

PROSTHETIC PERFORMANCES: Artistic Strategies, and Tactics for Everyday Life

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The prosthesis is an object filled with various values. In medical and rehabilitative discourses, prostheses are instruments that “fix” “dysfunctional” bodies. This article, instead, uses the disability studies perspective in which they are perceived as social, cultural and political actors. Their usage as well as rejection may be read as a political act and/or identity statement. This article analyses case studies of public acts of rejection of the prosthesis or the contrary – their excessive use. Prosthetic performances by individuals with disabilities drew the public’s attention to broader social problems, such as the “technological fix” of people who do not perceive themselves as broken and the inaccessibility of the public sphere and public spaces. As it turns out, prostheses have been used to challenge the very notion of “disability.”

Introduction

The study of the relationship between technology and society should be a study of technology in use, as British historian David Edgerton wrote.¹ Focusing on the laboratory origins or commercial fortunes of a technology or prioritising theoretical and historical perspectives in the study of technology can lead, as Walter Vincenti warned, to incomplete or even erroneous epistemology.² How technologies are abandoned, how devices deteriorate, what users do with them, and what meanings they ascribe them are all the more interesting the closer a technology comes to the body; prostheses are a particular example of such intimate technology.

The word ‘prosthesis’ is derived from the Greek πρόσθεσις. It indicates an addition or complement and was used originally to describe prelabialisation—the linguistic process of adding superfluous sounds at the beginning of a word. “Prosthesis” appeared in English in the mid-sixteenth century, retaining its original meaning; by the early eighteenth century, it had shifted into the domain of medicine, where the term came to describe the replacement of missing body parts with

1 Edgerton, “From Innovation to Use”, 112.

2 Vincenti, “Engineering Knowledge,” 17–18.

artificial replacements.³ Since then, the prosthesis has become an important element of the technological landscape, and in the twentieth century it propagated into the humanities, where it has made a dizzying career as a capacious metaphor for the relationship between man and technology. At the same time, it also became carrier of other concepts. It is the origin of ideas of prosthetic memory,⁴ prosthetic aesthetics,⁵ or prosthetic territories.⁶ Indeed, such extensive and metaphorical use of “prosthesis” has been the subject of criticism.⁷ Katherine Ott has argued, however, that one exhaustive definition of prosthesis is not possible, and the meanings inscribed in it depend on the discourse in which it appears.⁸ The first section of this article elaborates on the cultural construction of prosthesis (and assistive technology in general) through the user with disability, and simultaneously on the construction of a person as “disabled” through the prosthesis they use.

The prostheses, their design, and the specific solutions they offer reflect societal perceptions of disability and the values associated with it. At the same time, they also determine the role and nature of the presence of people with disabilities in social interactions. In the popular medical sense (referred to as the ‘medical model’ in disability studies⁹), disability is seen as an individual tragedy, a misfortune that the “affected” person and their family and friends have to “solve.” In this perspective, prostheses/assistive technologies (including hearing aids and captions) restore lost or absent body parts and/or their functions so that people with disabilities look and function analogously to the able-bodied, thus normalising them. Using prosthetics to “fix” disabled bodies is generally considered an obvious and unambiguous practice. It is worth examining however how prostheses/assistive technologies are used by people with disabilities themselves as forms of expression—individual and collective,

3 Jain, “The Prosthetic Imagination.”

4 Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*.

5 Smith and Morra, “Introduction.”

6 Driscoll and Brahm, *Prosthetic Territories*.

7 See e.g. Sobchack, “A Leg to Stand on.”

8 Ott, “Prosthetics”, 397.

9 In the Anglo-Saxon tradition of disability studies, medical and social models of disability are seen as distinct and in fact oppositional. The latter is based on the distinction between bodily impairment and social disability, that is, the set of barriers, prejudices, and stereotypes faced by those with such impairments (e.g., it is the lack of a ramp that prevents a wheelchair user from entering a building, not the fact that he or she cannot walk). Jan Grue, a Norwegian writer and researcher, pointed out that the medical model of disability is not recognised by those who use it—they do not see it as one of the many ways of thinking about disability. Grue postulates that we should not write about the medical “model” because this would maintain the illusion that it has something meaningful to offer the discourse on disability. (Grue, *Disability and Discourse Analysis*, 38.)

both in the realm of everyday life and in the arts—outside the rehabilitative and assistive realm. When prostheses are used beyond the modes of operation taken for granted, when they are rejected or become an element of excess, especially publicly, they become carriers of new meanings and evoke different values—such as empowerment and agency, pride and self-esteem, or tireless efforts for communication and understanding. This article explores the meanings and values that prostheses acquire as they become part of disability performance in which they are either rejected or, conversely, made hypervisible.

The main part of this article discusses four types of public performances in which prostheses were used by people with disabilities. It analyses the performances in which the prostheses were rejected by people with disabilities to (1) accelerate legislative change (as in the case of the so-called Capitol Crawl) or (2) to challenge the popular notion of a prosthesis that unquestionably improves the user's body (as performed in the case of Criptease). These analyses are preceded by argument placing the prosthesis within the concept of the gift culture in order to expose the transgressive and radical character of a public rejection of the prosthesis by its user. Then it discusses (3) the idea of excessive use of hearing prostheses as an everyday communicative strategy for deaf users. Finally, it examines (4) how deaf artists use the assistive character of writing (handwriting or words as subtitles on the television screen) to mediate a deaf communication experience.

