

# The (Narrative) Prosthesis Re-Fitted

## Finding New Support for Embodied and Imagined Differences in Contemporary Art

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This article undertakes analyses of the contemporary American artists Robert Gober and Cindy Sherman to argue that they use the tropes of the obscene, abject, and traumatic—as discussed by Hal Foster—to make literal and metaphorical reference to David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s narrative prosthesis and its “truth,” while simultaneously leaving out the lived experience of disability. Consideration is given to the works of artists Carmen Papalia and Mike Parr, who use complex embodiment as a new methodology to signify empowerment and agency over what we might previously have considered the obscene, abject, or traumatic. They transform traditional understandings of the “prosthetic” within the specific rhetoric of disability.

### Introduction

Why is it so de rigueur for contemporary artists to use disabled embodiment as a means to convey troubled emotional states, as a narrative and literal prosthesis? *Narrative prosthesis* is a term originally developed by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, where the disabled body is often inserted into literary, or in this case, visual narratives as a metaphorical opportunity. The disabled body or character is used as a type of crutch or supporting device that allows the narrative to take a turn or a new direction, but often the relationship between the story itself and the disabled body is one based on exploitation. “Through the corporeal metaphor,” Mitchell and Snyder articulate, “the disabled or otherwise different body may easily become a stand-in for more abstract notions of the human condition, as universal or nationally specific; thus the textual (disembodied) project depends upon—and takes advantage of—the materiality of the body” (50). Unfortunately, the disabled body typically becomes a stand-in for reductive notions of the universal or normal human condition—the disabled body as the failing, deviant, and wrong member of mainstream society. Mitchell and Snyder also offer an affirmative face to the theory, which outlines that the narrative prosthesis, or the prosthetic function,

seeks to “undo the quick repair of disability in mainstream representations and beliefs” (8). I seek to use both these reductive and affirmative characteristics, providing examples in contemporary art where the narrative prosthesis is rendered in problematic ways, while simultaneously accomplishing how faulty and imperfect the prosthetic function and the narrative prosthesis actually are.

Many contemporary artists frequently conflate the uncanny with the freak, which most often summons images of disability, and their usage of the narrative prosthesis is prolific, which means the rendering of disabled corporeality is extraordinarily limited. Indeed, Mitchell and Snyder state that the characterization of disability results in enduring, contrived portraits, often depicted in contemporary art (9). Mainstream art history has typically turned to using tropes like the obscene, abject, traumatic, or the freak of nature, as discussed by art historian Hal Foster, rarely mentioning the connection of their emotional and physical forms to “disability” and how these forms might interfere with or form relation to disabled embodiment and affect.<sup>1</sup> So while disability is a common feature of narrative and aesthetic characterization, a critical disability discourse is rarely mentioned in direct connection with such narratives. Disability is misplaced in the conversation around the abject, so I seek to confront more explicitly the silence around its associations in contemporary art. I move beyond binaries of normal/abnormal and the well-known lineage of “freak” or “enfreaked” representation in canonical art history and popular culture, to explore why certain types of “affect” are represented in forms considered marginal, troubled, and traumatized but also have aesthetic and stereotypical associations with disability without mention. I undertake analyses of the work of contemporary American artists Cindy Sherman and Robert Gober to argue that they use the tropes of the abject, traumatic, and obscene to make literal and metaphorical reference to the prosthesis and its “truth,” while simultaneously leaving out the lived experience of disability. Within the specific context of the prosthesis then, and how it is metaphorically used within mainstream contemporary art, the concept remains, ironically, at arm’s length.

I offer the works of two artists, Carmen Papalia and Mike Parr, who use complex embodiment to signify empowerment and agency over what we might previously have considered the obscene, abject or traumatic. They transform traditional understandings of the actual “prosthetic” object *within the specific rhetoric of disability*. I offer work by these artists that transcends the abject or traumatic to consider how the prosthesis can become a more complex

1. The words *abject*, *traumatic*, and *obscene* are inspired by Foster’s essay title.

embodiment in the hands of both non-disabled and disabled artists. I discuss their work within the discourse of disability studies as I attempt to bridge the gap between mainstream art historical discourse and disability studies to highlight the generative intersections that occur. I maintain that re-fitting the prosthesis with new metaphors by conflating disability studies with contemporary art will enable us to ask new questions, as Katherine Ott puts it, about “the body’s limits, boundaries and essence as well as the body’s authenticity and agency” (31).

