



Overdone

More women are asking their doctors for so much cosmetic filler that they end up looking unnatural—even unhuman. What are they thinking, and what do they see in the mirror? *Allure* goes behind the scenes with doctors and patients to find out why so many are going so far. By Joan Kron

Strangers usually have the good sense not to tell you to your face what they honestly think of your appearance. But Denise*, a 36-year-old nurse in New York City, recently met an obstreperous passenger aboard the Lexington Avenue subway who really let her have it. “I was seated across from this woman—fortysomething, blonde, heavysset. She was talking loudly and kept using this gay slur,” says Denise, who had soon had enough. “I stood up and told her she was being offensive,” she says. “When I did that, the woman stood up and got in my face, saying, ‘Fuck you, you fucking plastic-surgery bitch with your fucking plastic-surgery face!’”

Denise was so shocked by the attack that she was crying by the time she got off the train. Not just because some nut job on the subway was dropping f-bombs:

New Yorkers are used to that. What upset Denise most was the fact that more than a year had passed since she had stopped having cosmetic injections in her lips and cheeks, and yet she still looked plastic to a complete stranger. “Obviously the woman was ignorant, but to have that pointed out.... I thought I looked normal, but I guess I don’t know what normal is anymore.”

There’s a lot of that sort of confusion—or maybe the word is “delusion”—in the world of aesthetic enhancement these days. On the streets, at the office, on reality TV, more and more women have what skilled dermatologists and surgeons consider an overdone look, as if the patients in question simply can’t stop getting injections to plump their lips and cheeks and freeze their wrinkles. We used to talk about Jocelyn Wildenstein, the woman whose surgery made her look like a cat, as the model of excess. Today, however, our definition of what is acceptable seems to have changed. “With the advent of minimally

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invasive procedures, like hyaluronic acid fillers for the cheeks, we've seen a drift," says David Sarwer, a professor of psychology at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania and a body-image expert at the university's Center for Human Appearance. "Younger women are having these treatments and not recognizing that they're not always getting a natural look."

By some estimations, we now live in an era of "volume abuse," to borrow a phrase from Beverly Hills plastic surgeon Lawrence Koplin. And he should know: Back in 1988, Koplin injected the lips of actress Barbara Hershey with collagen for her role as a younger woman in the film *Beaches*, a milestone in the evolution of exaggerated lip styles. Other actresses took the look further (including Lisa Rinna, who told a host of the *Today* show, "I never had a career before I had the lips"). Soon a new generation of hyaluronic acid fillers, like Juvéderm and Restylane, came along that made altering the face a relatively inexpensive—and scalpel-free—option for millions of women: instant gratification, with almost no recovery time. Shots in the morning, then out to dinner that night. It's no wonder Britney Spears recently called lip injections "the fun stuff."

Today, however, critics of the overdone look worry that what used to be considered excesses in the past—golf ball cheeks, "trout pout" lips, frozen foreheads—are closer to becoming the rule. Part of the problem, and this has been true as long as plastic surgery has existed, is that patients simply don't see themselves as others do, says Koplin. "We all have a built-in Photoshop in our brain," he says. "People see what they wish to see." Like many (but certainly not all) doctors, Koplin considers it his professional duty to point this out.

"Sometimes with a new patient who wants more filler when she's already had too much, I'll take my iPad and take a photo. I sit next to her and say, 'Do you see this ridge of filler in your smile line?' And the patient will say, 'Gosh, I never saw that.'"

The phenomenon he describes sounds like a version of what Julius Few, a plastic surgeon in Chicago, calls the "distortion vortex." It's a form of cosmetic blindness that strikes when a patient is so excited by a round of treatments that she can't resist having another. "The first time a woman gets injections for, say, deflated cheeks or deep smile lines, there's an initial rush," says Few. "If it was that good, she reasons, maybe if I do a little more I'll look even better." That creates a dilemma for the doctor that would be familiar to a

1988

The year actress Barbara Hershey got collagen injections for the film *Beaches*, which launched the trend in big lips.

bartender: whether to tell the patient she's had enough or risk losing her to another practitioner. "I tell them, 'No, and if you go somewhere else and get it, I'll charge more to make it go away if you don't like the way it looks,'" says Few.

It took more than a nudge to make Denise, the nurse who was insulted on the subway, realize just how far she had gone. For three years, she visited a dermatologist four times a year for shots of filler in her lips, cheeks, and smile lines, plus Botox in her forehead and to lift the corners of her smile. It didn't hurt that she got a discount because she worked for a plastic surgeon. "I liked the way I looked," she says, even though people she was close to tried to persuade her to stop. "My sister would say, 'You were prettier before. You think it looks good, but it doesn't.' My boyfriend hated it. He

told me he would break up with me if I didn't stop." Denise simply didn't believe them. "It's like an eating disorder. You become warped."

A mishap at the dermatologist's office opened her eyes. During an otherwise typical appointment, a doctor in training hit a blood vessel while injecting Denise's lips, causing severe swelling. "I looked like I'd had a stroke," she says. And that was it: She sought help from another doctor, who removed some of the filler. Today, Denise realizes that her distorted features still haven't entirely deflated, and she has come to accept part of the blame. "It's not all the doctor's fault. I asked for these things. I liked the look till something went wrong," she says. In fact, she still gets Botox for her frown lines. "A part of me says I should stop and see what I would look like—but I'm afraid I'll look tired and old."