When analysing these specific examples, this article concentrates on different aspects of each type of prosthetic performances and applies various analytical approaches. In the case of the Capitol Crawl, it concentrates on the visual side of this happening because it was precisely designed as media event. In relation to Criptease, the article looks at the performer's (auto)narratives. The everyday small-scale performances of deaf individuals in the third section are presented in an anecdotal manner, while the gallery-anchored deaf art discussed in section 4 is examined through a detailed description and author's analyses.

Through analyses of performances, this article argues that prostheses may be rejected or used extensively—on stage, in gallery, or in everyday life practices—as an expressive tool of communication. They thereby are used to challenge social norms regarding disability and the disabled body.

Social distinction through assistive technology

The relationship between technology and its disabled users is often circumscribed by the category “assistive technology.” Attempts to define this term reveal its fluid and circumstantial nature, which depends on the social categorisation of the user: whether they are considered persons with a disability.

Diane C. Smith argues that the term “assistive technology” is used to indicate

solutions that give freedom to those with disabilities by enabling them to function as independently as possible.¹⁰ “Assistive technologies” are viewed similarly by John C. De Witt,¹¹ who defines them as devices that enhance the ability of those with disabilities to perform everyday activities, actions, and tasks. In the US, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 defined “assistive devices” as “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off-the-shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a child with a disability.”¹² According to these definitions, the distinguishing feature of “assistive technology” is that it is used by a person with a disability. Yet individuals with disabilities are often recognised as such precisely because of the “assistive technologies” they use. There is thus a circle of social distinction and differentiation: technology is defined by the user, and the user is defined by the technology. “Assistive technologies” are often accompanied by the stigmatisation inherent in the social image of disability as an undesirable condition. Those with disabilities are seen as inferior, as not fully human, and therefore as incomplete citizens or adults. American psychologist and Deaf¹³ ally Harlane Lane did not hesitate to describe hearing prostheses as technological stigmas, a way of socially differentiating the Deaf; such prostheses express the fact that deafness is not accepted by hearing society.¹⁴

“Assistive technology” is therefore a context-dependent term. For example, it may be a speech synthesiser, an electronic organiser, or speech recognition software,¹⁵ but it may also be a voice recorder, an iPod,¹⁶ or software that suggests words and phrases when writing.¹⁷ Such devices are “assistive” when used by those with disabilities, yet for others they are “normal,” common and unassuming functions that are now often included in even the most basic smartphones.

It also happens that a technology or service that was originally “assistive,” so designed for those with disabilities, ultimately serves a more diverse group. An

10 Smith, “Assistive Technology”, 115.

11 De Witt, “The Role of Technology”, 317.

12 US Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, General Provisions, Sec. 602 Definitions.

13 Deaf with a capital ‘D’ is a cultural concept where the deafness is perceived not as a lack and problem to be fixed but the valuable element of cultural (and language) diversity, and due to that subject of appreciation and protection. Being Deaf means representing distinctive culture (Deaf Culture, Deaf World, Deaf Way...) and language (e.g. American Sign Language, Polish Sign Language). Some have criticized the concept of capital ‘D’ Deaf, e.g. Wrigley, *Politics of Deafness*, 54.

14 Lane, “Cochlear Implants”, 278.

15 Forgave, “Assistive Technology.”

16 Bouck et al., “Promoting Independence through Assistive Technology.”

17 Edyburn, “Rethinking Assistive Technology.”

excellent example of this is captions for the deaf, which, as a result of deaf advocacy and the fight for full cultural citizenship,¹⁸ have become standard in online audio-visual media. Who among us doesn't use subtitles when watching movies on Netflix or YouTube?¹⁹ Other examples include tactile strips which warn both the visually impaired and smartphone-wielding pedestrians that they are approaching a crossing. Similarly, lowered kerbs at pedestrian crossings, as well as ramps, lifts, and swinging or sliding doors installed next to revolving doors are used by just about everyone. While all these "facilities for disabled people" are useful for those in wheelchairs or on crutches, they also (and perhaps even more often) help the elderly and those travelling with a pram or a suitcase. However, a shift in our understanding of "user" often involves an uneven distribution of costs and benefits. Those with disabilities are still often perceived as a troublesome, costly, and needing "special solutions," despite the fact that these solutions also benefit those without disabilities. Such "facilities" are consistently marked with graphic icons depicting wheelchair users, or blind or deaf people. At the same time, the assistive origins of technologies that have become mainstream (such as touchscreens²⁰ and OCR technology²¹) are hazy at best, and we do not even know these conveniences were originally created for and often by those with disabilities.²²

The assistive nature of devices, instruments, or, more broadly, technologies is not innate, but is dependent on the socially constructed condition of their user. Disability and prostheses/assistive technologies are intertwined and connote each other in the social and cultural space.