While on the surface it might appear to be easy to critique work by Sherman and Gober from a disability justice position, and argue that their work is reductive toward disabled people and disabled artists, I ultimately suggest that the problem with representations and metaphors of disabled embodiment, such as the prosthesis, is not in the representations themselves but in the framing of disability in our culture, in line with the thinking of Ann Millett-Gallant, disability studies scholar and art historian (18). Social constructions and perceptions of disability reveal and create limited thinking steeped in centuries of oppression toward this minority. In our acts of viewing and interpreting works of art, both historical and contemporary (of which work by Gober and Sherman are no exception) reductive assumptions and stereotypes about disability are deeply entrenched.

Change and progress must be made within such ideological thinking and misperceptions, and visual culture is part of the process of challenging these misconceptions. Millett-Gallant suggests that it is important to find complexity, nuance, and slippage in signification—that a work of art and an interpretation of it is both potentially degrading and liberating (18). In other words, we must seek to add more dimensions and layers of meaning in contemporary representations of disability or works that allude to disability within a certain metaphorical construct (18). Rosemary Betterton says, “art is not meant to function by offering better aesthetic or political models for the embodiment of ‘others,’ but it can better explore relations between culturally constructed bodies of both material and imagined differences” (80). If the prosthesis was re-fitted to support and brace new types of figurations of material and imagined subjects, we might be able to consider new ways of being in the world. In turn, this re-fitting provides an enhanced understanding of cultural anxieties around the disabled body with an acknowledgment of its potential power and agency.

### The Prosthesis and Its Discontents

Ott, along with several other scholars who work within a disability studies context such as Vivian Sobchack, try to provide alternative historical, cultural, and embodied perspectives as a corrective to the vogue for prosthetics found in psychoanalytic theory and contemporary cultural studies. Ott makes particular mention about how the prosthesis is also used reductively as “a synonym for common forms of body-machine interface,” most explicitly in conversations around the cyborg and Donna Haraway’s scholarship (18). While the fusion of technology (in the form of prosthesis) and body is one that ends up displacing the material body, Ott argues that these assertions “hardly begin to comprehend the complex historical and social origins of prosthetics” (18). Ott and Sobchack argue that this theorizing of the prosthesis needs to stop ignoring historical, cultural, and embodied complexities brought by the reality of prosthetics.

For instance, what are the realities of being a prosthesis user? Sobchack is a single above-the-knee amputee and scholar working in film studies at the University of California in Los Angeles. She provides a more intimate, practical tale about her experiences as an amputee and prosthesis user in her essay “A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor and Materiality”. Sobchack maintains her confusion around why so many scholars, artists, and art historians find the prosthesis such a seductive object. According to her scholarship, the prosthesis has become “extraordinary,” so she endeavors to “both critique and redress this metaphorical [...] displacement of the prosthetic through a return to its premises in lived-body experience” (206). Like myself, Sobchack is not interested in intervening in any flights of the artistic or scholarly imagination or in denying them freedom or mobility to explore the abject as metaphor. But Sobchack summarizes her agenda well, which parallels my own, when she says that “perhaps a more embodied ‘sense-ability’ of the prosthetic by cultural critics and artists will lead to a greater apprehension of ‘response-ability’ in its discursive and artistic use” (207).

Part of the challenge with attacking the reductive use of prosthetics is dismantling the binaries with which their representation is mediated, ranging from self/other, body/technology, beautiful/ugly, perfect/grotesque, male/female. Sobchack claims that the literal and material ground of the metaphor of the prosthesis has largely been forgotten, if not disavowed (208). Ultimately, Sobchack claims that the true scandal of the metaphor is that it has become fetishized and “unfleshed-out,” so that the prosthesis instead becomes an

uncomfortable “floating signifier” or catch-all word for a broad discourse on technoculture or the abject, obscene, and traumatic (209).

