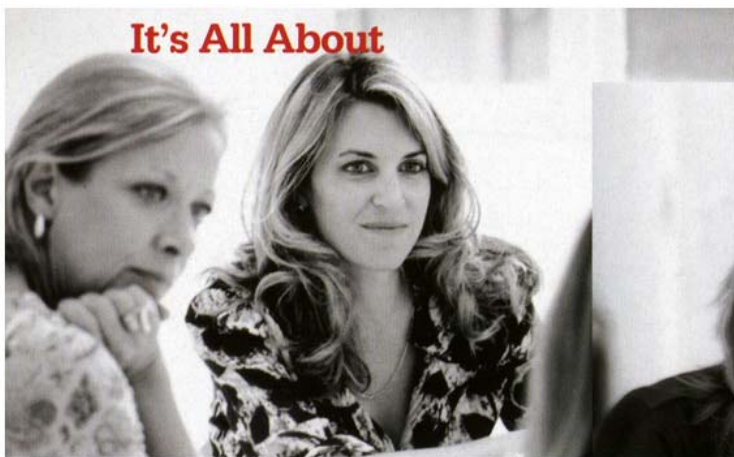
MK An aesthetic eye, yes.

MG It's not about being an artist in the sense that you're looking at a blank canvas and wondering what to create. You're an artist who's working with a canvas that's already there. But you have to have some artistic awareness.

'Surgery is extremely fine craftsmanship, rather than art. It would be fun to be an artist and a surgeon – the results would be very interesting'

MARTIN KELLY

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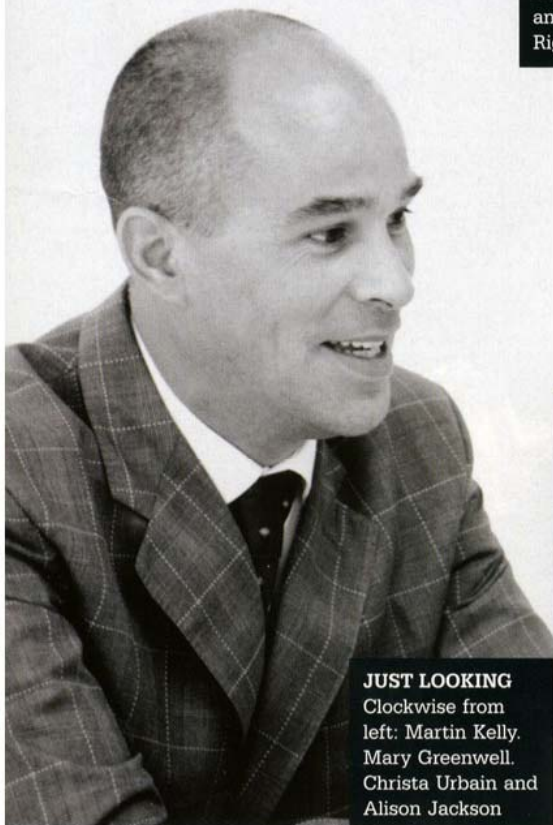
SIGHT TESTERS

Left: Mary Greenwell and Christa Urbain.
Right: Newby Hands

MK You need an aesthetic sensibility, but I don't think you can have artistic autonomy over what you're doing. It is extremely fine craftsmanship, rather than 'I'm feeling a little like Picasso today, so I'm going to make a nose like *this*.' It would be fun to be an artist and a surgeon – the results would be very interesting.

AJ It's like applied arts; you have to have some kind of visual sense about the design of someone's face.

MK Ultimately, plastic surgeons should have an artistic sensibility – without becoming too artistic.



JUST LOOKING

Clockwise from left: Martin Kelly, Mary Greenwell, Christa Urbain and Alison Jackson

'I think there's room for people like Cher in the world. There is artistry in that artificiality'
NEWBY HANDS

NH But I think there's room for people like Cher in the world. There is artistry in that artificiality.

CU So what is your concept of beauty? Do you think plastic surgery has influenced our idea of attractiveness?

NH Speaking as a beauty editor, I think that recently it has been a lot to do with good health. When you look at Hollywood, there's not one dominant, set look. There are lots of different beauty types out there. And you do

see those pictures of celebrities in *Heat* magazine looking awful, which is fantastic.

MK I think beauty is an intoxicating, ethereal quality that magnetises and makes people powerless – you fall completely under the spell of that person. I think it's biologically allied to health, and to youth. And I think it's all wrapped up in a very genetic, innate desire to reproduce. That's really what it's all about – it's about exchanging genes and finding a mate, and that's why, when you're dazzled by beauty, you feel so

powerless. In rejuvenation, in surgery as well, it's about trying to get back to that optimal appeal of the reproductive years.