A prosthesis to be thankful for

Before discussing individual and collective performances which main element was the public rejection of prostheses, this section will elaborate on the concept of the

18 Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship in San Jose, California"; Ong, "Cultural citizenship as subject-making."

19 As Katie Ellis points out, it is hearing users who have created a whole new market for subtitles on the web and who are pushing content providers (such as YouTube and Netflix) to provide better subtitles. (Ellis, *Disability and Digital Television Cultures*.)

20 Mazzucato, *Entrepreneurial State*; Liz Jackson, "We Are the Original Lifehackers," *New York Times*, 30 May 2018.

21 Bodine, *Assistive Technology and Science*, 133.

22 Activists are trying to reclaim the concept of inventiveness for disabled innovators and to rescue disability from a dead end, devoid of agency, an inspiration for 'real' designers and inventors: Jackson, "We Are the Original Lifehackers." Noteworthy initiatives include The Disabled List, a group of disabled activists who promote disability-based design. In addition to its PR activities, the organisation curates a list of disabled designers who can assist in designing universal, non-discriminatory objects.

prosthesis as a gift and the obligation to use it, both of which are involved in the act of providing a prosthesis. Reimbursed by state insurance schemes, prostheses and therapies function as gifts which society is obliged to provide, just as their recipients are obliged to accept them. When we examine them more closely, such obligations are quite complex and multi-faceted. The following will highlight two issues.

The first is the state's commitment to wounded veterans, which has provided an exceptional impetus for modern prosthetics and rehabilitation. Since the American Civil War, when medical advances and the development of the railways meant that wounded soldiers more often received medical assistance and survived it, thus the number of young men who have had limbs amputated or have lost their sight or hearing has increased exponentially. Caring for veterans and trying to restore them to their pre-war, able-bodied state was, and still is, a sort of moral obligation of the society in whose defence those veterans lost their able-bodiedness. At the same time, however, rehabilitation and prosthetics were an attempt to return disabled veterans to the workforce, while both free-market capitalism and communism alike saw work itself in rehabilitative terms.²³ Both understood work in moral terms as representing the value of man. After the devastation of war, economies needed many hands to work, and such work was considered a patriotic duty and an expression of responsibility for the common good. As Sławomir Łotysz writes, "the rebuilding country needed hands to work, even artificial ones."²⁴

The second issue is the ethical commitment to prevent suffering. Susan Sontag points this out in her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*,²⁵ indicating that such obligation demands a decisive response, that is, attempting to prevent or reduce suffering. These attempts often take the form of choosing what is deemed the lesser evil. In the dominant medical model, disability is perceived precisely as suffering; as such, it demands intervention, even if it is costly, troublesome, or painful for the object of care—the person with a disability is turned into a patient. After all, any effort to normalise disability is justified if we regard disability as an undesirable condition that clearly brings suffering.

However, the moral obligation applies not only to those who help and "fix" disabled people, but also to the users of prostheses or rehabilitation services. This is the obligation to accept help and care, to submit to it, and to be grateful for it—

23 In socialist countries, an institution which exploited the concept that work was therapeutic developed: the "sheltered workshop" was one in which people officially recognized as disabled performed very low-paid work. Teodor Mladenov points out that this system kept people with disabilities in poverty and resulted from the perception that for them, work was a form of socialisation and therapy rather than a source of livelihood. (Mladenov, *Disability and Postsocialism*.)

24 Łotysz, "Penicylina i protezy," 128.

25 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

after all, the whole society contributes to it, and when it comes to medicine and biotechnology, that contribution is not insignificant. The social and cultural reflection on “assistive technologies” perceives them as over-engineered and exceptionally costly, and therefore virtually unavailable outside of public reimbursement systems. Examples include cochlear implants for the deaf and (still experimental) exoskeletons for those who cannot walk unassisted. Beyond being state-of-the-art and therefore exceptionally expensive, both prostheses offer unrealistic promises: implants cannot actually restore hearing and exoskeletons cannot actually make paralysed people walk. Despite the promised “miracles of modern medicine,” neither the *hearing* nor the *walking* these prostheses enable come even close to those experienced by the able-bodied.²⁶ With these prosthetic technology solutions, hearing and able-bodied engineers seek to provide deaf and disabled people with a way to experience reality in a normalised way—by hearing and walking.

While undoubtedly capable of fulfilling the desires of many people and their families, advanced prostheses raise serious questions. The combination of technology, medicine, and the state places their users in a complex system of supervision: as patients they are monitored by medical institutions (in the broad sense of the term), as a health care recipients they are monitored by the state, and as a technology users they are caught up in a system of necessary and inevitable upgrades. Moreover access to expensive medical equipment and to health care in general is determined by social status, which translates for example into the financial resources allowing the patient to pursue a diagnosis (including travel to medical centres). This makes advanced prostheses and therapies more readily available in Global North countries and, within them, to privileged groups.²⁷

If the purpose of prosthetics is to abolish differences, to restore productivity, and to enable users to participate in the workforce, the refusal to use prosthetics may be interpreted as a refusal to make the effort to be useful. Such a refusal would seem irrational, so the reasons for not using prostheses are most often attributed to their defective design, to users’ difficulties in accepting their condition, and to the shame that prostheses evoke as a visible signal of disability. These motivations are therefore read, like disability itself, through the prism of medical pathology, as a

26 More on user experiences of these prostheses: Chorost, *Rebuilt*; Romoff, *Hear Again*; Miryang Kang, “Exoskeletons and the Imperative of ‘Normal’ Walking: A Recent History of Technology, Mobility and Disability,” International Committee for the History of Technology’s 46th Symposium, Katowice, 22–27 July 2019.