I argue that the discomfiting effect of “immobilizing” disability in art history is the product of the *uneasy fit* of the narrative prosthesis itself. In everyday terms, the prosthesis is an important practical tool in the disability world to assist amputees with mobility and therefore independence. Within contemporary art, artists like Gober and Sherman’s symbolic use of prostheses gives uninformed metaphors to interior emotional and psychological states. And yet, as much as Gober and Sherman employ the prosthesis in their work, when comparing it with the grotesque and the abject, disability discourse is not incorporated directly or explicitly. While there *is* a persistence of disabled people and their contributions in *visual* art history, as disability is an integral part of the human condition it is still not fully integrated into mainstream art historical discourse. What would it mean for the prosthesis to move from an over-used metaphor to becoming a representation that reflects the day-to-day realities of its use as a tool for mobility? In other words, what would it mean for the amputee to appear in contemporary art, rather than just as the disembodied, floating prosthesis? Can we locate the disabled body, arm, or leg that the prosthesis actually supports—what is the narrative underneath that body—rather than the inanimate prosthetic object? Mainstream art history might then be confronted by the possibility of recognizing disability in its true form, rather than as a seductive body part consistently removed from the embodied amputee.

It is important first to begin thinking about the signification of the metaphor of the prostheses itself, particularly within the context of Foster’s references to the obscene, abject, and traumatic. How have contemporary artists typically used the prosthesis in their artworks? For many, the prosthesis symbolizes disruption—it is the body in chaos, the body fragmented and broken. The prosthesis is a symbol of loss. A limb—a leg, or an arm, or even an ear or an eye, a finger or a toe that is lost—is surely indicative of a gap, creating a space for something that is missing. In her seminal essay, “The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity,” art historian Linda Nochlin outlines that she does not wish to propose some “grandiose, all-encompassing theory of the fragment,” while she still believes that it should be grounded “on a model of *difference*” (56). She also acknowledges the dual marvelous–horrific function that the fragment gives to an artwork, tracing its lineage in different periods and movements in art history from paintings, drawings, and sculptures during the French Revolution, through Impressionism, Surrealism, and the more modern art practices of Louise Bourgeois, Robert Mapplethorpe, and

Cindy Sherman. Even though Nochlin argues that the fragment assumes new transgressive forms in the practices of these contemporary artists, such as the notion that the body is hardly unified or unambiguous, Nochlin and these artists still exclude any discussion around the intersections and the impact of this rupture for disabled subjectivity.

Amputee, prosthesis user, and scholar Steven Kurzman captures how the signification around the prosthesis has been metaphorically displaced: “Artificial limbs do not *disrupt* amputees’ bodies, but rather reinforce our publicly perceived normalcy and humanity. [...] Artificial limbs and prostheses only disrupt [...] what is commonly considered to be the naturally whole and abled Body” (374). In other words, using the metaphor of the prosthesis to connote loss, trauma, or abjection indicates ablest thinking in an ablest world. Disability is indeed a social construction, and this has a long lineage. Michael Davidson has talked about how, for eighteenth-century German art historians and writers Gottfried Lessing and Johann Winckelmann a “realistic depiction of a ‘misshapen’ man is less important for its verisimilitude than for its demonstration of artisanal superiority. In both Winckelmann and Lessing, the ability of aesthetics to define affective and sensory response depends on—and, indeed, is constituted by—bodily difference” (27). The binary between normal/abnormal aesthetics has been set in place for some time.

It is worth briefly turning to the origins of the word *prosthesis*. Emerging from ancient Greek, it was ported into the English language in the sixteenth century in the context of linguistics. Its root “pros” translates as “adding, furthering, advancing, giving additional power” and so emphasizes the prosthetic as an addition rather than as an extension of an existing word (Funk 3). Therefore, the prosthetic gives power to what is missing, so it is possible that the literal definition of the word lends itself to a suite of metaphorical constructions that have little or no basis in the everyday prosthetic experience of an amputee. Indeed, based on the definition, it implies that losing an arm or a leg is considered traumatic, and thus the prosthesis as a kind of “savior” that is endowed with a power in its ability to fill in the gap or loss. But again, also like the word *disability*, even though dominant culture may wish to designate prosthesis and its so-called grotesque associations to anyone with physical and mental “handicaps,” it is hard to affix “prosthesis” to any one particular type of metaphor. Ultimately, the status, value, and significance of prosthetic metaphors are absolutely reliant upon entrenched cultural perceptions that must be destabilized. I now turn to an analysis of Robert Gober and Cindy Sherman, where both the reductive and affirmative aspects of Mitchell and Snyder’s narrative prosthesis become evident.

