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## **MY PROSTHETIC AND I: Identity Representation in Bodily Extension**

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My prosthetic is a secret of my self. It hides, tucked beneath clothing, allowing me to pass as something that I am not, that I can never be. It is precious to me, it enables me, gives me mobility and an aesthetic that would cease if it was removed from me. Within my body schema, my prosthetic is as much a part of my body as my skin, blood, and organs. It is also an object of technology, a topological replacement of a missing body part. However, a large, un-chartered misunderstanding of experience separates both of these experiences. For many years, academics, artists, and theorists have tried to merge the two, in the process bringing forth ideas on the prosthetic that have seemingly removed it from the realm of disabled experience and into the fantastical world of the uncanny. Therefore, the question for myself, as an artist, is how to explore this large chasm of differing experience and draw out the uncanny into a world of subtle, lived understanding and visual acceptance.

Firstly, to cross such a large chasm of understanding, one has to understand the differing meanings and symbolism that imbue the word “prosthetic.” In terms of conventional thinking, a prosthetic is an object that is attached/inserted into the body to replace the function of a missing or defective body part. There is little thought given to aesthetics or conceptual concerns: the prosthetic is a purely functional object. For artists and academics the prosthetic becomes a concept, an idea with which to explore the bounds of the human body. In the book *The Prosthetic Impulse*, Vivian Sobchack, herself a person using a prosthetic limb, talks about the difference between the actualised reality of wearing a prosthetic and the visualised/imagined reality of the able-bodied, academic, and artist:

. . . there are(sic) both an *oppositional tension* and a *dynamic connection* between *the* prosthetic as a topological figure and *my* prosthetic as a material but also phenomenological lived artefact – the *the* and the *my* here indicating differences both of kind and degree between generalisation and specificity, figure and ground, esthetics(sic) and pragmatics, alienation and incorporation, subjectivity and objectivity . . .(18)

Sobchack refers to the differences between each meaning given to the prosthetic, illustrating the degree to which each opinion is marked by a particular subjective issuance of the prosthetic.

For Sobchack, as for myself, these are issues that have to be addressed on a personal level. I have congenital limb deficiency: my right arm and leg are both shortened, and I procured a prosthetic leg and arm as a toddler. During this process of adjusting to and incorporating prosthetic limbs into the schema of my body, I rejected the prosthetic arm and accepted the prosthetic leg. At this young, tender age, I made a functional and aesthetic choice as to the integration of objects into or onto my body. In full rejection of the prosthetic arm I was rejecting not only its supposed functional purpose, but also its true symbol of “normalisation” of my body – the synchronisation of my body. The prosthetic leg, however, was accepted, not just as a functional object that enabled me mobility, but also on an aesthetic and phenomenological level. It has become an integral part of my identity.

My own art practice, particularly over the last two years, has involved the photographic representation of my own body and disability. In its conceptual oeuvre, however, the focus has shifted away from the political implications of such work to a concerted interest in the relationship between my body and object, my body and space. In shifting this focus, my experience of my body suits a phenomenological

approach to aesthetic representation, rather than a political/activist view, which can generalise the experience of disability. The relationship between my prosthetic (object) and my body (subject), thus becomes a natural exploration of the interaction between our selves and reality, reality as we perceive and understand it. This connection to an object outside of the body schema (or integration of the object into the body schema) links into Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theoretical understandings of the body and perception, a theory which enables the viewer of artistic interpretations of the prosthetic to appreciate the interconnection of the body and prosthetic. Merleau-Ponty's theories include ideas on the nature of the body and object incorporation, which distinctly links into the experience of the impaired body and its aids: "The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight" (165). This theory, so perceptive of the nature of the object/body integration experience, can be applied to prosthetics – particularly as the blind man's cane can also be described as a prosthetic aid.<sup>1</sup> This example of Merleau-Ponty's reference to the encapsulation of the blind man's cane into the body theoretically enables my own articulation of prosthetic experience, via artistic representation, aesthetically signifying the merging of technology and the body.