27 Data on cochlear implantation in the United States indicate that children of Caucasian and Asian descent are five times more likely to receive implants than those of Hispanic origin and ten times more often than African-Americans. Unsurprisingly, the use of prostheses is also reflected in socio-economic geography: children who are implant recipients are more likely to live in areas with above-average income than those with hearing aids, which are cheaper and more accessible. (Stern et al., “Recent epidemiology.”)

defect of the users' individual bodies, minds, and emotions, and not as the result of systemic issues, or still less as an expression of a voluntary decision. By examining public performances in which those with disabilities reject prostheses we can come to understand prostheses differently than as medical equipment that rehabilitates and normalises disabled people. As the following two sections show, such rejections are tools for critical reflection on the position of people with disabilities, as in the case of Capitol Crawl, or for affirmation of the disabled body and experience, as in the case of Criptease.

Rejecting the prosthesis to accelerate legislative change: Capitol Crawl

During the Capitol Crawl, a public event, activists with disabilities performed a collective crawl up the US Capitol stairs, fully aware that this act would draw media attention as well as notice among the general public. The participants emphasized the visibility of their disabilities by the rejection of prostheses and assistive objects. The disability movements which developed in Britain and the United States since the 1970s have exploited the visibility of people with disabilities by taking power over the glances and stares which they were surreptitiously or directly subjected to. Like other social groups fighting for representation and equal rights, people with disabilities have employed actions in the public space which are visible and difficult to ignore, such as sit-ins and protest marches. The Capitol Crawl was one of the most interesting and perhaps best-known episodes of the persistent, visible presence of disability in the urban space (which is the scene of the struggle for representation and rights).

On 12 March 1990, disabled activists gathered at the Capitol to express their opposition to discrimination and lack of access to media and means of communication, and to demand the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which included regulations to make the public sphere more accessible to those with disabilities. At the foot of the Capitol steps, the participants abandoned their wheelchairs (which could not climb the stairs), threw down their crutches (which would only have made the climb more difficult), and, moving their bodies with their non-normative motor skills, began the arduous ascent, crawling, wobbling, or climbing on all fours. They did it under the watchful cameras of journalists and reporters, among them was Tom Olin, who documented this and other disability protests for a disability rights magazine. His photographs served the disability community rather than the general public, providing documentation and visual proof of the "DC Action . . . Success."²⁸ Till this day archive of his photos serve as a valuable source on American disability activism.

28 "DC Action a Huge success," *Incitement* 6, no. 1 (1990): 3-4, 3.



Figures 1 and 2. Capitol Crawl Photos. (Source: Tom Olin Collection, MSS-294. Courtesy of Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections, The University of Toledo Libraries.)

The Capitol Crawl furthered the tradition of occupying a symbolic place, a kind of synecdoche of the order to which the protesters objected. For those with disabilities fighting for equal rights, the Capitol was the perfect stage: they used this instantly recognisable symbol of American law and legislative order and the values that shine through it—with equality for all citizens at the forefront. The temporary occupation of this meaningful place was a reference to a familiar repertoire of protest tactics; the unique yet shocking *modus operandi* was the abandonment of prostheses in order to overcome the physical barrier that made it difficult for people with disabilities to present their arguments.

The rejection of prostheses by the protesters revealed the Capitol steps as an architectural barrier, as a design feature that disables some citizens and impedes their access to the heart of American statehood. The stairs were a sign—indeed an emblematic example—that legislative changes requiring buildings, means of communication, and media to be accessible to disabled citizens were in fact necessary. They became more than just a sign of architectural inequality and inaccessibility. In *Academic Ableism*, Jay T. Dolmage examines the role of steep steps in the iconography and imagery of the university as an institution for the fittest, based on improvement and competition—a place for strong and capable bodies and

minds, but also for the representatives of privileged backgrounds. Steep staircases are a sign of elitism, which is based on exclusion. Revealing the Capitol stairs as a boundary, against which those with disabilities may seem helpless, exposed the systemically designed inferiority of disabled citizens in law-making.²⁹

The decisive factor in the crawl was the transgressive character of the images of the protesters' movement, unassisted by technology. Mobility disabilities are framed by the relatively familiar and recognisable conventions of using a wheelchair or walking with crutches or a cane. However, adults crawling and moving on all fours is avoided in urban public spaces. Protesters bolstered their case by putting uncommon, non-normative movement practices on public display. Without their prostheses and assistive technologies, the protestors seemed vulnerable and fragile, yet they showed their doggedness and determination in getting the top of the stairs and indeed fighting for themselves. Film and pictures of the event show that those crawling up the Capitol steps were supported by their loved ones: they accompanied them, cheered them on and gave them water. It was reminiscent of the television coverage of a race, a sporting event revolving around the struggle with one's body and its (always ultimately transcended) limitations.