### Robert Gober's Reverse Amputations

Robert Gober is an American artist who uses everyday objects, such as sinks, doors, beds, and playpens, and calls them into question in relationship to our bodies. He especially uses disembodied legs emerging from walls as a sort of “reverse amputation.” Some of Gober’s sculptures could easily be mistaken for votive offerings, as candles often jut out of sacrificial limbs. They could also function as leg and/or foot fetishes, fragments of cannibalism or prostheses (Miglietti 45). They are often hyper-realistic; he uses plastic, clothing (cotton, leather etc.), and real human hair to shade bare legs (see Figure 1). Numerous scholars write about the origins of Gober’s legs: some say that he used to see amputated legs in the hospitals where his mother worked as a nurse when he was a child, while others talk about how Gober was struck by the sophistication of the legs of business men he would observe as he was flying in airplanes. Gober has discussed the eroticism he finds so appealing in the skin revealed between the end of a pair of pants and the beginning of a sock on a foot (Flood 18); in that space, he finds promise and metaphor. Scholars have commented on the symbolism of Gober’s “reverse amputations” as a symbol of loss, castration, abjection and anxiety. Gober captures the dual binary of the prosthesis as metaphor perfectly, moving in and out of fantasy/horror “seamlessly.”



Figure 1: Robert Gober  
 Untitled Leg,  
 1989–1990.  
 Beeswax, cotton,  
 wood, leather, human  
 hair,  
 11 3/8 × 7 3/4 × 20"  
 © Robert Gober,  
 Courtesy Matthew  
 Marks Gallery.

Gober falls on ableist notions of “lack” and “loss” when he sees the castrated limb as a monstrous fragment. My name for his sculptures—“reverse amputation”—while self-explanatory, also carries a loaded meaning, as I suggest that Gober himself is cutting off any “realistic” disabled body from the production of his legs: the material and embodied experience of amputation; the stability or instability of walking on prostheses; any vulnerability; the affects/effects of vanity and self-image by wearing prosthetic legs; the visibility and invisibility in the act of “passing” (as one who can “fake” being identified with real legs as they are able to walk so naturalistically with their prostheses); physical therapy and rehabilitation; and fears associated with accidents and falling over in public places and spaces. Gober’s legs indeed look as if they have fallen over; they are traumatized, but where is the human to give us a pronounced sense of such trauma? Why must Gober’s legs be de-humanized in the act of amputation? His violent act may mimic the reality of amputation, but I argue that to elevate the limb to the status of art, while ignoring the realities of amputated flesh for what remains (namely, the torso, other limbs, and head) is to leave out much of the narrative. The limb is reduced to familiar symbol or metaphor, perpetuating its agency as an object endowed with both great horror and awe.

### **Cindy Sherman’s Grotesque Prosthetics**

Cindy Sherman is an important and influential contemporary American artist widely known for self-portraits in which she dresses up in various elaborate guises using wigs, costumes, make-up and prosthetics to comment on the nature of representation in popular culture. In the *Disaster* series from 1986 to 1989, Sherman experiments with image-making by removing her body completely, favoring grotesque tableaux, showcasing scenes of destruction and mayhem. The smooth, glossy body now turns into the monstrous otherness behind the cosmetic façade. Her figures now become supernatural, inspired by fairy tales and monsters. Sherman’s “centerfold” series conveyed, through pose and facial expression, interiority of secret thought, while the grotesque work suggests the emergence of the unconscious itself. The grotesque and deforming make-up blurs gender identity—figures are horned and snouted like horrific mythological hybrids. Body parts are replaced by prosthetics, false breasts and buttocks, and there is nothing left but disgust. We also see sexual detritus, decaying food, vomit, slime, menstrual blood, and hair. In Figure 2, Sherman depicts a full-frontal prosthetic rump emerging from the underneath a woman’s short skirt. The rump is full of painful-looking boils, acne or ulcers,