In writing this article I must admit to a certain level of subjective conjecture, since to describe my experience of the prosthetic I cannot admit to knowing other people's experience, due to differing circumstances, such as the technological degree of the prosthetic, as well as how the person has come to the prosthetic. Therefore, to maintain a certain level of objective process this article will also look at three other people whose identities are intertwined with the prosthetic. One who has produced

and documented the prosthetic (an example of historic representation), one with limb deficiency and lastly, an able-bodied artist – as a counterpoint for my own experiences. In the nineteenth century, James Gillingham’s ingenuity and skill changed the production and aesthetic of the prosthetic limb. His skill as a prosthesis maker and photographer allows us a glimpse into the attitudes and expectations towards limb deficient people from that time. Aimee Mullins is an American woman who had her lower legs removed at birth due to a medical condition. She is now a Paralympic track star as well as muse, of sorts, to artist Matthew Barney. This “double-life” has come to define her by her prosthetics; as for both “jobs” she has many varied and specialised prosthetic legs. Another woman, who, though able-bodied, developed prosthetics within an artistic/conceptual process whilst she was suffering a medical condition, is Rebecca Horn. Horn, as an artist who explores the subtle and dreamlike land of the unconscious and its relationship to the body, explores the limits and extensions of the body, quietly bringing forth the uncanny. Her work remains largely neutral, though it does refer to certain political movements such as feminism. This political inference, however, does not impose on her exploration of her own world, agency, and identity.

In terms of technological advances, the prosthetic limb has appeared, in some form or another, for thousands of years. But in relationship to my own particular research, I turn to the production of limbs and subsequent photography of James Gillingham. Gillingham’s work (circa 1870 onwards) brought about a new vision of the prosthetic – not just of its use and application, but of its aesthetic, the materials used to produce the limbs, and the concept of what a prosthetic limb could be. It is this conceptual thought and visual representation through Gillingham’s photography that not only records a momentous technological leap forward in regards to prosthetic

limbs, but enables the patient: “to perform tasks,” and: “also improve their appearance and so their self esteem” (Warren, 41). This results in an articulation of a new aesthetic of the prosthesis.

In Gillingham’s photographs the prosthetic limb is revealed, exposed as the antagonist of the image. The men stare out of the image, their prosthetic drawing the eye of the viewer from this confrontation to the “product” that is, in effect, being advertised. As for the women, their faces are commonly hidden. This variation in pose, their shying away from a direct confrontation with the viewer over their difference, can be read on multiple levels. Issues of female submissiveness and social roles arise, as does the exploration of identity and self; however, what is perhaps most poignant about the photographs is the ease with which the women raise their skirts, revealing not just the prosthetic, but also their flesh.<sup>2</sup> In the era in which these photographs were taken, revealing the body to this extent, would have appeared morally dubious; but the promise of technological advancement and the improvement of peoples’ lives due to Gillingham’s “discoveries,” seems to counteract the outrage that such images would otherwise suggest. The act of covering the women’s faces thus seems to indicate a delicacy to protect the women’s identity and modesty.

Given the historic context of Gillingham’s photographs, how does his aesthetic translate into contemporary representations of (in particular) the woman’s body and the prosthetic? Firstly, I would like to confront the “disabled” woman and the representation of the prosthetic, as explored in Sobchack’s *The Prosthetic Impulse*. Sobchack refers to Paralympic athlete Aimee Mullins for differing visual representations of the disabled woman and prosthetic. Well known for her achievements and aesthetic representations, due to her career as an athlete, model, and part time muse for artist Matthew Barney, Aimee Mullins has become defined by

what has enabled her to achieve a level of aesthetic interest: her prosthetic legs. Depending on her role at the time, her prosthetic legs become a symbol of that role, explaining to the public what her actions and motives will be at that particular point in time. If she is wearing her “Cheetah” legs, she is about to spring into action; if she is wearing her “Cinderella” legs, she is fulfilling an artistic aesthetic to do with imagined beauty and fragile perfection. In both examples a fantastical representation of the uncanny prosthetic is revealed.

As Aimee Mullins has incorporated prosthetics into her body schema from early childhood, so have I, though perhaps not with the technological or aesthetic advantage that she has enjoyed. I have had to make do with whatever could be provided for me. In terms of technological advancement, my prosthetic leg is neither “cutting edge,” nor aesthetically pleasing. Yet, my mind and my body feel that it is “my” leg. It is this particular relationship between the prosthetic and the body that interests me – why and how does this phenomenon of object integration happen? And how does this body/object interaction affect my identity?

Considering my own relationship with my prosthetic from a phenomenological consideration of the prosthetic within artistic representation, it seems pertinent to talk about Mullins’ relationship with her prosthetic as artists’ muse. In Mathew Barney’s *Cremaster Cycle 3* (2002), Mullins comes to represent an idealised other, symbolised by the variety of prosthetics that she wears, prosthetics that seem to envelop her identity within a certain fetishising articulation. By this, I refer to characters that she comes to represent through the narrative of her prosthetics – the “Cinderella” glass legs, and the “Cheetah” animal legs. Technological advances as well as aesthetic considerations forefront her role in Barney’s films, she becomes the putty with which the ideal (or un-ideal) woman is moulded. However, it appears

that the desire for the “perfect” woman’s legs is particularly a goal for Mullins, and not necessarily Barney, for it is Mullins herself who often talks about her “perfect” legs (prosthetic legs that resemble a Barbie doll’s, slim, smooth, and with perfect arches for high heeled shoes). For Mullins, it is participation through Barney’s films that allows a certain fulfilment of this goal however, in the process of wearing the “perfect” legs, she comes to embody the “perfect” legs and hence the “perfect” woman.