In other protests, disabled protestors consciously used their prostheses to make themselves known in the public space, for example by using their wheelchairs to block busses not adapted for their use and by organising "marches" in which they raised banners and shouted slogans. The Capitol Crawl, however, was a different form of protest. Its participants exposed not so much the prosthetics themselves, but the voluntary and conscious abandonment of them. This drew public attention not only to their physical condition, but above all to their social and cultural condition. In this case, the rejection of the prostheses/"assistive technologies" was an element of a collective effort to force a legislative and social change, and an act of disabled people fighting for their rights.

Rejecting prosthesis to challenge the notion of improving user's body: Criptease

The act of rejecting prostheses, or rather stripping himself of them, is the core element of Criptease, performed by Mat Fraser, a British actor, activist, musician, and dancer who has challenged popular notions of disability in his other projects as well. Fraser is among those with birth defects resulting from the use of Thalidomide by his mother in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the drug was prescribed to pregnant women for morning sickness. It irreversibly damaged fetuses, causing mutations. In Fraser's case, the mutations manifested as phocomelia: shortened arms

29 Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 59–60. For more on the Capitol Crawl: Hamraie, *Building Access*; Davis, *Enabling Acts*.

and deformed hands. As an artist and performer, he willingly and creatively uses various visual and discursive conventions not only to express himself, but also to challenge popular notions of non-normative corporeality. In his diverse oeuvre, within the context of rejecting prostheses, two projects are of particular note: the difficult to classify performance *Cabinet of Curiosities: How Disability was Kept in a Box* and the burlesque *Criptease*.

The former combines various types of expression, from recitation with accompaniment, to testimony, to rapping, to classical, scholarly reading. *Cabinet of Curiosities* was the culmination of a two-year project funded by the Wellcome Trust and conducted by British and American research institutions, which provided Fraser with access to archives, documents, and artefacts relating to disability, often prostheses themselves. As Fraser notes, these objects, like those with disabilities, were a subject of study for science, a problem for medicine to solve. Disabled people rarely disposed of the images of their bodies, and medical reports and artefacts were not accompanied by the narratives of those to whom they related. Fraser aimed to combine the sources collected in the archives with a story told from a different point of view: that of a disabled researcher, activist, and artist.

His narrative was oriented towards the objects he accessed. These included a corset with attached prosthetic legs and arms, which was supposed to improve Terry Wiles' Thalidomide-altered body. The small yet very complex prosthesis was intended for the young Wiles, whose arms and legs had not developed properly. Fraser shows archival footage of tests of the prosthesis with little Terry inside—a silent medical documentary complemented by memories of the now-adult Wiles: “That was pretty weird . . . when I was on the legs [in the prosthesis] I was hanging in mid-air. It was a really disorientating feeling for a kid, it's really scary. And then I had these arms on as well and they were really heavy . . . so I felt like . . . really unwieldy, really, really, really unsafe. And I felt like my personality and my whole thing had been changed by these arms and legs. And I felt like ‘Why am I wearing these? . . . It's a shit. It's crazy.’ Yea, it was stupid . . . and dangerous . . . I hated wearing them, but it was kind of like I was an invisible person . . . Nobody would listen.”³⁰

Fraser's neo-burlesque show *Criptease* in London in 2012 can be understood in a similar vein. The name of the event was a portmanteau of the words *cripple* and *striptease*. In keeping with convention, Fraser stripped off his clothes to the sound of music, seducing the enthusiastic audience with a repertoire of striptease gestures, glances, and poses familiar in popular culture. He took off his shoes and tossed them away, shimmying his shoulders dynamically, shook off his jacket, and jumped up and down to get his trousers off; the audience saw his body dressed in a shiny thong

30 Mat Fraser, “Cabinet of Curiosities: How Disability Was Kept in a Box,” Museum Association Conference and Exhibition, 7 January 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49gXhrmmj9M>.

and a white shirt with short sleeves, exposing his prosthetic arms. Their presence, however, did not surprise the audience—they were given away by stiffness and unnatural movements that did not match the nimble and dynamic body of the artist. The prosthetics dangled inertly, and Fraser, rocking them back and forth, threw them around his neck to demonstrate just how much they contrasted with the limber body they were supposed to improve.

On stage, in the dance, the prosthetics proved unnecessary and stupid, just as Wiles said. They did not support their user; on the contrary, they obstructed him and slowed him down. So, Fraser stripped himself of them and discarded them, freeing his hands. He showed a body devoid of ballast, altered by Thalidomide, but able in the full sense of the word. He kissed and licked his hands in a gesture familiar from the striptease repertoire, while adding new, affirmative meanings to the disabled body. The torpid prostheses gave the performer virtually no agency in the dance; they could only sway when set in motion by the performer's body, but his hands, freed from them, regained control—he unbuttoned shirt and performed the classic elements of a burlesque show, such as rubbing his nipples with his thumbs.³¹ Freed from the prosthetics, the artist's body was not only able to function freely (move, dress, and undress), it was also fit and athletic, and via the context and convention in which it appeared, Fraser emphasised that the body he proudly displayed was also sexual and could arouse desire. In contrast to the Capitol Crawl, Crip-tease was a one-performer event. The act of rejecting the prosthesis was the same, but whereas in Washington, DC participants were exposing their vulnerability, Fraser proved that his body stripped off prostheses was in some ways more 'able' than when burdened with them.