AJ I think it's got a lot to do with the composition and proportions of the face. Greek sculptures and Renaissance paintings correspond to a set of proportions. When these proportions are right – and this is true of good plastic surgery – it's classical beauty. I take photographs to study classic proportions, and the best way is to capture a face at a three-quarter angle: Andy Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe is at a three-quarter angle; Mario Testino always photographed Princess Diana at that angle; the same goes for photographs of Che Guevara. All those iconic people are depicted in a certain way that makes them acceptable to the public eye, and therefore more beautiful.



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MK Thankfully, many great beauties fall outside of the classical template. An American facial surgeon has published a map of the human face based on classical proportions. He then traced Elizabeth Taylor's face, among others, onto this template, and it didn't quite match. The eyes would have to be closer together to fit the template. I think that's a tragically misinformed approach to beauty; there are many beautiful faces where, if the eyes or nose were considered separately, they would be too large.

CU Why is aesthetic surgery so popular right now? Why are there so many reality shows about it on television?

NH I think one of the reasons is that surgery has become cheaper. Also, you can try something like Botox and it won't last for ever.

MK I have a big problem with those programmes – they are quite wrong. All the surgeons I have spoken to thought they would have a negative impact. All the surgery is done at once, and there is so much styling, hair and make-up that the end product is unrealistically polished. This is broadcasting an image that says: 'This is what you can do with plastic surgery.' The 'contestant' is then spat out at the end, and I think it's the wrong message. It's inaccurate.

NH Horrific though these programmes are, and despite the fact that they go against everything I believe in as a beauty editor, I find them fascinating. But, four months later, without a team of LA hairdressers, how do the participants keep up the look?

CU Does being beautiful make life easier?

MK Beauty is a VIP card. There's less graft involved in being beautiful – you can dazzle people. That's perhaps why beautiful people don't have so many interesting qualities – they don't feel they have to develop them.

AJ I think beauty is fascinating, particularly in art history. And I hope that continues.

MK How important is the pursuit of beauty for modern artists?

AJ I would say it's not fashionable in contemporary art. People try to do anti-beauty.

MK So beauty in art has become more about an idea or an aesthetic?

AJ Absolutely. I don't think one has to do classical beauty anymore in art.

MK Do you think it's because, as an artist, it's increasingly difficult to produce real beauty?

AJ I don't think it's hard, but there's a lack of interest. I think everything goes through fashions, and I'd say contemporary art is in an anti-beauty phase right now. Most artists seem more interested in conceptual art.

MK And it's quite difficult to paint like Renaissance artists, too, I imagine.

AJ Yes, but I suppose artists feel that type of painting has already been done.

MK In Renaissance art, for instance, the artist has invested a great deal to achieve beauty in that way. You don't see that now, you see an idea or a concept instead.

AJ It's about putting forward a view.

MG Do you think that beauty has become so available to us that we can't create a great picture? Beauty is everywhere now and it is accessible. To

create beauty at this level in art is almost impossible – it's lost its meaning.

AJ Maybe it's seen as too easy because it's so accessible.

MG Do you think it's hard for artists to create a beautiful picture without being seen as less of an artist?

AJ There's definitely that view, because where do you go with beauty? There's a lot of history, but I think there's a fear of it as

well. Artists don't want to create something that's too beautiful, because it's slightly naff or not 'difficult' enough.

CU Except in the case of Anish Kapoor.

MG That's a different sort of beauty. It's the hugeness of something such as *Marsyas* [Kapoor's sculpture for the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern]. It's not a tableau or a portrait.

MK The beauty is in the scale and drama of it.

MG But I don't know if you could call it beautiful. It's like being inside a whale.

CU There used to be a clear ideal about beauty in the past. Is there still this one ideal? Or is difference, such as a person with mixed ethnicity, the new ideal?

NH Models are much more diverse-looking now. Interestingly, a few years ago, they came up with a computer programme to create the most beautiful face, and it looked like Yasmin Le Bon, who is a mix of different races. Nowadays you can't tell where people come from, and I think this has a much wider appeal than a blue-eyed blonde.

MK Thankfully, all my patients don't come into my office saying: 'I want to look like Yasmin Le Bon,' because that would make life a little difficult. But a good patient has filtered through thousands of magazine pages to get a feel for what realistically might be more harmonious for their face, and it's not necessarily the goal of looking like a celebrity. A patient will understand that their nose or their eyes are not quite in line with the aesthetic template in their mind. When we look at a face,

we decide in microseconds whether there's harmony, and patients do that themselves. They don't come in with a picture of a celebrity's nose, and if they did, I certainly wouldn't touch them. □ *'Aesthetic Surgery'* (£29.99, Taschen), edited by Angelika Taschen, is published on 24 October.

'There's a fear of beauty in contemporary art. Artists don't want to create something that's too beautiful, because it's naff or not "difficult" enough'

ALISON JACKSON