Figure 2: Cindy Sherman  
 Untitled, 1987.  
 Chromogenic color print,  
 47 1/4 × 70 1/2 inches  
 (image)  
 49 1/8 × 72 1/2 inches  
 (framed).  
 Edition of 6  
 (MP# CS-177).  
 Courtesy of the artist  
 and Metro Pictures.

to emphasize disease. By encountering the rump “face-first,” we are also reminded of the rump as the outlet of excrement.

This work comes close to depicting the Kristevan concept of the abject: disgust aroused in the human psyche by lifeless, inanimate bodily matter, bodily wastes, and the dead body itself.<sup>2</sup> Barbara Creed’s argument is that abjection is central to the recurring image of the “monstrous feminine” in horror movies and the monstrous in Sherman. Her figures have a pathos that can be understood as monster or victim (Creed 45).

In “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” Foster argues that abjection occurs in the photographs because Sherman is attacking the scene of representation through her images of repulsion. Abjection is a condition that is troubled, so Foster argues that this is the attraction of the trope for artists and writers who want to disturb orderings of subject and society. The rhetoric that Foster uses around the abject— notions of the “schizophrenic breakdown in language and time” and “bipolar postmodernism”—invokes historical and medical terminology related to disability. Foster calls these qualities—the body being breached, the gaze devouring the subject and subject becoming space—the conditions of art today (118).

Conditions of art, then, mirror conditions of the disabled embodiment. Such characteristics are a blend of ecstasy and despair equating to schizophrenia. This binary of ecstasy/horror is enunciated in the “bipolar” motivations of artists who either want to inhabit fully the abject or be totally drained by it.

2. For more information, refer to Kristeva and Roudiez.

In other words, they wish to “possess the obscene vitality of the wound” or “occupy the radical nihilism of the corpse” (Foster 118). Foster says that the abject materializes in art in two ways: the first is through an identification with the abject, “to probe the wound of the trauma,” and the second is to represent the condition of abjection itself, where certain subjects or conditions in an image provoke abjection as operation (118). For instance, the abject disturbance is made manifest in images by Sherman where the canvas might be torn or probed.

Foster then questions why artists have a fascination with the abject and with trauma today. He states that there is a real despair regarding the social forces that surround us, such as the “AIDS crisis, invasive disease and death, systemic poverty and crime, a destroyed welfare state [...] a broken social contract. [...] Together they have driven the contemporary concern with trauma and abjection” (Foster 118). Most compellingly for disability studies, Foster says, is that “a special truth seems to reside in traumatic or abject states, in diseased or damaged bodies” (123). In other words, a violated body is often evidence or witness to truth, to be used as testaments against power. Sherman’s *Disaster* series, Foster’s theorizing on the abject and its relationship to Sherman’s images, her use of the grotesque and how broken, freakish forms both real and imagined are “useful,” are all evidence of disability’s common role as a narrative prosthesis in contemporary art. Direct reference to disability studies discourse and the lives of real, disabled people are rarely mentioned within these contexts. If disability harbors this powerful discursive position, according to Foster, then surely this also implies that disability’s explicit rhetorical contributions to future contemporary art discourse have yet to be awakened by scholars still unfamiliar with its vast and dynamic terrain. A disability studies framework employed by Gober, Sherman, and Foster would deepen and complicate their imagery and their modes of analyses.

### **Adjusting and Moving Toward Complex Embodiment**

I would like to offer complex embodiment as a new framework for problematizing the prosthesis and its use in contemporary art. The idea of complex embodiment was developed by Tobin Siebers in reaction to the limitations of the ideology of ability. He says, “Disability creates theories of embodiment more complex than the ideology of ability allows, and these many embodiments are each crucial to the understanding of humanity and its variations, whether physical, mental, social, or historical” (317). Complex embodiment can offer

layers of inquiry and take us down an unconventional path, so that categories of difference, identity, and disadvantage in relationship to disability can no longer be essentialized by terms such as the “abject,” “traumatic” or “obscene.” How does the addition of complex embodiment change things in the context of my argument? What did it do before? What does it do now? Does it reveal something in Gober and Sherman that was unseen before?