Prosthetic visual excess to improve communication: Bold hearing aids

The subjects of this section, in contrast to the Capitol Crawl and Crip-tease, are the prosthetic performances of a completely different scale: everyday micro-actions undertaken by people with disabilities—deaf people to be exact. Some individuals choose to use hearing prostheses to technologically mediate their condition in order to navigate social relations more easily.

Historically, prostheses used to be a subject of visual excess as luxurious and/or prestigious goods. Objects such as wheel chairs, glasses, canes, or hearing aids have been used as objects of "conspicuous consumption".³² They proved the high social

31 Brownie, *Acts of Undressing*, 37–38.

32 Wheel chairs: Guffey, *Designing Disability*, 22–30; Canes: Pullin, *Design Meets Disability*; hearing aids: Zdrodowska, *Telefon, kino i cyborgi*; "conspicuous consumption" is a notion from Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

and economic status of those who could afford them and presented users as fashionable and sophisticated consumers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³³ The members of polite society (or aspiring to it) used to flaunt their prostheses to express technophilia—distinctive for their social class.³⁴ In his essay “Disability as Masquerade,”³⁵ Tobin Siebers discusses the various strategies employed by people with disabilities to play up their disabilities in order to make their everyday lives easier. The researcher refers to these strategies as a “masquerade,” which he understands as an “alternative method of managing social stigma through disguise, one relying not on the imitation of a dominant social role but on the assumption of an identity marked as stigmatized, marginal, or inferior.”³⁶ As such, a masquerade could achieve its goals by both *rejecting* prostheses in order to highlight disability and *using* extensive prostheses to reveal disability.

In the public space, prostheses can also exhibit the user’s disability to their advantage, activating socialised and commodified behaviours that support disabled people in their daily lives. The white cane of a blind person may trigger associations with being lost, with slow movement, or with the presence of a service animal, and may activate socially sanctioned behaviours such as patience, forbearance, and willingness to help.³⁷ Visually signalling disability by using a prosthesis is one of the coping mechanisms employed by the disabled in their everyday interactions. Brookes writes: “Assistive devices become a signal because the sight of a person using assistive technology sends a message that this is not an ordinary person and that one needs to behave differently around this person.”³⁸ Siebers recalls the declaration of a person who, although they do not have to use a wheelchair every day, does so when travelling by air, wanting to avoid unpleasant situations where travellers are expected to be very agile and quick, and where the lack of these qualities may cause impatience and anger among fellow passengers. The prosthesis may represent a means of preventing human “micro-aggressions” incorporated into what Derald Wing Sue calls “functional survival skills.”³⁹

33 Turner and Withey, “Technologies of the Body.”

34 Esser, “Re-assembling the Victorians.”

35 Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade.”

36 Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade”, 5.

37 Testimonies from the blind indicate that their condition and their white cane trigger behaviours of assistance and intimacy that can cause frustration and even fear, as they often result in the arbitrary shortening of physical distance.

38 Brookes and Brookes, “Models for understanding”, 4.

39 Cited in Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. Based on ethnographic research, Dokumaci describes the experiences of those with disabilities in the urban environment and how they use their bodies, though I assume that prostheses may successfully become part of the strategies she describes.

In describing the masquerading of disability, Siebers also mentions those whose condition is not revealed at first contact either through their behaviour, their appearance, or the technologies they use. Deafness is an example of such a condition. If someone does not realise that they are speaking to a deaf person because that person does not use hearing aids or because the hearing aids they use are not visible (which was and remains the ideal and the goal in the development of hearing prostheses), they may perceive the deaf person as strange, rude, or intellectually disabled. The deaf and hard of hearing cannot answer questions they do not hear, and they do not engage in small talk—they are often unaware that someone has initiated it. Seeing no prosthesis, people react to such behaviour with nervousness, irritation, or amusement. Joseph Grigely, a deaf artist, wrote in reference to such situations: “Perhaps I need a hearing aid, not a flesh-coloured one but a red one ... a signifier that ceremoniously announces itself.”⁴⁰ Rather than a prosthesis hidden in embarrassment, a hearing aid could become an instrument that facilitates social interaction not via its functionality but via its visibility, which warns others of the user’s condition and triggers friendly behaviours of social interaction. This is how Dorothy Eugenie Brett (1883–1977), a deaf British painter and member of the Bloomsbury group, used her hearing aid (which she repaired herself many times over the years). Medical historian Jaipreet Viridi points out that for the artist, the prosthesis—which Viridi calls an “object of disability”—embodied a demand for recognition of Brett’s identity as a deaf woman. Brett wrote about herself that she was “invisibly crippled,” that people felt uncomfortable around her because she looked at them too closely (lip-reading), that she interfered in conversations, and seemed nosy. All this was out of keeping with her social status and resulted from her deafness. Her ostentatiously large, boldly exposed “ear machines” made her deafness visible. Viridi stresses that using a large trumpet (and later a hearing aid) and giving them names was not so much an expression of Brett’s eccentricity, as biographers claim, but evidence of her accepting herself as a deaf person and forcing others to acknowledge this fact and take it into account when interacting with her.⁴¹

