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# The New Normal

In this plastic surgery age, keeping up appearances may require spare parts.

PHOTO BY RICHARD PIERCE

**P**atients who visit the Park Avenue offices of plastic surgeon Stephen R. Cohen often come armed with Victoria's Secret catalogs. They aren't planning on lingerie shopping in the waiting room—it's the breasts they covet, not the bras.

"A patient will point to a model in the catalog, and say, 'Dr. Cohen, I just want my breasts to look perfectly natural.' And I tell her that, for a 45-year-old woman who has breast-fed two kids, she already looks perfectly natural. What she wants is to look perfectly *unnatural*," he says.

"Beauty standards are changing. We don't think natural is normal anymore."

Of course, when it comes to attractiveness, popular culture has seldom favored the natural look. In past centuries, however, beauty ideals were attainable with temporary fixes such as wasp-waisted corsets, bullet bras or false eyelashes. If perfection required permanent change (foot binding, neck elongation), it was restricted to one body part at a time. But that's changing, as skin-care, plastic surgery and cosmetic dentistry become less expensive and celebrity role models increasingly resemble Barbie dolls. These days, we don't or



Mix and match: Dissatisfied with what nature gave you? Pick a new body part.

can't) raise a Botoxed brow at a woman who opts for chin, cheek, breast and buttock implants—all at once. No body part (no shortening, anyone?) or profession (male swimsuit models strutting the runways with telltale circular liposuction scars on their hips) is immune. Now some doctors wonder whether they are ushering in an age of bionic beauty, an era in which "the new normal" is a cosmetically enhanced face and body.

"We are creating a population of 75-year-old women with 25-year-old breasts," notes Colen, who says that patients often reject his recommendations of smaller implants. "If society decides that 75-year-old women with 25-year-old breasts are the beauty standard, then more and more women will do it. And what happens in the year 2020," he worries aloud, "if naturally beautiful women who don't look like that are considered ugly?"

Other plastic surgeons see our rapidly escalating aesthetic arms race as inevitable—simply a consequence of better health, nutrition, medicine and new technology. "If, at 60, you are as fit and healthy on the inside as a 40-year-old once used to be, then you want to look that way on the outside as well," theorizes Manhattan facial surgeon Thomas Romo III. "And the new techniques we have to massage the aging face are much safer and less invasive with much less downtime, so more people are doing it."

One way Romo charts changing beauty norms is via *Playboy* magazine models; in his youth, he notes, "they were all 21-year-olds, but now a 60-year-old could be in there." He's not so far off. Farrah Fawcett was 50 when she posed for the magazine's cover; Nancy Sinatra was 54. "Girls are getting nose jobs earlier, starting at 16, and breast jobs earlier, starting at 18," Romo says, which isn't surprising since their role models are buxom young celebs such as Lindsay Lohan and Tara Reid. "If we can make a 50-year-old look 35 with an endoscopic browlift, what's wrong with a 35-year-old wanting to look 24?" he adds. "Everybody wants to look younger and healthier."

Of course, one idea of a young and healthy look is changing so rapidly that it's becoming harder and harder to keep up appearances. Lately, in a crowded room full of bleached teeth, the person with an untreated smile begins to look alien—or at least British.

"In the 1980s, when bleaching first came in, we used to call the color Hollywood white," recalls Manhattan aesthetic dentist Peter Rinaldi, who recently, in the name of one-stop shopping, opened an office with Romo. "At the time it was extreme, but the more people who get the look, the more you take it for granted as normal." When it comes to teeth, he says, "what we used to think of as white we now think of as yellow."

Once clients obtain that snowy hue, Rinaldi says, they begin to want bigger smiles—one new enhancement tends to beget another. Porcelain veneers, which cosmetic dentists use to widen people's grins and to make teeth longer, are especially popular with women whose collagen- or Restylane-injected lips start to hide their pearly whites. Sometimes, in the wrong hands, veneers can look less chic and more Chicklets.

"It takes artistry to know what's right for a particular person's mouth," says Manhattan cosmetic dentist Marc G. Lowenberg, who won't name his



Supersize icons, from top: Lindsay Lohan, Pam Anderson and Tara Reid



**"If the breasts are far apart"—in other words, a normal human chest—"they look horrendous, terrible!" says Robert Rey on E!'s Dr. 90210 show.**

star clients but is happy to speculate on those he hasn't treated. "David Bowie's teeth are horrible; I can only surmise that some dentist made them way too big and too long. Matt Dillon's teeth are gigantic. And Demi Moore's chompers! It looks like someone gave that beautiful woman crocodile teeth."

Perhaps patient zero of this yes-they're-fake aesthetic is Pamela Anderson. It seems quaint, looking back, that Americans were so shocked in 1995 when Anderson admitted to *TV Guide* that she'd gotten double-D implants a few years earlier (an event recounted in her campy new roman à clef, *Star*). While a modicum of honesty is always welcome in the world of celebrity plastic surgery, the fallout from all that nipping and tucking is worrisome.

"Our nation is obsessed with plastic surgery," says Tara, the Webmaster behind the wickedly astringent *Awful PlasticSurgery.com*, which speculates on the flamboyant extremes of Hollywood aesthetic tinkering (according to Tara, who declines to give her last name, the site receives more than a million hits a month). "I can't imagine Dustin Hoffman coming up in this era and being so successful. He just doesn't have that pretty-boy look that Hollywood likes. I don't think it's possible to be a star today without getting something done."

And, in America, where what's good for the celebrity goose is automatically listed after by the public gander, extreme makeovers are increasingly sought after by civilians. Popular Beverly Hills plastic surgeons such as Robert Rey of the E! Network's *Dr. 90210* show are encouraging nonactors to go bigger and better. In one recent episode he urges a petite, rail-thin woman who wants small implants to go for much larger ones because, he says, "if the breasts are far apart"—in other words, a normal human chest—"they look horrendous, terrible! There is nothing uglier than a wide cleavage."

And then, it seems, we're starting to think of bodies not as something we are, but as something we own—like cars—which can be sent in for flashier headlights and a new paint job. If medical breakthroughs continue at the current rate, it won't be long before we regard our physical selves as mere shells, epidermal clothes which can be bought, new or used, and discarded when they fray or go out of style.

At least that's what happens in award-winning writer Hanif Kureishi's recent novel, *The Body*, in which a small clique of wealthy elders have their brains transplanted into beautiful young bodies. Kureishi calls the transplant club *Newbodies*, while the rest of the population, forced to

weather natural aging and gravity, are the unfortunate *Oldbodies*.

The story might sound far-fetched, but it holds at least a grain of reality. Doctors at the University of Louisville in Kentucky are preparing to perform the world's first face transplant. They plan to replace a patient's horribly disfigured visage with one from an unblemished corpse. Perhaps the day that plastic surgeons simply replace a sagging face with a new one—for purely aesthetic reasons—will never come to pass. But all our technological advancements and enhancements tend to make one nostalgic for the days when aging without intervention, with the grace of, say, Katharine Hepburn, was a little bit more of the norm.

—NAJASHA SINGER