As I have already established, in the framing of the work of Gober and Sherman, the prosthesis has worked as a narrative to “fit” a certain ideological framework around loss, abjection, death, violence, and the grotesque. While I suggest that alternative characteristics and attributes must be written into such scripts regarding the disability experience, Mitchell and Snyder state that it is critical at the same time to note that “disability as a category of human difference cannot be absorbed into a homogenizing scheme of people’s shared attributes,” particularly in contemporary art representations (44). They continue that there is a “kaleidoscopic nature of historical responses to disability, and it is an important tool for interrogating the ‘naturalized’ ideology hiding behind current beliefs” (44). This is what the “complex” implies within “complex embodiment.” Rather than a black and white perspective on how the prosthesis might be applied in contemporary art, complex embodiment provides another heterogenous palette of options for the artist to consider. Complex embodiment, then, reinforces how Gober and Sherman’s perspective on the prosthesis is limited, and how their work would benefit from a more rigorous, broader examination of the prosthesis in its many manifestations, both in literal and creative terms. Complex embodiment also offers other agentive possibilities for the disabled subject through the funnel of contemporary art, where the disabled body is no longer relegated to often-used constructions of the freak. At this point in my discussion, I am also suggesting that it is necessary to move from the narrative prosthesis and put it to one side. The narrative prosthesis has been useful to point out the problematic and faulty ways that the disabled body, specifically the prosthesis, has been used as a crutch, but I now turn to complex embodiment as a replacement tool. This is because I argue that complex embodiment aids the artist’s ability to think forward and deeper about the representations of the disabled body in contemporary art, stepping beyond simply overwrought portraits into categories that provide more shades of gray.

But what would the new forms within complex embodiment consist of? I am not arguing for an antithesis of Gober and Sherman’s imagery, where horror, disgust, and “negative” imagery is somehow turned into “positive” imagery and disabled people and their experiences are observed in a good light. Rather,

as David Hevey says, “acceptable portrayals entail the refusal to disavow or suppress the site of struggle and oppression that characterizes a contemporary experience of disability” (444). Here Hevey argues that disability should be politicized by portraying disabled embodiment as the result of impairment, including physical and attitudinal environments. Mitchell and Snyder make clear that, “Limitation needs to be represented in a visceral way, but it should not be relegated to the level of an individual predicament or a purely embodied phenomenon” (44). Ultimately the issue comes down to controlling the means of production. If disabled people take responsibility for the production of their own images, they will evolve into more “acceptable” forms, or at least forms that challenge the reductive relationship between stereotypical disabled forms and arcane notions of the abject, horror, obscene. At the same time, representations of disabled forms can be handled with more sensitivity and knowledge by non-disabled artists, again through the generative framework of complex embodiment.

In the next section, I take up an examination of artists, both disabled and non-disabled, who are making work that complicates the embodied and imagined experiences of the prosthesis, by adding dynamic layers of meaning. After all, a prosthetic device can evolve into so much more than the “average” leg or arm when it begins to get a firm grasp of complex embodiment as a critical methodology.

### **Carmen Papalia’s Prosthetic Extensions**

In Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment, objects or entities in the spatial field—devices to extend or replace the senses—mediate the experience of the self and the world of the person who uses them. How do artists with impairments use object body extensions in embodied, performative acts? How can the performance of prosthetics by disabled artists shed light on experiences of the disabled body, both for performer and audience? Miho Iwakawa proposes that Merleau-Ponty introduced “the innovative idea that the body “extends” an object, for example a cane for the blind, so that it literally becomes a part of the body” (78). Such bodily extension and scrambling of the senses offer counter embodiments and complex embodiments in view of Siebers’s thinking. I would like to suggest that the cane is a type of prosthesis; just as a body extends itself into a cane, an amputee’s body extends itself into a prosthesis. What imaginative and metaphorical opportunities can be affixed to

current standardized usages of the prosthesis in contemporary art practices if we consider the prosthesis as a new form such as the cane?