Opposition to hearing technologies is, as Rebecca A.R. Edwards has pointed out,⁴² part of a deaf tradition of contesting medical technologies seen as means of repairing and normalising the deaf and forcing an oral mode of communication, thus both Grigely’s consideration of a red hearing aid and Brett’s practice of using hearing aids may be considered excessive. The visual excess lies in abundance and

40 Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade”, 6.

41 Jaipreet Viridi, *Synchromist Sensibilities: Intersecting Histories of Disability, Art, and Technology*, presentation at the BSHS Global Digital History of Science Festival, 6 to 10 July 2020.

42 Edwards, “Sound and Fury”, 894.

exceeding what is socially desirable. In this sense, it is a violation of social rules, a disruption of the order and the accepted strategies of action; to this extent, it is a political strategy of resistance.⁴³ The above examples of the excessive use of hearing aids go against the tradition of designing them to be as small and invisible as possible. Excessive use of boldly visible hearing aids may be interpreted as extravaganza or self-creation of one's artistic persona, however, as the above examples indicate, it may also be an element of deaf people's self-management in a world defined by oral communication. They facilitate their interactions with not only the sonic qualities of their hearing prostheses but also their visibility.

Exhibiting the deaf experience: Assistive technologies in art gallery

There are many examples of prostheses being used as artistic material. This section will not cite examples of artistic activities in which those with disabilities use prostheses as a natural part of their bodily practice, such as the dance performances of Scottish dancer and choreographer Claire Cunningham. The artist moves about on crutches and has, as it were, incorporated them into her artistic practice of movement on stage. This section focuses instead on examples in which artists with disabilities make their prostheses an element of their artistic activities and a means of expression.

For the deaf, everyday communication often includes writing; when interacting with hearing people. They will often reach for a piece of paper and pen to use writing or a drawing to support a conversation with someone who does not know sign language. The aforementioned Joseph Grigely uses this phenomenon in his project *Conversations with the Hearing* running since 1994. He has collected evidence writing and drawing being integral elements of his communication with the hearing — scraps of paper, napkins, and tickets. In his exhibits, the artist juxtaposes them such that they begin to form relationships, to create new stories and tales. The exhibits also serve as a record of the great need for interpersonal contact and understanding and reflect the specificity of the deaf experience in the hearing world. The artist first exhibited the collection of notes where his erstwhile encounters took place, in their natural environment, in cafes and restaurants, to which Grigely's installations imparted an archaeological account of long-lost conversations. In 2000, Grigely turned two and a half thousand notes into the installation *White Noise*, which was exhibited at New York's Whitney Gallery. He covered an oval-shaped room with them from floor to ceiling, and both the accumulation of the notes and their abstraction from their original context made the installation a universal commentary

43 The poetics of visual excess is an element of queer theory (e.g., Musser, *Sensual Excess*; Schmidt, *Poetics of Waste*).

on both efforts to reach understanding and the difficulties in doing so.⁴⁴ Indeed, pen and paper are used when other forms of communication fail.

Christine Sun Kim, another deaf artist, has offered a critical reflection on the subject of media communication mediated through subtitles in her sound-art project, *Close Readings*,⁴⁵ which is anchored in her own experience. She mentions that the subtitles for the film *Kumiko* (Zellner, 2014) were so extensive that she actually read the film, rather than watching it.⁴⁶ The subtitles went so far as to describe sounds such as the patter of raindrops hitting windowpanes and the scratching or a pen writing on paper. The artist emphasises that her understanding of the film and her impressions of it depend on the individuals writing the subtitles—that is, on which sounds they consider important enough to record in written form. Will the background music be described with the word ‘music’, or will it allow her, as an audience member, to feel the anxiety that an unsettling musical theme impends? Will the subtitles reveal if a character speaks with an accent, or perhaps has a particularly squeaky voice? Subtitles define the ‘auditory’ experience of the deaf viewer, as do sign language interpreters, who also select the utterances that they deem relevant to the situation—for example, when interpreting a lecture, they would ignore any comments whispered between students.

Close Readings problematises subtitles as a cultural text using particular films. For the exhibition, Sun Kim asked deaf people to subtitle fragments of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968) and Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (Musker and Clements, 1989). In Stanley Kubrick’s work, the soundtrack plays a significant role and is inseparable from long shots of outer space, devoid of any dialogue (which would be much easier to convey using subtitles). Film scholars emphasise the role of music in *2001: A Space Odyssey*: Howard Suber characterises Kubrick’s work as musical rather than dramatic,⁴⁷ William Whittington points out that the musical pieces in the film do not so much fulfil an illustrative function as provide a “deep structure to the narrative and its speculative aspects”⁴⁸ and Vivian Sobchack argues that the director

44 Margaret Sundell, “Joseph Grigely’s Art of Conversation,” accessed 29 December 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/182450498479506/photos/artforumjoseph-grigelys-art-of-conversationdeaf-since-the-age-of-ten-joseph-grig/1139464002778146/>.