She's certainly not an aberration. Almost every doctor interviewed for this story says the pressure from patients to exaggerate features is real. "I spend a lot of time talking women out of overfilling the top lip," says Rod J. Rohrich, the chair of the plastic-surgery department at the University of Texas, Southwestern, in Dallas, who still believes in the old-school theory that the bottom lip should be significantly larger to create the ideal mouth. "The upper lip should never override the lower in *Homo sapiens*; otherwise women will look like giraffes," he says. But that's a hard message to deliver when full-page ads for Guess jeans feature the exquisite Bollywood actress and former Miss World Priyanka Chopra, whose lips are nearly equal in size, and Hollywood remains smitten with a superstar named Angelina Jolie with God-given gorgeous lips.

And that particular part of the anatomy is only part of the controversial look. Patients also ask doctors to erase their smile lines and undereye creases—landmarks that define the face. "A woman walked into my office, pulled out a page from a magazine, and said, 'I want

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to look like this.' It was a picture of a 20-year-old model, and the patient was 65," says Roy Geronemus, a clinical professor of dermatology at New York University Medical Center. "She wanted filler under her eye with no demarcation between her lash line and her cheek. I have to tell patients like this that what they really should want is to look natural, that too much filler will detract from their appearance." Other patients have asked Lawrence Bass, a plastic surgeon in New York City, to entirely eliminate their nasolabial folds, the grooves that run between the bottom of the nose and the corners of the mouth. "We all have that fold at the age of 15," says Bass. "We have to look human! Youthful, beautiful is nice—but at all costs, human."

Economics may also play a role in the current urge to overfill. Not long ago, dermatologists and plastic surgeons charged their patients by the visit or procedure. With the advent of injections, however, many now charge by the syringe, and that's a billing system that none-too-subtly encourages abuse, according to some doctors. At training sessions sponsored by professional societies, doctors watch other doctors demonstrate how to inject as many as ten syringes of filler in single patient's face. Most doctors won't sacrifice their reputation for extra profit, but there's an incentive to overprescribe filler, especially if that's what the patient wants.

In truly extreme cases—the ones that show up in Google searches—a kind of silent conspiracy can develop between doctor and patient, with neither party clearly to blame. As Steven Teitelbaum, an associate clinical professor of plastic surgery at UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine, describes this process, patients may start with simple pro-

cedures that deliver natural-looking results. "But with their doctor's help, they embark on this course where they slowly but inexorably get accustomed to their oddness and continue on to ever-greater oddness." Some people mistakenly identify this condition as body dysmorphic disorder, defined as an intense preoccupation with an imagined defect of appearance, like Michael Jackson's reported obsession with his nose.

But let's take a breath here and consider what's really at stake. Everybody knows the Michael Jacksons of the world are rare indeed. And just for the record, there's no disorder defined by a desire for outlandish facial features in the American Psychological Association's official diagnostic manual. Overinflated lips may offend the tastes of some observers, but after all, they're temporary and can be corrected with a simple shot of hyaluronidase, a chemical that dissolves most fillers. So what's the real problem with choosing to exaggerate your facial features? "If the individuals don't have significant psychological issues related to their appearance and have the resources to pay for these treatments, then perhaps it's not that different than multiple visible tattoos, piercings, and hair color," says the University of Pennsylvania's Sarwer.

One person who must surely know what it's like to live with a face that's on the extreme side is Angela Raiola, or Big Ang, as she is known on VH1's *Mob Wives*. Since making her debut on the show in 2012, Raiola has become famous for her smoker's rasp, her 42 triple-J breasts, and her eighth-wonder-of-the-world lips (none of which are natural). Raiola's lips, whose print appears on the label of her Big Ang Wines, took shape almost 14 years ago when a doctor injected them with what the TV personality recalls as "collagen and plastic"—probably a filler that wasn't approved by the FDA at the time. It hurt, but the lips never developed lumps or became

hard. "I paid \$3,500, and I'm done," Raiola tells me with pride.

Unlike Denise, who was confronted on the subway on Christmas Eve, Raiola has never been criticized in person for her lips. But "on the computer they are writing, 'Her tits are so big, her lips are so big,'" she says. She doesn't let it bother her because her fans are so loyal. "They tell me, 'You are beautiful.'" Clearly, this woman loves the face she has created with a doctor's help and sees it in a light that is only positive. So I ask Raiola what she thinks of that other icon of cosmetic excess, Jocelyn Wildenstein. "Jocelyn who?" she responds. You know, the Cat Woman, I explain. "Oh, I saw her picture on TV once," Raiola says after reflecting. "That's a little over the top." ♦



Angela Raiola, known to fans of *Mob Wives* as Big Ang, has lips to match her outsize personality.



Kristina Rei, from St. Petersburg, Russia, has reportedly had more than 100 lip injections to achieve a look based on the cartoon character Jessica Rabbit.

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