For example, in Carmen Papalia's performance piece, *Blind Field Shuttle*, relationships of trust and explorations of the senses unfold as the artist, who identifies as a non-visual learner, leads walks with members of the public as part of his experiential social practice. Forming a line behind Papalia, participants grab the right shoulder of the person in front of them and shut their eyes for the duration of the walk. Papalia then serves as a tour guide, passing useful information to the person behind him, who then passes it to the person behind him or her, and so forth. As a result of the visual deprivation, participants are made more aware of alternative sensory perceptions such as smell, sound, and touch, so as to consider how non-visual input may serve as a productive means of experiencing place (Papalia).

Papalia uses "extensions" in similar ways that synthesize with Merleau-Ponty's theories about phenomenological knowledge. Papalia's cane "leads" a new kind of sensorial and prosthetic experience for a group of participants, as they rely on under-used senses, but they also rely on the prosthetic extension of Papalia's cane and the shoulder of the person in front of them. They must learn to walk again under entirely new circumstances with an alternative set of tools, not unlike the experience of an amputee walking with new legs. The long chain of people walking one after the other is a type of prosthetic extension into public space, as they feel their way along and around the streets, curbs, sidewalks, and pedestrians. Sensorial possibilities are expanded by the expansion of the prosthesis itself, as it is loaded with phenomenological opportunities, as well as imagined and metaphorical ones, often seen in contemporary art practice. The prosthesis in this context is endowed with knowledge and guidance: it is also practical as it comes to be useful for people with limited experience around the prosthesis. In other words, the prosthesis can become a shared, communal experience much like the objectives of a socially-engaged art practice itself.

Papalia's additional work, *Long Cane*, is a comical mobility device: a walking cane that, when used, draws attention to the user as an obstacle (see Figure 3). Papalia developed the idea for what he calls his "performance object" in 2009 because he did not feel comfortable with the institutionalization of the white cane as a symbol for blindness or blind people. He remarked that the white cane was a lightning rod for attention, and that the cane separated him from his peers and identified him as different, therefore creating a hierarchy, reinforcing the binary of ability and disability, and marking and organizing bodies. The artist recognized the distance that the cane was creating between his body and other bodies on the street; the cane tended to push people away,



Figure 3: Carmen Papalia, *Long Cane*, 2009 performance. Courtesy of the artist.

as they would often jostle to scurry out of his way and avoid bumping into it. Papalia's *Long Cane* makes the force field bigger, where he exaggerates the distance between himself and other public bodies to occupy public space with more agency.

Through his antagonistic performance, Papalia is hoping that his prosthesis as performance object will generate productive dialogue about disability. Further, the artist seeks to challenge the standardizing of any prosthesis attached to a disabled body, such as a cane for blind people, arguing that a prosthetic can be personalized, radical, and powerful. Papalia hopes that his fellow pedestrians will become more self-aware of any discomfort they might express toward disabled people through their body language and gestures. In this context, Papalia's fictive prosthesis brings with it comic and guerilla qualities that can be seen as a radical form of trespass, both immobilizing and destabilizing entrenched assumptions around access for disabled people.

### **Mike Parr's Prosthetic Subversions**

Mike Parr has been one of Australia's pioneers in the field of conceptual and performance art since the 1970s, particularly in extreme body performance. Felicity Fenner said that:

“in 1977, Parr shocked an audience with a simulated ‘arm chop’ performance. He pretended to chop off his left arm, stirring deep-rooted fears of mutilation and castration, transgressing the unspoken boundaries of ethical behavior. He penetrated the façade of order to reveal inner chaos, as blood and guts poured

forth from inside the chopped arm and buried emotions from inside traumatized viewers”. (Fenner)

Parr shatters all idealistic, awe-filled notions of the prosthesis, focusing instead on the horror of amputation, and he is the epitome of metaphor-opportunism and corporeal deviance; although this time as one who was born with a misshapen arm, he takes advantages of his physical characteristic and uses it as a feature in many of his works to take on additional agency. The metaphor of loss, trauma, and abjection goes “hand in hand” with Parr’s “single-handed” twisted control; he demands autonomy and control over such identifications and how they are to be wielded. In *Arm Chop*, Parr is essentially taunting and playing with his audience, fueling their fears and confirming stereotypes and prejudices about amputee embodiment. He is literally throwing amputation,



Figure 4: Mike Parr,  
*Portrait of M & F*, 1996.  
Gelatin silver  
photograph,  
24 × 21 inches,  
edition 3/3.  
Courtesy of the artist.

disfigurement, and his misshapen arm into their faces, a flow of fresh blood and meat. Indeed, he provides the other corporeal side of the story to Gober's stumps.