45 The work was exhibited at Carroll Fletcher Gallery in London (November 2015–January 2016) and at Zero + Futurdome Gallery in Milan (April–May 2016). This is the first video work in the artist’s oeuvre.

46 Jeppe Ugelvig, *Sonic Identity Politics with Christine Sun Kim*, dis (blog), 20 January 2016, <http://dismagazine.com/blog/80643/sonic-identity-politics-with-christine-sun-kim/>.

47 After: Whittington, *Sound Design and Science Fiction*, 39.

48 Whittington, *Sound Design and Science Fiction*, 39.

made music a phenomenon that actively creates and destroys cinematic visuality.⁴⁹ In the light of these analyses, Sun Kim's choice to use *2001: A Space Odyssey* specifically may seem rather daring. *The Little Mermaid* was also a significant choice, though rather in terms of its message: the protagonist gives up her voice—something deaf people are so often deprived of—because she wants legs so that she can live among people with her beloved. When understood from the perspective of the Deaf community, the film gains new critical potential.

For the exhibition, Christine Sun Kim asked four deaf people to produce their own subtitles for film extracts that she chose. This resulted in inscriptions that “range from literal to conceptual, imagined or even poetic.”⁵⁰ The famous shots of the spacecraft moving through pitch-black space are accompanied by “overly pretentious piano music that evokes absolutely nothing”⁵¹ or “frenetic silence,” while the iconic red eye of artificial intelligence is described as “the sound of a light that never flickers.”⁵² Though the deaf subtitles can sometimes be ironic and demystify the atmosphere of the scene, they also happen to fit perfectly into the atmosphere of the film, providing a unique, poetic interpretation of the visual layer.

In preparing the video installation, Sun Kim deliberately blurred the image on part of the screen, limiting the visual stimuli that define the film medium, although a trained eye, or at least one that is familiar with these particular films, could recognise individual scenes. Only the lower part of the screens displaying the captioned passages was clear and sharp. In so doing, she focused the viewer's attention on the subtitles, but it is hard to escape the interpretation that this was also intended to reflect the way in which a deaf viewer interacts with a captioned film or television programme—particularly if they are not fluent in verbal language. Their attention and interpretative effort are focused on the word projected on the screen, to which the image seems to be only a pretext or an addition.

Both artists, Grigley and Sun Kim, try to show how the deaf experience is embedded in writing. The frame of the modern art gallery encourages viewers to read a more universal message from these artists' works on the nature of the relations between the deaf and the hearing.

49 Sobchack, *Screening Space*, 212–3.

50 Carol Fletcher, “Christine Sun Kim: Rustle Tustle,” London Korean Links, 3 December 2017, <https://londonkoreanlinks.net/2015/11/26/exhibition-news-christine-sun-kim-rustle-tustle-at-carroll-fletcher/>.

51 Tessa Solomon, “Smithsonian American Art Museum Acquires Its First Sound Installation,” ARTnews, 18 September 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/smithsonian-american-art-museum-acquires-christine-sun-kim-works-1234570931/>.

52 Emily Watlington, “Christine Sun Kim and the Deaf Artists Claiming Sound as Their Subject,” Manchester International Festival, 7 May 2001, <https://mif.co.uk/news/christine-sun-kim-deaf-artists-work-about-sound-captioning/>.

Conclusion

Public performances in which people with disabilities use prostheses or assistive technologies, either rejecting them, exposing or exhibiting them, seem to be transgressive in the context of the tradition of designing these objects as unobtrusive, imitating a human body's colour and texture. The enormous effort put by United States president Franklin D. Roosevelt, his family, and the administration into concealing the fact that he used a wheelchair⁵³ was, in fact—as in the case of other people hiding their prostheses—an attempt to avoid the social stigma of disability. The “prosthetic performances” analysed in this article transgress the pathologizing notion of disability as a source of suffering and ground for pity. Performers who reject prostheses use the hypervisibility of their disabled bodies to take over agency from their spectators. The public rejection of the prosthesis is a significant act of revealing the crip body and confronting the viewer with its limitations, but also abilities and capacity, as in the cases of Capitol Crawl and Crip tease. Similarly, exposing assistive technology—a sign of wealth and prestige in times when these instruments were not provided by the state—may be used in contemporary times to deliberately manage social interactions and other people's behaviour. By transgressing the tradition of hiding disability under prostheses on stage, in the gallery and in everyday life, the performers described in this text reveal their disability and regain power over their bodies and the representation thereof. Abandoning prostheses or placing them on public display, however different in their form and purpose, may be an expression of acceptance or even affirmation of disability, and may also be an identity statement or a political declaration. It thus goes far beyond the medical and rehabilitative discourse associated with repairing and normalising disabled bodies and the concept of disability as a problem to be solved, as suffering to be relieved.

Biography

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53 Gallagher, *FDR's Splendid Deception*.

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