By becoming her prosthetic limbs, Mullins’ identity is so entwined with what they have come to represent: a mask behind which she can shield her “true” self. Mullins has stated that: “to be without prosthetic limbs is to be exposed, to be laid bare . . .”(Smith, 66). This reveals an interdependence between the prosthetic and herself: she gives her prosthetic limbs life and they provide her with protection against the aesthetic “differences” which her impairment creates. I believe that it is this rather complex relationship that is explored by Barney in the artistic representation of Mullins and her prosthetics.

In regards to Barney’s *Cremaster Cycle 3* (2002), Mullins’ characterisations are dominated by the identity of the prosthetics. Her prosthetics are “obvious,” but only in the way that they affect the mobility of her body. We first see Mullins in the role of “Cheetah Woman.” The camera pans her body, the large cheetah legs dominating the screen; Mullins’ movements seem difficult and stilted, even as she lies like a cheetah, gazing at Barney as he makes his way past her. This lack of motility as a “Cheetah woman,” directly contrasts with Mullins’ usual association with the term “Cheetah” (the legs that she uses for racing – and thus enabler of extreme physical movement, are called “Cheetah Legs”).

In her next *Cremaster Cycle 3* (2002) role, she walks on “glass legs,”



indicative of the fragile relationship between the body and the prosthetic.<sup>3</sup> She may be walking on “perfect legs,” however, again her movements are awkward and difficult; it looks as though at any moment her prosthesis will betray her, will cause her to fall and expose herself as what she really is. In this sense, whilst Mullins is “other” due to the prosthetics, she will doubly be revealed as “other” if the prosthetics are removed – with the prosthetics she can pretend to be “normal,” but she never will be. It is this fragility in the relationship between the body and the prosthetic that reveals the inherent and utterly intimate nature that is required in the body/object relationship. This intimate nature is particularly apparent in the amputee/prosthetic relationship, due to the symbiotic connection between the body and object. The object requires the body for it to become animated, the body requires the prosthetic to negotiate the space it moves through. This body/object relationship also questions Merleau-Ponty’s assertion about the “inclusive” nature of the body, and begs the question: how connected is Mullins to her prosthetic legs as part of her body schema?

This question can be answered with reference to the relationship encompassing the connection between consciousness and the body. To what extent are we aware of the body and the connection to inanimate objects that we attach to it? Mullins and Barney explore the extent of identity formation that involves the prosthetic, but in doing so also expose the technological advances made within the realm of prosthesis, which can ascertain a particular aesthetic, but prove uncomfortable in its locomotive action. However, to answer the previous question, one needs to consider the relationship between the prosthetic and the body as phenomena. One particular artist who subtly observes the phenomena of the body’s relationship with the object is Rebecca Horn, whose work encompasses a multi-media approach to understanding this interchange.

Horn's particular use and understanding of the prosthetic was brought about by her need to create bodily extensions that enabled her when severely limited by temporary physical disability. Therefore, the direction of her art practice became about the extension of the body, the perceived limitations of the body, and the ways in which the artist interprets this relationship. Horn's creation of bodily extensions continued to inform her work, even after her convalescence, as her understanding of her body came to reflect a more phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, as described in Pollio's *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life*, is "a relationship between people and their world, whether the world at that moment consists of other people, nature, time, one's own body, personal or philosophical idea, or whatever"(4-5). For Horn, her art practice defines and describes her experiences as she perceives the events; this is particularly evident in her earlier work, which included body sculptures and performance.

If Horn's works are essentially phenomenological in nature and thus reflect the perceptual relationship between the body and the mind, it would appear that her work also makes a comment on the fragility of the body and the mind. It is the phenomena of the mind and body as a whole entity that experiences the world through a subtle arrangement of sensation and perception that Horn presents via her interpretation of the prosthetic. Emotionally, her work reads of an alienation of the "self" into the "other," evident by the beautiful movements evoked by her body sculptures, particularly when performed. This is in contrast to Mullins, whose awkward movements via her "useful" prosthetics, seem to indicate the prosthetics' totality over the body. It is this difference of body/object integration that reflects either a fetishist experience of the prosthetic or the prosthetic representing the uncanny.<sup>4</sup> Mullins' prosthetics and their totality over her body certainly speak of a

highly controlling relationship with her identity, whilst Horn's prosthetics seamlessly merge with the body, emphasising the sensuality and unpredictability of the experience.