Parr's work further enhances another "corporeal side" in the black and white photograph entitled *Portrait of M & F* (1996). Parr sits on a bed, shirtless, next to a topless woman (see Figure 4). Both stare intently and without emotion into the camera, calmly and defiantly watching us staring at their commingling missing limbs. Parr's misshapen arm foregrounds the woman's missing right breast; their atypical forms juxtaposed against each other create a type of diptych.

These figures have agency because they reject being marginalized subjects under the ableist gaze. There is no shame and, equally, no desire for cover in their unique coalesced form. Rather, their form almost becomes sculptural-like, where beauty can be found in absence. Ultimately, this portrait provides opportunity to reconsider notions of beauty, perfection, and ideal human form so characteristic of classical Greek sculpture and Kant's aesthetics. What beauty can be found in the human form without the narrative support of the prosthesis? Can these forms be admired and appreciated without the great weight of metaphor surrounding the artificial prosthesis? Must the misshapen body be supported by the prosthesis to possess currency, agency, and exoticism? How can an amputee find sexiness and shed vulnerability and inhibition without a "crutch"? Parr's work provides exciting new possibilities.

### **Conclusion: A Leg to Stand On**

I have made a case for how the use of the prosthesis in contemporary art demands a more rigorous, nuanced reading than those previously undertaken. Part of this new reading involves incorporating and examining work by disabled and non-disabled artists where *embodied* experiences of the prosthesis inform its imaginative and metaphorical constructs, such as intervention in public space, as a mobile sensorial device exchanged within a group, or as a violent rupture, subversion, and transgression through a trickster's game. It is critical for contemporary artists and critics to begin to re-think and *re-fit* the prosthesis within new frameworks and to make adjustments to complex embodiment. Mitchell and Snyder argue that the "discontent produced by the prosthetic relation that is representation provides a fulcrum at least, for identifying the culture that *might be* rather than that which *is*" (45). I propose that we begin to use the discontent induced by disability as a narrative prosthesis



in contemporary art to interrogate, critique, and ultimately transform the discourse around the abject, the obscene, and the traumatic, so that new, productive conversations might be added into the many grotesque folds of disability discourse. Given that artists and art historians already understand the power of disability as “narrative prosthesis” in-and-of-itself, it is time for the prosthesis to be re-fitted in contemporary art and made to support new forms of embodied and imaginary differences within complex embodiment as a critical methodology. Critics, scholars, and art historians must be encouraged to contextualize the work of prominent artists like Gober and Sherman in a disability studies framework. This is not only a responsible act, but it is also urgent in light of the evolution of disability studies as a legitimate field of inquiry in the academy over the last 30 years, where it now assumes a more promising place. Art history would do well to keep up with the progress of disability studies.

Further, while I am not suggesting that contemporary artists completely abandon their imaginative use of the prosthesis to convey notions such as the obscene, abject, or traumatic, it is necessary that artists bring into their representations a more informed, sensitive, and responsible framing that supports disabled *and* able-bodied experiences of complex embodiment. Ideally, my future visits to an art museum will display an exhibit by Robert Gober or Cindy Sherman juxtaposed with work by Carmen Papalia or Mike Parr. The goal is to destabilize previously entrenched notions of the prosthesis and its accompanying popular metaphors to provoke a new constellation of ideas and configurations about the lived experience of the amputee in conjunction with alternative but no less creative portrayals of the prosthesis. Perhaps such innovative curatorial displays will transform standardized misperceptions, so that the prosthesis in contemporary art, to borrow from Sobchack’s appropriate essay title, will finally have a leg to stand on.

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