In this respect, the reaction to the prosthetic is also affected by its level of technological construction; Mullins' prosthetics are created with technological advances and materials, which presupposes an easier interaction and acceptance of such an object with the body. However, it has been suggested that for Mullins' legs to work properly she must maintain a certain level of momentum; she can never be "just still." With Horn's "bodysculptures," basic materials are used to create elegant, easily integrated, bodily extensions that speak more of "self" extending into object, than object extending onto "self." An example of this within Horn's work is her most well known "bodysculpture," and film, *Einhorn (Unicorn)* (1970-1972). This film represents a subtle relationship between the performer and the prosthetic (in this case a unicorn's horn, strapped delicately to the body by thin, soft white straps). This relationship reflects a seamless coming together of prosthetic object and the body. The viewer ceases to see the object and subject as "different" to each other, instead, the fantastical becomes the possible, the uncanny is revealed. Difference becomes the aesthetic outcome of the relationship, proving that that which is "uncanny," that which is truly strange, is most desired. Therefore, in creating such a relationship via prosthetics that fail to have any purpose outside of their intended artistic use, the body and the prosthetic become one, and the phenomenological nature of the relationship is complete.

As an artist whose concern is to comprehend the rather tenuous and loaded relationship between my body and my prosthetic, I must consider both representations of the prosthetic, as technological advance and artistic device. However, in doing so,

on a cultural and social level, the prosthetic must be talked about, acknowledged, and accepted as an experiential condition of understanding. What do I mean by this? Well, as stated in the opening paragraph, my prosthetic is a secret of myself – I experience it and therefore I must describe it, by whatever means suit. Just as Aimee Mullins has her own lived-experience with her prosthetics, she describes her experience via her sporting pursuits and involvement in Barneys' films. Nonetheless, it is this form of description that is called into question by two able-bodied interactions with prosthetics: Gillingham and Horn. I feel that Gillingham's rather blatant exposure of the prosthetic, rather like Mullins', reveals the process of prosthetic "take-over" of the body. Their images, unlike Horn's, represent a need to be known by the prosthetic, both technologically and aesthetically.

Through artistic prosthetic creation – without the absolute reliance on technological advances – Horn's interaction with the prosthetic, and hence, explanation of the prosthetic, seems more in line with my own understanding and experiences. It is this phenomenological approach to understanding of the world that I wish to apply to my own understanding of my prosthesis. As Sobchack implies, the prosthetic, for the wearer, only comes into consciousness when it is "pushed to the foreground," i.e., when I am faced with certain terrain or stairs, my manoeuvrability becomes limited by the prosthetic. However, for Mullins, where her identity is so engulfed by her prosthetic legs, there is no opportunity for them to be "pushed to the foreground," for they are always in the foreground, always visually exposed (Smith, 22-23).

As a technological advance, the prosthetic provides the wearer with a means of mobility, a means of "passing" through this world as something that they are not, and an aesthetic that conjures re-imaginings of the human body. However, people that

wear the prosthetic often become defined by it, their experience of the prosthetic is presumed. It is at this juncture that perhaps, as humans, we must consider a softer, subtler approach to understanding what the prosthetic has come to mean within a broader scope. It is possible to understand this broader meaning of the prosthetic as long as artists and academics continue to question its role with the body and the responses that it invokes from the observer – a question that imbues my own artistic and life practice.

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<sup>1</sup> This is based on an understanding of impairment and “aids” that remove the impairment or enable the impaired person to negotiate the world they are in, such as a blind man’s cane or a prosthetic limb – which relates to my own spatial experience and bodily integration of my prosthetic leg.

<sup>2</sup> These implications would involve other theories, including feminism, which are not mentioned within the article.

<sup>3</sup> This impression of Matthew Barney’s film *The Cremaster Cycle 3*, cannot be considered as a complete understanding of the work, as, due to the expanse of all of the films, I have only viewed portions of the entire work. I simply make this judgement and understanding of Mullins role in the films from what I have viewed.

<sup>4</sup> The online Cambridge Dictionary describe Fetish and uncanny as –  
Fetish (noun) 1. a sexual interest in an object or part of the body other than the sexual organs  
Uncanny (adjective). Strange or mysterious; difficult or impossible to explain  
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